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The only safe ship in a storm is leadership.

Faye Wattleton, president of the Center for the Advancement of Women

The 2008 presidential election made history on many levels. Barack Obama was elected the first African American president, Hillary Rodham Clinton became the first truly competitive woman candidate seeking the presidency, Sarah Palin became the first Republican woman to be nominated for vice president, and the campaign itself was both the longest and most expensive in US history. At the congressional level, the 2008 election outcome meant that more women than ever before would be serving in the US Congress. At the start of the Obama administration in January 2009, several women were appointed to prominent positions in the cabinet and as White House advisers, and when faced with his first Supreme Court vacancy a few months later, President Obama nominated Judge Sonia Sotomayor to become the third woman (and first Latina) to serve on the nation's highest court. Generally speaking, the 2008 elections represented a significant moment for women in US politics as they continued to earn positions of political power, even if their progress overall has been slower than many Americans would like. In addition, the historic campaigns of both Clinton and Palin focused tremendous attention on the topic of women as political leaders as voters assessed these two candidates with vastly different life experiences, governing styles, and ideological perspectives. While neither candidate won the office
that each sought, the significant roles that both played in the presidential campaign broke through barriers and showed the success that women are now capable of having on the national political stage.

In the aftermath of Clinton's presidential campaign—during which she received 18 million votes in the Democratic primary contest—Palin's rise as a political star in conservative Republican circles, and Nancy Pelosi's historic ascent to speaker of the House in 2007, political pundits and scholars alike have been intrigued by the idea of women as political leaders and by the question of what changes, if any, would occur in the political arena if women held more positions of power. In recent years, several books and articles have been devoted to the simple question, what if women ran the world? Similarly, if every position of political leadership in the United States, whether elected or appointed, were suddenly held by a woman—not only the president but all of the cabinet and advisory positions, all of the leadership positions in Congress (including speaker of the House and the Senate majority leader), and all nine seats on the US Supreme Court, along with every state governorship, every leadership position in each of the fifty state legislatures, and every mayoral position in every city across the country, would the US governing and political processes, as well as the public policy agenda, suddenly change? And if so, would it improve by becoming more efficient and effective?

While theoretically this kind of extreme shift in political leadership is possible, it is probably unlikely. Women in the United States, who have only had the right to vote since 1920, are still struggling to reach parity with, let alone dominance over, their male counterparts in political leadership positions. In theory, democratically elected political bodies should look something like the larger society that they represent. This provides legitimacy to political institutions, particularly in regard to women, who make up slightly more than half of the US population. However, thinking about such an extreme shift in the political landscape is quite instructive, since it was not that many years ago that men held every political leadership position in Washington, DC. The thought of every position of power being held by a woman raises some interesting questions. Does gender matter when electing political leaders? Perhaps more important, how do Americans view women as political leaders, and how does this view impact
women’s chances of success within the political arena? And finally, in a political age so driven by the influence of the news media, do negative stereotypes about women as political officeholders and power brokers harm women’s career opportunities in the public sector? These questions are crucial when studying the role of women in US politics, since not only do women have the right as citizens to political participation but full participation by women as both voters and officeholders has an important impact on the political process and on the outcome of important public policy debates.

Women as Political Leaders: A Historical Perspective

According to political scientist Barbara Kellerman, while few women have held formal positions of authority throughout world history, that is “not tantamount to saying they did not exercise power or exert influence.” Similarly, progress has been made in the past half-century, but only when including both informal as well as formal positions of influence within government, business, nonprofits, and religious organizations, with more women at the bottom as opposed to the top of most organizational hierarchies. The traditional view of US politics suggests that those with political power are those who hold specific leadership positions within government. From that vantage point, how have women fared?

Within the executive branch, no woman has ever been elected president or vice president, whereas only three women have ever served as secretary of state (Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Rodham Clinton) and one as attorney general (Janet Reno). These latter two cabinet positions, along with secretary of defense and secretary of the treasury, are considered the most prominent among the now fifteen cabinet-level departments in the executive branch. And the three most recent presidents (at the time of this writing) made these four appointments—with Albright and Reno serving in Bill Clinton’s administration, Rice serving in George W. Bush’s administration, and Clinton in Barack Obama’s administration—which means that this has been a fairly new trend. The early cabinet appointments of Frances
Perkins by Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 (to secretary of labor) and Oveta Culp Hobby by Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 (to secretary of health, education, and welfare, which is now split between the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education) are considered political anomalies; the next woman to be appointed to a cabinet position would not come until 1975, when Gerald Ford selected Carla Anderson Hills as secretary of housing and urban development. In total, forty women have held forty-five cabinet or cabinet-level positions (including the positions of United Nations ambassador, national security adviser, special/US trade representative, director of the Office of Management and Budget, chair of the Council of Economic Advisors, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, administrator of the Small Business Administration, and director of the Office of Personnel Management) since 1933.

