The Maleness of the American Presidency

Marcia Lynn Whicker
Todd W. Areson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops
Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol17/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.
The Maleness of the American Presidency

Marcia Lynn Whicker & Todd W. Areson
Virginia Commonwealth University

Introduction
The U. S. presidency has been a bastion of maleness. Outside of being First Lady, the closest a female has come to presidential power has been with the 1984 Democratic vice-presidential nomination of Geraldine Ferraro. The 1972 presidential candidacy of Democrat Shirley Chisholm, a black from New York, had been discounted by both the press and the public on sexual and racial grounds. In the 1988 primaries, Democratic U. S. Representative Pat Schroeder from Colorado briefly considered running for president but proved unable to raise the necessary funding.

Yet, women in more socially conservative societies—where fewer advances for women might be expected—have served as the chief executives of their countries. For the past decade, Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher has served as prime minister of Britain. Indira Gandhi was prime minister of India from 1966 until her assassination in 1984 by religiously motivated Sikh extremists. Golda Meir, a former school teacher from Milwaukee, served as the prime minister of Israel during the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Isabel Peron, the second wife of Argentine leader General Juan Peron, was elected president of that country in 1974, becoming the first woman head of state in the Western Hemisphere. In 1962, Sirimovo Bandaranaike was elected prime minister of her native Sri Lanka, following the 1959 assassination of her husband, the former prime minister. And, with the fall of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines in 1986, Corazon Aquino was elected president there in a bitter and contentious campaign.

What accounts for women becoming chief executives in countries more socially traditional than the United States and being precluded from the White House in all but secondary roles? The purpose of the article is to explore this crucial political and no longer academic question.

The Impact of the Presidential Structure
One commonality of the above women who became national chief executives is that—with the exceptions of Peron and Aquino, who succeeded to leadership roles after the deaths
of politically prominent husbands—they achieved power in parliamentary systems. Prime ministers are not elected directly by the people but by their fellow party members, since the prime minister is the leader of the dominant party in parliament. Party members and long-term colleagues likely have less traditional bias against women as political leaders than does the general electorate.

In aspiring to leadership of a political party, parliamentary members start with an equally recognized legitimacy: all have been elected from their districts or in national elections, depending on whether single-member districts or proportional representation was employed. Party members seem to operate on a "rough" merit system, which provides rewards of power and leadership based on political and legislative performances. Both male and female party members, once elected, have similar opportunities to excel in the tasks of creating national agenda, developing legislation, and shepherding proposals through legislative hurdles. In this legislative arena, paying one's professional dues is important and, generally, recognized.

In the United States as well as in the various parliamentary systems, women active in party politics have become more similar to the men who are active. Between 1964 and 1976, the differences between male and female political elites in terms of social background, political status, political careers, and perceptions of the political process—all factors affecting one's potential for leadership—were decreasing. During that period, issue orientations were predominantly a matter of party agenda rather than of gender, with the exception of issues dealing directly with gender roles.

In the United States, however, unlike parliamentary systems, presidents are elected by people, through the electoral college system. Despite concern over the biases this system causes, the electoral college rarely fails to confirm the popular vote. In practice, U. S. presidential outcomes may be based less on political and legislative merit than on effective media exposure and communications, levels of campaign funding, and personal appeal of the candidate.

While party identification affects outcomes in U. S. elections, the role of U. S. political parties has diminished steadily in recent decades as candidates have opted to build their own campaign organizations. In parliamentary systems, party discipline has been much stronger: parties control the nominating process and, through the selection of leaders, reward individuals who have provided loyal party service.

Women, while becoming leaders in political systems
based more directly on merit, have fared less well in arenas where public opinion dominates. In the U. S., anti-discrimination legislation has been a recent occurrence, made necessary by the slow pace of change in political opinion. Women only achieved the right to vote in 1920, with state ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

In other areas, especially employment, social legislation has been necessary to continue to advance. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 was the first federal law against sex discrimination in employment. In 1972 and again in 1974, two major expansions of the act extended coverage to executive, administrative, and professional employees and to most federal, state, and local government employees.

