

WOMEN IN AMERICA: THE OTHER FIFTY PERCENT

Historically, if you were not a property owning white male you did not have the right to vote in America. The decision to allow women the right to vote, after a long struggle, in 1920, was a key turning point in the transformation of the American democratic experience. The challenge from then on, of making this right meaningful across America, through changing mindsets and training women, was left, for the most part, on the shoulders of civil society. To secure a higher representation of the national congressional seats in Washington, the Federal Government must reinforce legislation such as affirmative action for gender mainstreaming in all policy areas. The inclusion and empowerment of women in the political arena is of utmost importance to achieving a government that is truly “by the people, for the people.”

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The historical struggle to include women, particularly women of African-American, Latino, Asian and other ethnic and religious backgrounds continues to be a source of contention in the United States. The fight against gender discrimination and the channelling of positive action for gender mainstreaming has taken a different route in many European countries. Motivated by the women's movement, the European Commission and other governing bodies have affirmed that women are a vital part of a functioning democracy and have established long term strategies to insure equal representation in all policy areas. The United States Government on the other hand has left the task to civil society organizations, to provide the strategies, resources and opportunities necessary to achieve gender equity and thus for the attainment of gender equality in the male dominated political system.

The Early Struggle for Women's Suffrage

As the U.S. Civil War was coming to an end, President Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, affirmed that equality under the law now included the former slaves. In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed to prohibit the states or the federal government from using a citizen's race, color, or previous status as a slave for voting qualification. However, it still did not grant the right for women to vote.

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”¹

Rather than conform to the status quo women courageously started to mobilize for a groundbreaking movement when they assembled at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848 for the first Women's Rights Convention. This was a historic event for the United States and the beginning of the mainstream women's movement. One of the leaders of the convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, launched the American Women's Suffrage movement when she read a manifesto demanding women be given the right to vote. In an effort to organize strategically, the national American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) was established. The AWSA, mostly a white women's organization, did include some black women and male supporters. The AWSA was also supportive of the movement to abolish slavery in the United States, but the male leaders of the anti-slavery movement were not equally supportive of women's suffrage. This was demonstrated by the lack of support for the voting rights of women after the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution only insured voting rights to former male slaves after the American Civil War.²

Women Suffragists (as they were known) organized supporters, wrote newspaper articles, conducted seminars, demonstrated, recruited new members and

¹ U S. President Abraham Lincoln (1863) referred to the Declaration of Independence from 4 July 1776.

² United States Constitution, 15th Amendment, ratified on 3 February 1870.

lobbied Congress for voting rights. Their persistence and determination finally paid off at the state level in 1869, when Wyoming, a thinly populated Rocky Mountain state in the American West, agreed to give women the right to vote in state elections. Other Western states such as Utah, Colorado, and Idaho voted in favor of women's suffrage at the later part of the 19th century.³ One of the most difficult challenges of the Women's Suffrage Movement was convincing the American public that women's suffrage was more than just a state level issue, but that it was also a national issue, which required a formal amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Similar to the events in the United States, several key leaders in the United Kingdom, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Emmeline Pankhurst, brought women's rights to the forefront in the mid 1800s. However, unlike the United States the women's movement in the U.K. challenged the even more unbreakable hierarchical class system. Mary Wollstonecraft was quickly labeled a radical for her piece, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which asserted that intellectual companionship is the ideal of marriage and pleaded for equality of education and opportunity between the sexes. In the late 1800s, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies united the various British women's organizations in order to be more organized and powerful. British women were eventually guaranteed the right to vote in 1918 in the Representation of the People Act.

Is This a Never-Ending Challenge?

After maintaining the status quo for decades, the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution was finally approved in August 1920 despite protests from both men and women who believed equal rights for women was not an integral part of American values. The Amendment simply stated that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."⁴ The decision to allow women the right to vote was another key turning point in the transformation of the American democratic experience.

As the long struggle for women's suffrage was about to become a success, the national American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) launched a new organization –the League of Women Voters (LWV). Similarly, the LWV was established to carry on the struggle for political rights for women and to "make democracy work for all citizens."⁵ As the National Legislature acknowledged the role of women in a participatory democracy, the next question was how to prepare twenty million American women to take advantage of their hard fought struggle for national voting rights and to address the social justice issues of concern to women of all backgrounds.

