Madam President: Gender, Power, and the Comparative Presidency

Farida Jalalzai

* University of Missouri-Saint Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Online publication date: 23 April 2010

To cite this Article Jalalzai, Farida(2010) 'Madam President: Gender, Power, and the Comparative Presidency', Journal of Women, Politics & Policy, 31: 2, 132 — 165

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/15544771003697643

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15544771003697643

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Madam President: Gender, Power, and the Comparative Presidency

FARIDA JALALZAI
University of Missouri-Saint Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

This article examines the paths and powers of women who have occupied presidential positions around the world from 1974 through 2008. While women have had less success in obtaining presidential posts compared to prime ministerial offices, there have been recent notable gains. Developing a typology of presidential positions, I find that presidential positions are still overwhelmingly dominated by men. Moreover, men tend to hold greater powers in their presidential posts than women. Strong women presidents are still exceedingly rare, particularly those elected by popular vote and absent familial ties to male leaders. Overall, the comparative presidency continues to be a male domain.

KEYWORDS women, presidents, prime ministers, gender

INTRODUCTION

The world recently witnessed a woman coming closer than any other to obtaining a major party’s nomination for president in the United States. However, Barack Obama defeated Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary and the American presidency continues to be the quintessential “all boys club.” At the same time, women have risen to the presidency in other countries around the world. This contrast between the United States and other countries offers an opportunity to pose these significant questions: How is the presidency a gendered institution worldwide? Are all presidential positions created equal? How do differences in presidential positions relate to gender?

Address correspondence to Farida Jalalzai, Department of Political Science, University of Missouri-Saint Louis, One University Boulevard, 347 SSB, St. Louis, MO 63121-4499. E-mail: jalalzaif@umsl.edu
This article examines women presidents around the world from 1974, the first year a woman (Isabel Perón of Argentina) held this office, through 2008. While women have had less success in obtaining presidential posts than prime ministerial office (Jalalzai 2008), there have been recent notable gains in women presidents in a variety of geographical areas, levels of development, and cultures. In exploring these cases, it is particularly important to examine paths to leadership, types of presidential positions, and presidential powers in relation to gender. Bringing together a primary focus on women attaining the presidency worldwide and a secondary emphasis on why the United States has yet to join these countries, this article adds to the sparse literature on women as national leaders and to the burgeoning scholarship focused on the possibility of an American woman president. While this work is not primarily centered around Hillary Clinton, analyzing women’s obstacles in obtaining the American presidency allows for a greater understanding of the limitations to women holding presidential offices worldwide. For example, given world patterns, what particular significance would a Madam President of the United States have on women’s executive authority? Is Clinton’s defeat suggestive of the larger impediments to women’s ability to exercise dominant authority in countries that are major players on the world stage?

My major argument is that it is a gross oversimplification to speak of a monolithic presidency—not all presidents are created equal. While this is hardly a novel concept, its application to a systematic and comparative understanding of gender and the presidency is new. In this article, I examine all 20 cases of women presidents coming to power from 1974 through 2008 to develop a typology of presidential positions and to relate presidential powers to gender. I also analyze cases representative of presidential types, integrating the most recent women presidents such as India’s Pratibha Patil and Argentina’s Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Assessing whether more current examples of women presidents signify critical departures from previous ones or merely more of the same in terms of paths and powers is a key concern. Male executives are also examined to see if there are major differences in paths to office and the presidential powers exercised between men and women.

The number of women presidents substantially increased beginning in the 1990s and progress within the first decade of the 2000s has already outpaced other periods. However, powerful women presidents are still exceedingly rare, particularly among those elected by popular vote and those without familial ties to male leaders. Presidents exercising dominant power are seldom women, especially in countries that are important on the world stage. Weaker presidential positions, including those that are largely symbolic in nature, are more open to women. However, regardless of the type, presidential positions are overwhelmingly dominated by men. Moreover, men tend to hold greater powers in their presidential posts than women.
Given the nature of the American presidency, the possibility of a woman president is particularly challenging. If Clinton was triumphant, her path to office would have resembled that of others, but her potential powers and relevance in global politics would signal a major shift for women. Her ultimate defeat given her various advantages in fundraising and name recognition further confirms how difficult it is for women to shatter the American presidential glass ceiling.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Little scholarship has focused on women as national leaders, especially the extent to which executive selection processes and powers relate to gender. Most studies of women executives concentrate on their behaviors once in office. These studies are generally case studies (Clemens 2006; King 2002; Saint-Germain 1993; Thompson 1993; Thompson and Lennartz 2006) or collections of biographies (Liswood 1995, 2007; Opfell 1993), although larger area studies do exist (Hodson 1997; Richter 1991). Michael A. Genovese's collection, *Women as National Leaders* (1993), focuses on prominent women executives throughout modern history such Indira Gandhi (Everett 1993), Corazon Aquino (Col 1993), and Benazir Bhutto (Anderson 1993). Case studies highlight paths to power, forms of leadership, and tenures in office. Since Genovese's collection studies only seven women, the scope is relatively modest, with some temporal and geographic variations. Genovese's findings do underscore larger patterns of women's national leadership.

Regarding women's paths to office, women serve as leaders in countries at all stages of development and levels of democracy. Some enter office young and with very little prior political exposure while others are older and highly experienced (Genovese and Thompson 1993, 9). Behaviors also vary. "None of these women has been a 'revolutionary' leader, and overall they have tended to be spread across the ideological spectrum" (Genovese 1993, 215). Some women do, however, provide transformative and feminist leadership. Transformative leadership changes in individual citizens, states, and societies (Sykes 1993). Transformative leadership does not need to include a feminist agenda, but it does, in some way, fundamentally change the status quo. In contrast, feminist leadership explicitly focuses on changing the place and perception of women in society, acknowledges that gender is socially constructed, and advocates gender equality. Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister (PM) of Norway, was transformational because she pushed for environmental protections and was feminist because she appointed large numbers of women cabinet ministers. In contrast, Margaret Thatcher was transformational because she ended the 40-year postwar consensus and ushered in a revolutionary era of economics in the United Kingdom (King 2002), but Thatcher was not feminist. Others
like India’s Indira Gandhi (Sykes 1993) offer neither feminist nor transformative leadership, but they still challenge prevailing assumptions that women exhibit a softer style of leadership. In fact, similar to Thatcher, Gandhi exhibited highly masculine traits as prime minister such as an unwillingness to compromise and be controlled, ultimately winning the “title of the only man in a cabinet of old women” (Masani in Everett 1993, 112).1

Larger comparative analyses of factors related to women’s rise as national leaders are scant (Jalalzai, Watson, Jencik, and Selzer 2005). Political institutions and processes appear principally important. Women are more likely to serve in parliamentary systems than presidential and are more often prime ministers than presidents (Jalalzai 2008). Women have greater success as prime ministers because women in those roles are able to bypass a potentially sexist public, have less political autonomy, and women are more able to collaborate than dominate in a political system (Jalalzai 2008). These explanations are thoroughly dissected subsequently, particularly in relation to gender norms.

Structural factors are highly important to women’s successful incorporation in political institutions. Early comparative research found women’s educational attainment and participation in the labor market related to their legislative representation (Rosenbluth, Salmon, and Thies 2006). Other work demonstrates the association between women’s political representation and their levels in professional occupations (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Norris 1997; Rule 1987). If political leaders are generally drawn from the highly educated professional classes and women are disproportionately underrepresented in these groups, then women face reduced chances of electoral success. However, other research challenges the assertion that women’s education and labor force participation are related to their ability to serve as a political representative (Matland 1998; Moore and Shackman 1996).

