trends

gender politics

by deborah carr

History was made on January 8, 2008, when Sen. Hillary Clinton pulled a surprise upset over Sen. Barack Obama in the New Hampshire primary. At that moment, Clinton's bid to be the nation's first female Democratic presidential nominee seemed a very real possibility.

In the months that followed her campaign faltered and political analysts dissected her every word, wardrobe choice, and personnel shift. Many observers cried sexism and argued that candidates' tears (or décolletages or derrieres) have nothing to do with their ability to lead our nation. Debates raged as to whether Clinton's failure to clinch the nomination reflected deep-seated sexism among voters and the media, or her vote to authorize the Iraq War, or the fact that she was simply outshined by Obama's charisma and cult-like following.

The Clinton campaign also raised an important question more generally: why do women still lag behind men in American politics?

Women trail men in all types of elected offices in the United States, although the gender gap is more pronounced at the national than the state level. In 2008, women accounted for just 16 percent of seats in the 110th U.S. Congress—16 of the 100 Senate seats and 72 of the 435 House seats. At the state level, by contrast, women hold 23.8 percent of all elected executive offices and 23.5 percent of seats in state legislatures.

Although these numbers may be discouraging, they represent a remarkable increase, even since the 1970s. To put these numbers in historical perspective, consider the fact that since 1789, women have made up only 2 percent of all members of Congress. It was only as recently as 1975 that Ella Grasso of Connecticut became the first woman elected governor in her own right. The previous three female governors assumed leadership only when their husbands died or were unable to take office.

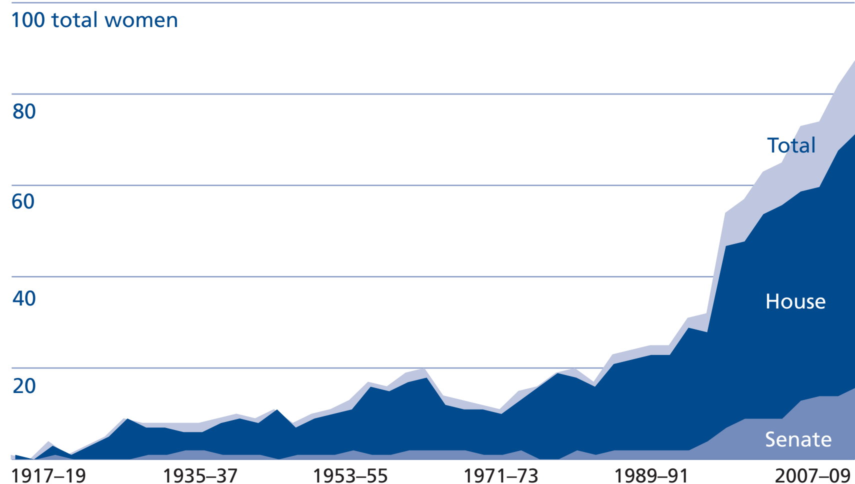
As we can see below, the number of women in Congress inched up slowly between 1917 and the late 1980s. Just one woman served in the House in the 65th Congress (1917–19), yet by the 1940s 10 women held this role. These numbers climbed steadily over the next four decades, and then increased from 32 in the 102nd Congress (1991–93) to 54 in the 103rd (1993–95). Between 1995 and 2007, women's count jumped from 54 to 88.

Another important trend is that women have finally established a foothold in the Senate. While nearly all female Congresspersons through 1991 were in the House of Representatives, Senators now account for a growing share of women's national political involvement.

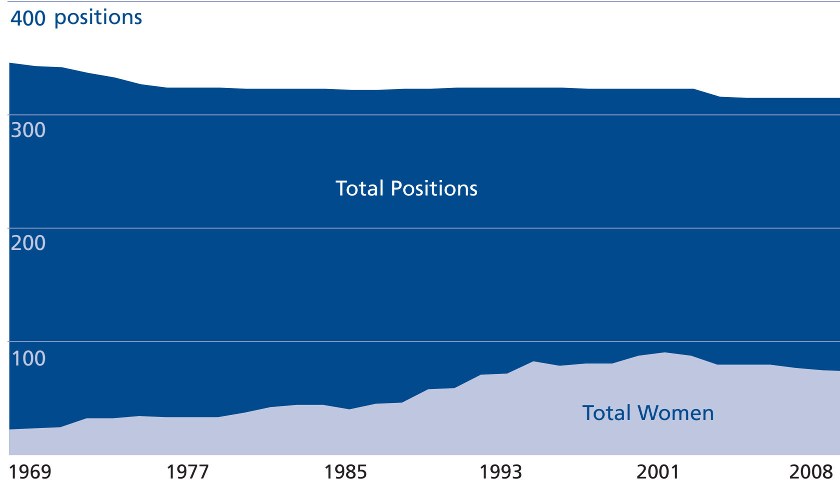
State-level politics has changed even more profoundly. Women accounted for just 23 of the 345 statewide elective executive offices in 1969 (6.6 percent), yet their participation increased to 13.3 percent in 1985, 25.9 percent in 1995, and peaked at 28.5 percent in 2000 (right, top). Today, women hold 23.8 percent (or 75 of the 315) of state-level offices. In 2008, women held the positions of governor (eight states), lieutenant governor (10), attorney general (five), secretary of state (12), state treasurer/chief financial officer (11), state auditor (six), state comptroller/controller (four), chief state education official (eight), commissioner of insurance (two), commissioner of labor (one), corporation commissioner (one), public service commissioner (five), public regulation commissioner (one), and railroad commissioner (one).

