

# The Washington Post

## Women are mysteriously missing from D.C. think tanks' foreign policy panels. Here's the data.

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*Throughout academia, including in political science, women haven't achieved parity with men. As this series explores, implicit bias holds women back at every stage, from the readings professors assign to the student evaluations that influence promotions and pay, from journal publications to book awards. These political and sociological problems deserve study as much as any of the other issues the academy investigates. Here's the third piece in our [two-week series on the gender gap in political science](#) — and what we can do about it. — Kim Yi Dionne*

Although women make up half the world's population and a growing proportion of scholars and analysts, they're often absent in convenings of "experts." That's true across a number of industries, according to an event management company's [report](#) on gender diversity in about 60,000 events between 2013 and 2018 across 23 countries; the company found that 69 percent of all speakers were male. That's close to what political scientists Tamara Cofman Wittes and Marc Lynch [found](#) when examining women's participation in Middle East Policy panel events in 2014: Fewer than one-quarter of all the speakers at 232 events put on by six Washington think tanks were women — and 65 percent of the events included no women at all.

That matters, for a variety of reasons. It means women with expertise aren't getting the kind of exposure that helps their ideas spread and their careers advance. And it means that policies and decisions are made with only men's input, depriving us all of women's knowledge and insights.

In the past several years, however, observers have begun calling out all-male panels, now ridiculed with the term "[manels](#)." We wanted to know whether that had made a difference in one particular area of expertise: public forums on foreign policy. Our research found that in 2018, women experts still made up only one-third of the speakers at public foreign policy events — a proportion that varied from one think tank to another.

Here's how we did our research

Supported by an [E.U. research grant at the Institute for Women's Policy Research](#), we studied women's speaker participation at 2018 public foreign policy events hosted by 20 major think tanks based in Washington. We decided to look at the 20 think tanks captured by the [WIIS Gender Scorecard](#), which in Fall 2018 had released a report ranking think tanks according to the number of women scholars in foreign policy.

For foreign policy-focused think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, we included all public events listed on their websites in 2018. For multidisciplinary think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, we counted all public events that specifically dealt with

foreign policy. For each event, we collected names from the published event schedule, such as speakers, chairs and moderators. We then used Internet searches to read bios and look at photos to determine which speakers were women.

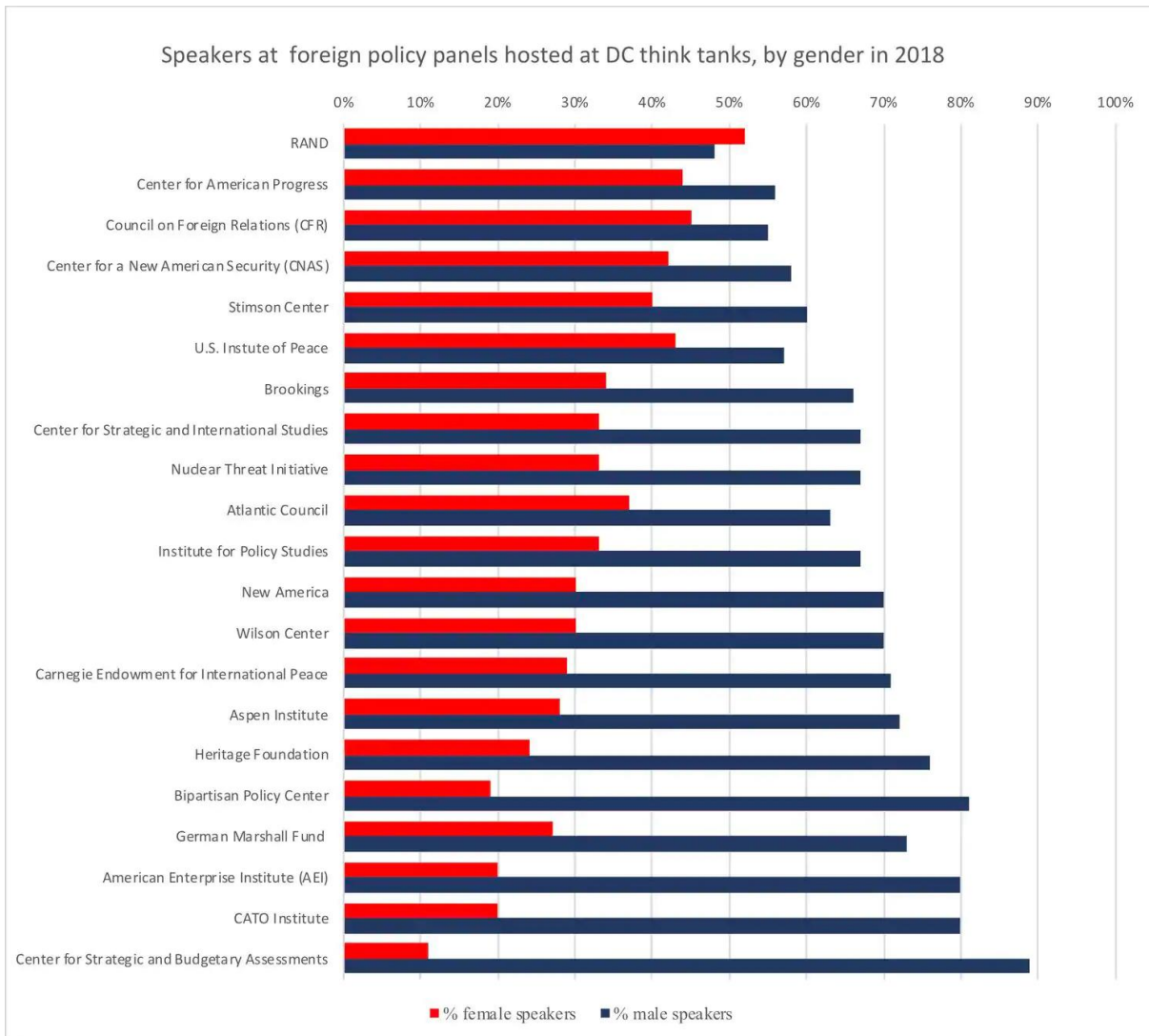
In all, our data include 5,192 speakers who participated in 967 public events at these 20 major D.C. think tanks in 2018. These events ranged from a former State Department official talking about strategy in a specific region at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to an Atlantic Council panel about the status of NATO cooperation in Europe.

