

What Does the Rising Tide of Women in Executive Office Mean?

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Americans came the closest they ever had to nominating a female presidential candidate in 2008, yet the possibility of a woman president in the end remained elusive. However, in recent years a number of other countries have seen women claim the presidency for the first time: in Argentina, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chile, Finland, India, and Liberia. Women have also become chancellor in Germany and prime minister in countries like Moldova, Ukraine, and Mozambique. Since 2000, 27 female leaders have assumed national office as president or prime minister. It has always been difficult to generalize about women heads of state and government because there have been so few of them, but the recent rise in women executives has opened up new possibilities for comparative scholarship (see the longitudinal study by Farida Jalalzai, “Women Rule: Shattering the Executive Glass Ceiling,” in the June 2008 issue of *Politics & Gender*). Much of the existing literature on the subject has looked, for example, at attitudes toward women in executive position and at the media’s focus on women executives’ personal characteristics, their emotional state, clothing, domestic abilities, and the way they negotiate their family relations.

The following essays deal with four countries where women have assumed executive office in recent years: Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia (2006), Angela Merkel in Germany (2005), Tarja Halonen in Finland (2000, 2006), and Michelle Bachelet in Chile (2006). The essays examine what the election of these women executives tells us about the changing nature of politics in these countries that allowed new players like women to assert themselves. The authors explore what was unexpected in these races and what surprised them and other scholars, the media, and voters about these elections. The essays point to new questions and areas of scholarship.

Without “giving away” the most interesting findings of our authors, we can reveal that the essays highlight a number of key factors that explain the new ascendance of women executives in a variety of extremely diverse contexts. The authors link these changes to major political upheaval in some countries, for example, the end of conflict in Liberia and the unification of Germany. They also underscore the importance of institutional changes and electoral reform in the case of Finland, while at the same time highlighting the ability of individual women to seize upon a window of opportunity within the party structure in the case of Germany and within the traditional elite structure in Chile. Women voters’ electoral activism is evident in Liberia, Finland, and Chile, together with the broader societal push for gender equality in all these countries. In some cases, the new importance of the electorate and popular opinion in selecting candidates becomes evident (Finland, Chile) as does the changing popular expectations of leadership and the perception that women may represent a new style of leadership, especially in dealing with corruption (Liberia, Chile, Germany).

These elections all have the element of the unexpected in them, not only because women won the election but also because they defied the status quo in other ways as well. Michelle Bachelet came from outside of the traditional elite political structure in Chile and was not related to power as has often been the case with other women leaders in Latin America. Angela Merkel was an outsider, a Protestant from eastern Germany who climbed the leadership ladder of a party that had a Catholic identity within western Germany. Moreover, none fit the typical profile of a leader in their country: with Bachelet as a divorced single mother of three, a socialist, and an agnostic in a predominantly Catholic country; Halonen as a single mother at the time of her election; Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf a divorced grandmother; and Angela Merkel a scientist. The fact that these women are breaking not just the gender barrier but also other traditional expectations of leadership makes their ascent to the highest office in their respective countries all the more remarkable, and it suggests that new definitions and expectations of executive leadership may be emerging globally.