³ James West Davidson, William Eugene Gienapp, Christine Leigh Heyrman, Mark H. Lytle, and Michael B. Stoff, *Nation of Nations* (Columbus: McGraw-Hill, 1990), p. 833-834.

⁴ The Constitution of the United States, 19th Amendment, ratified on 18 August 1920.

⁵ "5 Things You Need to Know on Election Day," *League of Women Voters*, <http://www.lwv.org>.

The LWV continued to build on the broad grassroots base of the AWSA at the local, state and national levels. The LWV focused on issues critical to women such as voting rights, civil liberties, and transparency and accountability in government. The LWV became one of the most respected non-partisan public policy organizations with the capacity to mobilize and educate citizens to make informed voting decisions. The LWV's involvement in organizing local and state level candidate debates and the participation of an educated citizenry in the political process helped to strengthen the leadership role of women in American politics.

The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was established when the National Federation of Afro-American Women and the National League of Colored Women merged together in 1896. The founding of the NACW was a monumental moment in the African American women's movement as well as the Women's Suffrage movement. The mission of the NACW was to "to furnish evidence of the moral, mental and material progress made by people of color through the efforts of our women."⁶ Due to the deeply rooted injustices towards African Americans, the NACW became involved in the civil rights movement. They also supported and organized programs for the economic and social advancement of the African American community.

Despite the passing of the 19th Amendment and the establishment of women's organizations, there was still a significant imbalance in women's rights particularly for women of color. The founder of the National Woman's Party, Alice Paul composed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1923, to guarantee the equality of rights under the law regardless of sex.⁷ The ERA was introduced in every congressional session from 1923 to 1972. It was passed by Congress in 1972, yet did not make the necessary three-fourths of state ratifications by the 30 June 1982 cut off date. Since 1982, the ERA was again reintroduced in congressional sessions and is now led in the 110th Congress by Senator Edward Kennedy from Massachusetts as Senate Joint Resolution 10 and Representative Carolyn Maloney from New York as House Joint Resolution 40.⁸

In 1964 the Civil Rights Act was passed, which forbid discrimination based on "race, creed, color, or national origin." Executive Order 11246, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on 24 September 1965 required Equal Employment Opportunity. The Presidential Order "prohibits federal contractors and federally assisted construction contractors and subcontractors, who do over \$10,000 in Government business in one year, from discriminating in employment decisions on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."⁹ Contractors are also required to "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race,

⁶ Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 21.

⁷ 110th Congress, 1st Session S.J.Res.10 Proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States relative to equal rights for men and women, 27 March 2007.

⁸ The 110th Congress runs from 2007-2008.

⁹ Tom Beauchamp, "In Defense of Affirmative Action," *Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 2 (1998), p. 143-155.

color, religion, sex or national origin.”¹⁰ It is important to note that Executive Order 11246 was a decision taken by the U.S. President since Congress did not take action to pass a law as in the Civil Rights Act.

Educational and Leadership Development Opportunities for Women

The women’s movement and the civil rights movement in the twentieth century did not make a significant impact on gender equality in the political arena. Unlike many EU member states the American Government has passed the challenge onto civil society organizations. The Council of Europe and the European Commission have both promoted initiatives for the implementation of gender equality in policies. Many EU member states now have quotas to guarantee the inclusion of women as well as offer incentives to political parties to recruit women candidates and voters.

I would like to share some examples of civil society organizations in the U.S., which put forth efforts in order to promote and educate an informed and participatory society, such as Girls State, the Public Leadership Education Network, the Center for American Women in Politics, the Aspira Association and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Associations. Their initiatives promote capacity building concerning the duties, rights and responsibilities of citizenship for young American women. It is dire for the U.S. Federal Government to provide a structured policy to ensure more than 17 percent of American women are represented in the political arena. Without Federal support these initiatives will continue to struggle to raise funds and will remain limited in their outreach programs.

