



The Rocky Road to the White House for American Women

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Across the world, female chief executives are no longer unusual. Women have held the highest national offices in Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Iceland, Finland, India, Israel, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Currently, women serve as presidents in Argentina, Brazil, Malawi, and South Korea, and female prime ministers direct national governments in nations ranging from Denmark to Senegal and Thailand. For a third time, a female chancellor and her party triumphed in the recent German parliamentary elections, cementing what the British Broadcasting Corporation now calls “The Era of Angela Merkel.” And in Norway, Irna Solberg now serves as her nation’s *second* female prime minister.

The United States stands apart, however. Not only have we never had a female president; neither of the two major parties has nominated a woman for the nation’s highest office. Why are the obstacles to women especially high on the road to the White House? The vast majority of the public seems open to a female president, but standard U.S. career routes make it unusually hard for women to position themselves for and win the presidency.

U.S. Voters are Open to Women

There is little evidence that American voters are unwilling to vote for female candidates on the basis of gender.

- Voter party identification, candidate incumbency, and the issue positions of candidates are the primary determinants of voter choices. Once nominated in districts friendly to their party and armed with adequate funding, female U.S. candidates have done as well as males in elections to Congress and state-based offices.
- Since 1937, the Gallup Poll has asked whether voters are willing to vote for a woman for president. By 2012, 95 percent of respondents claimed they would vote for a female, with Republicans, young voters, and elderly voters being somewhat less likely to say they would do so. For more than two decades, more than nine in ten Americans have declared their willingness to vote for a female presidential candidate, and the trajectory of openness is upward, with the caveat that about five percent of voters currently remain closed to the idea.

Uncertain Routes to the White House

By now, men of many different backgrounds have made it to the U.S. presidency. America has had an unmarried president (James Buchanan), a Catholic president (John F. Kennedy), an African American president, and presidents of varied ages born in 18 different states. But no woman has yet advanced to so much as a presidential candidacy, so tracing the paths taken by men may or may not show the routes likely to be taken by women in the future.

- For men, serving as vice president has opened the door to the presidency. Thirteen former vice presidents have later become president. This route is obviously not currently open for women. Only two – Geraldine Ferraro and Sarah Palin – have been ever nominated for vice president, both alongside presidential candidates who lost.
- The second most common male route has run through governorships, offices held by seven of the 43 male presidents. But right now only five women hold this office – including Democrat Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire and Republicans Nikki Haley of South Carolina, Mary Fallin of Oklahoma, Susana Martinez of New Mexico, and Jan Brewer of Arizona. The share of women in statewide executive offices has actually declined over the past decade.

In other democracies, routes to national executive office are more clearly structured. Aspiring candidates typically serve for several years in the national legislature and gain experience as a cabinet minister; many are then selected as party leader ready to wage a presidential contest or serve as prime minister. A clear path is visible to all competitors and politically ambitious women as well as men know what they have to do. In contrast, U.S. political parties do not control the route to the presidency, making preparation uncertain and difficult. Big money backers or national celebrity can boost an outside contender as much as any prior public service.

The U.S. has no gender-specific rules that might assist women in running for office. Political scientists have identified gender quotas as the quickest way to increase female candidacies. In France, Italy, Norway and Spain, among other countries, political parties have adopted gender quotas that increased the number of females running for legislative offices and set many on the tracks toward higher offices. In the United States, both the Democratic and Republican parties have adopted rules requiring equal representation of women and men within their party leadership structures and encouraging equality in convention delegations. But neither party has gender rules or quotas that would assist women in gaining legislative or presidential nominations. Given the relative weakness and decentralization of U.S. political parties, it is not clear that such rules could be enforced, even if they were devised.

Are U.S. Women about to Break Through?

The eligibility pool of likely female presidential candidates is small. In addition to current and former governors and serving or former senators, three female former secretaries of state are, in theory, available – including Hillary Rodham Clinton, who enjoys high level backing and is currently the overwhelming frontrunner according to polls taken of her party's voters. No one yet knows for sure whether Hillary Clinton will actually run in 2016, but would she open a route other women can follow?

In many ways, Clinton's ties and celebrity make her one of a kind. Not only is she a former senator and cabinet officer, she is married to a popular former U.S. president and was ranked as *the* "Most Admired Woman" for eleven straight years. She came very close to winning her party's presidential nomination in 2008. Even if Clinton wins the 2016 Democratic nomination and becomes the first U.S. woman president, she will hardly have followed a path readily open to others. Evidence shows that American women's prior progress toward high offices has been incremental and subject to fits, starts, and reversals. Until a broad pool of credible presidential contenders forms – featuring multiple female governors, legislators, and cabinet officers who enjoy broad visibility and powerful backing – the United States is unlikely to join other nations in regularly advancing women to the highest executive office.