

Nancy Pelosi: Two Heartbeats From the Presidency

U.S. Lags Behind the Rest of the World in Female Heads of State

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As Nancy Pelosi begins her term as the new House speaker, she is only two heartbeats away from an accidental presidency -- just like late President Gerald Ford once was.

The 66-year-old Democratic congresswoman from California is the closest a woman has ever come to the presidency, but a world away from the power enjoyed by a growing list of elected female heads of state on every continent except North America.

"This is an historic moment of progress for women in office," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "We have certainly lagged behind -- even in the federal legislature -- compared to other countries."

Enlightenment Outside the United States

Americans may think of themselves as socially enlightened, but even developing countries like Sri Lanka and Liberia have elected women to their highest offices. For nearly a half century, women have made their mark at the political top in most places but the United States.

In 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first, elected as prime minister to post-colonial Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). In 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia was Africa's first female president.

Europe had Margaret Thatcher who served as Britain's prime minister from 1979 to 1990 and Mary Robinson, Ireland's president from 1990 to 1997. Today, it has Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and Finland's President Tarja Halonen.

Asia boasts Indira Gandhi, elected prime minister of India in 1966 and Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who came to power in 1988.

And in the Middle East, Israel elected Golda Meir as prime minister in 1969.

In Australasia and South America, don't forget current Prime Minister Helen Clark of New Zealand and Chilean President Michelle Bachelet.

New York Sen. Hillary Clinton may run for U.S. president in 2008, but in France this year, socialist Ségolène Royal is the leading presidential candidate. And her competition from the center-right party could be another woman -- Michèle Alliot-Marie.

A Political Structure Beneficial to Women

One reason women have not been able to become president of the United States may be the structure of U.S. government, Walsh says. The parliamentary system of government in other nations, Walsh says, opens up the field for women.

In nations like Britain and India, women elected as members of parliament can rise through the ranks to be elected by their own party members to top leadership. If their party wins a majority in a national election, they automatically assume the role of prime minister.

Many countries also have quota systems to ensure females are elected to office. In fact, according to Walsh, when the U.S. was working with Iraq to set up their political system, the Bush administration mandated a 25 percent quota for women in their parliament.

Today, only 16.3 percent of the members of Congress are women, according to the Center for American Women and Politics. Even in less-developed Thailand, women make up 30 percent of the legislature.

Modest Strides in the U.S.

So far, there are more Democratic women elected to public office than Republican women. But Republican women may have difficulty in the primaries because they are more liberal than their party's conservative male base, according to CAWP studies.

Generally, American women also have more difficulty raising money for presidential campaigns than men. (Although Hillary Clinton could boast a campaign war chest that would be the envy of her rivals if she decides to run.) On the other hand, in Europe, women have had larger political success because elections are more of a meritocracy, according to the National Association for Women (NOW).

Women have made modest gains in gubernatorial races, which are seen as a stepping stone to the presidency, and now hold office in nine states.

"Considering women are still such a small proportion of the governors and members of Congress, there is a relatively small pipe line to presidency," said NOW President Kim Gandy. "Women also have fewer economic resources than men. Follow the money."

In 1977, women made 59 cents on the dollar compared to men. Today, that has jumped to 77 cents, but "it's been 30 years and we still haven't made up the 23 cents," said Gandy.

Pelosi Paves the Way?

Why do women run for political office? Usually they are passionate about community issues. Studies have shown that women in politics are more often teachers, health professionals and social workers. Men, on the other hand, are often lawyers and businessmen who see political office as furthering their career.

According to a 2001 CAWP study, women are also more likely to effect change for families and children, protect the interests of other women and champion the poor and ethnic minorities.

The study also showed female state legislators were more likely than men to favor harsher penalties for hate crimes, civil unions for gays and to oppose laws that would require permission for minors to obtain abortions.

What would a female presidency look like? Liberal and conservative women alike bring their own life experience to public office, say both Walsh and Gandy.

"How many men ever lost a night's sleep because he had a sick child and would lose a day's pay or get fired if he didn't go to work?" asked Gandy.

Political powerhouse Nancy Pelosi's ascension as speaker of the House could bode well for future female presidential candidates.

"The aspirations and expectations of our daughters and sons are molded by what they see around them," said Gandy the day before Congress reconvened as she raced to join Pelosi for tea in celebration of her new role.

"Nancy has a lot on her shoulders, but the rest of us are making sure that our daughters see her being sworn in."

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