While the literature focuses almost exclusively on legislators, executive scholarship indicates that women repeatedly come to power in countries where women’s general status is very limited in terms of educational, economic, and professional achievement (Jalalzai 2004, Jalalzai 2008). In fact, the only quantitative study on this topic finds a correlation between the presence of a female head of state or government and women’s general status but that lower levels of parity of women to men in life expectancy, education, and income are related to women executives (Jalalzai 2008).2 Yet, at the same time, women who attain these positions are usually highly educated and considerably more privileged than women in the general population (Jalalzai 2008). Therefore, it is misleading to assert that the educational and economic status of women is irrelevant to their executive political advancement. However, while higher class and educational attainment is generally crucial for those rising to power, women can also hold office where their overall status is low.
The proportions of women legislators and cabinet officials may also be germane to their executive advancement. Based again on the eligibility pool theory, experience at lower levels of politics is a step on the road to national leadership. Women’s political representation might also reflect the general openness of a political system to women’s participation. This link may seem more obvious in parliamentary than presidential systems because of the necessity of working one’s way up through party ranks. However political experience enhances credibility and also positions one within networks that recruit for presidential candidates. While there are several cases of women executives coming to power during periods in which women’s legislative representation is low, (Jalalzai 2008) some research finds that women’s greater legislative representation is related to the existence of a female executive in a country. Davis (1997) finds that European countries with female prime ministers also have slightly higher levels of women cabinet ministers. However, in a much larger analysis, Jalalzai (2008) find no relationship between the number of women cabinet members and the sex of the executive.

Attempts to reconcile the paradox of female leaders in contexts in which women are generally restricted in their educational, economic, and overall political power have pointed to the importance kinship ties (Hodson 1997; Richter 1991, Jalalzai 2008). Women leaders in certain regions are largely limited to relatives of former executives or opposition leaders, many of who were slain (Jalalzai 2008). There are gendered explanations relevant here—women are not viewed as independently politically ambitious and they are easily pushed aside by male leaders once they are in office. For example, Corazon Aquino “swiftly defaulted official power. Instead, power was exercised behind the scenes by her cordon sanitaire, made up of close kin and a menagerie of advisers” (Roces 2000, 118). Aquino and many other women leaders are also looked upon as healers after periods of political repression since they are perceived as conciliatory figures that act on behalf of the larger national family.

Kinship ties are related to political instability, another key explanation for women’s rise to power. Since providing the unity discussed previously is especially important in unstable contexts, political instability also benefits select women in their pursuit of power (Jalalzai 2008). In some regions, particularly Asia and Africa, various ethnic and religious factions that were suppressed during colonialism became salient following the achievement of political independence. The new importance of these groups leads to frequent regime change, evident in assassinations and repeated coups (Hodson 1997). These uncertain circumstances create more opportunities for women to gain access to executive posts than would normally be the case in a country with more stable transfers of power. As a result, the greater number of openings in cases of political instability sometimes benefits women. Instability is also associated with a lack of institutional
development which opens the door for a select group of women leaders by allowing for kinship, ethnicity, or charismatic leadership to play a pivotal role in politics. Examples of this path are highlighted in the case study portion of this analysis.

Therefore, a combination of factors including political institutions and processes, personal educational and economic attainment, women’s legislative representation, kinship ties, and political instability and institutionalization are related to women’s executive advancement. This study focuses on applying paths to the specific processes involved in executive selection and ultimate powers that women leaders exercise.

**WOMEN PRESIDENTS 1974–2008**

Table 1 shows that by November 2008, 20 women from 16 countries served as president. Four countries have had two female presidents come to power—the Philippines, Ireland, Switzerland, and Argentina. The number of female executives does not include seven women who only served on an acting or interim basis. In 1974, Isabel Perón (Argentina) became the world’s first woman president. However, this important event did not lead to a major increase in women presidents (Figure 1).

**Female Presidents by Decade**

Only four women came to power between the 1970s and 1980s. Women finally made major inroads as presidents in the 1990s, almost quadrupling their numbers from two in the 1980s to seven in the 1990s. This growth is particularly evident in the first decade of the 2000s; through 2008, nine new women came to power, the most in any decade. While this growth illustrates a clear improvement, presidents are still almost universally men. Currently, there are 135 presidents in office. Of these, only 7 are women while 128 are men. Thus, women only account for 5 percent of presidents around the world! Put into a historical perspective, of the 802 presidents coming to power since 1960, only 20 have been women. Therefore, over the last nearly 50 years, men comprise 98 percent of all presidents. Prior to that, no women executives, including prime ministers, had ever ascended to executive office.

Women presidents hail from four main geographical areas—Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They are most numerous in Europe (eight), particularly Western Europe, but they are also well-represented in Latin America (six) and Asia (five). Only one woman has ever served as president of an African nation, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia. Though African countries have almost universally adopted systems featuring presidents, women are limited to the much weaker post of prime minister (Jalalzai 2008). More regional differences are discussed throughout.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region/country</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>System</th>
<th>Powers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>Johnson-Sirleaf</td>
<td>1/16/2006–present</td>
<td>Popular vote</td>
<td>Unified pres.</td>
<td>Dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Patil</td>
<td>7/25/2007–present</td>
<td>Legislative appt.</td>
<td>Parl.-Weak pres.</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Dreifuss</td>
<td>1/1/1999–1/1/2000</td>
<td>Leg. appt.</td>
<td>Unified pres.</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Calmy Rey</td>
<td>1/1/2007–1/1/2008</td>
<td>Leg. appt.</td>
<td>Unified pres.</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Fernández de Kirchner</td>
<td>12/10/2007–present</td>
<td>Popular vote</td>
<td>Unified Pres.</td>
<td>Dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>Rodríguez</td>
<td>9/1/1999–9/1/2004</td>
<td>Popular Vote</td>
<td>Unified Pres.</td>
<td>Dominant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THEORETICAL BACKDROP: 
THE PRESIDENCY AS A MASCULINE OFFICE

How is the presidency a masculine office? Research exploring this important question generally centers on gender stereotypes, mainly in the American context. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) distinguish between gender-trait and gender-belief stereotypes that result in men and women being viewed as competent on different policies. Belief stereotypes link gender to perceptions of party and ideological leanings. Men are perceived as associated with the Republican Party and conservatism and women with the Democratic Party and liberalism. Based on party stereotypes, Republicans are depicted as stronger on issues such as national security while Democrats are better at providing social services. As a result, men are considered more proficient on defense and military issues and women are considered superior on a host of “compassion” issues including welfare and education.

Gender-trait stereotypes are based on male and female personality characteristics; toughness is associated with masculinity and compassion with femininity, again leading to assumptions of men’s superiority at handling military conflicts and women’s supremacy at alleviating poverty (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Trait stereotypes also result in different perceptions regarding men’s and women’s suitability for specific political offices and leadership qualities. Toughness is seen as an advantage for men in executive positions while compassion is a liability for women (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Fox and Oxley 2003). These findings are bolstered by cross-national studies indicating that leaders are viewed as possessing masculine traits and that men are more likely to be seen as displaying these traits (Sczesny et al. 2004). These gender stereotypes are also reinforced by media portrayals of political candidates around the world (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008).
Linking gender stereotypes more closely to political institutions, Georgia Duerst-Lahti (1997) argues that executive power arrangements are masculine because they are centralized and hierarchical, making it difficult for women to break into these roles. For example, women’s progress in attaining gubernatorial office in the United States has been mixed. According to the Center for American Women and Politics, out of the 29 women who have served as governor, one-third were appointed, moved up the ranks to succeed male governors, or were elected to their husband’s posts. Further, women rarely lead more populous and politically consequential states. While the issues governors are responsible for clearly span the “female” and “male” divide, it may be the masculine traits seemingly required that hold women back (Fox and Oxley 2003). Women are also seldom represented in powerful national executive branch positions, but are commonly found in functional areas associated with women such as healthcare and children (Borrelli 2002; Martin 2003). Comparative data reinforces these findings. Women around the world are generally seldom assigned to more prestigious cabinet posts and they are often relegated to “women’s ministries” (Blondel 1988; Davis 1997; Paxton and Hughes 2007).

