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They've Come a Long Way - Really? Women in Politics in Germany and the United States

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What factors contribute to greater women's political participation in Germany?

Do women's political organizations play the same role in the two countries?

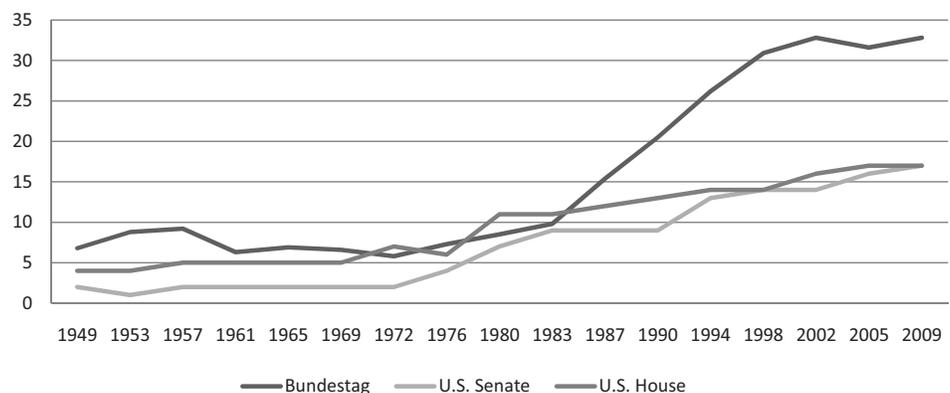
Are Germany and the U.S. continuing to make strides in women's political participation?

In Germany and the United States alike, politics and political participation were not very attractive for women until the 1970s. The political arena was looked upon as men's domain, to which few women aspired and indeed were admitted.¹ At the beginning of the 7th legislative period (1972 – 1976) there was an all-time low of 30 women, or 5.8 percent, in the German federal parliament, the Deutsche Bundestag.² Ten Congresswomen served in the 91st U.S. Congress (1969 – 1971) and there was only one female Senator, accounting for 2.2 percent women in the House and only 1 percent in the Senate.³ Today the German Bundestag and U.S. Congress are comprised of 32 percent and 17 percent women, respectively. What caused the increase in women legislators in both countries and why was there a more incremental growth in Germany than in the U.S.?

It might be that the development in both countries would have been more similar if a new party had not shaken up the German political landscape. As Figure 1 indicates, the Green Party's entry in the German Bundestag in 1983 brought an exceptional number of women to Parliament. The share of female Members of Parliament (MP) rose from 9.8 percent to 15.4 percent within a single legislative period. This increase continued throughout the next twenty years, reaching almost 33 percent in 2002. By then the Greens were not alone in sending a considerable number of women to the Bundestag: Fear of losing votes, especially among women, caused the other parties to also increase their number of female officeholders.

The advancement of women in the U.S. federal legislature proceeded quite differently. At the beginning of the 1990s the share of women was still below 10 percent. Then the biggest increase in history occurred in 1992, a year that was labeled "The Year of the Woman" after the election of 24 new female Senators and Representatives. Energized by a record-breaking number of women on the federal ticket,⁴ an outstanding number of women went to the polls. But despite the steady increase of women in the U.S. Congress, the numbers remain low. Today the U.S. ranks only 69th in terms of the percentage of women serving in national legislatures worldwide, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's World Classification.⁵

Figure 1: Proportion of Women MPs in the German Bundestag and Women Legislators in the U.S. Congress since 1949 (%)



Over time the German development appears to have created a political opportunity structure more conducive to women's participation than that in the United States.⁶ One reason is certainly the German multi-party system, contrary to the two-party system in the U.S. Furthermore, one of the most consistent findings about women's representation in legislative bodies is that the electoral system matters considerably. Plurality systems as in the U.S. make it more difficult for women to be elected as there can only be one winning candidate per district. In contrast, proportional representation (PR) has been found to greatly increase women's chances of election. The German electoral system is a mixed one: half of the Bundestag is elected by plurality system and the other half by proportional representation. In 2009 women were twice more likely to have been elected via PR than via plurality. Two-thirds of the 196 women in the Bundestag won their seats by PR as a candidate on their party's list. That means that women won 44 percent of the total seats by proportional election and 21 percent by plurality election. Men won 56 percent of the total number of seats by proportional election and 79 percent by plurality election.

