

# Gender and Politics in the US

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is focused on the gendered nature of politics where now gender has an impact on how people think, organize, or the information and knowledge they have in the world. The study of the role of especially women has proved to be quite an interesting research topic. The current political situation of the world and especially the United States involving specifically the female gender is made all the more impressive in that as recently as the 1920s women didn't even have the right to vote. Besides voting, women were completely left out of the formal structures of the political scene. They were outsiders that could not hold elective office not even serving on juries (Ramirez, Soysal & Shanahan, 1997).

While the current state of politics can be considered a considerable step in the right direction thanks to the historical fight fueled by women to get equal rights in the world of politics, there is still a long way to go. Long gone are the days that a woman could not have a separate legal identity from her husband, but still, new challenges stand in the way of political equality among all genders. By understanding that politics aims to instill its values in society without any discrimination based on gender, race, tribe, or any other orientation then this would act as a stepping stone to achieve equality in the landscape of politics (Campbell, 1992).

Since the nineteenth amendment to the constitution made it possible for women to vote, many women have indeed participated in politics actively besides the voting process. However, gender stereotypes about voters as well as politicians of the female gender still exist. Indeed the study of women in the field of comparative politics has been found wanting (Merkl, 1976). Historically women have faced barriers in their fight for equal political rights and this struggle is up until now happening. While women have made strides in politics as seen in the almost record number of 86 women in Congress, this is put to shame when you consider for every one woman in Congress there are five men. Women may have the same equal political rights but the gender biases are hurting their stand in the political life (Vega & Firestone, 1995).

Experts have found that the barriers that hinder the success of women in politics are lower as compared to the past, but the

issue is that these barriers no matter how insignificant they may seem do exist and are playing a quite significant role. Female lawmakers in the Congress have been proposing bills that have brought greater attention to the issues affect the female gender most notably children. While this is a progress to be proud of, there are some bills that have been shot down due to the lack of support. These initiatives as much as they are helpful, face stern rejection as they could potentially lead to a newer political world not focused on or influenced by gender (Karen, 1991).

## HISTORY OF WOMEN STRUGGLES TO GAIN EQUAL POLITICAL RIGHTS

During the beginning of the 20th century, the one thing that was clear was that the political structure favored some people more than others. This was brought about mostly by differences in religion, class, race, region, and ethnicity. However, gender was perhaps among the biggest issues in this structure as women were marked as secondary citizens meaning that they more than often suffered discriminations. With time, however, women found ways in which they infiltrated the different sectors of political life, though equality was and is still a big issue today (Hunter, 1992).

In 1900, the legal standing of a woman was essentially attached to their marital status where a separate legal identity was non-existence meaning they could not participate in political activities such as voting or hold public office. Let alone political issues, a woman did not have the right to share information about family planning or even control her own biological reproduction. No separate legal identity would mean that a woman could not sue or be sued. Some of other rights that women didn't have were the option to pursue their career of choice or even own property.

One of the barriers to women's charge in the political field was the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution which they were not under "persons" meaning that equal protection under the law was nothing but a distant dream then. The women's responsibility was confined to the homes where the boy child was raised to be a future citizen but the daughter child was to be raised so they could be the mothers of tomorrow.

In the 1830s, at a time when women speaking in public was considered scandalous, Sarah and Angelina Grimké started speaking against slavery and this would lay foundations for the women to make the step to change the political world in the 20th century (Birney, 1969). The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 also had a part to play in the progress women have made today on the political platform. It's rightfully considered the first ever women's convention to be held in the USA soil with the main focus being to address the rights of women (Wellman, 2010). This was the first wave that would build foundations for the antifeminism force that would take over the political world in the United States. This was more than just the simple right to vote as it was focused on the wide women's right. These courageous acts led to more and more women appearing in public setting by 1900, and this led to the strengthening of the foundation. This started to bear fruits where women's education was expanded and they could now choose a variety of career paths unlike before. Women's suffrage movements gained a lot of power and this led to increased individualism especially in the urban areas and they pushed for equal rights of the most basic rights (Buechler, 1990).