Special advisers within the White House are often considered even more powerful and influential than cabinet appointments. No woman has ever served as chief of staff; only two women have served as presidential press secretary (Dee Dee Myers served as Clinton’s press secretary from 1993 to 1994, and Dana Perino served as George W. Bush’s press secretary from 2007 to 2009); and only one has served as the national security adviser (Condoleezza Rice served in this role during George W. Bush’s first term from 2001 to 2005). Karen Hughes, who held the joint title of director of communications and counselor to the president for George W. Bush from 2001 until her resignation in 2003, is considered one of the most influential women to ever serve in an advisory capacity to a president within the Oval Office. Similarly, Valerie Jarrett, who holds the position of senior adviser and assistant to the president for public engagement and intergovernmental affairs, is one of only three senior advisers to President Barack Obama.

In the judicial branch, only three women have ever served on the US Supreme Court: Sandra Day O’Connor, nominated by Ronald Reagan in 1981; Ruth Bader Ginsberg, nominated by Bill Clinton in 1993; and Sonia Sotomayor, nominated by Barack Obama in 2009. In the legislative branch, no woman had ever held a top leadership position until Nancy Pelosi’s (D-California) ascent in 2003 to Democratic minority leader in the House of Representatives. Pelosi went on to become speaker of the House
of Representatives in 2007, a position she holds at the time of this writing in 2009, and she remains the only woman ever to hold a congressional leadership post. At the state level, only thirty-one women have ever served as governors, and Ella Grasso’s election as the Democratic governor of Connecticut in 1975 marked the first time that a woman was elected to the top state executive position in her own right, without replacing her husband in office (due either to his death or his inability to succeed himself).

Since the days of Nellie Tayloe Ross (D-Wyoming) and Miriam “Ma” Ferguson (D-Texas), both elected in 1925 as governors of their respective states to succeed their husbands, and of Frances Perkins, who made history as the first woman cabinet member in Washington, women have made tremendous progress, at least statistically, in gaining access to elective or appointed office at most levels of government. Yet reaching a level of parity that is representative of the population at large, in which women voters slightly outnumber male voters, is still many decades away. And due to recent gains for women in elected positions, public perceptions seem to indicate that most Americans believe that women are receiving equal treatment in regard to leadership opportunities in both the public and private sectors. According to the Center for American Women and Politics, as of July 2009, there are now more women serving in the US Congress than ever before—seventeen in the Senate and seventy-two in the House of Representatives. In addition, a total of seventy-three women hold statewide executive positions, 1,792 women serve as state legislators, and eleven women serve as mayors of the hundred largest US cities.

As impressive as those numbers may be, however, the percentages tell a different story. Of the 535 seats in the US Congress, women hold only 16.6 percent. Of statewide executive positions such as governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general, only 23.6 percent are held by women (and only six of fifty governors are women). A total of 24.3 percent of state legislators are women, and eleven women mayors represent only 11 percent of mayors in the hundred largest cities in the nation (topping the list is Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake of Baltimore, Maryland, the fifteenth largest city in the nation, followed by Mayor Ashley Swearengin of Fresno, California, thirty-sixth in the ranking of cities by population). Although women have made tremendous progress in gaining access to positions of political leadership in recent years, they
are still “underrepresented at the top and overrepresented at the bottom” in US government at all levels. According to political scientist Susan C. Bourque, public perceptions of women as active participants in the political process are now more common and accepted, yet various societal factors continue to restrict political leadership opportunities for women in the United States. These include the sexual division of labor (women are still predominantly responsible for child care and household chores); differing structures and expectations for the sexes in the workplace (lack of “flex-time” and other career advancement opportunities for women with family responsibilities); ambivalence about women exercising power; and media portrayals of women leaders in a negative light.

Women as Political Leaders: Does Gender Matter?

Defining the term leadership and determining how it applies to the US political process are essential activities for understanding the unique dynamics within democratic governing institutions. As women continue to gain more prominence as active participants in the US political and electoral process as voters, candidates, and officeholders, it becomes even more important to understand how leadership is defined from a woman’s perspective. The essential question becomes, do women political leaders make a difference through their style and approach to governing and policymaking? And, perhaps just as important, how do women differ from each other in leadership positions?

