

Gender Diversity in Politics: Current Trends

By Jacquelyn Katuin

The U.S. population is 50.8 percent female; however, women are chronically underrepresented in the national political arena (United States Census Bureau, 2011). At the federal level, 20 percent of Senators and 18 percent of House members are female. State legislatures are slightly more representative, with women making up 24 percent of all state legislators. However, only 10 percent of U.S. governors are female (Motel, 2014). Minority women are even less likely to serve as political leaders; only 6.2 percent of members of Congress are women of color (CAWP, 2015). In a 2010 report, the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranked the United States as 40th in political empowerment for women (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2011).¹ By 2016, the United States had dropped to 73rd in political empowerment for women (World Economic Forum, 2016). While this shift can be heavily attributed to the increase in political empowerment scores in other countries, as opposed to a sharp decline in the American score, it remains a salient signal about the stagnation of gender equity in American politics (McGregor, 2013).

Women have made marginal gains in American politics since the 1970s. However, the increase in female participation has plateaued since the early 2000s, and is still not equal with participation levels of their male colleagues. In the past 25 years, there has only been a nine percent increase in women's representation in the House of Representatives (Representation, 2016). From 2016 to 2017, there was actually a slight decrease in the percentage of women in Congress, accompanied by a small increase in female participation in state legislatures (CAWP, 2017). This stagnation and marginal decline in representation may be due to broader institutional and structural barriers that continue to block women from entering the political arena. Nearly 100 years after the passage of the 19th Amendment, women are less than two-fifths of the way to gender parity in government (Representation, 2016).

There is historical evidence that putting political power in the hands of women is beneficial for society as a whole. Decreased child mortality rates have been causally linked to women's suffrage in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Miller, 2008). There is also evidence that suffrage in the United States provided women with leverage for other policy changes, including mother's pensions, the abolition of child labor, and improved health and safety standards (Sparks, 1995). A growing body of research has focused on the impact of gender diversity on legislative bodies in the United States, and around the world. Statistical analysis suggests that diverse legislatures are more responsive to minority issues, and lend more credibility and legitimacy to the policies they create (Minta and Sinclair, 2013).

In addition to greater attention to social welfare policies and minority issues, there is evidence that women are particularly effective legislators. Recent research indicates that women are not only as effective as men, but can be even *more* effective legislators (Volden, 2010). There are documented gender differences in leadership styles, and in the types of legislation that women support. Data suggests that women are more likely to exert high effort in legislatures, participate in consensus building efforts, and focus on specific "women's issues." For female legislators, it appears that their female identity transcends their political, racial, ideological, or party differences. Women tend to focus on issues related to health care, education, and policies that specifically impact women, such as sexual

¹ This political empowerment score was based on the ratio of women to men in high-level positions in the government, but did not include information about the number of women in local government. The three main variables included in the analysis were: (1) the ratio of women to men in Parliament (2) the ratio of women to men at the ministerial level, and (3) the ratio of women to men in terms of the number of years they served in executive office (president or prime minister), over the past 50 years.

harassment and reproductive rights (Volden, 2010).

Social and Psychological Barriers

Two percent of the American public has run for political office, and of this population, only a quarter of candidates have been women (Motel, 2014). There are a myriad of social, psychological, and cultural reasons that help explain why women do not enter into the political arena. Gender norms and stereotypes continue to hinder women's likelihood to run for office in the United States.² Politics in particular have been seen as an "old boys' club," or solely a domain for men (Volden, 2010). About 40 percent of Americans believe that women do not enter into political leadership roles because they are held to a higher standard than men (Pew, 2015). In addition to these socialized gender norms, women often face family obligations and private costs to public engagement (Sapiro, 1982). Fathers are typically praised when they run for office, while mothers, especially those with young children, are often criticized (Layton, 2007).

Gender norms are only one impediment that women face before running for office. Some studies show that women are considerably less likely to be encouraged to run for office by political activists or party leaders. Women also tend to view themselves as less qualified for public office than men (Fox and Lawless, 2004). Researchers have identified a gender disparity in those that run for office and discuss the "gatekeepers" or the individuals who end up selecting the candidate. Gatekeepers may be voters, party members, or political leaders; it is apparent that the biases of these individuals have an impact on who ends up winning elections. These gatekeepers are much more likely to be men, and therefore may make it more difficult for women to be successful political candidates (Conway, 2001). Though there are statistically significant disparities in the rates at which men and women run for office, when women do run, they win at the same rate as men (Fox and Lawless, 2004).

Structural and Institutional Barriers

In addition to social and cultural barriers to entry, there are several structural challenges that prevent women from entering politics. In the early 1980s, the average female Congressional candidate did not raise as much money as the average male candidate (Uhlener, 1986). Today, female candidates garner the largest share of their campaign funds through smaller individual donors. Democratic women are more successful at raising funds through individual donors than Republican women or men, primarily because of Political Action Committees (PACs) like EMILY's list. However, Democratic women experience a gender gap when it comes to more significant donations, and are not as successful at bringing in large donors (Crespin and Deitz, 2010). There is also evidence that gender differences in campaign finance are more pronounced when women enter the political arena for the first time (Werner, 2007).

Gerrymandering and redistricting efforts also have a substantial impact on gender differences in politics. The majority party typically draws districts in an attempt to gain power or protect incumbents. This methodology often makes districts less competitive (FairVote). The practice of drawing districts to favor incumbents presents another barrier to entry for women into politics. Since there are fewer female incumbents than male incumbents, gerrymandering favors male politicians. Additionally, a decrease in the number of competitive seats reduces the number of opportunities women have to enter the political arena, if and when they do decide to run (Fox and Lawless, 2004)

² According to a recent Pew Research survey, 54 percent of respondents said that a man would be better at running a professional sports team than a woman. However, Americans are more likely to see a woman as a better manager for a retail chain or hospital (Pew, 2015).

There are many different angles from which to address the issue of gender equity in politics. Since women can win elections at the same rate as men, it appears that the main barriers manifest themselves before women ever run for office. A comprehensive solution will need to tackle multiple parts of the pipeline. It is important to help young girls and professional women overcome cultural and social norms, and provide them with the tools to successfully address institutional barriers.

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