

# Women in Political Office in North America

*Farida Jalalzai*

## Introduction

This chapter examines women's progress in obtaining positions of political leadership in North America. While making some comparisons to its northern and southern neighbours, this chapter mainly concentrates on the United States. It provides an overview of patterns of office-holding and identifies opportunities for improvements. It concludes by offering insights into how women can influence the political agenda and help women better articulate and further advance their political interests. Women's political incorporation varies throughout the region. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Mexico has the highest level of women in the national legislature in North America and ranks fifth overall in the world: 49% of the seats in both the Chamber of Deputies and Senate are held by women. Women occupy 29% percent of seats in the House of Commons and 49% of the Senate in Canada. Finally, women make up 23% of members of the House of Representatives and account for 25% of senators in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The United States places near the middle of the pack globally, ahead of Croatia and Brazil but behind the United Arab Emirates and South Africa. This is in spite of the fact that women in the US outpace men in degree attainment and benefit from more progressive attitudes regarding gender and political leadership.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=3&year=2020>. Accessed 13 April 2020.

## Trends

After a very slow start, women started making inroads in the US Congress during the 1990s. By 2000, they still only comprised 13% and 9% of the House and Senate respectively. Twenty years later, women made gains in both chambers, more than doubling their percentages in the Senate. Though enjoying record numbers compared to previous decades, women, however, still remain grossly under-represented in Congress. This chapter explains why the US still lags behind many countries worldwide in this regard and why it matters.

## Explanations for Women's Political Under-Representation

A main explanation for women's under-representation in legislative positions centres on institutions. Parliamentary systems have greater percentages of women legislators and countries using proportional representation (PR) electoral systems tend to see a higher share of women in parliament.<sup>2</sup> Generally, countries with PR systems promote women at a higher rate, followed by mixed systems, and finally, single-member majoritarian systems.<sup>3</sup>

In multi-member districts, having a greater number of seats at stake (higher district magnitude) is generally considered better for women. Many argue that closed lists, where the party exerts control over the order of candidates on the ballot, enhances women's presence.<sup>4</sup> Others, however, find that open lists, where the public is able to register a preference, may

---

<sup>2</sup> "The Proportion of Women in Legislatures and Cabinets: What is the Empirical Link?" *Polity* 49, no. 3 (2017): 434-460; Rainbow Murray, "French Lesson: What the UK can Learn from the French Experiment with Gender Parity." *Political Quarterly*, 83, no. 4 (2012): 735-741; Rob Salmond, "Proportional Representation and Female Parliamentarians." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2006): 175-204.

<sup>3</sup> Manon Tremblay, "The Substantive Representation of Women and PR: Some Reflections on the Role of Surrogate Representation and Critical Mass." *Politics & Gender*, 2 no. 4 (2006): 502-511.

<sup>4</sup> Miki Caul Kittilson, "Women's Representation in Parliament: The Role of Political Parties." *Party Politics* 5, no. 1 (1999): 79-98; Maarja Luhiste, "Party Gatekeepers' Support for Viable Female Candidacy in PR-List Systems." *Politics & Gender* 11 no 1 (2015): 89-116.

be better for women, depending on the context.<sup>5</sup> Whether the party or the general public in a particular country proves receptive to women in power should therefore be considered.

Countries increasingly adopted legislative quotas in the 1990s. Quota effectiveness is highly dependent on many factors, including the strength of enforcement mechanisms and electoral system type. While the ultimate impact of quotas on women's legislative incorporation varies, many countries with the greatest percentages of women parliamentarians use quotas.<sup>6</sup>

The United States utilises single member majoritarian districts and lacks quotas. The incumbency advantage (there are no federal term limits) further constrains women since they are less likely to hold seats in the first place.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, Canada has quotas at the party level. While women's percentages in the Canadian Senate appear impressive, it should be noted that it is an appointed body that is substantially weaker than the House of Commons. That Canada also utilises single member districts may explain why it is only slightly ahead of the United States in terms of women's percentage in the lower house (29% versus 25%).

