

American Women Making Breakthrough in the Arenas of Politics and Government

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Abstract

The deep-rooted protectionism tendency towards the American women prevented women from occupying high posts in the legislative branch. However, women's prominent movements engendered several outstanding women in elected positions starting from the first half of the XXth century. By the mid-1990s there were more women in Congress in Capitol Hill. Janet Reno was appointed as the first woman U.S. attorney general in the American History, Madeline Albright, the first woman secretary, Condoleezza Rice as the first woman national security adviser for President Bush, Nancy Pelosi was the first woman, the new minority leader of the House of the 108th Congress in 2003 and others, Kamala Harris is the first highest-ranking female, the first African American and first Asian Vice President of the United States.

The question is – whether elected women can make a crucial difference in political institutions and public policy that is still dominated by masculinist interests?

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Introduction

Until 1970s, laws that affected the civil rights of women were based on the traditional viewpoints of the relationship between men and women. These laws were founded on “protectionism” (Janda, Berry, Goldman, 2004, p. 538) – the idea that women must be sheltered from life’s harsh realities. And “protected” they were, through laws that discriminated against them in employment and other areas. Women were also “protected” from voting until 1920. The demand for women’s rights arose from the abolition movement and was later based on the Fourteenth Amendment’s prohibition of laws for women. However, the courts permanently rebutted challenges to protectionist laws. In 1873, the Supreme Court upheld the statute that prohibited women from practicing law. The adoption in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment gave women the right to vote. During World War I and again during World War II women entered the work force in significant numbers, but received lower wages than the men they replaced. Justification was the “proper” role of women as mothers and homemakers and it was tied to social attitudes. As the society anticipated women to stay at home, it was assumed, that they needed less education than men did, therefore qualified only for low-paying, low-skilled jobs.

As in the first half of the 20th century, the United States transformed into a world power after arising victorious from two world wars and beating a depression, economic and social reforms gave workers advanced standards of living and African-Americans hope for racial equality. These years also witnessed women making breakthrough gains in fields for a long time considered outside their traditional roles as wives, mothers, caretakers. Winning the vote in 1920 encouraged women to shape their career in the arenas of politics and government.

Women and Political Activism

Politics includes the utilization of power. Who has it? How is it used? Who benefits from it and who is underprivileged? In political science “power” is defined as the ability to influence others. This may be by persuasion, charisma, law, political activism, or coercion (Anderson, 2000). Individuals and groups have power and influence based on different attitudes (race, class, gender, age, education, etc.) that are appreciated in the society. Essayist Audre Lorde writes of women’s personal power and refers to the importance of personal empowerment (Lorde, 1996). People apply power through institutions such as education, religion, corporations, the media, the law, the military, and all aspects of government.

Women in Electoral Politics

The main goal for women going into electoral politics is to make a difference in people’s lives, especially for women and children. Ardent supporters of women candidates for political office believe that a critical mass of women in elected office will be able to change public policy and legislation to provide for women’s needs. This includes local offices like parent-teacher associations (PTAs), city council seats, statewide offices, and the U.S. Congress.

The first female representative elected to Congress was Jeannette Rankin. Soon after hundred and then thousands of women ran for city, county, state, and national office. These included Ella Grasso, the first women elected as governor in Connecticut; Wilma Mankiller, the first female principal chief of a Native-American nation; and Several women who have run for president or vice-president of the United States, including Shirley Chisholm and Elizabeth Dole. Appointments to office like Eleanor Roosevelt of the United Nations, Sandra Day O’Connor in the Supreme Court, Condoleezza Rice, Madeline Albright, Hillary Clinton at the State Department also are among the many outstanding women whose talents have enriched political life in the United States and abroad (Women of Influence, 2006). However, their stories start with pathfinders like Jeannette Rankin and Hattie Caraway.

Jeannette Rankin joined the 1910 suffrage drive in Washington and led the successful campaign in 1914 for women’s suffrage in Montana. The new women voters in Montana helped Rankin become one of the few Republicans elected to Congress in 1916. Seeing it as her “special duty” to speak for American women, she helped draft legislation helping women and children and supported a constitutional amendment to give women the right to vote.

However, voters rejected her bid to become a senator in 1918, presumably because of the vote against U.S. entry into the First World War year earlier. Rankin actively returned to social work reforming National Consumers’ League, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Re-elected to Congress in 1940, she cast the only vote in Congress against war on Japan after the attack on Pearl Harbor. With her political career ended by this unpopular vote, Rankin devoted the rest of her life to her favorite causes, e.g. at the age of 86, she participated in the march on Washington opposing the Vietnam War.