While women in Germany certainly profit from the party and electoral system, in general there are a number of hurdles they still have to overcome when entering the political arena. One of the biggest handicaps for women is seen at the nomination stage. Still today women find themselves at the bottom of their parties' lists and their chances to be nominated for a direct seat are very small. While in the U.S., candidates are chosen by primary voters, in Germany political recruitment works quite differently. Active members of the political parties control candidate nominations and therefore it is still up to the male-dominated party assemblies not only to set the political agenda, but also to determine which women are elected into responsible positions. Consequently, in order to reach their share of participation, women have to play by the rules because those who make the decisions often favor the kind of women that do not question the existing order but condone the status quo. Additionally, to ensure a promising single-member district or to be at the top of the party list, it is necessary to constantly work one's way up through the party ranks. Traditional social networks and local party committees have an infrastructure that hinders women's participation through mundane mechanisms, such as holding meetings at times when women are bound to family commitments or in locations like the legendary smoke-filled backroom, including beer consumption and smutty jokes. Women frequently point out that they experienced the meeting rituals as quite forbidding and as subtle mechanisms to keep women out.⁷

Although they are considered much weaker than their German counterparts, parties in the U.S. also matter to the success of women. In general women who reach the legislature do so with the support of their party organizations and elected officials, who are the most influential agents of recruitment. A recent study⁸ finds political parties play an important role in encouraging and deterring candidacy. While party officials and legislative leaders are named the single most influential source of encouragement they were also named the most common source of discouragement. Even though parties are looking for the most electable candidate there is still bias against female candidates and a certain reluctance to support them, regardless of the amount of success they might achieve.⁹ Party chairs in the U.S. are still predominantly held by men and among them remain patterns of preference for male candidates. Niven's recent study shows that male party chairs consider fewer women as candidates for races than do female party chairs.

Party ideology also plays an important role for women's political representation. In both Germany and the U.S. parties on the left¹⁰ have a more significant share of women in elected office than those on the right. As Figures 2 and 3 show, in Germany the SPD, Greens, and Left Party have between 38 percent and 53 percent women among their MPs, while the CSU, CDU, and FDP have between 13 percent and 25 percent. In the U.S. the Republicans have 10 percent women in the Senate and the House. The Democrats have 23 percent in the Senate and 22 percent in the House.

Figure 2: Women in German Parties (%)

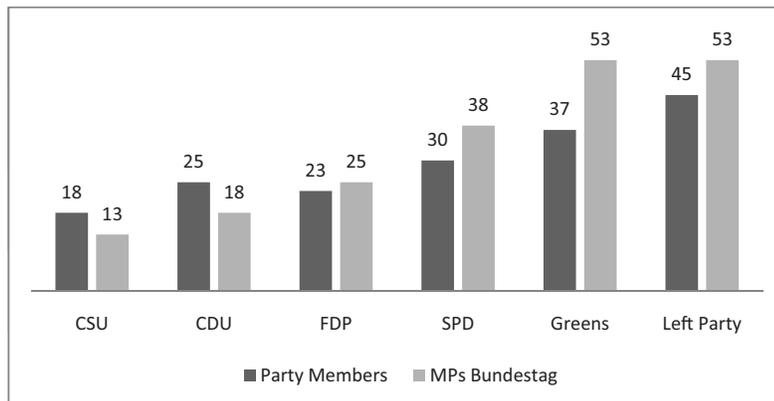
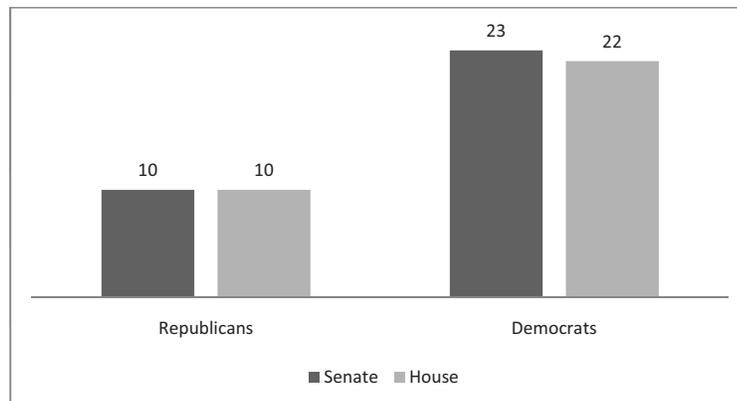