Most American and comparative research probing discrimination against women candidates focuses on legislative candidates and these findings suggest that women win as often as men in the United States (Dolan 2004; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). The few comparative findings generally fail to confirm discrimination against women parliamentary candidates by voters (Black and Erickson 2003; Hunter and Denton 1984; Rasmussen 1983; Studlar and McAllister 1991). However, these studies are conducted on only Western parliamentary systems, which still leaves unknown the dynamics of voter stereotypes in other settings where discrimination is more overt. Comparative public opinion data, though still limited in scope, find that respondents in many countries continue to believe that men make better political leaders than women. This is particularly true for respondents in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In fact, Paxton and Kunovich (2003) find a strong negative relationship between the belief in the superiority of male political leaders and the percentage of women in parliament.

While there are mixed findings regarding the role of sex stereotypes and discrimination and women’s successful attainment of legislative office around the world, it is important to understand how national executive posts differ. Presidential and prime ministerial offices diverge in selection processes and their relative authority, autonomy, and traits deemed necessary for success. Some attribute the greater success of women’s attainment of prime ministerial posts to the selection that allows them to be chosen by the party instead of a potentially biased general public (Whicker and Isaacs, 1999). Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom and Angela Merkel of Germany are good examples of women who rose to power through party
promotion (Clemens 2006; King 2002). The success of female prime ministers does not necessarily mean that elites always promote women candidates. In fact, some find elites discriminate against women parliamentary candidates during the recruitment process in many Western contexts (Niven 1998; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Still, some women are actively recruited by parties, ultimately rising to the prime ministership. In contrast, ascension to the presidency typically relies on some sort of popular vote.

Another major difference between the presidency and the prime ministership is the fusion of executive and legislative authority within parliamentary systems. Since prime ministers share power with cabinet and party members, the traits necessary for this position are negotiation, collaboration, and deliberation, all of which are considered more feminine. Because legislatures are deliberative institutions, decision-making processes are slower. Women are less hindered by views of their abilities to collaborate and deliberate than their capacities to lead quickly, decisively, and independently (Duerst-Lahti 1997). In contrast, presidents in presidential systems act independently of the legislature and generally are expected to lead in a quick and decisive manner, traits which are more often associated with masculinity (Duerst-Lahti 1997; Jalalzai 2008).

The path to the presidency may also work in tandem with the rules dictating presidential tenure. Whether through party elections, the dissolution of parliament, or a vote of no confidence, prime ministers may leave office at any point in time (Jalalzai 2008). Presidents generally have fixed terms, though in cases of severe wrongdoing they may be impeached. This generally places presidents in a more secure position, also possibly working against women. Parliamentary systems also feature party financing of elections, which alleviates potential gender discrimination in fundraising (Hodson 1997).

However, many systems do not neatly fit within the presidential and parliamentary categories and the semi-presidential system classification has traditionally covered a wide array of cases bearing little resemblance to one another (Siaroff 2003). Further, while there are many differences between the positions of presidents and prime ministers, very large variations are evident within these types. In short, not all presidencies or prime ministerships are created equal (Jalalzai 2008) and this has gendered implications. An important element guiding paths and authority is whether the executive is comprised of one person (unified) or two (dual). I expect women come to power more frequently as executives within systems where structures are dispersed, such as a dual executive. Dual executives’ powers are not as concentrated and thus not as challenging to the prevailing gendered order. Furthermore, since there are twice the positions at play, this increases women’s odds of success. However, the positions they tend to occupy within dual executive structures are generally weaker and more vulnerable to ouster. I also expect that women rarely serve in very powerful presidential positions, particularly through the popular vote.
A sense of the specific systems in which executive authority is exercised is necessary to truly understand presidential powers. Based on Siaroff (2003), I developed a typology of systems with presidents and specific presidential posts. I assigned one point for each of the following eight presidential powers: pivotal appointment powers; chairing cabinet meetings; veto; unlimited long term emergency or decree powers; foreign policy powers; defense roles including commander-in-chief of the armed forces; playing a major role in governmental formation; and dissolving the legislature at will. Based on this range of points (0–8), I classified presidents as one of the following three types. First, the dominant president possesses full executive powers or shares powers with a weaker PM (6–8 points). Second, the powerful but not dominant president possesses some powers but shares power with a stronger PM (4–5 points). Third, the president with minimal powers possesses few or no powers and shares power with a much stronger PM (0–3 points).

I also analyzed the circumstances under which women occupy the presidency. One expectation is that women rarely come to office through popular election since this signifies an ability to successfully garner wide appeal, which is particularly difficult for women given the sex stereotypes discussed earlier in this article. Women can overcome this obstacle when the presidency is relatively weak or when women possess various advantages such as being a member of a political family. Thus, one crucial test is whether a woman comes to power through popular election. A second is whether candidates run on a party label and represent this party once in office. If candidates do not run on a party ticket, the president is likely a nonpartisan figure and one that lacks a policy role. Symbolic leaders may be hampered by party affiliations since partisanship invokes a particular political role as opposed to country unifier. For example, the President of India is not elected under a political party and has few substantive powers in practice overall. I analyzed country constitutions and relevant amendments, media articles, biographical accounts, country reports, and governmental Web sites, to assess the situation specific to when each woman first entered office.

Based on powers, I also categorize countries with presidents as one of four main types (See Tables 1 and 2). First, unified presidential countries elect a president in some fashion and the president does not share power with a prime minister. Second, parliamentary-presidential dominance countries distribute power between a dominant president and much weaker prime minister. Third, parliamentary-presidential corrective countries have a president who is not dominant but possesses considerable powers (possibly the power to dissolve the legislature) while the prime minister is more influential. Fourth, parliamentary with weak or figurehead presidents countries have presidents that lack substantive powers or have very limited
authority while the prime minister is decidedly dominant. Presidents have the most power in unified and presidential dominance systems and the least power in parliamentary systems with figurehead presidents.\textsuperscript{12} I expected women would be least represented as presidents in unified and presidential dominance systems, and more represented in weaker positions sharing power with a much stronger prime minister.

WOMEN PRESIDENTS 1974–2008

Women Presidents: Paths and Powers

Upon investigating paths and powers, obstacles to women’s advancement to presidential office became clear (see Table 1). Only 12 women presidents (60 percent) initially entered office through popular election. Several
bypassed the public: three were vice presidents succeeding male presidents when the position suddenly opened and five were elected by legislatures. Eleven operated within unified systems. While unified systems typically correspond with full executive powers as is the case for nine women, both female presidents of the Swiss Confederation are considered weak for reasons discussed subsequently. Nine other women executives shared authority with a prime minister; seven possessed weaker powers than the prime ministers. The other two presidents in dual executive systems were dominant presidents who served with much weaker PMs. Upon analyzing party ties, six women lacked party affiliations or had to renounce them upon entering office. As illustrated later, women presidents are generally symbolic leaders who exercise few powers. Overall, the fact that there have been only 20 women presidents in the history of the world reinforces the dominance of men in this position. But among the 20, just over one-half held significant authority as presidents.