At its inception, the suffrage movement was driven mostly by the educated white women but by 1910s it had become a mass movement where its goals and aims adhered to African American women as well as those in the working class who had their own political agendas and used this movement as a gateway to push their agendas such as racial discrimination which was shared by the class of working people (Buechler, 1990). The effect of the suffrage movement combined with other factors was the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution where American Woman Suffrage Association was dismantled and formed a new as the League of Women Voters (Young, 1989). The purpose of the newly formed movement was to teach women from all walks of life how to exercise their voting rights (Brown, 1993).

As mentioned above there was increased individualism among women and this lack of solidarity meant that the subsequent women movements created had little impact on the stand of women in politics as their constitutions were not only narrow but they also differed in priorities. However, all was not well as still women suffered legal discriminations especially those who had sought to live as professions. Thus, an Equal Rights Amendment was introduced in 1923 by The National Women's Party but was rejected by other suffragists who viewed this as a risk to their recently acquired rights from the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution (Zimmerman, 1991).

While women had found their voices there still remained distinct racial lines. Although the African American Woman supported the cause through the mass movements her voice

was muted. In 1950, a lot changed where women would work in the labor force as the effects of the Second World War had a telling and lasting impact (Goldin, 1991). However, the traditional gender roles took their place and the male returned to having most of the rights. The women were, however, not to be shot down and this saw the rise of activism among women from different constituencies.

The years between 1960 and 1980 was the home of not only women rights but also wider rights revolution that aimed at eliminating the legally sanctioned discriminations based on gender and race. The women's movement led direct assaults on the structure of their rights and this left a telling mark on the landscape of politics. Women were pushing for issues like child care, domestic violence, abortion, and sexual harassment. While the Equal Rights Amendment may have gone down in defeat in 1982, this contrasted to the early years of the 20th century as the new right had seen an overwhelming growth of political power (Soule & King, 2006). While the women did focus on individualism they never lost sight of the task at hand which was to ensure equal rights in the political environment.

This new wave of antifeminism flourished mostly because of the insecurities introduced into the economy thanks to the Vietnam War which almost crippled it. This situation while unsuitable for the country represented a catalyst that the women movements were missing. This only hastened the approach on the point of having equal legal rights as those of their male counterparts. Their directness and aggressive nature in which they pushed for the settling of issues such as sexual harassment, and domestic violence served to reveal how deep this problem had been entrenched in the country for decades. Antifeminism became a strong force in the 1970s thanks to the mobilization of anti-abortion forces (Qian, 2004).

The changes that occurred up until this point in history illustrated a long journey to ensure that the political field did not tip the advantage based on the gender of the candidates running for public office or being involved in any one of the many political activities. The direction in which women politics took could not be envisioned in 1900, where now women are not only enjoying equal rights but are making serious advancements in the field of politics and to imagine this all started with a courageous public speaking (Qian, 2004).

## **WOMEN INVOLVEMENT IN RECENT POLITICS**

Ever since the nineteenth amendment to the constitution, women have made remarkable steps in infiltrating the political world as well as working their way through the many levels of

government in existence of the United States. This has truly been one journey that took a lot of sacrifices and the fruits have been worth it, with more still to come. Perhaps the first significant climb to political power happened in the Supreme Court. In 1981, Sandra Day O'Connor was named as the first Supreme Court Justice by the then President Ronald Reagan. The Supreme Court has served as an example to illustrate the ascendance of women to political power as Sandra Day O'Connor was joined by Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Successions happened in the Supreme Court where Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan soon claimed the seats of power too. To add to this, women comprised a third of the nine sitting justices in the Supreme Court in 2012.

The Secretary of State is another position of political power that was first held by a woman named Madeline Albright who was appointed by President Bill Clinton in 1996. This post was to be held by another woman named Condoleezza Rice brought into the power seat in 2005 by President George W. Bush. This post was also held by Hillary Clinton.