Figure 3: Women in U.S. Parties (%)



In general the stronger support for women in the left parties can be traced back to these parties' endorsement of more egalitarian ideologies. In Germany, that led to employing active strategies to increase women's representation since the left parties' egalitarian ideology justifies intervention in the recruitment and nomination process. Partly emerging from the women's movement, the Greens imposed conditions for their elected officials from the beginning. In the early 1980s they pioneered the use of gender quotas in Germany, requiring at least 50 percent of electoral list places and party leadership positions for women, with the top slot reserved for a female candidate. The Social Democrats adopted a quota in 1988 for fear of losing increasing numbers of their female voters to the Greens. They require both men and women to have at least 40 percent of the slots on their electoral lists and inner-party offices. The Left Party commits itself to providing equal representation of men and women at all levels. On the other side of the party spectrum the CDU also has a 33 percent women's quorum on both electoral lists and inner-party offices. However, party statutes allow the quorum to be circumvented if, after a concerted search, not enough qualified and willing female candidates are available. The CSU and FDP so far have not adopted a quota for women's representation in party positions and on the electoral lists, referring to the concern that quotas in general undermine individual achievement.

In the U.S. neither the Democrats nor the Republicans were initially sympathetic to women's participation. Even as women made room for themselves within the parties they still faced resistance and power ultimately remained in the hands of men. It was not until the women's movement that women's roles within the party organizations finally changed.¹¹ Though gender quotas are an anathema to American politics, both major parties enforced some kind of gender balance on national and state convention committees. Nevertheless, the Democratic Party is considered more liberal on gender roles than the Republican Party¹² and Democratic women are more likely to think about seeking office than are their Republican counterparts.¹³

At this point it is necessary to broaden the view beyond the political parties by directing attention to women's organizations and networks. While in Germany most women's groups are established within the respective political parties, in the U.S. there is an extensive network of organizations and political actions committees (PACs) that recruit, train, and provide resources to female candidates. In addition to the two intraparty groups, the Democratic EMILY's List and the Republican WISH List, there are numerous other groups, mainly bi-partisan, who aim to advance women's candidacies. They are not only helping to raise the vital early money but also encourage women to run, help them to develop political skills, and cultivate resources to ultimately bring more women into politics and elected office. A fact sheet from the Center of American Women in Politics (CAWP) indicates that in 2009 there were 48 PACs and donor networks that either gave money predominantly to women candidates or had a predominantly female donor base. Those networks are not to be underestimated; for example, EMILY's List has come to wield considerable power within Democratic circles because of its "accumulated financial clout and campaign experience."¹⁴ Today EMILY's List is the dominant financial resource for Democratic candidates and the nation's largest PAC leading all PACs (not just women's) in the amount of money they raise.¹⁵ In Germany women's organizations are less influential and sometimes quite isolated within the parties—even though they consider themselves advocacy groups for both women's interests and representation. Women who are active in the women's organizations and want to run for office cannot rely on the organizations since, as of today, they still cannot be considered an internal party power base that could effectively support and put through the candidacy of their female members.

Though structural factors like the multi-party system and the electoral system are both very strong indicators of women's political representation, there is more to be considered. First and foremost there is the traditional view still espoused by a number of people—of both sexes—that men should hold public leadership roles while women remain at home tending to domestic responsibilities and child-care. Historically it has been hard for women in German and American politics alike to adjust their personal lives to contradictory pressures of political life and femininity.

Again, despite the parallels, there are significant differences regarding gender roles in Germany and the U.S. that require a closer examination. Even though women politicians are still subject to public scrutiny in both countries, there is a different strategy used by those dealing with the issue. It appears from the media coverage that most American women in public office no longer hide their choices and lifestyles, while this is not quite true for many of their German colleagues.¹⁶ Also different are the reactions from the American and German female population. While a growing number of mothers in the U.S. have appeared to be empowered by and identify with women like Sarah Palin,¹⁷ considering her lifestyle of working extra hours and fighting hard to clear some quality time for her family, Germany's top female politicians face less public support. Few countries are more resistant to the idea of working mothers; only a few female politicians have challenged the deeply-held prejudices in German society, chief among them that a woman must choose either to work or to raise children.