A brief word regarding general patterns of dual executive systems and executive positions is in order. While Western Europe generally established parliamentary forms of government, several systems feature dual executive structures with primarily weak presidents. Newly independent countries in Central and Eastern Europe also have dual executive systems, but they generally are dominated by presidents. Asia has a mix of unified and dual executive systems. Among dual structures, presidential powers vary with some featuring symbolic presidents and some featuring very powerful ones. Among unified systems, there are several instances of presidential governments, particularly in Southeast Asia. African countries vary in the adoption of dual or unified systems, but there is a clear pattern of presidential authority regardless of the number of executives. Finally, the prevailing executive system in Latin America is the unified presidential system, indicating strong presidential powers. Relevant cultural factors in light of these geographical differences will continually be presented along with the institutional factors that have allowed women to come to power.

Women Presidents with Minimal Powers

Given that Western European systems are generally parliamentary, it is no surprise that nearly all presidents with minimal powers are from this region (see Table 3). Though Central and Eastern European countries generally have strong presidents, the only female president from this area, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga of Latvia, had relatively few powers. Her powers were limited to a veto, a defense role, and most importantly, the ability to dissolve the legislature. Although she could propose the dissolving of parliament, this action must be approved by a majority of popular vote. If the referendum is defeated, the president can be removed from office, which is likely why Latvian presidents do not use these powers. While
Vike-Freiberga was clearly more than just a symbol, her powers were not substantial. She also lacked a party affiliation and was elected by the parliament. Given the lower level of support for women as political leaders among the general public in Eastern Europe (Paxton and Kunovich 2003), women may be less likely to attain the most powerful presidencies in this area.

Though the Maltese Constitution actually permits the president to dissolve Parliament, to dissolve Parliament, she must seek the advice of the prime minister and cabinet. Agatha Barbara also lacked a party base and she was not popularly elected. Barbara was a symbolic president, according to the media and government Web sites describing the nature of the presidency.

Other European presidents lacking strong power were elected through a popular vote. In 1980, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir (Iceland) was the first woman in the world to become president in this manner. However, her powers were clearly among the weakest among the entire sample. The Icelandic president does have the authority to decide which party forms the government when there is no majority, a power which may come into play often given the multiparty nature of the country. The Icelandic president can sign bills into law, although this essentially is a technicality. Presidents can exercise veto power in refusing to sign a bill which is then subject to public referendum (Blondal 1996). However, this never occurred in Iceland until 2004 (under Finnbogadóttir’s successor President Grímsson). Therefore, while Finnbogadóttir possessed veto power, Icelandic presidents do not use this power in practice. Finnbogadóttir delayed bill approval, discussed momentarily. It is perhaps to no surprise that she came to power absent prior political experience. Given the nature of the position, a political background is unnecessary or perhaps undesirable.

Ireland is the first country in which a woman succeeded another as president, and a woman has continuously occupied this post since 1990. However, though greater than Finnbogadóttir’s, neither Mary Robinson nor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Malta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calmy Rey</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreifuss</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnbogadóttir</td>
<td>Iceland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McAleese</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinson</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patil</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vike-Freiberga</td>
<td>Latvia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 8
Mary McAleese possessed strong powers. Potential powers of the Irish president include making some appointments and a form of presidential veto. However, the President’s constitutional powers, such as a strong defense role, appear greater than those exercised in practice. Both in practice and in the Constitution, the Oireachtas (Parliament) and ministers of relevant cabinet positions hold dominant roles in military and defense matters. The Constitution also limits presidential influence by prohibiting the President from leaving the country without permission from the government and placing strict limitations on partisan declarations. Irish presidents are permitted to run as partisans and keep their partisanship upon their ascensions. However, several have ruled as independents for at least some part of their tenure. Independents are particularly likely to arise when parties select a consensus nominee prior to an election. In these cases, presidential elections are in essence unopposed contests that do not require a public vote. Mary Robinson was officially an independent in office but was affiliated with the Labour Party as a candidate. McAleese ran and ruled on the Fianna Fail label her first term. Uncontested for her second term, she became an independent.

The last European examples of weak presidents include Ruth Dreifuss and Micheline Calmy Rey from Switzerland. The governmental structure of Switzerland is quite different than others discussed since the president is part of the seven-member Federal Council. The Swiss president is elected by the Federal Assembly for a one-year term. While the president is the only executive her powers are limited to only chairing cabinet meetings. All other powers are exercised with the Council or Assembly. Therefore, executive power is very dispersed and presidential authority is minimal. However, this type of collaborative structure may actually bode well for women’s representation given the arguments put forth earlier regarding gender stereotypes and executive office. Negotiation, compromise, and collaboration are all generally considered stereotypically feminine traits.

There is only one case of a weak woman president outside of Europe—President Pratibha Patil of India. Women executives from Asia and Latin America generally only come to power when they have family ties to power. Patil represents a departure from this pattern. However, she is not very powerful, she officially renounced her Congress party link, and she was elected through an electoral college comprised of legislators, not a popular vote. While the Indian president has authority over the armed forces and ability to dissolve parliament, the 42nd amendment places clear restrictions on this power stating, “There shall be a Council of Ministers with the Prime Minister at the head to aid and advise the President who shall, in the exercise of his functions, act in accordance with such advice” (Indian Constitution).

The Indian president holds some sway is determining which party will form the next government when there is no majority. Patil, a former
Congress Party member, has close ties to Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi. This partisan connection explains why Patil’s presidential credentials were severely attacked by opposition parties, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Though Patil was a parliamentarian for 10 years, held several ministerial and leadership posts, and later was governor of Rajasthan, opposition parties and the media accused her of having a “thin political cv” and being a “political lightweight” (Ganguli 2007). Given that her predecessor Abdul Kalam was an engineer with no prior political experience, these criticisms are particularly puzzling. Still, Patil won the election handily, with nearly two-thirds of the vote. However, negative press has continued, focusing particularly on the alleged wrongdoings of her husband and brother. While the characterization of Patil as too politically inexperienced for an apolitical position is clearly dubious, there is no denying her close connections to the Nehru/Gandhi dynasty. Therefore, although she lacks familial ties and now a formal political party label, Patil’s bonds to the Gandhis have been pivotal to her securing the governorship of Rajasthan and now the presidency.

Although some Indian presidents, including Rajendra Prasad and N. Sanjeeva Reddy, have played more influential political roles than others, Indian presidents occupy a much lower status than prime ministers. The symbolic nature of presidents is also particularly important given the extreme ethnic, religious, and caste divisions in India. In fact, it is the presidency that political minorities including Muslims (President Kalam), dalits (President Narayanan), and now women have broken through. Their selections send a message that the country accepts historically oppressed groups in political positions, but their elections leave the power structures unchallenged due to the lack of presidential authority.

Are these women presidents unimportant because they have relatively low levels of authority? Although the limitations of such offices are clear, even “figureheads” are significant. Such leaders may translate largely ceremonial power into more substantive forms. Even though Robinson was limited in delivering partisan declarations, she found ways to indirectly express her support for change through her relationships with progressive reformers (Sykes 1993). Because of Robinson’s actions, legislation suspending laws against homosexuality and birth control were passed. Iceland’s Finnbogadóttir severely pushed the boundaries of her authority by delaying the signing of a bill to show her support for workers (Liswood 1995). Finally, female presidents send a message that women are part of the public sphere and provide role models to girls and women.