In general terms, leadership is defined as the ability to encourage, influence, or inspire others to act in pursuit of a common goal or agenda. How to define such a malleable term like leadership, however, is not an easy task. Leadership theories abound that discuss specific traits, skills, styles, or personality characteristics that leaders possess as well as the situations that emerge to allow leaders to then act accordingly. Perhaps one of the most widely recognized theories of leadership would be the work of James MacGregor Burns, who introduced the idea of transformational leadership in the late 1970s. For Burns, leadership is more than just the act of wielding power; it involves the relationship between
leaders and followers. By way of comparison, he defines transactional leadership as the top-down mode of governing that most leaders are able to accomplish—the day-to-day exchanges between leaders and followers that have come to be expected. For example, a congressional candidate may promise to introduce a bill to reform the nation’s health care system, and, once elected, may follow through with that plan. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, provides more than just a simple change to a particular policy. A transformational leader provides broader changes to the entire political system that raise the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. As Burns states, “Transforming leaders define public values that embrace the supreme and enduring principles of a people.”

However, as Burns and many other scholars have pointed out, the definition of leadership is fluid—it can change based on the context and situation in which the term is used. Although a universal and precise definition of effective or successful leadership may not exist, we do know that historically, leadership has always been defined on male, as opposed to female, terms. In US political, business, and military circles, strong leadership is defined as the ability to exert one’s will over a particular situation, and this view has been indoctrinated into the consciousness of most Americans through the traditional interpretation of our national history. This view of leadership, in turn, affects how the public will view other aspiring leaders, particularly women, and it leaves women with a “double standard and a double bind” as men are still more readily accepted as leaders than women. For example, in facing these stereotypes, women leaders are viewed negatively if they exhibit leadership characteristics that are either too masculine (assertive translates into being abrasive) or too feminine (soft translates into not tough enough to do the job). Similarly, the term working mother carries negative connotations, in that women are perceived as not being able to meet all necessary work responsibilities; meanwhile, the term working father is rarely used, as men’s child-rearing responsibilities do not enter into the equation. This double bind for women leaders is also due to the fact that gender stereotypes about leadership are both descriptive and prescriptive, meaning that women are expected to be “warm, kind, and sensitive,” and if they fail to meet this stereotypical standard, they “may be seen as difficult and unlikable.”
This conceptualization of leadership on male terms has often served as a barrier for women in politics—not only those seeking office but those holding it as well. The US policymaking process is viewed as the reallocation of resources throughout society, with the winners exerting their power and influence over the losers within the political arena. Since men are traditionally expected, due to stereotypes, to be competitive, strong, tough, decisive, and in control, male leaders appear to better fit the US political model. Women, by contrast, are expected, again due to stereotypes, to exhibit supportiveness, understanding, and a willingness to both cooperate with and serve others. Other female characteristics of leadership include using consensus decisionmaking, viewing power as something to be shared, encouraging productive approaches to conflict, building supportive working environments, and promoting diversity in the workplace. Gender, socialization, and chosen career paths all play an important role in the defining of leadership and in explanations of the differing leadership styles of women and men.13

Scholars who study gender-based differences in leadership show that in some areas, particularly politics and business, women often bring “a more open, democratic, and ‘people-centered’ approach to their leadership positions.” However, a more inclusive and participatory approach to leadership is not exclusive to women, and since women have yet to reach parity with men in leadership positions, not enough evidence yet exists to categorize leadership styles based on gender alone.14 Differences between male and female leadership styles are sometimes subtle and should not be overstated. It is also important to point out that a “generic woman” does not exist when attempting to determine such differences, because race, class, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation perhaps play even more important roles when determining the context of one’s actions or behaviors in the political arena.15 And women leaders in other nations have exhibited diverse leadership styles—some more traditionally male, like former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, and some more traditionally female, like former Philippine president Corazon Aquino.16

Does gender matter in the area of policymaking? First, it is important to note that not only is the electoral process in the United States male dominated, but its political institutions are male dominated as well. Once elected, women politicians tend to
bring different priorities into the policymaking arena than their male counterparts. Women are also more likely to work across party lines to achieve their goals, as the actions of female members of the US Senate in the past two decades have shown. Both Democratic and Republican women in the Senate have made their collective voices heard on bipartisan issues affecting women, such as the Homemaker Individual Retirement Account (cosponsored by Democrat Barbara Mikulski of Maryland and Republican Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas, which allows homemakers to invest as much money in tax-free retirement accounts as their working spouses) and a resolution in support of mammograms for women in their forties (cosponsored by Mikulski and Republican Olympia Snowe of Maine).17