Considering developments in Germany over the last ten years it is obvious that there has not been much of an improvement regarding female participation in the legislature either on the federal level or on the state level. It rather looks as if the rapid rise from the 1980s and 1990s has come to a deadlock. One might ask oneself whether Germany is now resting on its laurels or whether the fixation on Angela Merkel as a female head of government has drawn attention away from the barriers women still face in politics. After all, it is possible that arrangements of affirmative action, positive discrimination, and gender quotas have reached their limits.

In the U.S., progress has been much slower. Since the candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, however, the question of female representation in politics has certainly aroused more and more attention. Lacking structural opportunities, but at the same time lacking structural barriers, I predict that the more women enter the political arena and become obvious role models, the more women will follow and enhance female representation. Even though the "entrepreneurial system of candidacy"¹⁸ has been seen as an obstacle to women, it might also be a big opportunity in the future.

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The views expressed in this essay are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies.

NOTES

- 1 Beate Hoecker, "Barriers to and Chances for Women in West German Politics", in *Politics and Society in Germany, Austria and Switzerland* (Nottingham, 1988/1989): 33-42.
- 2 All data on women in the Bundestag collected from <www.bundestag.de>.
- 3 All data collected on women in U.S. Congress from <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/Congress-HistoricalInfo.php>.
- 4 *Women in Congress, Assembling, Amplifying, and Ascending*, <http://womenincongress.house.gov/historical-essays/essay.html?intlID=5&intSectionID=26>
- 5 Inter-parliamentary Union, *Women in National Parliaments World Classification*, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.
- 6 Louise Davidson-Schmich, *Who wants to run for office from which party? Political Party Gender Quotas and Political Ambition in Germany* (Miami, 2009).
- 7 Cathrin Kahlweit, *Damenwahl. Politikerinnen in Deutschland* (München, 1994); Maybrit Illner, *Frauen an der Macht. 21 einflussreiche Frauen berichten aus der Wirklichkeit* (München, 2005); Isabelle Kürschner, *Den Männern überlassen wir's nicht! Erfolgreiche Frauen in der CSU* (Baden-Baden, 2009).
- 8 Kira Sanbonmatsu, Debie Walsh, Susan J. Carroll, *Poised to Run. Women's Pathway to the State Legislatures* (Center of American Women in Politics, Rutgers University, 2009).
- 9 David Niven, "Party Elites and Women Candidates: The Shape of Bias," in Mona Lena Krook, Sarah Childs, *Women, Gender and Politics: A Reader* (Oxford, 2010): 151-158.
- 10 With the term "left parties" I refer to the Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Left Party in Germany and the Democrats in the U.S. Consequently the German Christian Democrats, the Christian Social Union, and the Liberals (FDP) are considered right parties as well as the Republicans in the U.S.
- 11 Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Where Women Run. Gender and Party in the American States* (Ann Arbor, 2003).
- 12 Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Democrats / Republicans and the Politics of Women's Place* (Ann Arbor, 2002).
- 13 Richard Fox, *Gender, Political Ambition and the Decision not to Run for Office* (Center of American Women in Politics, Rutgers University, 2003).
- 14 Barbara Burrell, "Political Parties and Women's Organizations" in *Gender and Elections – Shaping the Future of American Politics* (Cambridge, 2007): 143-168.
- 15 EMILY'S List, <www.emilyslist.org>.
- 16 See for example on representatives in the U.S. Congress and the German Bundestag: "Politics, family intertwined for women politicians," *The Washington Post*, 15 July 2009; "Mom's in the House With Kids at Home," *The Washington Post*, 19 July 2007; "Member Moms," *National Journal*, 7 April 2007; "Heimliche Muttis," *Die Zeit*, 28 September 2009; "Mutter Müllers schweres Herz," *Stern*, 3 June 2009; "Die Mutter der Nation," *Süddeutsche Zeitung Frauen Heft*, April 2006.
- 17 "Palin's candidacy sparks working moms' debate," *MSNBC.com*, 11 September 2009.
- 18 Barbara Burrell, "Political Parties and Women's Organizations," in *Gender and Elections – Shaping the Future of American Politics* (Cambridge, 2007): 143-168.

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