It was the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Title VII) that safeguarded equal opportunity for women in employment. Originally intended to protect blacks and other racial minorities, the 1964 act included equal opportunity for women as an amendment—and a political miscalculation by opponents of the act. Intending to kill the act by including coverage of women, opponents were surprised when the amended act passed. Title VII also covers sexual harassment on the job. The Pregnancy Disability Act of 1978, an amendment to Title VII, provides pregnancy protections for female employees.

Social legislation has also been necessary to protect women from discrimination in non-employment areas. Federal legislation has prohibited discrimination by institutions receiving federal funds. In marriage and divorce, it has taken a combination of both court suits and legislation to diverge from the English common-law assumption that husband and wife are one, with reciprocal and not equal rights. Only in 1974, with the passage of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, was sex discrimination in credit approval banned.

Popular biases against women, partially overcome through social legislation, still exist in politics and can be expressed more directly in presidential electoral politics than in parliamentary selection of prime ministers. As Madison feared, majority rule rather than elite rule—a founding principle of the nation and one to which most citizens readily adhere—can sometimes be used as an instrument of bias and prejudice.

An Absence of Appropriate Political Experience

A survey of the previous political experience of presidents and party nominees for president since 1960 indicates that three backgrounds emerge as the dominant training grounds for those who would be president—the offices of vice-president, U. S.
Senator, and governor.

John F. Kennedy, the first president born and elected in this century, was a Democratic U. S. Senator from Massachusetts when he ran for the presidency in 1960. Democrat Lyndon Johnson, his successor, wielded great power for years as Senate Majority Leader before accepting the vice-presidency in 1960, after a failed presidential bid. Had he not become president as a result of Kennedy’s assassination, he likely would have run again for the White House.

The necessity of first being tempered in these special “proving grounds” is not limited to Democrats. Republican Richard Nixon served in the Senate and as vice-president prior to both his unsuccessful 1960 presidential bid and his successful 1968 bid, against Vice-President Hubert Humphrey.

Even with the one “accidental” president in recent years, Republican Gerald Ford, the pattern holds. Ford was catapulted to the vice-presidency through the resignation of Nixon’s corrupt vice-president, Spiro Agnew. Within a few months, Nixon’s own resignation, brought about by impeachable charges of obstruction of justice in the Watergate Affair, propelled Ford into the presidency.


Even unsuccessful presidential nominees have acquired their political experience in the U. S. Senate, the vice-presidency, and the presidency. Former Vice-President Nixon, who opposed Senator Kennedy in 1960, fits this pattern. In 1964, Republican Senator Barry Goldwater ran unsuccessfully against Vice-President Johnson. Former Democratic Senator from Minnesota and incumbent Vice-President Hubert Humphrey was defeated by Nixon in 1968. In 1972, President Nixon defeated South Dakota Democratic Senator George McGovern.

In 1976, former governor Jimmy Carter defeated incumbent President Gerald Ford and, in turn, former governor Ronald Reagan defeated incumbent President Jimmy Carter in 1980. In 1984, President Reagan’s unsuccessful Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale, had been both a Democratic Senator from Minnesota and Carter’s vice-president.

This pattern of formative political experience in the Senate, the governorship, the vice-presidency, or the presidency
continues to hold, applying to the presidential and vice-presidential candidates in 1988 as well.

On the Republican side, the major contenders early in the race were Vice-President George Bush and Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole. Eventually, Bush gained the nomination and appointed Indiana Senator Daniel Quayle as his vice-presidential running mate. All fit the pattern.

In the early 1988 presidential primaries, the Democratic picture was more chaotic. By Super Tuesday, however, the three major contenders were Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and Tennessee Senator Albert Gore. Only Jackson, the first black to contend seriously for the White House, deviates from this norm. But traditionally, blacks in the United States have been excluded from the highest echelons of elected office and political leadership. Jackson has compensated by pursuing those avenues of power open to him, including leadership in the black church and in the civil rights movement. Before the close of the 1988 primaries, Governor Dukakis had secured enough votes to gain the Democratic nomination, appointing an established political insider, Texas Senator Lloyd Bentsen, as his running mate.

