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INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Women and the 2018 US Mid-term Elections

Implications for National Security

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When the 116th Congress is sworn into office this winter, there will be a record 121 women and counting ready to take their seats.[1] The 2018 midterm elections showed America countless firsts, giving voice to groups who previously lacked visibility at the highest level of political representation. We saw gains in racial, religious and sexual diversity across the board. 84 women of color ran for Congress or Governor, up 42% from previous elections and a massive shift in the demographics of U.S. Congress. A more diverse Congress is a Congress that represents a real America.

Sharice Davids, a member of the LGBTQ community, joined Deb Haaland among the first Native American women elected to Congress.[2] Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib were the first Muslim women elected to Congress, ushering in a new era of religious diversity.[3] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will be the youngest member of Congress, followed closely by Abby Finkenauer.[4] Sharice Davids, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are just a few of the names now enshrined in national history. While gender parity remains a distant reality, the diverse and well-qualified showing of female candidates in 2018 signifies a promising step forward in a time of political turmoil.

Historical Background

The current level of female representation is undoubtedly a high point in American electoral history. It is important to note that this historic class of congressional women is part of a larger historical battle for gender equality and equity in the nation's legislature. While women's right to vote became enshrined in the Constitution with the 19th amendment in 1920, forty states allowed women to vote and run for public office before the passage of the amendment.

Jeanette Rankin was a true pioneer for female representation in the legislature. Rankin was elected to represent Montana to the House of Representatives in 1917, becoming the first woman elected to Congress. Congresswoman Rankin was elected twice to Congress, serving her first term from 1917-1919 and her second term from 1941-1943. A devoted pacifist, she famously voted against the United States entering both World Wars. Before casting the sole dissenting vote against declaring war with Japan in 1941, Rankin took to the floor and proclaimed, "As a woman, I can't go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else." [5]

The first female representative to the United States Senate, Rebecca Latimer Felton of Georgia, was appointed in 1922. Felton's appointment was mostly symbolic; the Senator was sworn in with just one day remaining in the congressional session. Senator Felton's one-day term still holds the record for the shortest time served by any US Senator in American history. The first woman elected to the Senate for a full term, Hattie Caraway of Arkansas,

took office in 1932. Caraway was no stranger to the Senate at the time of her election. After her husband passed away, Caraway served the final four months of his term before running for office herself. Senator Caraway was re-elected for two consecutive terms before losing her election in 1944.

Women have significantly lagged behind men in representation in both houses of Congress. Only in the 1990's did women comprise more than 10% of the House; only in the early 2000's, did women comprise 10% of the Senate.

Female members of Congress have also faced institutional inequalities, such as restrictions from wearing pants in the Senate chamber to the lack of access to a nearby.[6] Female representatives received a women's restroom near the Senate floor in 1993, but it took until 2011 for female representatives in the House floor to have appropriate facilities installed nearby.[7] Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois made history as the first senator to give birth while holding office. In 2018, Duckworth successfully lobbied the Senate to allow representatives to bring newborns onto the Senate Floor and breastfeed newborns during votes.[8] These provisions passed unanimously.

Women's Influence on National Security

In addition to ethnic and religious diversity, a number of women with a background in national security gained positions this midterm election. Women like Abigail Spanberger [VA-07] and Elissa Slotkin [MI-08], former CIA employees, are key examples of female candidates with a strong background in national security. Spanberger and Slotkin both garnered enough support to flip their districts, demonstrating the energy and support for women in national security.

These women also join newly elected congresswomen with military backgrounds, such as Elaine Luria [VA-02], a Retired Navy Commander, and Mikie Sherrill [11-NJ], a former Navy Pilot. Women with backgrounds such as these are now positioned to make invaluable contributions to US national security policy. Greater female representation in the chambers of Congress may yield other notable effects on national security. More women in Congress may increase bipartisanship, decrease defense spending, and build stronger frameworks for peace. Moreover, they can set a precedent for a more equal representative democracy.

Regardless of their background, more women should run for elected positions to decrease gridlock. Soon-to-be Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill advocates for more women in office because she says it will increase bipartisanship and promote a higher functioning Congress. For Sherrill, congresswomen and men will connect through other identities, such as that of being a veteran.[9] More women in Congress will also break down gender stereotypes and barriers, a job that women such as Sherrill are used to.[10] A new commitment for respect across difference may help quell rising division and help representatives solve perennial challenges with fresh perspectives.

Furthermore, women's presence in the legislature adds substantively to national security. Among present security challenges, the federal budget deficit and defense spending figures threaten US economic and political stability. Current projections put the deficit on track to reach over \$1 trillion for this fiscal year.[11] The Trump administration is also setting new records for defense spending with a base budget of \$617 billion.[12] Research by Koch and Fulton find that the presence of women in a legislature lowers the state's propensity to engage in conflict and reduces defense spending.[13] According to Koch and Fulton, women's presence in democratic governments leads the latter to engage in less conflictual behavior.[14]

Congress has authority over many security determinations. When more women are voting as representatives, we see more cooperative behavior and peaceful solutions. The newly elected women in Congress could change national security through contributions to bipartisanship, equality, responsible spending, and peace. The increased number of women in the legislature promises hope of a new political frontier.

That said, female political gains may potentially also create “backlash.” Backlash can be understood as active resistance to a change in the status quo and a shift in the balance of power. Clearly, the newly elected women in Congress have shifted the balance of power. Powerful men, especially powerful white men, are losing their seats to a more diverse group. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez [NY-14], who unseated Joe Crowley, the Democratic Caucus Chair, offers a prime example of such a shift.

The sudden gains in female representation could lead to negative ramifications, such as resistance to the “women’s agenda” or matters traditionally conceived of as “women’s issues.”^[15] Such resistance could have an adverse effect on women’s rights. While it is important to take into consideration the potential for backlash of these representative gains, the threat of backlash should not be overstated. Women should continue to run for office, and all members of Congress should consider the value of gendered perspectives on matters of national security.

Endnotes

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[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., 2.

[15] Sanbonmatsu, Kira. "Gender backlash in American politics?" Politics & Gender 4, (4) no. 12 (2008): 634-642, <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxygw.wrlc.org/docview/194688136?accountid=11243>[4]Ibid.

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