State legislatures also have undergone a slow, steady gender transformation (right, bottom). In 1971—the year Congress established "Women's Equality Day" and the first issue of the magazine *Ms.* appeared as an insert in *New York* magazine—women accounted for just 4.5 percent of state legislators. The number of women serving their local constituencies quadrupled from 344 in 1971 to 1,732 in 2007. Women now hold 422 (21.4 percent) of the 1,971

Women in U.S. Congress



Women in statewide elective executive offices



state senate seats and 1,310 (24.2 percent) of the 5,411 state house or assembly seats.

Despite these strides, the halls of the Senate are still overrun by men. One camp argues it's simply a matter of preference. Women are interested in issues related to family and social welfare, rather than national defense and international relations—so they either stay out of politics all together or focus their efforts on local offices and initiatives. The "preferences" camp also has theorized that women are more risk-averse than men and thus less likely to throw their hats into the ring. Others say women's family responsibilities (including the desire to spare their families from the media's prying eye) keep them out of politics, just as it keeps them out of Fortune 50 boardrooms and careers in the hard sciences.

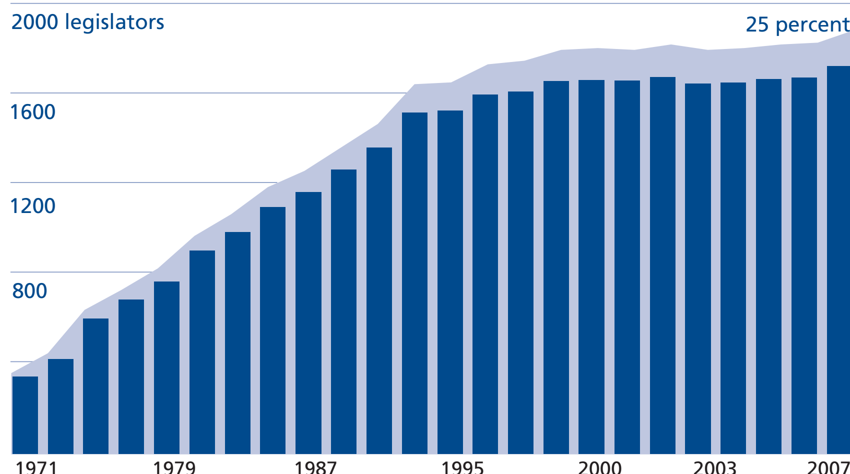
Another camp claims it's economics, stupid. Women have fewer dollars of their own to fund multi-million dollar campaigns, and they lack the Harvard MBA or frat house social connections that give them access to other people's (or more accurately, other men's) money.

Still another explanation points to historical context and the "pipeline" argument. A key prerequisite for holding national office is to have held a prior elected office. Men have more years of experience in state and local offices before making the leap to the national arena. They also are more likely to have served in the military or had a legal career—both of which are springboards to politics. Men also are more likely than women to be incumbents; it's far easier for an incumbent (or current office-holder) to win a re-election than it is for a newcomer to win a first-time election. Incumbency also carries rewards critical to winning elections—name recognition and access to donor databases and pocketbooks.

A final hypothesis is sexism. Adherents to this perspective don't necessarily believe the electorate won't vote for a woman. Rather, voters may hold stereotypes about what women can and should be, and being assertive, self-assured, and focused on global politics may violate idealized notions of what a woman "should" be. At the same time, even the most assertive female candidate may be viewed as "too soft" to take a hard line with terrorists.

Although it may take decades until a woman is elected president of the United States, this possibility becomes increasingly likely as more women seek careers in law and military, amass their own investments and political alliances, and establish themselves as trustworthy and effective legislators and leaders at the local level. And history could be made in November 2008 if Republican presidential candidate John McCain is elected to office. His running mate, Alaska governor Sarah Palin, would become the nation's first female vice-president.

Women in state legislatures



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Contexts, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 58–59. ISSN 1536-5042, electronic ISSN 1537-6052. © 2008 American Sociological Association.
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DOI: 10.1525/ctx.2008.7.4.58.