

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVI

Fewer Women Run Big Companies Than Men Named John

Fewer large companies are run by women than by men named John, a sure indicator that the glass ceiling remains firmly in place in corporate America.

Among chief executives of S.&P. 1500 firms, for each woman, there are four men named John, Robert, William or James. We're calling this ratio the Glass Ceiling Index, and an index value above one means that Jims, Bobs, Jacks and Bills — combined — outnumber the total number of women, including every women's name, from Abby to Zara. Thus we score chief executive officers of large firms as having an index score of 4.0. [...]

Even as this ratio falls short of the score among chief executives, it remains astonishingly high. It also understates the impermeability of the glass ceiling. After all, most companies understand that an all-male board looks bad, and so most of them appoint at least one woman, although only a minority bother to appoint more than one. Far fewer of these large firms — currently one in 25 — are run by a woman serving as C.E.O.

We can also use our index to compare the permeability of the glass ceiling in corporate life to that in the political domain. The United States, which has never had a female president, has had six named James, five named John and four named William. Thus, even if Hillary Clinton were to be elected, the Glass Ceiling Index would be 15.

Turning to Congress, there is a partisan divide in the Glass Ceiling Index. On the Republican side of the Senate, there are as many men named John as there are women. Add in the Senator Roberts, Senator Jameses and Senator Williams, and they outnumber their female colleagues by a ratio of 2.17 to one. The score in the House is slightly less unbalanced, but there are still 1.36 Jims-Bobs-Jacks-Bills for every woman.

By contrast, on the Democratic side, women outnumber the men with these particular names by quite a margin, and by my count, the Glass Ceiling Index suggests a ratio of 0.3 to one in both the House and the Senate. Likewise, within the executive branch, President Obama has appointed Secretary (John) Kerry and (Robert) McDonald, but they're still outnumbered by six women, yielding an index score of 0.33. (Treasury Secretary Jack Lew is a Jacob, not a John, and so not relevant to this index.)

Even the index for Democratic politicians and cabinet members remains more than twice as high as the benchmark for the population as a whole. In 1990 — the last year for which the Census Bureau published data on first names — Jameses made up 1.6 percent of the population, Johns were an additional 1.6 percent, and Roberts and Williams accounted for another 1.5 and 1.2 percent. The other side of our ratio is the share of women, who were 51.2 percent of the population. Putting these numbers together, the ratio of Jims-Bobs-Jacks-Bills to women is 0.12 to 1.

Other institutions are clearly in transition. For instance, Chief Justice John Roberts is the only John on the Supreme Court, and he is outnumbered by three women, which yields a score of 0.33. But this is a more balanced court than it has historically been, and before Justice Elena Kagan took over from Justice John Paul Stevens, there were as many Justice Johns as women.

Emboldened by this new approach to quantifying the glass ceiling, I felt compelled to also track progress within my own field, which is academic economics. I took a quick count of full professors in the "top six" economics departments — typically thought to include Chicago, Harvard, M.I.T., Princeton, Stanford and Yale — and discovered 1.12 Professors James, Robert, John or William for each female economics professor, suggesting that we are still a substantial distance from gender parity. Indeed, this is a setting where the index probably understates the problem, as economics faculty members are an internationally diverse group, and the index is unmoved by Jaimes, Robertos, Juans or Willems.

The Glass Ceiling Index is a fun but quite imperfect way of measuring the permeability of the glass ceiling. (Especially because in a few decades, the millennial Jacobs, Tylers and Zacharys will outnumber baby boomer Bills and Bobs.) But it does point to an important truth — that in many important decision-making areas of American life, women remain vastly outnumbered.

The New York Times, 2 March 2015