Jeannette Rankin had a strong belief in the importance of utilizing women’s talents and expertise to build better

societies. "Men and women are like right and left hands; it doesn't make sense not to use both", she mentioned. According her will, Jeannette left money to women to get education and help society. The Jeannette Rankin Foundation, one of the many legacies of this determined and committed American, has been providing educational opportunity to low-income women since it was chartered in 1976 (ibid, 18).

Hattie Ophelia Wyatt Caraway was the first woman elected to U.S. Senate. After her senator husbands – Thaddeus Caraway's death in 1931, Arkansas Governor Harvey Parnell appointed Hattie Caraway to her late husband's seat. A special election January 12, 1932 confirmed her appointment. In difference from outspoken Jeannette Rankin, Hattie was restrained, made no speeches, or supported unpopular causes – earning the nickname "Silent Hattie". However, she was a diligent public servant, taking her responsibilities seriously and gaining the reputation for integrity. A democrat, she permanently supported president Franklin D. Roosevelt and New Deal legislation on behalf of veterans and organized labor. "Silent Hattie took everyone by surprise on May 9, 1932, announcing to the reporters gathered for the event of the first woman presiding over the Senate, that she was running for re-election. She won that election. In the 1940s she signed the Equal Rights Amendment as a co-sponsor. She left the Senate in 1945, after defeated by William Fulbright.

Her career in public service was not over, however, she was appointed by Roosevelt to the U.S. Federal Employee's Compensation Commission and later to the Employee's Compensation Appeals Board. Her correspondence and other papers tracing her years in office were published under the title "Silent Hattie Speaks: The Personal Journal of Senator Hattie Caraway" (Caraway, Hattie & Diane, D. Kincaid, 1979).

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt

"First Lady of the World"

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt's presidency of the United States (1932-1945). She became an inspiration to millions around the world by giving a voice to the powerless: minorities, women, the poor, and the disadvantaged. She was a contentious figure to others because of her devotion to human rights, civil rights and women's rights. Her husband's election to the New York State Senate in 1910 commenced her career as political helpmate.

After Roosevelt's election as president Eleanor toured a country ravaged by the Great Depression. She recounted back to him on conditions and inexhaustibly promoted equal rights for women and minorities, child welfare, and housing reform. She became the first president's wife to conduct regular press conferences, to write a syndicated column ("My Day") and do radio commentary, to hold successive courses of lectures and to address political convention.

After Franklin's death, President Harry Truman appointed her a delegate to the United Nations. She served as chairman of the U.N.'s Commission on Human Rights and played a leading role in the drafting and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy made her the chair of the President's Commission on the Status of Women, work she continued until her death in 1962.

President Truman praiseworthily called Mrs. Roosevelt "First Lady of the World". She was typically humble in describing her achievements: "I just did what I had to do as things came along" (Roosevelt, 1992); (Roosevelt, 2001).

Sandra O'Connor, Texas born, was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court and half-century later by President Ronald Reagan. Despite her law degree – with honors – from Stanford University, O'Connor was turned down by law firms due to her gender, a wide-spread practice in the 1950s. O'Connor became deputy county attorney of San Mateo, California. This job exhibited to her, that she greatly enjoyed public service. Later she got included in Republican Party Politics and in 1969 was appointed to the state senate, won re-election twice to that post, and became senate majority leader in 1972. In 1975, voters elected her to a state judgeship on the Maricopa County Superior Court. Four years later, Arizona's governor appointed her to the state's Court of Appeals, and Reagan formally nominated her to the Supreme Court on August 19, 1981. O'Connor brought to the Supreme Court experience in government, as well as being the only sitting justice previously elected to public service.

In her years on the Court, O'Connor's pragmatic character changed into a compromiser, changing her into the "swing" vote in many divisions.

She was seen by many as the most powerful woman in the United States. O'Connor's attitude provided judicial guidelines on federalism – the constitutional division of power between the states and the federal government – and on debatable issues such as affirmative action, the death penalty, and abortion. However, she remained conscious that – being the first woman in the Court – some people might focus on her

sex and not her talent while, contradictorily, her appointment represented an achievement for American women. "The power I exert on the Court depends on the power of my arguments, not on my gender," she once said, adding: "half the population in my country are women, and it makes a difference for women to see women in positions of authority in high office" (O'Connor, 2004).

Justice O'Connor retired from the Supreme Court in 2006. She is presently co-chair of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, a group dedicated to preparing the next generation of Americans for citizenship (O'Connor, 2004).

Wilma Pearl Mankiller*

First Woman Chief of an American-Indian Nation

The woman from Tahlequah, Oklahoma did become head of one of the largest tribes in the United States and established thriving community-building programs for her people. A U.S. government Indian relocation program compelled her family's move to San Francisco, where young Mankiller joined the Native-American activist movement of the late 1960s, which got inspiration from the development of Third World nationalism in that decade, as well as the U.S. civil rights movement. She raised funds for the support and defense of the young men who seized Alcatraz Prison for 18 months to protest wrongs suffered by Native Americans. These activities forged her understanding of Native-American social and economic problems, and of the agitated relationship between the independent tribal nations and the federal government.