Mexico uses a mixed electoral system (a combination of both single districts and PR seats in each chamber). A legislative quota was enacted in 2003. A series of reforms, including a constitutional measure passed in 2014, strengthened the quota mandate and enforcement mechanisms. This enabled women to gain about nearly half the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate in 2018. Crucially, not only did the quota require

---

<sup>5</sup> Sona N. Golder, Laura B. Stephenson, Karine Van Der Straeten, André Blais, Damien Bol, Philipp Harfst, and Jean François Laslier, "Votes for Women: Electoral Systems and Support for Female Candidates." *Politics and Gender* 13, no. 1 (2017): 107-131.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo, *The Impact of Gender Quotas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012; Mona Lena Krook, *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox (editors), *Women and Elective Office*, 2nd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

equal numbers of men and women candidates, parties could also no longer relegate women to just unwinnable districts.<sup>8</sup>

Other explanations for women's lack of progress in obtaining legislative positions centre on structural conditions. Evidence from US congressional elections largely demonstrate that women can and do win when they run and downplay gender discrimination as a hindrance.<sup>9</sup> Research also suggests, however, that women invest much time troubleshooting for sexist or gendered treatment coming from the public, political elites, and the mass media and have to work twice as long to secure the same funding as their male counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

Women's lack of confidence in their own credentials contributes to the leaky political pipeline. Highly educated women and those from professions considered springboards to political careers are also less prone to view themselves as eligible for office and are less likely to be recruited as candidates compared to their male counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Family duties have kept political careers out of women's reach.<sup>12</sup> Others, however, do not point to this as a leading factor hindering women.<sup>13</sup> Yet, both political elites and the general public prefer "traditional"

---

<sup>8</sup> Magda Hinojosa and Jennifer Piscopo, "Women Won Big in Mexico's Elections Taking Nearly Half of the Legislature's Seats. Here's Why." Washington Post, Monkey Cage. July 11, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/11/women-won-big-in-mexico-elections-taking-nearly-half-the-legislatures-seats-heres-why/>.

<sup>9</sup> Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless, *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016; Kathleen Dolan, *When Does Gender Matter? Women Candidates and Gender Stereotypes in American Elections*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Shauna L. Shames, Rachel I. Bernhard, Mirya R. Holman, and Dawn Langan Teele (editors), *Good Reasons to Run: Women and Political Candidacy*. Philadelphia, PA. Temple University Press, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> David Niven, "Party Elites and Women Candidates: The Shape of Bias." In *Women, Gender and Politics: A Reader*, edited by Mona Lena Krook and Sarah Childs, 151-58. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; Kelly Dittmar, *Navigating Gendered Terrain: Stereotypes and Strategy in Political Campaigns*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara C. Burrell, *A Woman's Place Is in the House: Campaigning for Congress in the Feminist Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010; Richard L. Fox, and Jennifer L. Lawless, "Reconciling Family Roles with Political Ambition: The New Normal for Women in Twenty-First Century U.S. Politics." *The Journal of Politics* 76, no. 2 (2014): 398-414.

candidates – ones that are married and with children.<sup>14</sup> This preference unduly burdens women given the difficulty of balancing family responsibilities with full-time political careers.

## Impacts of Women in Office

The dearth of women in politics matters in a democracy. Women in politics send important messages to the public about the accessibility of institutions to women. Recognition of this enhanced legitimacy makes women (and men) more confident in their ability to affect the political system, heightens their interest in politics, and increases their likelihood of participating in the public sphere. This context creates a more active, vibrant, and representative political context from which all can benefit. Prominent women role models may also generate greater public support for female leadership and may inspire women and girls to enter the political fray.<sup>15</sup> Several studies confirm that women legislators do act more on behalf of women's policy interests, even after controlling for other relevant factors such as party.<sup>16</sup> For these reasons and more, women's political incorporation is imperative.

## Strategies and Opportunities

Women's presence will not increase absent significant structural, cultural, and institutional shifts. Women need resources to wage effective political

---

<sup>14</sup> Dawn L. Teele, Joshua Kalla, and Frances Rosenbluth, "The Ties That Double Bind: Social Roles and Women's Underrepresentation in Politics." *American Political Science Review*, 112, no. 3 (2018): 525-541.