However, not all women politicians automatically support women’s issues, since party affiliation and political ideology are still the most important predictors for bill sponsorship or the actual vote on a particular bill. One study on the state legislatures in California and Arizona showed that there is little difference between the behaviors of male and female members, particularly in regard to meeting the needs of constituents. Whereas women legislators often take the lead on women’s issues, both male and female legislators showed a willingness to engage in a cooperative, democratic, and open manner in developing legislation to meet the needs of constituents—even though such willingness is traditionally associated with female leaders.18 Other studies have shown that although men can easily adopt leadership strategies that are viewed as either male or female, and be praised for doing so, women are viewed more negatively if they adopt more traditionally male leadership style traits such as competitiveness, toughness, or decisiveness.19

Women must work hard to survive in the male-dominated world of US politics, particularly in the image-driven, media-saturated political culture that now exists. In 1960, in his study of leadership and the US presidency, Richard Neustadt provided the seminal definition of political power as the ability to effectively bargain and persuade to achieve political objectives.20 During the television age, that ability to bargain and persuade dictates that politicians must be effective communicators as well as savvy in their dealings with the news media. Therefore, when discussing women and leadership within the US political arena, we must
consider the ways in which women communicate, how they are viewed by the public, and how the press portrays them.

Research by communication and linguistics scholars show that men and women communicate differently. In general, men view communication as negotiations where they must maintain power in “a hierarchical social order in which [they are] either one-up or one-down”; women, by contrast, view communication as an opportunity for confirmation, support, and consensus within “a network of connections.”21 This difference can actually benefit women politicians who must appear on television, either during a campaign or while in office. As a medium, television demands intimacy and the ability to express the “private” self; this is obvious in the trend of personalizing politics throughout the 1990s. Male politicians more often discuss goals, whereas women politicians more often reveal themselves through an intimate, conversational, and narrational style of speech. Women politicians tend to be more comfortable expressing as opposed to camouflaging themselves publicly, which can be quite useful in developing their public images.22

Negative stereotyping of women politicians, however, can harm that public image. Whether it is positive or negative, stereotyping, which is a method used to quickly categorize information about someone, is a common everyday occurrence. Negative stereotyping about women as ineffective or weak leaders can harm their success as candidates or officeholders. For example, research in recent years has shown stereotypes to exist about both male and female political candidates. Women, who are considered more compassionate, are seen as more competent in the supposedly female policy areas of health care, the environment, education, poverty, and civil rights. Men, who are considered more aggressive, are perceived as being stronger in the supposedly male policy areas of military and defense matters, foreign policy, and economic and trade issues.23 The portrayal of women as ineffective or weak in these areas can harm their success as candidates or officeholders.

Women in politics, especially those who have succeeded, have also traditionally been viewed by the news media as an anomaly—a unique occurrence that deserves attention because it is outside the norm.24 Trivialization of women in the news media has also continued, through portrayals on television and in the movies that
can lead to “symbolic annihilation” of women in general,25 as well as the stereotyping that occurs in news coverage of women candidates and politicians.26 In many campaigns, news media coverage has added to the negative stereotyping of women candidates, thus hurting their efforts to win an elected office, since the news media pay more attention to style over substance when covering female candidates. Many voters may doubt the policy qualifications of women candidates when news coverage downplays issues and highlights personal traits, since this can develop less favorable images of women candidates.27

The Plan of the Book

This text is different than most other women and politics texts in that it looks at the core theme of women and leadership within the US political arena, outlining the essential themes for understanding women and politics from a traditional political science perspective. In addition, I will consider the issue of women’s leadership and the challenges associated with the current political environment (the importance of public image, the media, and money) as more women get elected to office (Congress and state governors), appointed to high-ranking federal positions (the executive and judicial branches), and as the United States moves closer to electing the first woman president. We will also consider the impact of women at all levels of the governing process—as citizens, voters, candidates, and office holders—and how, in turn, government policies impact women. For example, how has the government dealt with so-called women’s issues (traditionally defined as domestic issues such as welfare, health care, and education) in recent years? Why are certain public policies so important to women and what are the obstacles (if any) to making necessary changes? And, do women politicians bring different perspectives to the policymaking process?