Powerful but not Dominant Presidents

Tarja Halonen of Finland is the one female president in this sample possessing midrange powers. Constitutional revisions affecting the Finnish presidency were adopted prior to her election in 2000; these revisions
transferred powers largely to the parliament, the cabinet, and the prime minister, in particular. The president now shares foreign affairs responsibility with the prime minister who leads on European policy. The legislative assembly now nominates and dismisses the government and the prime minister (Holli 2008). The president does not carry out day-to-day domestic policy and Halonen had to renounce her partisan ties upon taking office. However, some of her remaining powers are extremely important including appointing and discharging military, defense, and foreign ministers. She also selects key financial officers and some judges. Other appointments (and removals) must be made in consultation with the prime minister. Through conducting her foreign policy role in high level meetings and summits around the world, Halonen is a highly visible figure. She also has veto power over legislation (President of Finland Web site).

The Finnish president has emergency powers, but they are limited to exceptional circumstances and they must be approved by Parliament after three months. The president appoints the PM in response to parliamentary elections, and PM can only be dismissed after a vote of no confidence. The president may only dissolve parliament as a result of a vote of no confidence. Overall, Halonen is stronger than a merely symbolic president. However, she is not the only executive exercising powers in Finland. The prime minister is a very important figure and appears to be at least marginally more powerful than the president.

Finland’s electoral process also changed. Since 1994, the president is elected in direct, two-round, majoritarian elections. Previously, the public voted on an electoral college that chose the president (Holli 2008). Perhaps not so coincidentally, a woman was elected to the presidency at the same time her powers were much more limited. Interestingly, Holli (2008, 505) argues that women’s chances for the Finnish presidency also increased due to these electoral reforms because it allowed women to engage in gender based voting, and challenge the masculine party hierarchies that kept women from the position prior to these reforms. At the same time, women’s support for women candidates has been challenged by men’s tendency to vote for male candidates (Hellsten, Holli, and Wass 2007). Therefore, even when a country generally has more progressive views on women’s political roles, this does not guarantee uniform public (or party) support for women presidential candidates. Institutional forms are also pivotal to understanding women’s success.

Dominant Women Presidents

Eleven women are dominant presidents—nine from unified systems and two who share power with a much weaker prime minister (see Table 4). These cases represent all the women presidents in Latin America, all but one in Asia, and the sole female president from Africa. While the ascensions of women presidents in these parts of the world appear surprising given the
high degree of constraints placed on women in these societies, there are two very important things to keep in mind in understanding their success: some citizens avoid the public vote and all but one of the female presidents have familial ties to power.

Only seven dominant woman presidents were elected by the public when they first entered office. Three were vice presidents who succeeded the president when openings occurred. Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia) was promoted after the president was impeached and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (Philippines) took office when the Supreme Court removed the president due to corruption charges. While Macapagal-Arroyo was later successful in obtaining office through popular election (though election results were disputed by some) Sukarnoputri was not. Isabel Perón (Argentina) was appointed vice president by her husband Juan one year before he died. While her ascension was controversial, she succeeded him briefly before being removed in a military coup. Last among dominant presidents who did not enter directly through popular vote is Janet Jagan (Guyana) who was selected as a candidate in parliamentary elections by the legislature and then through popular vote.

Several dominant women presidents are still elected directly by the public, which is portrayed as a very difficult scenario for a woman, particularly in cultures less supportive of women’s public role. The success of these women can largely be explained by women’s possession of familial ties to power, which compensate for these vulnerabilities. Familial ties are marital or blood connections of executives to other national executives or opposition leaders. While this analysis focuses on presidents, among both prime ministers and presidents in South and Southeast Asia and Latin America, it is almost only women with family connections to power who successfully enter office (Jalalzai 2008). In Asia, Sukarnoputri, Macapagal-Arroyo, and Chandrika

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aquino</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelet</td>
<td>Chile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chamorro</td>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernández de</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirchner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jagan</td>
<td>Guyana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson-Sirleaf</td>
<td>Liberia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumaratunga</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macapagal-Arroyo</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perón</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodríguez</td>
<td>Panama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukarnoputri</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N = 11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka) are daughters of former presidents or prime ministers. Corazon Aquino (the Philippines) was married to a major opposition leader. The sole female Asian president not possessing familial ties is Patil (India) who, as well-established earlier, is mostly a symbolic president.

Among Latin American cases, all of the six dominant women presidents have familial ties to power; all are through marriage except Chile’s Michelle Bachelet’s whose father Alberto Bachelet Martinez was an Air Force General and opposition figure. Isabel Perón (Argentina), Mireya Moscoso de Arias Rodriguez (Panama), and Janet Jagan (Guyana) were married to leaders of their countries. Latin America’s most recent female president, Argentina’s Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, presents a somewhat different pattern of familial ties. While others came to power after the deaths or assassinations of their husbands or fathers, her husband, Nestor Carlos Kirchner, is alive and was president of Argentina just prior to her election. Although eligible to run for a second consecutive term, he threw his support behind his wife’s candidacy, leading many political observers to assert this was a political strategy to allow the couple to alternate terms as presidents as some couples have done at lower levels of office in the face of consecutive term limits (Rohter, 2007a). However, both Kirchners are extremely politically experienced and ambitious and theirs is a political partnership rather than a case in which a woman followed her husband into politics. In fact, Fernández de Kirchner attained a national political position before her husband—a different trajectory than the Peróns (Rohter 2007b).

Not all women who come to power through familial ties are politically inexperienced and lack independent political ambition, particularly those from more recent generations (Jalalzai 2008). Although they benefit from family legacy, it is generally that these women come to power as a result of skillful political maneuvering (Hodson 1997). Moreover, familial connections do not exclusively benefit women; they have also aided male executives throughout history, many of whom are from the same countries as women leaders but different family lines including Argentina, Panama, and Sri Lanka. Family ties to the presidency are not just limited to the developing world as the cases of John Quincy Adams and George W. Bush in the United States make clear. However, while men occasionally have familial connections to power, nearly all women presidents in Latin America and Asia do, suggesting a major limitation on women’s paths to office.

While familial ties are related to the political fortunes of many women executives in the developing world, there are questions of why they must be addressed as well as how such relationships interact with other types of political opportunity. Familial ties are a pathway to power because of specific cultural constructs. Here, the family as opposed to the individual, is supreme, family and kinship form the basis for political identity, and politics is a family affair. Long histories of dynastic rule have privileged some elite families over others. According to Chua-Eoan (1990, 35):
For much of the Third World, the idea of the nation-state has not evolved too far from the idea of kingdoms; rulers are still heads of extended tribes or vast families, rather than chief executives of the machinery of government. Politics very often pits clan against clan, all the way from Machiavellian patriarchs to the wives and daughters, whose chief duty is still the procreation and maintenance of the tribe’s hearth. When chaos and violence rob a family of vigorous male representation, it’s senior women who then pursue the clan’s goals, much as queen regents or princesses would do in monarchies. As extensions of their high born families, the women are allowed to restore order to the national home.

Indeed, women with familial ties often come to power following instances of political instability and in countries lacking political institutionalization. Instability is common after these countries achieve independence following long periods of foreign domination. Upon embarking on political independence, various ethnic and religious factions that were often suppressed during colonialism become salient as people compete for power, and tensions that surface often lead to violence and instability. This instability results in frequent shifts of power for a variety of reasons, including the opening of office due to the assassinations of leaders and repeated coups. Democratic transition and consolidation have typically been problematic. Military entrenchment in politics is also common, because it is justified by the need to control violence and create stability. However, military rule has further delayed democracy and institution building and perpetuates instability and violence. The military influence also impedes autonomy including civilian presidents.

