



Why the United States Needs a Woman in the Presidency

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Even had Hillary Clinton prevailed in the 2016 presidential contest, the United States would still have arrived late to the promotion of a woman to the highest executive office. And since Clinton lost, the United States has yet to enter this game. In 1960, Sri Lanka became the first country to be governed by a woman, but this was hardly a sea change because women did not enjoy more widespread success until the 1990s. More than three-quarters of all female presidents and prime ministers have arrived in office in the last two decades, and the female ranks have grown faster since 2010. Nevertheless, the numbers have contracted in recent years. Currently, only six percent of all executives in power around the world are women; and a remarkable 61 percent of the world's countries, including the United States, have never been governed by a woman.

Why has the U.S. failed to elect a woman to the presidency? In my research, I engage this question by examining global patterns of women's executive office holding. In addition, I assess what happens when women are prevented from taking the helm, why it matters, and how this shortfall can be changed.

Why Female Executive Leadership Matters

The dominance of the American Presidency and the masculine traits often associated with and assumed necessary for office holders in American executive institutions pose significant challenges for women. What is more, many issues, like military and foreign affairs, are seen as masculine issues and often associated with the Presidency. Add to this the short supply of women legislators, governors, and presidential candidates (usually no more than one woman competes for a major party nomination) and it becomes difficult to imagine the executive glass ceiling cracking anytime soon.

What difference does it make that the United States has yet to elect its first woman president? Most basically, it matters because the election or appointment of a female executive facilitates women's political empowerment. Overall, women executives create important opportunities for all women in society. Specifically, women leaders can propose and implement policies that promote gender equality and empower many more women. Although we must take into account important factors in addition to gender – such as partisanship, party dynamics in the legislature, and the executive's institutional authority to propose and advance legislation – women executives can in one way or another facilitate policies favorable to women's advancement. And they can advance other women to power in cabinet positions, judgeships and the like. Finally, when women hold presidencies or prime minister ships, they influence the public's attitudes by providing important symbols of female political empowerment. The reality of women in power challenges prior presumptions about politics as a “man's world” – and this change in the sense of what is appropriate and possible in itself helps create a more equitable society.

Ways Forward

How can the United States and other lagging countries finally have a female leader? The following steps could help.

- To expand the pipeline, create more programs that prepare a diverse array of women to run for office at all levels of government.
- Increase the active recruitment of female candidates for offices at all levels by politicians, civic groups, and other leaders.
- Change institutional structures that constrict the political pipeline – for example, by instituting new party rules that require women’s representation on nominating ballots, at political conventions, and in appointive government offices.
- Build institutions that facilitate collaborative governance and women’s political inclusion, such as multi-party parliamentary systems where slates of officeholders can be designated without each having to win the popular vote directly.
- Heighten awareness of the sexist attitudes and stereotypes women still face in politics and create programs to combat such discrimination.
- Organize and advocate around issues especially relevant to women – including sexual harassment and violence, pay equity, reproductive rights, paid family leave, and women’s political incorporation. Place such concerns squarely on the policy agenda and make sure they are advanced, not just issues disproportionately relevant to men.
- Support organizations that mobilize rising numbers of unmarried, millennial, and minority voters, who often back more progressive women candidates and issues.

In 2016, Hillary Clinton lost to an unqualified and deeply flawed Donald Trump, despite the advantages she had in fundraising, family ties to power, name recognition, party support, and vast political qualifications. Had Clinton won, her path to the White House would not have been especially revolutionary, given her standing as the wife of a former president. Still, a win for her would have allowed the United States to join the company of the 74 countries that have had at least one woman in their executive.

In the future, given the high visibility of the U.S. presidency on the world stage, a woman serving in this office could signal to the world that females belong at the center of the democratic political sphere and might also stimulate enhanced levels of public engagement in politics worldwide. Achieving full political empowerment for women takes more than electing a female president, but the difficulties women have faced in achieving presidential power in the United States reveal that women the world over still have a way to go to overcome their political marginalization. The time for a woman in the highest U.S. office will surely come all the same. Although the highest glass ceiling remains unbroken in the world’s most powerful nation, it is not impenetrable – just as it is not unbreakable in other countries around the globe.

Read more in Farida Jalalzai, “A Comparative Assessment of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 Presidential Race”
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