Women are still underrepresented on D.C. foreign policy panels, in some think tanks more than others

In 2018, women made up only 34 percent of experts featured on D.C. foreign policy panels. Fully 27 percent of the panels in our study included only male speakers.

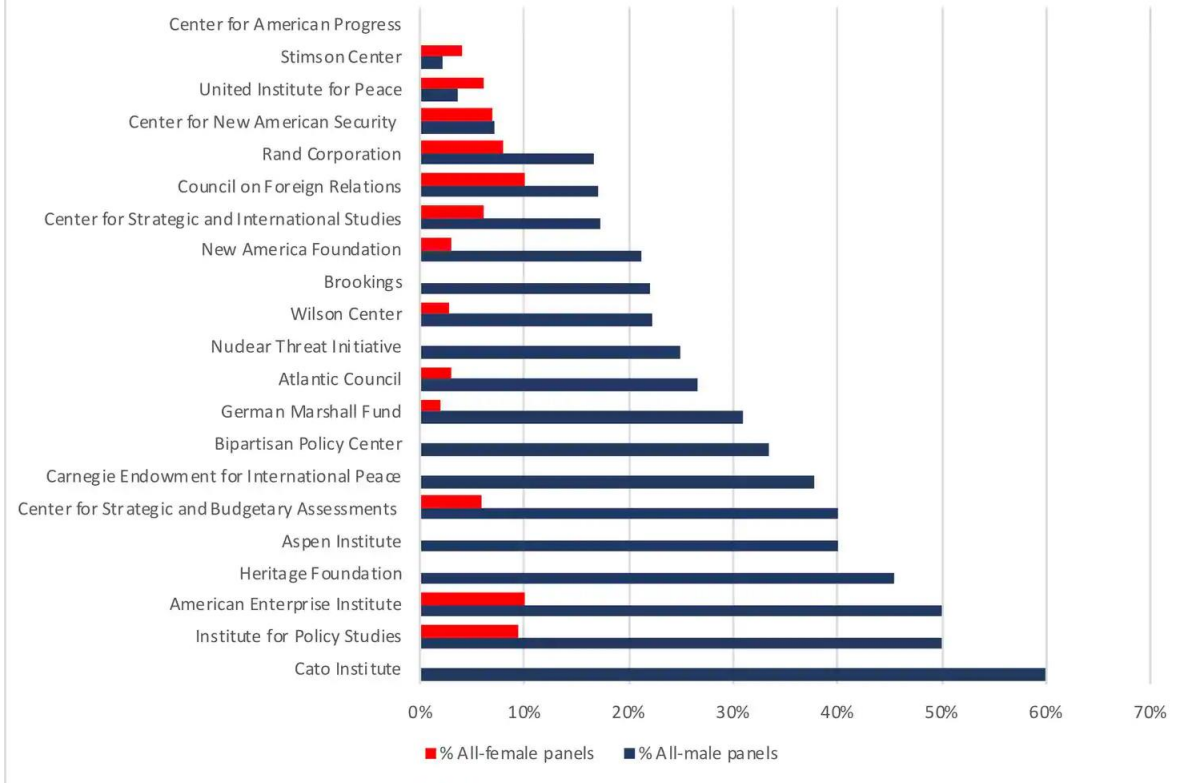
Of the panels that included women, those women often served as the panel moderator, not as a speaker. Women moderators in the absence of women expert panelists perpetuates the idea that women can be gracious hosts but are not actually experts.

There are a few exceptions, of course, as you can see in the figure below. RAND had slightly more than 50 percent women in its foreign policy panels, closely followed by the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for American Progress, the U.S. Institute for Peace (USIP), the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and the Stimson Center. All these think tanks' panels consisted of 40 percent or more women.



Only the liberal Center for American Progress avoided organizing single-gender panels. Half or more of the foreign policy panels were all-male at the libertarian Cato Institute, the liberal Institute for Policy Studies and the conservative American Enterprise Institute. One-third or more of the events were all-male at the right-wing Heritage Foundation, the nonpartisan Aspen Institute and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Bipartisan Policy Center. Of all the events we found, only a handful were women-only — and those were either held on International Women’s Day or focused on topics such as sexual violence.

Proportion of same-gender panels at foreign policy events hosted by DC think tanks, by gender in 2018



In the world of D.C. think tanks, being visible is essential for professional advancement. The first step toward increased visibility is speaking on panels. If women are to have equal opportunities in foreign policy, think tanks must work to ensure gender parity on panels. Think tanks wishing to avoid “manels” can turn to a variety of sources to find female experts, including [Women Also Know Stuff](#) and the [Brussels Binder](#).