Many students ask, why study women and politics? They also wonder, what is the difference between women and politics and women’s studies? Women’s studies as an academic discipline grew out of the women’s movement in the late 1960s. It began with informal groups of students and professors who were interested in studying gender and asking questions about how women (as
opposed to the generic term “man”) fit into the political and social order. Since then, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the existence of women’s and/or gender studies programs has increased dramatically at the college and university level, as has the number of women and politics courses being taught within political science departments across the country. The two areas of study are intricately linked, through the development of feminist theories as well as the methodologies (how we study issues) and core themes of studying women as women (the gendered meanings of social institutions, experiences, events, and ideas). Women’s studies courses and programs of study are interdisciplinary, which means that ideas and methodologies come from a variety of disciplines (like political science, history, economics, psychology, philosophy, and communication, to name a few) and are brought together in an attempt to better understand the experiences of women in many facets of life.28

Like women’s studies, the study of women and politics also grew out of the women’s movement. Prior to the late 1960s, as the feminist movement grew within colleges and universities, only a handful of books or studies had ever been conducted about women as political actors. The study of women and politics grew rapidly throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as did the subfield of women and politics within the American Political Science Association. The study of women and politics is more specific than women’s studies, focusing solely on women as political participants, officeholders, and policymakers and considering how public policy at all levels of government impacts women. All political scientists, not just those who call themselves women and politics scholars, have benefited from this expansion of disciplinary boundaries by raising questions about what political scientists study and how they study it. By identifying women as a category of study, “feminist political scientists have been able to call into question some of the central assumptions and frameworks of the discipline.”29 However, whereas the discipline of political science “now has gender on its agenda,” much research remains to be done to better understand the roles of race, class, party affiliation, and ideology in shaping how women politicians impact the policy-making process, as well as the role of the media in shaping perceptions of women leaders and how that may limit their political opportunities.10
This book is firmly grounded within the traditions of women and politics as the field has evolved within political science, and it highlights the theme of political leadership throughout by providing examples and profiles of prominent women political leaders. Understanding the role that women play in US politics must begin with an examination of women as political participants. Chapter 2 provides a historical analysis of the women's movement in the United States and its leaders, including its various phases and its generational differences (for example, the fight for suffrage that culminated in 1920, followed by the drive for an equal rights amendment to the US Constitution that began in 1923 and continued until the amendment’s close defeat in 1982). Understanding feminist theory is also relevant to studying women and politics, and this chapter provides a brief discussion of feminist theory and its various classifications (liberal, radical, socialist, Marxist, black, Latina, etc.) and how feminism continues to influence women and politics.

Next, how women participate in politics is examined. Chapter 3 takes a look at women as voters and as members of political parties and interest groups. Important questions include how women vote and why as well as whether there is truly a gender gap in US politics. Also, how do political parties and interest groups represent women’s issues, and how do they court women for support? The socialization process, including the role of the news media, is also important to this discussion to determine how women think about politics in general, about their role as voters, and about policy issues relevant to them. Chapter 4 looks at women as political candidates, exploring the unique challenges that women have faced in running for office at all levels of government. Breaking into the system and becoming political leaders are not easy tasks for women candidates, and we will consider the progress that they have made in state and national elections in recent decades. Also, what challenges do women face within the party structure and in raising adequate funds to finance campaigns? Is there gender bias in news media coverage during campaigns, and does this lead to negative stereotyping of women candidates?

The next three chapters will look at women as political leaders, officeholders, and policymakers. Chapter 5 will consider women within Congress and state legislatures. Women holding executive positions at the federal, state, and local levels are cov-
Chapter 6 looks at women within the federal and state judicial branches. To what offices have women been elected and/or appointed, and have they made a difference in the areas of leadership, governance, and policymaking? Have women political leaders effectively raised public awareness of women’s policy issues and/or developed workable solutions? Do women governors or legislators govern differently than their male counterparts and/or from one another? What challenges do they face in their careers, and how do these challenges differ from those faced by men? Chapter 6 will also ask a much-talked-about question: when will the United States elect its first woman president?

Finally, Chapter 8 will provide a concluding look at the progress that women have made in US politics, as well as address future challenges for women within the political process as voters, candidates, and political officeholders. Returning to the theme of leadership, we will consider how women impact the political and policymaking process as leaders and what trends may emerge in the future.

### Study/Discussion Questions

1. Why has leadership traditionally been defined on male, as opposed to female, terms? How has this served as a barrier to women’s success in politics?

2. What role did the women’s movement have on the academic study of women and gender, particularly within the field of political science?

3. How has the women and politics subfield within political science shaped our understanding of the category “woman”?

### Online Resources


Notes

1. For example, see Ellison, *If Women Ruled the World*; Rachanow, *If Women Ran the World*; and Rachanow, *What Would You Do If You Ran the World?*
6. See Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Northouse outlines a variety of leadership theories, including those that focus on traits, skills, styles, situations, and personality.
7. See Burns, *Leadership*.
11. Ibid., 7–8.
23. See Huddy and Terkildsen, “Gender Stereotypes.”
29. See Carroll and Zerilli, “Feminist Challenges to Political Science.”