Candidates with other political backgrounds, including experience as a U. S. Representative, traditionally have been unsuccessful, in capturing their party's presidential nomination. In 1976, Democratic Congressman Morris Udall from Arizona and, in 1980, Republican Congressman John Anderson from Illinois were unsuccessful presidential candidates. In 1988, the campaigns of both Democratic Congressman Richard Gephardt from Missouri and Republican Representative Jack Kemp from New York faltered.

Paradoxically, four recent presidents have served in the U. S. House of Representatives — Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford. Yet their service in the House has been coupled, in each case, with later experience in the Senate or the vice-presidency. While four of the last six presidents started in the House of Representatives, House experience in itself has not been sufficient to support a successful presidential nomination.

Nor can it be stated that these three backgrounds are irrelevant to or an improper proving ground for the presidency. In fact, each provides an opportunity to develop the qualities and skills that presidents needs. The first is high political visibility and stature, combined with tempered experience in the exercise of power. The second is broad legislative experience; senators, vice-presidents, and governors all must sell their policies and programs to national and state legislatures.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Winner</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Loser</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>Senator</td>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Senator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>Senator</td>
<td>Goldwater</td>
<td>Senator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Senator</td>
<td>Humphrey</td>
<td>Senator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Nixon</td>
<td>Senator</td>
<td>McGovern</td>
<td>Senator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>Mondale</td>
<td>Senator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>President</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>Vice-President</td>
<td>Dukakis</td>
<td>Governor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Third, all three backgrounds require a working knowledge of national political issues and of the intricate balance between federal and state governments in achieving national policy goals. One final advantage is the rigorous practice they provide in analyzing, staking out, communicating, and defending positions in a visible, public, and adversarial arena—not unlike the presidential campaign trail.

Since few women have served in these presidential "launching roles," the selection pool for female presidential candidates has been minimal. In 1988, only 2 out of 100 U.S. Senators and 3 out of 50 state governors were women. No women have been vice-presidents. With such a disproportionately small pool of women presidential candidates, the odds of women achieving the presidency in the near term are negligible, statistically. Aspirants to the presidency usually enter politics at subnational levels, through either state or local elective office. But entering politics at any level presents barriers to groups previously excluded, including the major barrier of raising money.

**Campaign Funding and PAC Power**

The advent of elections brings home a basic principle of politics: money begets power. Political action committees (PACs) have long been guided by this principle and have grown in clout and number in recent years. Yet, women have had difficulty raising money to enter politics at all levels, especially from PACs, partially because they are more typically non-incumbents and partially because they are women.¹⁶

In politics, as elsewhere, nothing succeeds like success. This produces a political Catch-22 for would-be women candidates: PACs are more likely to support proven winners, i.e., incumbents. As for non-incumbents, PACs give more freely to those perceived more likely to win, typically white males. With lower budgets for campaigns resulting from their difficulties in fund-raising, women often cannot take full advantage of modern campaign techniques, including running television commercials and conducting polling throughout their campaigns. These handicaps reduce the likelihood of female challengers being elected.

Given their difficulty in securing funds from interest groups, especially PACs, female candidates would benefit disproportionately from reforms in campaign financing. Public financing for presidential general elections has existed since the adoption of the Revenue Act of 1971, which provided the first-time, income tax checkoff as a federal subsidy.¹⁷
candidates receiving public funding are limited in their total expenditures; yet these expenditures may be supplemented by independent spending, by PACs for example. The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 established procedures for the public disclosure of contributions and expenditures of $200 or more. This law also set ceilings on the amount of contributions that presidential and vice-presidential candidates and their families could contribute as well as on the amount spend for media advertising.  

Because, historically, women have been considerably less successful in reaching presidential “launching roles,” they have benefited less from public financing for the presidency. Then, too, public financing has not been adopted for other national and subnational offices—including the U. S. Congress and major state offices, where women might compete both more readily and more successfully. Some members of Congress fear that public subsidies would encourage opponents, equalizing the resources available to incumbents and non-incumbents alike. Others charge, however, that the spending ceilings on total campaign spending that would necessarily accompany such additional public financing would further bias elections toward incumbents, who already have a proven track record and greater name recognition.

Despite such criticisms, proponents argue that the nation as a whole—not just women candidates—would benefit from enacting public financing legislation for Congress and other levels of government. These reforms would not only allow greater diversity in the pool of candidates for elective offices but also reduce the pressure on officials, once elected, to conform to special interest needs at the expense of national and constituents’ interests.