The sole female president possessing dominant powers and lacking connections to a political family is Liberia’s Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. In this way, her rise signals an important departure from other women presidents. Her powers also differ from her African female counterparts who have occupied much weaker prime ministerial posts (Jalalzai 2008). Moreover, she is the only African woman leader elected by the public at a time in which women have increasingly sought the presidency in Africa. Between 1997 and 2007, 23 women ran for the presidency in 14 different African countries (Adams 2008). However, the majority of women received less than 1 percent of the vote (Adams 2008). In contrast, Johnson-Sirleaf, competing against 22 candidates in the first round, placed second with 19.8 percent of the vote. In the second round, she defeated her male opponent, former soccer star George Weah. The post conflict climate in Liberia aided the development of an effective women’s movement that took advantage of various opportunities (Adams 2008, 480). Benefiting from a lack of an incumbent, Johnson-Sirleaf seized this opening, capitalizing on perceptions that women in Liberia have been peacemakers rather than those responsible for sparking the conflict. She also took a strong stance against corruption, building on the widespread view that women are less corrupt than men. . . .
mobilization of women in support of Johnson-Sirleaf in the second round of the elections, when she was the sole woman contender, propelled her to victory (Adams 2008, 480).

Therefore, Johnson-Sirleaf’s path is similar to others who came to power in politically unstable, post-conflict societies. However, she lacked familial ties to power that other women in the developing world possessed. Also, unlike these cases, women’s support, which also crossed ethnic and class lines, appeared crucial to her advancement (Adams 2008). In contrast to other African women leaders, Johnson-Sirleaf possesses dominant powers and authority in the system. Her experience suggests another path to power for women in the developing world through support from active women’s movements and women voters. It reinforces other findings on the benefits of a specific campaign style that links stereotypical female traits to the betterment of democracy, but it does so without requiring the leader to be from a particular political family.

Generally, the powers held by dominant women presidents include a type of veto, the ability to make key appointments, and the ability to play an important role government formation, foreign affairs, and defense. For the most part, these powers do not include the ability to dissolve the government or use unlimited emergency decree powers, though a few dominant presidents have these powers. The powers available to women who occupy office with a weak prime minister are clear. In fact, both Jagan’s (Guyana) and Kumaratunga’s (Sri Lanka) powers are among the strongest in the sample. Along with the typical authorities presidents in a unified system possess, these dominant woman presidents can dissolve the legislature more or less at will. Therefore, even though they appear to have more dispersed powers, presidents from presidential dominant systems are extremely influential players and in some cases, hold more power than presidents in presidential systems.

While women have occupied dominant presidential positions, their influence may still be constrained in Latin America and Asia because of political instability and military influence, as evidenced by in Perón’s ouster. Corazon Aquino survived several coup attempts during her six-year term. She was kept out of many important governmental negotiations, denied access to information, and she generally ceded powers to a handful of advisors (Roces 2000). The current president of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, has also faced several coup attempts by the military and three impeachment processes. Now that she has largely adhered to military demands, the military actually protects her against opposition parties and the general public demands for her resignation (Conde 2008). Violeta Chamorro’s authority as President of Nicaragua has also been questioned. To stay in office, Chamorro had to continually appease the military. Her decision to retain Humberto Ortega (Daniel Ortega’s brother) as army commander was
extremely controversial (Opfell 1993, 178). Also, “The Sandinistas still controlled the army and the police. In some parts of the country their word remained law” (Opfell, 179). However, women in politically unstable climates do not always cede power. Kumarantunga’s (Sri Lanka) case suggests that some exercise a great deal of authority to curb political violence. In this case, the enduring conflict with the Tamil Tigers continually led her to declare states of emergency, sack many cabinet officials, and dissolve parliament (“Profile: Chandrika Kumaratunga” 2005).

Upon analyzing women around the world, it is clear that they represent a very small fraction of presidents. Numbering only 20 to date, many women presidents hold weak powers. Nearly all women holding dominant power as executives benefit through family connections to power and several bypass popular election. Though instances of women presidents have vastly increased since the beginning of the 1990s, their pathways to office and powers represent more of the same. As can be seen through these cases, women can possess authority in a political system as dominant presidents. However, the fact that this pathway is generally open to only women possessing familial ties suggests continued constraints on women’s abilities to break through to power. Moreover, specific power dynamics within these countries may impede their autonomy, although this is not necessarily linked to gender but to the extremely volatile political climate.

**PRESIDENTS 2008: DISTRIBUTION OF POWER**

Before moving forward, a word is in order regarding men’s powers. While an analysis of the power all male presidents have held over the course of history would be ideal, given their sheer numbers, this would require a great deal more analysis than is currently possible. This prospect is particularly daunting since many countries have greatly changed their electoral processes and presidential posts over time. Therefore, I limit my comparison to women and men in office in 2008. As can be seen in Table 5, men are not just overwhelmingly more represented in presidential positions than women, they are also more powerful. As expected, women are twice as likely to hold positions with minimal powers than men, and men are much more likely to hold positions of dominant power than women. Furthermore, the sheer numbers of men in these dominant positions reinforce the masculinity of presidential office and the dominant presidency in particular. For example, while 57 percent of women currently in office are dominant presidents—they only comprise four cases; 70 percent of male presidents hold dominant powers but account for ninety cases. Put another way, dominant presidents are 22 times more likely to be male than female.

Regarding pathways to office, men and women who currently hold office come to power through popular vote at similar rates—approximately
85 percent of the time. However, it should be kept in mind that these rates only account for their paths to their most current term in office. Going back farther to their initial terms in office illustrates a somewhat different trajectory for some men; 12 percent of dominant male presidents initially seized power through a coup they helped orchestrate, often as members of the military. Nearly all of these cases are in Africa. While women have often benefited from unstable political systems, they have generally been charged with installing democratic institutions. Seizing power directly through a coup has not been a path to office for women. Finally, as noted previously, men have also benefited from familial ties. At least 4 male presidents in power in 2008 (3 percent of the total male sample) have benefited from familial ties. Those men serve in the African countries of the Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Togo, and Botswana. Three male presidents are sons of former presidents while another is a nephew. Interestingly, daughters of former presidents have not become executives in Africa (Jalalzai 2008). Among the women presidents currently in power, three of seven (43 percent) have familial ties. All three are dominant presidents and from either Latin America or Asia. While familial ties are also a path to power for men, this is the prevailing avenue for women holding dominant presidential power. Clearly more research is needed to understand how family ties differ depending on specific cultural and gendered contexts.

**TABLE 5** Distribution and Paths to Power of Presidents in 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimal (%)</th>
<th>Powerful (%)</th>
<th>Dominant (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>2 (29)</td>
<td>1 (14)</td>
<td>4 (57)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV</td>
<td>1 (50)</td>
<td>1 (100)</td>
<td>4 (100)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA/V</td>
<td>1 (50)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>19 (15)</td>
<td>19 (15)</td>
<td>90 (70)</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV</td>
<td>15 (79)</td>
<td>12 (65)</td>
<td>82 (91)</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA/V</td>
<td>4 (21)</td>
<td>7 (37)</td>
<td>8 (9)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: PV = popular vote; LA/V = legislative appointment or legislative vote. Percentages are drawn from the total number of women and men in these positions respectively. For example, 19 of 128 men have minimal powers, comprising 15% of men’s total sample. One dominant woman president initially entered through succession before coming through the popular vote; 25 dominant men presidents initially entered through succession, a coup, or a type of legislative appointment before coming through the popular vote.*

**LINKS TO THE AMERICAN SYSTEM**

Based on the current analysis, the greatest challenges to an American woman president appear to be both institutional and cultural. The United States has a unified presidential system with a dominant president. Presidents are responsible for both domestic and international issues, encompassing
both “male” and “female” policies. However, some of today’s most prominent issues are masculine, including the economy, national security, and defense. As both the head of state and the government, the American presidency fuses ceremonial and substantive roles. Ceremonial duties support feminine leadership because of their symbolic and apolitical nature. However, several substantive responsibilities are highly masculine including the role of commander-in-chief (Duerst-Lahti 2006). Foreign policy powers are numerous (again, a stereotypically masculine realm) including negotiating treaties and forging executive agreements with other nations (Patterson 2008). Presidential appointments of cabinet officials, military staff, judges, and personal advisors are vast and can prove extremely influential (Edwards and Wayne 2005). Though various powers are exercised in a vast system of checks and balances, the President of the United States is the dominant actor in the executive branch, and he or she is enormously significant within this system. The traits deemed important in this position include toughness, an ability to command authority, to act rapidly, decisively, and often unilaterally. These traits are synonymous with masculinity (Duerst-Lahti 1997). According to Dahl (2001) among advanced democracies, the United States is the sole example of a country with a single, popularly elected chief executive entrusted with the most important constitutional powers. The strength of the presidency remains evident when incorporating examples from diverse corners of the world. Moreover, the American president is a dominant player on the world stage.

