

WGS.S10 Discussion – International Women in Politics

Article:

Beyond Hillary and Benazir: Women's Political Leadership Worldwide

Background:

The article surveys and analyzes recent gains for women in electoral politics, in order to further understand why women's representation has increased in some countries but not in others, and to see what these developments mean for women as a group.

Main Points:

I. Introduction

- a. Rise of several female leaders reflects gains that women as a group have made in the political sphere
- b. However, experiences and portrayals of female politicians, as well as overall under-representation demonstrates that politics are still gendered

II. Women as National Leaders

- a. **Women tend to become national leaders in countries where women's status lags far behind that of men in educational and economic spheres**
 - i. However, women who actually get these positions are usu. highly educated and more privileged than most women in their country
 - ii. Importance of kinship/family ties
 - iii. Instability may create more opportunities for women to access executive posts
- b. **Influence of structure of the political system:** women more likely to serve in parliamentary systems and as prime ministers than presidents
 - i. Bypassing biased general public and chosen by party instead
 - ii. Different traits required of positions
 1. Prime ministers share power w/ cabinet and party members, so "feminine" qualities like negotiation/collaboration may be more valued
 2. Presidents are expected to act independently, so more "masculine" qualities may be more valued

III. Women in National Parliaments

- a. **Three factors shaping women's access to national legislatures**
 - i. Political institutions
 1. Countries w/ proportional representation (PR) electoral systems have more women than countries with majoritarian electoral systems (parties expecting to win only a few seats are less likely to nominate women)

- ii. Socioeconomic factors
Sex segregation in labor force means women are less eligible

- iii. Cultural factors
 1. Nordic countries place strong emphasis on social and economic equality ▼ high proportion of women in parliament
 2. Public-private divide: gender roles discourage women from pursuing politics
 3. Media portrayal of female politicians

IV. Gender and Routes to Political Office

- a. New Trends in Women's National Leadership
 - i. If a position has lower levels of autonomy, security, and individual prerogatives, its structure may pose fewer challenges to women (ex. prime ministers may be ousted)
 - ii. Most female national leaders have secured positions through **appointment, not popular vote**
 - iii. Most female leaders (67%) are from dual executives systems (**share power**)
 - iv. **Political instability** help women rise to power: interim or transitional terms
- b. Recent Trends in Women's Access to National Parliaments
 - i. Adoption of **gender quotas**
 1. These don't always lead to intended effects
 2. Have greatest impact in PR electoral systems and in left-wing parties
 - ii. Why aren't there enough women? 3 possibilities:
 1. Political ambition
 2. Biases in recruitment practices (elites discriminate against women when selecting candidates)
 3. Prejudices of voters (this has been largely debunked!)

V. Other Hurdles: women who reach these positions do not always try to promote

women

- a. Oftentimes constrained by male leaders who appoint them
- b. Self-imposed concerns to avoid being pegged as only focusing on women's issues
- c. Many adopt "masculine" styles of leadership

Questions for Discussion

1. Many of the discussed countries, which lag in terms of women's equality as compared to America, have managed to have prominent women in positions of political power. Some reasons provided in these articles for women's abilities to get to these positions are familial ties, political instability, political structure (appointment vs. popular vote), cultural factors, and gender quotas in parliament. Are there any other factors that you think are holding the U.S. back? How long do you think it will be until we see a female president? Is it feasible given that our political system and culture lack many of these factors that have led to female leaders in other countries?

2. It seems like, as with many of the problems we've discussed in class, the lack of representation of women in politics could be addressed at the level of culture and socialization, and also at the level of policies to help combat discrimination (i.e. gender quotas).

What do you think is appropriate to address this issue? <http://www.emilyslist.org/>. Are quotas a good thing, or are they unfair? Will they only undermine women's legitimacy to be in positions of power (think affirmative action and "you only got in because you're a girl"), or will they rightfully help women who deserve power to attain it? What can be done for presidential/prime minister positions as opposed to parliamentary positions?

3. Do women in power have a responsibility to promote an agenda to advocate for women and gender equality? What do you think of women who do not? Is it strategic? To what extent do you think women have to distance themselves from womanhood or feminism to be taken seriously as political leaders?

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