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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

The State of the Field: Studying Women, Gender, and Politics

Introduction: Where We've Been and Where We're Going

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Exactly 10 years ago, U.S. Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), the longest serving woman in the United States Senate, hailed the results of the 2000 congressional elections. Reflecting on the electoral victories of Hillary Clinton, Debbie Stabenow, Jean Carnahan, and Maria Cantwell, Senator Mikulski explained that women candidates' successes pave the way for eventual gender parity in government: "Every Tom, Dick, and Harry is now going to be Hillary, Debbie, Jean, and Maria."[1] Six years later, politicians remained just as upbeat about women's electoral fortunes. According to Rahm Emanuel, who served as Chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in 2006, female candidates were well positioned to compete and win in the most competitive districts: "In an environment where people are disgusted with politics in general, who represents clean and change? Women."[2] Indeed, noted professor and political analyst Larry Sabato predicted that 2006 would be the best year for women congressional candidates since 1992; he expected women to gain at least nine seats.[3] Even amidst Hillary Clinton's presidential primary loss in 2008, Geraldine Ferraro voiced optimism when she reflected on Sarah Palin's place on the Republican ticket and women's prospects for political success: "I never thought I'd see

1. "More Women Go to Congress," *Houston Chronicle*, 16 November 2000, Section YO, page 7.
2. Robin Toner, "Women Wage Key Campaigns for Democrats," *New York Times*, 24 March 2006, A1.
3. Sabato's prediction, like those of Barbara Mikulski and Rahm Emanuel, was wrong. Women gained only three congressional seats that cycle. Anushka Asthana, "A Political Opportunity for Women; Advocates Predict Gains in Congress and Push for More Participation." *Washington Post*, 7 October 2006, A9.

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another woman on a national ticket in this cycle after Hillary lost. . . . But it's like a ripple effect. Hillary's candidacy, my candidacy — they have a ripple effect far beyond the immediate results."[4]

Yet despite these assessments, as well as women's increasing presence in the professions from which most candidates emerge, significant gains in women's numeric representation have not materialized in recent election cycles. Indeed, the 2010 midterm elections amounted to a net decrease of women serving not only in the U.S. Congress (the first time this has happened in 30 years), but also in state legislatures across the country. Of course, in an election cycle in which women competed for fewer than one-third of the 435 seats at stake in the House and only 14 seats in the U.S. Senate, substantial or even incremental gains for women were almost impossible. And because 77% of the women in the House and Senate were Democrats, women were in a particularly precarious position as they faced an anti-Democratic, antiestablishment electorate.

I do not mean to minimize the last half century's evolution toward the social acceptance of women running for office — both in the United States and around the world. Prior to 1978, no woman whose career was not linked to the death of her spouse ever served in the U.S. Senate. Currently, 17 women serve in the Senate and 71 occupy positions in the House of Representatives. The 1992 "Year of the Woman" elections, alone, produced a 70% increase in the number of women serving in the U.S. Congress (from 32 to 54). From a global perspective, women occupy 19% of the seats in national legislatures around the world, a number that has climbed steadily over the course of the last several decades. Eighteen women also now serve as president or prime minister of their countries; this figure is nearly double what it was merely one decade ago. But it is clear that we still have far to go on the path to any semblance of gender parity.

As gender politics scholars, therefore, we continue to have our work cut out for us. The good news is that we have had plenty of practice. Since the 1970s, we have employed a multifaceted and eclectic approach to investigate why so few women hold positions of political power and why their numeric underrepresentation is important, both normatively and substantively. We have surveyed and interviewed candidates and elected officials to assess levels of discrimination

4. Lois Romano, "Ideology Aside, This Has Been the Year of the Woman," *Washington Post*, 24 October 2008, A01.

against women. We have combed fund-raising receipts and vote totals to determine how women fare at the polls and in the campaign process. We have analyzed institutional barriers, electoral systems, and public opinion data to uncover structural obstacles faced by women. We have examined historical documents, legislative proceedings, committee deliberations, and governing behavior to determine how women legislate, prioritize issues, interact with each other and their male colleagues, and achieve (or fail to attain) legislative successes. And we have withstood the temptation to conclude that because it is often difficult to identify gender differences in general election vote totals and campaign fund-raising receipts, the electoral process is "gender neutral." Remarkably, we have conducted this research across subfields and employed various units of analysis, often amidst a discipline that does not always embrace the study of gender, women, and politics.

Because political institutions remain deeply gendered in how they structure the parameters of electoral competition and governance, many questions remain open, many avenues of research remain fruitful, and many research trajectories for scholarship remain underexplored. Put simply, the confluence of gender, behavior, and structure carries profound theoretical and methodological implications for scholarship on women and politics. The essays that follow — written by the new editorial team at *Politics & Gender* — provide an overview, by subfield, of the state of the research, the holes in the scholarship, and the exciting new questions we might seek to address in the coming years. As Richard L. Fox (associate editor for U.S. politics), Mona Lena Krook (associate editor for comparative politics), Sharon Krause (associate editor for political theory), Elisabeth Prügl (associate editor for international relations), and Sue Tolleson-Rinehart (book review editor) make clear, the future for gender politics scholars is bright, even if the prospects for women's full inclusion in the political sphere are somewhat bleak.

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