Paths to powers are important as well. Presidential elections are held once every four years, and unless they are impeached, presidents remain in office during this term. This bodes less well for women for reasons discussed earlier. The United States stands apart from other countries due to the added obstacles associated with complex electoral procedures. While a female candidate in a parliamentary system faces the public in her election as a legislator, she rises to executive office through party elections. In the United States, not only do candidates face the public in a party primary, the presidential election process begins well in advance now—in the “invisible” primary (Cohen et al. 2008). During the nomination stage, emphasis is on voters, who may not be interested in promoting women. The federal structure of the government results in different procedures in the 50 states regarding candidate selection procedures. This also makes the costs related to a successful run for the nomination vast, limiting the pool of candidates who have a realistic chance of winning due to financial constraints and placing those who must rely on federal matching funds and spending limits at a disadvantage. Since the female presidential pipeline is already small, chances that a woman would raise the necessary funds are comparatively slim. In fact, all modern female presidential aspirants prior to Hillary Clinton were hampered by the large sums needed to wage a credible presidential campaign (Farrar-Myers 2003, 2007).
While voters are of primary importance in selecting nominees, party activists are still consequential at the nomination stage and they want to affect outcomes:

Faced with multiple candidates beseeching them for support, party regulars-from governors to weekend activists-have a lot of choice. But party insiders cannot hope to control the outcome of the voter primaries unless they coordinate on someone broadly acceptable. So, after meeting the candidates, party members discuss and deliberate who can best represent their own concerns, unify the party, and win the general election in the fall (Cohen et al. 2008, 8).

A key question regarding women candidates is if they can achieve the daunting task of being considered broadly acceptable and viable in a general election by the public and party elites. Party support for female nominees has also been deficient (Haussman 2003). Even if successful, a female party nominee must navigate the complicated general election stage that follows. With government funding of general presidential elections, once a woman becomes a major party nominee, fundraising may not be a main concern. However, Barack Obama’s decision to forgo government funding to avoid spending restrictions has likely ushered in a new era of general election financing, which may be difficult for women candidates to navigate.

The importance of states in the American system is evident. The Electoral College makes both the popular vote and state distribution of votes pivotal in presidential election outcomes. Dahl (2001) argues this system produces potential undemocratic effects including candidates winning without a majority of popular votes and overrepresentation of voters in small states (81). Another undemocratic effect is that successful candidates tend to be white Protestant males. The complicated task of appealing to voters in certain states, some of which are more egalitarian than others, is particularly daunting for women and minority candidates.

America’s lack of readiness for a woman president is apparent in surveys tapping gender stereotypes. Women candidates are considered lacking in the requisite qualifications and traits for the presidency (Kennedy 2003; Heldman 2007). Whether the public would vote for a woman president remains an open question because no woman has ever been a major party candidate. However the Gallup organization has regularly assessed support for a woman president. In 1937, only 33 percent of respondents would vote for a qualified woman president if she received their party’s nomination. Public support for a woman president has largely improved over time. The highest level it reached was 92 percent in 1999, it dropped to 87 percent in the aftermath of 9/11, and recovered only slightly to 88 percent in 2007 (Jones 2007). Thus, even at a time when Hillary Clinton was poised as the
early frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, the American public was actually less favorable to the idea of a woman president than in recent years. Given the close outcomes of current presidential elections, this may place women in a particularly vulnerable position. There is evidence that the public believe that men have greater abilities to espouse the masculine qualities deemed necessary for the presidency outlined above, and that this has been particularly true since 9/11 (Lawless 2004). Moreover, Streb and colleagues (2007) find that support for a female presidential candidate is exaggerated, given pressures on respondents to offer socially desirable responses. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that the American public is hesitant to elect a woman president. Moreover, given the reliance on the general public in the nomination of presidential candidates and general election, these stereotypes may hamper a woman’s presidential aspirations.

Media coverage is relevant to the public’s perception of female presidential candidates. Research on presidential coverage finds that women are the subject of less overall coverage and they face more trivializing accounts of their personal lives and appearances. Among the Republican 2000 election presidential hopefuls Elizabeth Dole repeatedly ran only second behind Bush in early public opinion polls but she received far less coverage than her male competitors. Furthermore, the media was generally more concerned with covering her dress and makeup, also known as the “lipstick watch” (Heith 2003, Woodall and Fridkin 2007). Media coverage, therefore, is a potential hindrance.

Despite these challenges, the United States has now witnessed a woman coming closer than any other to the presidency. What does this suggest for women’s chances, given comparative findings? While this article argues that strong presidencies are the most challenging for women to access, a way to overcome similar hurdles for women has been through the possession of familial ties. Thus it is not a coincidence that former First Lady Hillary Clinton came closest to achieving this milestone. As seen in other cases, possessing familial connections to power have propelled other women into the presidency around the world. Family connections to political power have also benefited American women in reaching gubernatorial and congressional office (Jalalzai and Hankinson 2008). Moreover, as mentioned previously, familial ties also have benefited male presidents, reinforcing the general importance of American family dynasties.

As a former First Lady, Hillary Clinton suffered from neither a lack of name recognition nor the usual fundraising shortages of previous female presidential aspirants. Considered the early front-runner, her candidacy was generally well-received and promoted by the party establishment, suggesting that she had wide enough appeal. Polls indicated that the public perceived Clinton to be a stronger leader and who was superior on
defense, foreign policy, and economics than Barack Obama. Some of these perceived strengths are attributable to her successfully highlighting her more masculine traits and expertise, illustrating that specific candidates can challenge prevailing gender stereotypes. Her support of the initial resolution to enter Iraq and initially more conservative plans regarding troop withdrawal potentially alienated liberals who wanted to usher in a new era of politics. While Clinton received lots of media attention, she was often reported on in trivializing ways similar to women candidates before her.

The effects of her marital ties to Bill Clinton are difficult to discern. At times, her husband proved a major distraction and liability to the campaign. While her name recognition was quite pivotal to her becoming a leading contender, it was not enough to guarantee political success. In fact, because of these very links, she was unable to run as the change candidate, even though she would have been the first female president. As an African American, Obama’s candidacy also signaled a potentially historic first for the presidency, but as a relative newcomer, he could more successfully conduct a campaign based on change, which is what the public generally desired in 2008.