The Image of Women Candidates

Women have experienced additional handicaps to election to higher political office, in part because of the public image of women as candidates. Women are still viewed societally in terms of domestic roles; men are viewed in terms of occupational roles. Women politicians are viewed as interlopers in the political arena who should function behind the scenes rather than out front as candidates.  

Female candidates, then, have to convince the electorate that their home responsibilities are not too demanding to permit them to make the commitment required by political officeholding. A study of men’s and women’s campaigns found that women were asked more often how they would manage their
family responsibilities if elected and whether their husbands and children approved of their political activity. Men were not asked whether their wives and children approved of their political activity. Rather, familial approval of male political participation was assumed. In one poignant example of this double standard, in the mid-1970's, U. S. Representative Martha Keys of Kansas married fellow Representative Andrew Jacobs of Indiana. They had met while serving on the House Ways and Means Committee. When each sought reelection in their districts, the political marriage became a campaign issue for Keys but not for Jacobs.

Because of the political liability regarding family responsibilities that people ascribe to women, many women politicians are either single, widowed, or do not become active in politics until after their children are adults. For example, Kathryn Whitmire, mayor of Houston, was a widow when she sought and attained political office. Barbara Jordan, former U. S. Representative from Texas and spokesperson for the Democratic Party, never married. Nor did Elizabeth Holtzman, a Harvard lawyer and U. S. Representative from New York, who played a visible role in the Watergate hearings in the mid-1970's. Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic vice-presidential nominee in 1984, had older children by the time she gained national attention.

The public perception that women candidates who are married and in their child-bearing years will neglect their familial duties if they run for and hold elective office affects women's achieving the presidency in two ways. First, it reduces the pool of available female candidates that the public finds acceptable. Second, it delays the entry into elective politics of those women who choose to marry and have children to such an extent that they may never recoup this lost ground. During the decades when women are bearing and raising children, their male counterparts who aspire to the presidency are gaining formative experience at subnational and national levels. Men gain access to the requisite presidential "launching roles" on a schedule compatible with career advancement, while women face a substantially telescoped time frame, among other handicaps, for such advancements.

The negative image of women as candidates, especially reproductively fertile ones, continues to present a significant handicap. To be elected to political office requires the overt approval of over fifty percent of the electorate, in most cases. There is still a proportion of the electorate that will not vote for female candidates simply because they are women. In highly competitive races and in races where an incumbent is being challenged—the typical race that women face—a successful
candidate cannot afford to lose even a small fraction of that electorate automatically, uncontested. While the proportion of the electorate opposed to women on gender alone has been diminishing, the diminution is a slow process. Further, equality of opportunity in politics cannot be regulated or mandated, since it depends instead on shifts in public opinion. Changes in political opportunities and electoral success for women, then, depend to a large extent on the pace of social change.

Birth control has played a helpful role in increasing the number of women in politics since it has allowed women to control the number and timing of offspring. Such control is crucial for those who contemplate a political career, especially while public perceptions continue to make it difficult for women with small children to engage in high-level, elective politics.

Conclusion

We have discussed four factors, that, traditionally, have undercut the opportunity for women to compete for the presidency:

(1) the presidential system itself, which relies more closely on direct, popular election than the parliamentary system, which elects its prime minister from among fellow party members;

(2) the paucity of women gaining experience in the presidential “launching roles” of the Senate, governorships, or the vice-presidency—roles that men have traditionally attained before competing, successfully and unsuccessfully, for the presidency;

(3) the difficulty women have experienced in securing PAC and other campaign funding for national and subnational races; and

(4) longstanding public images that the traditional childbearing and -rearing roles of women conflict with simultaneous participation in high-level, elective politics.

Equality of opportunity cannot be legislated in presidential politics or in politics at any level. Reforms that encourage female participation at subnational levels, such as public financing and other campaign reforms, will contribute to the available pool of female presidential candidates. Ultimately, shifts in public opinion—including a recognition that political roles do not conflict with familial roles any more for women than they do for men—must occur in order to level the “playing field” of U. S. presidential politics for women.
FOOTNOTES


18 Ibid.