How far women have come in politics is perhaps illustrated even better by Hillary Clinton who has run for the presidency twice. While she was the twenty fifth woman to attempt to hold the presidency seat the first time she ran, she almost came close to becoming the first woman to win the nomination of a major party. However, she did manage to do just that in 2016 and was truly marginally close to beating President Donald Trump to the hot seat, where people had been for once considering the possibility of having a woman president. Though she did not win, she managed to transcend gender in one of the most truly remarkable showings of that anyone from any gender can strive and conquer politics. By making history, Hillary Clinton could change the entire landscape of politics where now more and more women will view the political world as one that they can conquer regardless of their gender. This could have an effect of improving on the 20% of women in the Congress as this will lead to more women interested in politics where they believe that their genders don't matter as much as their ideas and policies they are looking to implement.

This represents significant steps as the first woman to run for presidency known as Victoria Claflin Woodhull came about 150 years ago in 1872 before the nineteenth amendment to the constitutions and the only way she was able to join the race was because she had started a newspaper firm that had a huge support for women's suffrage. Though, she would go on to receive no single vote running on the Equal Rights Party (Goldsmith, 2011).

## **BARRIERS TO WOMEN IN POLITICS TODAY**

One interesting question you might ask is the number of women in office that low almost 100 years into getting the right to vote and participate in politics. Do you blame the political system for being or impenetrable or are the women uncertain, unwilling, or just plain uninterested? These are few of the questions that people ask while trying to understand the low number of women at the political offices.

One of the factors that handicap female candidates are campaign funding which will tend to favor the male. This is because of the gender wage gap that exists as a result of many factors which leave women with lower incomes. Besides the gender wage gap, disproportionate unpaid family care and occupation segregation all account for the low incomes. There is no public funding allowed in the United States and this means women are at a disadvantage before even the race starts (Schneir, 1994).

Another factor is more a social/ cultural barrier where there are persisting gender roles where for instance masculinity is associated with leadership. Hence, a lack of women in the high political positions may change the perception of both women and men leading them to rethink women's "ability to rule". This leads to even other women candidates to perceive electoral environment biased against women and also highly competitive. By thinking they are less likely to qualify than their male counterparts, they are already handing over the advantage to the men.

According to several surveys, women were more likely than men to think of politics as pointless. This was furthered by where women are brought into politics but are forced to conform to the male norms. The perception of the ideal candidate needs to be altered so that women can be given more opportunity to run.

The last barrier is going to cover is about the time constraints and family work where the woman holds the majority of the responsibility of household tasks and child care. This leads to a situation where women will spend most of their time at home compared to men. The constant persistence of women to deal with child care and other responsibilities makes it difficult to juggle a political position in between as these activities are rarely equally shared and hence, the woman suffers (Okin, 1989).

## **GETTING MORE WOMEN INVOLVED IN POLITICS**

The strong suffrages led to the addressing of women rights and while it may sound ironical, the current political environment

is in need of a strategic and coordinated feminist movement that will perhaps increase the participation levels of women in politics as the parties are looking quite ineffective in doing just that. A feminist movement could sponsor more female candidates which would in pressurize those in office regardless of their gender. This movement would also be well within their rights to push policies that would bring about gender equality which seems to be the root of multiple problems. To ensure that the feminist movement is effective it needs to be autonomous such that it does not affiliate with any single party as this will make increase the power it has so that it can apply pressure to the parties (Alexander, 2012).

The current situation of women's movements is dire as most are struggling and this is taking with it the "civic voice" of women. The broad-based movements need to be replaced by more local movements which will have a higher chance of getting young feminist interested in the movement as well as in politics. There has been a noted deterioration in the level of activism in the grass root due to this issue.

Another measure would be to ensure that women and girls feel positive about their role in society by ensuring that laws, procedures, and policies aim to ensure gender equality. Gender analysis during policy making will go a long way into ensuring that the rights and needs of women are catered for and that they are provided with an easy route to get into politics (MacKinnon, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

There can be no questioning the dedication that women have gone through to ensure that they are subjected to the same rights as men. However, the entire struggle that women put is at risk due to poor policy making behind the scenes and also the slow but inevitable crumbling of feminist movements. While the number of women in politics continues to increase, the gender stereotype is threatening to undo the good work where besides men, women themselves expect men to perform better in politics. Therefore, to avoid falling back to the women's revolution in politics better policy making as well as movements that organize women is crucial (Alexander, 2012).

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