<sup>15</sup> Amy C. Alexander and Farida Jalalzai, "Symbolic Empowerment and Female Heads of States and Government: A Global, Multilevel Analysis." *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 8: no 1, 2020: 24-43; Christina Wolbrecht and David E. Campbell, "Leading by Example: Female Members of Parliament as Political Role Models." *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (2007): 921-39; Christina Wolbrecht and David E. Campbell, "Role Models Revisited: Youth, Novelty, and the Impact of Female Candidates." *Politics, Groups, & Identities* 5 no 3 (2017): 418-34.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Childs, "Hitting the Target: Are Labour Women MPs 'Acting for' Women?" *Parliamentary Affairs* 55 (2002):143-53; Debra L. Dodson, *The Impact of Women in Congress*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; Kelly Dittmar, Kira Sanbonmatsu, and Susan J. Carroll, *A Seat at the Table Congresswomen's Perspectives on Why Their Presence Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

campaigns. A number of organisations aim to spur women's confidence, efficacy, and ambition. Affiliated programmes help build financial support for women candidates. Parties must actively recruit a diverse array of women candidates. Through a host of virtual networks, women share successful electoral strategies and advocate on behalf of issues important to them. Such linkages build mentoring systems between seasoned and up-and-coming women leaders.

Individually, women can pursue issues that they are passionate about and use that as their starting point, not power itself. Women are more likely to pursue office when they identify a specific goal. They can focus on making a difference overall but also concentrate on advancing policies empowering women. Expansions of paid family leave across states and on the national stage are necessary to address work/life balance. Identifying the personal, cultural and professional barriers to advancement or leadership and determining potential opportunities for overcoming challenges is also key.

Women can also work to build a trusted team of personal and professional advisors, develop a base of supporters from within their specific communities and build relationships with those who can help them attain power, including party members, leaders, government colleagues, and civil society. Again, the motivation is not power for its own sake, but for empowering marginalised groups, including women. That women in the US have surpassed men in their attainment of college and Masters degrees also presents an opportunity for women's political empowerment. Networks of alumni together can help bring change and support women's bids for office. Educational settings are ideal for transmitting political aspirations to future women leaders.

Since 1980, the proportion of women voting in US presidential elections is higher than men. Women's turnout could make a substantial difference on politics especially since they more often vote for the Democratic Party, which generally takes more liberal positions on gender issues. Activists need to recognise women as an even stronger force in politics and send messages to political candidates and politicians that they will not gain election or retain power without women's support.

But the responsibility cannot just be placed on the shoulders of individual women and women as a group. Candidate training, networking, active recruitment, and even running for office can only go so far toward

the goal of empowering women. Absent larger institutional and cultural change, women will not gain political footholds or be able to empower women through their work.<sup>17</sup> While there is truth underpinning the mantra that “when women run, they win,” the literature outlined throughout this chapter also confirm that women still navigate a highly gendered political terrain. Society as a whole must acknowledge these inequities, confront them and work to dismantle them. Women still must exert much effort counteracting negative perceptions of women’s leadership. Sexism among the public, the political establishment, and the media should be called out rather than ignored if there is to be any hope of changing attitudes and behaviours. Highlighting the difference women can make as political actors can be used to press for changes in the electoral laws. As mentioned, quotas matter. Actors committed to women’s empowerment in the United States can take advantage of the many resources available that provide information on how to best design quotas.

## Conclusions

Women in North America are gaining ground in politics. The reality is, however, much more work must be done. There has never been a better opportunity to develop strategies for political empowerment. With more women at the helm, women as a group will attain a greater sense of efficacy and have greater willingness to participate in the political system. As suggested, women legislators are also more likely to work on behalf of issues important to women. Even in spite of differing ideological and partisan considerations, women can caucus together to identify issues and employ strategies that empower women. This is not only better for women but for democracy overall.

---

<sup>17</sup> Kelly Dittmar, “Encouragement is not Enough: Addressing Social and Structural Barriers to Female Recruitment.” *Politics & Gender*, 11(4) 2015b: 759-765.