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What is the Mexico City Policy?

The Mexico City Policy, commonly known as the “Global Gag Rule,” denies U.S. family planning funds to any foreign non-governmental organization that provides, lobbies for or counsels on abortion, even with its own resources. The Policy, which turns 30 years old this summer, is so named because of its origins at the International Conference on Population that took place in Mexico City in 1984. The Policy was instituted by executive order by President Ronald Reagan in 1984, rescinded by President Clinton in 1993, reinstated by President Bush in 2001 and rescinded by President Obama in 2009.

What has been the policy's impact?

The harms of the Mexico City Policy have been well-documented and demonstrated, including the fact that it has not only limited women's access to abortion information and services, but also disrupted family planning services by NGOs that became ineligible as a result of it. More recent evidence demonstrates that the Policy has led to decreases in overall funding for family planning assistance as well. (See, for example, [Access Denied](#) and [Determinants of foreign aid in family planning: How relevant is the Mexico City Policy?](#))

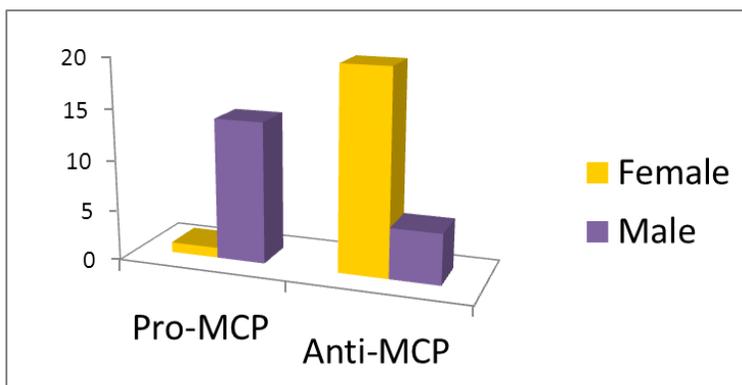
Why study Congressional debates about the policy?

The United States Congress has attempted many times over the years to legislate the Mexico City Policy (support for which can be seen as a proxy for opposition to international family planning and reproductive health) either into or out of existence – voting on the House floor on eight different occasions (for a total of 13 votes) between 1995 and 2007. These floor debates have been increasingly characterized by politicization and partisanship. Analyzing votes and floor debates, as this study did, over a 12-year period offers insights into how reproductive health advocates can develop effective arguments for

What did the study find?

Support for the Mexico City Policy varies by a Congressional representative's party and gender. A far lower percentage of Democrats support efforts to legislate the Policy into existence than Republicans. This partisan divide has increased over time. Further, female members of Congress vote and speak in support of on international reproductive health issues (i.e., in opposition to the Mexico City Policy) far more frequently and more positively than their male counterparts.

May 16, 2001 Floor Debate

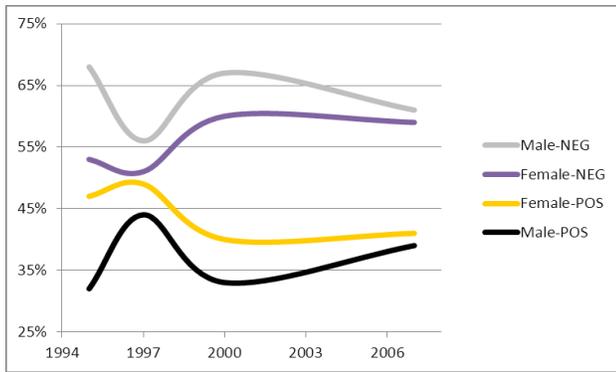


From 1995 – 2007, women represented 7 to 17 percent of the House of Representatives, but female members represented 35 to 65 percent of those speaking in opposition to the Mexico City Policy (MCP) during this time, a rate three to six times their representation in Congress. During a May, 2001 floor debate (see box at left), just one woman and 14 men made statements in support of the Mexico City Policy. In contrast, women represented 20 of the 25 members, or 80 percent, speaking *against* the Policy.

A content analysis of floor debates found that the tone of these debates has been increasingly negative over time, with those supportive of the Mexico City Policy using negative language at greater levels than opponents.

The use of negative language and images suggests that congressional opponents of international family planning are attempting to appeal to their passionate supporters in Congress and amongst interest groups, as well as to the emotions of those otherwise apathetic to the cause, in order to diminish support for these programs.

Tone of Debate: Interventions by Gender



Interventions by female members during floor debates were both more positive (gold line) and less negative (the purple line) than that of their male counterparts.

Abortion and family planning are often conflated on both sides of the debate, but with different intent.

In studying the language employed by members of Congress across the 12 year time period, the word “abortion” is consistently one of the most utilized words in floor debates. Supporters of the Mexico City Policy link abortion and family planning, often using negative and quite graphic language around abortion in debates on these issues. At the same time, opponents of the Mexico City Policy argue that investing in family planning *reduces* abortions, and conversely, that restrictions on family planning programs would lead to more unsafe abortions.

Female representatives and those opposed to the Mexico City Policy overwhelmingly mention “women” during the Congressional debates on the policy.

While many male members of Congress have spoken about women in the developing world as part of these debates, female members do so most frequently. As Representative Louise Slaughter (D-NY) remarked in a 1997 debate, “*somebody has to speak for the millions of women around this world...*” Indeed, references to women are made most frequently by female members of Congress.

Opponents of the Mexico City Policy speak of women’s value and their rights to family planning information and to space and time their pregnancies, as well to the relationship between family planning and women and children’s lives. They also discuss women in relation to their choices and their ability to control their own reproductive lives. Positive references to women refer to the need to value women, and to “help” women and children around the world. Those supportive of the Mexico City Policy who reference women – and they do so far less frequently than opponents – speak of women in quite different manners and tones than do opponents of the Policy. They have spoken, for example, of representing women in the United States who are opposed to abortion, as well as to the “traumatic” impacts they believe abortion has on women.

The word “population,” and themes related to population growth have become less utilized in these debates over time.

In the 1990s, members of Congress frequently discussed the need for U.S. family planning assistance as a means to reduce population growth and pressure. Nearly all of the references to population were made by opponents of the Mexico City Policy, who invoked population growth as a way of generating support for international family planning. This argument has lessened significantly in frequency over the years, with but a few, rare references to the issue in the most recent debates.

Useful Lessons for the Future

Population growth is increasingly less relevant.

As an argument for international family planning, population growth has become less important to members of Congress over time, so trying to make this connection may not be as appropriate a strategy as it seemed in previous decades.

Women’s health and rights remain a critical element of this debate.

Stressing the importance of international family planning as a critical element of improving women’s health and rights appears to be a highly relevant and useful frame.

Women represent women.

Female members of Congress represent women’s interests more powerfully than their male counterparts, and they do so with less negative and combative language. Electing more women to Congress should thus help to shift the tone of the debate. Looking at both vote counts and congressional engagement on the issue, the more female Democrats that are elected, the more support there will be for international reproductive health.

False connections between U.S. funding for family planning and funding for abortion must be discredited.

Opponents of international family planning have led a concerted effort to conflate family planning with abortion in these debates. While advocates must help members of Congress to discredit the false and misleading connections that are made, they must also be careful to not further stigmatize and marginalize abortion within U.S. international policies and programs.

