

## Women Replace Men As Leaders Of Progressive Think Tanks

By: [Laura Bassett](#) – May 3, 2013

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As conservatives consider new ways for the GOP to reach out to women voters, progressives have taken a different approach: tapping women to run their think tanks.

When Anne-Marie Slaughter was chosen to succeed Steve Coll as president of the New America Foundation in April, she became the latest in a long line of women to succeed a man at the helm of a progressive or quasi-progressive think tank in the past two years.

Former Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.) succeeded Lee Hamilton to become the first female president, director and CEO of the Woodrow Wilson Center in February 2011. Katherine McFate was named president and CEO of the Center for Effective Government (formerly OMB Watch) in May 2011, replacing Gary Bass.

In July and October of 2011, respectively, Janice Nittoli replaced Richard Leone as president of the Century Foundation, and Neera Tanden took over for John Podesta as president of the Center for American Progress (CAP). Sarah Rosen Wartell, a co-founder of CAP, succeeded Robert D. Reischauer in February 2012 to become the third president of the Urban Institute, and Felicia Wong took over the Roosevelt Institute for Andrew Rich in March 2012.

Slaughter said most people don't realize how increasingly common it is for a progressive think tank to be run by a woman. "Right after I was named, somebody tweeted something about how I was a very rare bird," she told HuffPost in an interview. "They said I was as rare as a panda, or something, as the female head of a think tank. But people jumped in and said, 'what are you talking about?' There have been a number of us, and certainly a lot more in the past couple of years. I think it's high time."

Slaughter said she doesn't believe that women are necessarily better at running think tanks than men are, but the fact that women had been ignored for these leadership roles was becoming a problem. "I'm not sure it's bringing anything special to the table, so much as it really is just time," she said. "What should have been unusual was how locked up it was by men. I do think it's got to be on every search committee's mind that Washington is still heavily male-- especially in my world, the foreign policy world."

Tanden, the president of CAP, said she believes she has brought something different to the table as a woman. She's given the organization a more generous paid-leave policy, encouraged men to take more parental leave, mentored young women leaders and driven a new research initiative that compares other countries' family friendly work policies with those in the U.S.

"We've created a new women's initiative looking at these substantive issues about a women's leadership lag and its connection to policy," she said. "Is one of the reasons why

the U.S. lags in terms of leadership in both the public and private sectors behind many European countries because our work family policies are so much [further] behind these countries as well? We're really examining those issues because we made a decision to invest in that area."

Tanden added that the new wave of women presidents at progressive think tanks has also helped other female employees within those organizations move up the ranks. "I think that for progressives, there's a little bit of an issue of walking the walk and talking the talk, because we always talk about the importance of diverse leaders and diversity in the workforce," she said. "I will note that that's only happening on one side of the ideological divide in terms of think tanks."

Indeed, it's hard to find a female president of a conservative or quasi-conservative think tank. The Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Hoover Institution and the Center for Security Policy are all run by men.

"I think it's consistent with what we've seen even in electoral politics: The Democrats and progressives have done a much better job fielding female candidates," said Jennifer Lawless, director of the Women & Politics Institute at American University. "Part of it is a supply issue. Prominent, well accomplished women whose names bubble to the top of the short list are more likely to be Democrats and progressives than Republicans."

Lawless said the influx of women leaders into think tanks won't necessarily change the course of progressive politics, but it does generally look good for the Democratic Party. "It's certainly symbolic," she said. "It conveys a sense of inclusiveness."