If a woman is ultimately successful in advancing to the Oval Office, what implications would this victory have for the gendered nature of the presidency worldwide? It depends very much on the particular woman. If, like Clinton, she has familial ties to power, her election would represent more of the same. However, the powers at her disposal and her sheer visibility as a world player would be an important victory in the quest for women’s executive political representation. This is likely why the American presidency is particularly resistant to women. While Clinton’s election alone would not have eroded the masculine nature of the American presidency, it would begin to chip away at perceptions of the presidency as the quintessential male bastion.

CONCLUSION

Upon analyzing women around the world, it is clear that they represent a very small fraction of presidents. It is obviously difficult to draw definitive conclusions from only 20 cases. Moreover, because the goal of this work is to offer more general assessments of the link between gender and the comparative presidency, it is difficult to also fully portray the circumstances each specific leader faced in becoming president and those encountered once in these positions. At the same time, important contextual details presented ultimately provide a window into global patterns of gender and the presidency, which have generally been ignored in previous research.
Overall, regardless of geographic region, strong women presidents are a rarity in the world. Still, some women presidents do hold strong powers. However, these women are generally from very specific backgrounds and contexts; they have family connections and are from the developing world and unstable and post-conflict societies. Moreover, women are not able to follow suit in countries where men occasionally rise to the presidency as inheritors of family power, such as the United States. Even when this possibility was most likely, in the 2008 US election, Hillary Clinton was unable to successfully capitalize on her political name. The presidential system and the United States’ preeminent role on the world stage are likely culprits. Though women are making inroads into the presidency worldwide, the dominant presidency is generally elusive which restricts the influence women have on world politics.

NOTES

1. Gender is defined as “the socially constructed meaning given to biological sex, especially sex differences. Gender is how we come to understand and often magnify the minor differences that exist between biological males and females” (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1996, 13). As a category, gender is a “multidimensional mapping of socially constructed, fluid, politically relevant identities, values, conventions, and practices conceived as masculine and/or feminine with recognition that masculinity and femininity correspond only fleetingly and roughly to male and female” (Beckwith 2005, 131). This understanding of gender informs the analysis throughout this paper.

2. This finding is based on The Gender Related Development Index (GDI) which assesses women’s parity in relation to men’s in education, health, and income on a scale of 0 to 1, with 1 indicating complete parity (see Jalalzai 2008).

3. Because of the Federation of Bosnia’s nontraditional and complex governmental structure, its President, Borjana Kristo, is excluded from this list. Bosnia has multiple executive entities including a three person presidency, with rotating chief executives. Kristo is not part of this collective, but is president of another executive system within Bosnia. This makes it difficult to compare to the other systems.

4. While women became prime minister earlier than presidents (beginning in 1960) they share a similar pattern in becoming much more numerous in the 1990s and 2000s.

5. Based on counts from World Political Leaders 2010. Excluded are nonautonomous countries, those not conforming to a traditional executive structure like collective presidencies, absolute monarchies and others not open to contestation such as one party communist states or absolute military dictatorships. Among these systems with presidential figures, this amounts to thirteen exclusions, all but one of these presidencies are held by men.

6. Women’s percentage is .051.

7. 1960 is chosen because it is the first year a woman became executive of her country, though prime minister. This figure excludes temporary leaders and only counts a president once even if he or she has been in office in a time period prior to avoid duplicate counts. It should be noted that it is only men who have left office and returned as president on multiple occasions, not women. Counts are tabulated by the author from the World Political Leaders (2010) Web site.

8. Only 29 women in 22 states have been governors. Moreover, 10 did not face popular election and Texas and Michigan are the only major states to have been led by a woman governor (Center for American Women and Politics 2008). While it is impossible to know whether this is due to discrimination by the electorate, it potentially reinforces arguments regarding women’s greater vulnerability in reaching executive positions, particularly through the popular vote.

9. Party recruitment is highly dependent on parties, with leftist parties promoting women’s parliamentary leadership more (Kittleson and Fridkin 2008).
10. Siaroff (2003) examines several powers presidents around the world hold, including veto, discretionary appointments, ability to dissolve the legislature, having a central role in government formation, foreign policy influence, long-term emergency powers, and chairing cabinet meetings (302). He examines countries over time, taking into account changes. Similar to Siaroff, I assigned one point for each of the following powers—appointment, chairing cabinet meetings, veto, prolonged emergency or decree powers, foreign policy, playing a key role in government formation, and dissolving the legislature. Unlike Siaroff, I also include a point for having a central role in defense. Another difference is that Siaroff gives one point for presidents being popularly elected. While I assess this as well and whether they have a party affiliation but do not count these points in the totals because they are not specific powers. While I consult Siaroff’s coding, many countries were not included in his sample which only extends to early the 2000s, making it necessary for me to collect my own data for each case. I first analyze country constitutions, but then also powers and procedures used in practice since they are sometimes at odds with written processes. To do so, I examine a combination of sources including media reports such as the BBC, country websites, and the World Factbook.

11. Appointment of various governmental officials including cabinet ministers, judges, and in some cases where there is a dual executive structure, the prime minister. While these powers may require legislative approval, the president plays an important rather than nominal role in nominations. This excludes presidents who formally approve officials but lack real decision making authority. Chairing cabinet meetings goes beyond chairing just the first session of the administration. Emergency decrees are those that bypass the legislature or provide unlimited authority to extend emergencies. Foreign policy powers are determined by whether presidents appoint key officials in foreign policy, represents the country at political summits or meetings, and crafts relevant policy. Governmental formation role is indicated by the ability to appoint or retain members of the cabinet or possibly even the prime minister in some contexts. Dissolving the legislature absent various requirements such as a vote of no confidence or dissolution upon the approval of the prime minister.

12. These classifications are also based on presidential powers tallied above (see Siaroff 2003).

13. Perón-Argentina, Macapagal-Arroyo-Philippines, Sukarnoputri-Indonesia succeeded presidents as vice presidents, Patil-India, Vīķe-Freiberga—Latvia, Barbara-Malta, Dreifuss and Calmy Rey—Switzerland were selected in some fashion by legislatures.

14. On the other hand, Kalam helped develop India’s nuclear missile program which had important policy consequences. After Kalam initially stated he would seek reelection, some of the same parties voicing concern over Patil tried to draft him to run again.

15. Kumaratunga was not just aided by her ties to her father, former Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike, but her mother Sirimavo Bandaranaike as well who served as prime minister on three occasions. Interestingly, Kumaratunga’s blood ties were pivotal in her mother becoming prime minister for a third term in 1994.

16. Upon serving a consecutive term, a candidate for president in Argentina can serve again after another president occupies the position.

17. Janet Jagan of Guyana also had a long political career independent of her husband.

18. They were subsequently popularly elected to the presidency. Another 14 either moved up the line of succession as vice presidents or were first appointed to the post by the legislature.

19. While the presidential appointment powers in the United States are obviously curtailed by senatorial oversight, this is not the case for executive agreements and appointments of some of the president’s closest advisors who now tend to exercise more influence than the cabinet (Edwards and Wayne 2005).


21. Mayer (2008) asserts that this complex form was instituted to preserve and enhance executive independence, out of fear of corruption in the electorate, a heightened concern for small states, and a cautious respect of the role of popular participation (214–220).

22. Obama’s recent election illustrates that it is possible for members of disadvantaged groups to gain the presidency, although it reinforces the unofficial qualification of being male.

23. See a variety of recent poll results on pollingreport.com (http://www.pollingreport.com/wh08dem.htm).
REFERENCES


Heldman, Caroline. 2007. “Cultural Barriers to a Female President in the United States.” In Rethinking Madame President: Are We Ready for a Woman in the White House?, eds. Lori Cox Han and Caroline Heldman. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 17–42.


Martin, Janet M. 2003. The Presidency and Women. College Station Texas: Texas A&M.