Mankiller started working for the Cherokee Nation, establishing its Community Development Department and initiating programs like the Bell Water and Housing Project. Each Indian family in the Bell projects was accountable for laying one mile of water pipe and for raising the money needed to do so. It was a great accomplishment: many homes got fresh running water for the first time. Estimating her leadership abilities, then Principal Chief Ross Swimmer asked Mankiller in 1983 to run for election as his deputy. Mankiller received death-threats during her campaign and persons opposing a woman leader for the tribe, slashed her car's tires. Nevertheless, she and Swimmer won. In 1985 Swimmer resigned and Mankiller undertook his post. She was elected in her own right in 1987, and twice after that, by overwhelming majorities.

Believing that Indians should solve their own economic

problems, Mankiller appeared to exercise guidance over more than 220,000 people, with an annual budget of \$75 million. She signed a landmark self-government U.S.-Cherokee Nation agreement in 1990 that gave chance her people to manage federal funds previously managed on their behalf by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She also founded tax commission and improved the Nation's courts, education and police. Wilma Pearl Mankiller is acknowledged as the most elaborated Cherokee of the 20th century, receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998, as well as several other awards (Mankiller & Walls, (1993).

Kamala Devi Harris is an American politician and attorney who is the 49th and current Vice President of the United States. She is the United States first female Vice President, the highest-ranking female elected official in U.S. history, and the first African American and first Asian American Vice President (Wikipedia).

Born: October 20, 1964 (age 56) Oakland, California, U.S.

Spouse: Douglas Emhoff (m. 2014)

Office: U.S. Vice President since 2021

Education: UC Hastings College of the Law (1989), Howard University (1986), Westmount High School (1981).

Previous offices: Senator, CA (2017-2021), Attorney General of California (2011-2017)

Awards: Glamour Award for the Advocate

Books: 1. "Superheroes Are Everywhere" – 2019, K. Harris.
2. "The Truths We Hold" - 2020, K. Harris

Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

The National Women's Party first introducing the proposal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1923 saying: "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex" (Janda, p.542) – was restrained IN EVERY Congress until 1970, when Representative Martha Griffiths brought it to the House floor. The House passed the ERA, but the Senate rejected it. A national coalition of women's rights tried to get the ERA through Congress in 1972. Proponents had

*Surname signifies a Cherokee military ranking

seven years to get amendment ratified, but three states were short of that goal, Congress extended the ratification, however the ERA died in 1982, still three states did not adopting.

Why did the ERA fail? Perhaps ERA proponent's hurt exaggerated the amendment's affects: e.g. the claim that the amendment would make wife and husband equally responsible for their family's financial support – that alarmed the lawmakers.

Despite its failure, the movement to ratify the ERA brought benefits. It raised the consciousness of women about their social position, encouraged the formation for the National Organization for Women (NOW) and other large organizations, contributed to women's participation in politics, and generated important legislation affecting women (Mansbridge, 1986).

Conclusion

Patriarchal attitude of protectionism created great obstacles for the American women for more than a century to reach some level of political equality: starting from the political battle – women's suffrage movement with the prelude of 1917 police arresting 201 women from twenty-six state while picketing the White House, demanding the right to vote, following hunger strikes, all culminating in the adaption in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment – giving women the right to vote. The next seemingly advanced step towards equal payment right with man, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, had the influence of the protectionist laws – restricting women to jobs than men usually did not want. Women got equal opportunity for employment only in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Policies protecting women founded in sexual stereotypes have been textured into the fabric of American life.

Despite the American women's accelerated political movements in the twentieth century, which encountered lot's of obstacles the above mentioned singled out women officials, earning the highest posts in Congress have worked long and hard to pass legislation to ensure better opportunities for women, for example, Title IX of the 1972 Education Act, which required schools and colleges that receive federal founding to provide equal opportunities for male and female students, the Family and Medical Leave Act, Violence Against Women Act. They have also worked for improvements in women's wages, the availability of child care, the opening of maternity combat roles to women and so forth. In 1990 there were more women in elected positions than ever before: 5.6 percent of Congressional representatives, "about on a par with Iraq and Sri Lanka" (Davis, 1991, p. 204). According that statistics, it would be another fifty years before

there was equality in state legislatures and almost three hundred years before there were equal numbers of women and men in Congress. However, the percentage of women elected to political office has increased since then sufficiently: as of January 3, 2021, there are 122 women in the U.S. House of Representatives, making women 27.2% of the total of U.S. Representatives. In 2020, 126 women hold seats in the U.S. comprising 23.6% of the 535; 25 women (25%) serve in the U.S. Senate.

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