The American Legion Auxiliary, established in 1919, is the world’s largest women’s “patriotic service” organization. It originally focused most of its attention on support for Veterans yet quickly grew into a source of leadership and support for the equality of women. Each year the American Legion Auxiliary hosts “Girls State” training events in every state and the District of Columbia (Washington, DC) “to awaken within the youth of our nation a sincere conviction that a well informed, intelligent, participating citizenry is most vitally needed to protect and preserve our American institutions and our American democracy.” The Girls State program creates an environment for young high school women to elect their own city, county, state and national governments. The participants choose their own representatives in accordance with regular election procedures. They learn the duties of the various elected positions. The participants introduce and debate their legislation in ‘mock’ state legislatures. Justice is even administered by their own law enforcement agencies and courts. The Girls State experience encourages alumni to participate in political campaigns and to run for political office.

¹⁰ Tom Beauchamp (1998), p. 143-155.

Governor Ann Richards, participated in Texas Girls State in 1949, was elected Travis County (location of Austin, the capitol of Texas) Commissioner, then State Treasurer and later the Governor of Texas. Carole Keeton Strayhorn, 1956 Texas Girls State, was elected to the Austin School Board, then Mayor of Austin and became the first woman elected to the Texas Railroad Commission. Judge Bea Ann Smith of the 3rd State Judicial District participated in 1960.¹¹ Governor Richards, Commissioner Strayhorn, Judge Smith and other distinguished women leaders gained a sense of citizenship from their experiences at Girls State just as many other women who participate in the program have become active in politics at the local, state and national levels across the United States. I became more politically active after participating in Texas Girls State by serving as a campaign worker in local school board elections, working in one of the 2000 Presidential primary campaigns and by working for the local implementation of Title IX, which requires federal funds for education to be equally allocated for both genders.

The Public Leadership Education Network prepares university-level women for political leadership. They focus on participatory teaching methods through group exercises, role-plays, and exposure to the political process. The participants gain a sense of how public policy is shaped by interacting with a variety of women leaders from the U.S. Congress, federal agencies, and public policy institutes. Upon completion of the program, participants partner with community organizations to provide leadership in their home regions.

The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), located at the Eagleton Institute of Politics of Rutgers University in New Jersey, facilitates multiple approaches toward women's capacity building. Responding to the variety of women's issues and the effects of gender inequality in the United States, the CAWP has four main program areas: information services of gender-based statistics; networking among women officeholders; skills development for college students; and leadership training for women interested in running for public office or who are interested in running political campaigns.¹² CAWP alumni continue their public service involvement through service in law, community organizations, government and politics. The CAWP "Ready to Run Initiative" attains that 25% of their participants have run and won their campaigns. CAWP's diversified approach provides their participants with higher level of effective political skills necessary to secure gender equality for women at the ballot box.

There are organizations that help to develop women based upon their cultural and socio-economic background. The Aspira Association, founded in 1969, provides leadership training and educational assistance for the Hispanic community. The association provides training in public policy for high school students.

¹¹ Nancy Beck Young and Lewis L. Gould, *The Life and Times of Frances Goff: Texas, Her Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1997), p. 131

¹² Discussion with Kathy Kleeman, Senior Program Associate, Center for the American Woman and Politics, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 12 January 2007.

Its sister organization, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Associations (HACU) has provided internships for college and graduate level students for the past fifteen years. The HACU internship program has placed more than 6,500 students in assignments with federal agencies in Washington, DC and throughout the Nation. Initiatives such as the Aspira Association and HACU are critical to overcoming the decades of discrimination against women of color.

Is There Light at the End of the Tunnel?

When the 110th United States Congress convened on 4 January 2007, Representative Nancy Pelosi of California became the first woman to hold the position of House Majority leader in the United States House of Representatives.¹³ In her acceptance speech, she said that her selection marked “an historic moment for the women of America”. She continued,

“It is a moment for which we have waited over 200 years. Never losing faith, we waited through the many years of struggle to achieve our rights. But women were not just waiting; women were working. Never losing faith, we worked to redeem the promise of America, that all men and women are created equal. For our daughters and our granddaughters today we have broken the marble ceiling.”¹⁴

With the selection of Mrs. Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the House, American women have now broken through the political glass ceiling at the national level. But, despite a hundred and fifty-nine years of struggle since the the first Women’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, they still only comprise 17 percent of the seats in the United States Congress. The graph below charts the progress of women from 1919, when not a single woman was represented in Congress to today’s current 110th Congress where 17 percent of women are represented.

Mrs. Pelosi is a leader in the Democratic Women’s Working Group, which strives to provide a platform to discuss women’s issues and to embody a sense of civic duty among women. The group’s activities confirm that women in elected office tend to raise distinctive concerns and issues of unique importance to their own gender.¹⁵ This is reflected in the comprehensive nonpartisan political agenda of the American women’s movement, which has come to encompass a agenda that includes voting, political rights, human rights, and protection of civil liberties.

¹³ The Speaker of the House is the second in line of succession to the Presidency after the Vice President.

¹⁴ Nancy Pelosi, “Built on the Values that Made Our Country Great,” Speaker of the House, <http://speaker.house.gov/newsroom>, 4 January 2007.

¹⁵ Pippa Norris, *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 179.

Figure 1

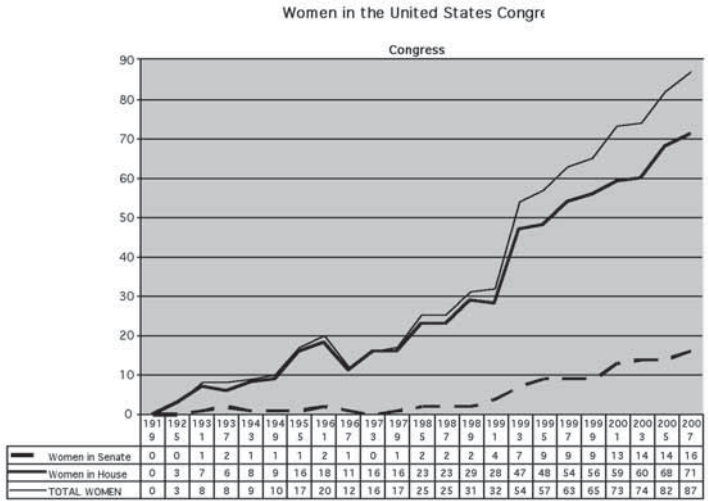


Table 1: Women in the United States Congress

Source: The Center for American Woman and Politics – Women in the U.S. Congress, 2007

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, it is critical for the U.S. Government to consider the possibility of implementing a quota system. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance recently published a comprehensive study, which analyzes the various political, socio-economic, psychological and electoral obstacles that might prevent women from entering into elected office. The study presents three main quota systems to open the political doors for women: a constitutional quota is legally bound under the country’s constitution; a legislative quota is bound under the political party’s law or election law; and a voluntary quota is adopted voluntarily by political parties and is not legally binding.¹⁶

Women in the political arena in Argentina and Rwanda rank among the highest in the international community. This is largely due to the implementation of a constitutional quota. In 2003, 48,8 percent of women were elected in Rwanda, despite the harsh reality that it is severely economically challenged and is transitioning into a post-conflict environment. Similarly in 2005, 35 percent of women in Argentina were elected into the National Parliament even though a severe economic crisis hit the country in the mid 1990s.¹⁷

Despite the recent advances women have made on the political front, a long term strategy for gender mainstreaming, one that encompasses all policy areas is crucial to the continued democratic development of the United States. As a

¹⁶ Stina Larserud and Rita Taphorn, *Designing for Equality, Best-fit, Medium-fit and non-favorable Combinations of Electoral Systems and Gender Quotas* (Stockholm: IDEA Publishing, 2007), p.9.

¹⁷ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and Stockholm University, “Global Database of Quotas for Women,” *IDEA*, <http://www.quotaproject.org/2007>.

major leader for democracy building in the international arena, the United States should arguably put forth initiatives and support from the National level. If the sole responsibility continues to rest on a few Congresswomen and civil society organizations, then European Union Member States, as well as developing countries such as Liberia, Rwanda, and Argentina will continue to surpass the political representation of women in the United States.