

Women in Politics and the Media : The United States vs. The Czech Republic

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Females worldwide have overcome many obstacles over the past hundred years. Times are quickly changing, and more women are becoming involved in politics with each election cycle. Is the United States ready for more female politicians to become involved in politics at the local, state, and federal levels? Is the Czech Republic ready for more female politicians in the House and Senate? A survey conducted in the United States by Gallup in 1937 suggested that of those surveyed, only 33% of the population would vote for a woman who is qualified for elected office. But nearly sixty years later in 1999, the same survey was conducted and that number rose to an all-time high of 92% of the population would support a qualified woman for elected office (Anderson,

2002). In 1989, the communist legislators in Czechoslovakia put forth a quota for the number of female politicians in Parliament. The target goal was 30% but the quota was never met. Currently the European Parliament contains roughly only 16%, which is about half of the target goal (Radio Praha, 2013). With an evolving society in the United States, it is becoming increasingly popular for women to become involved in politics, but in the Czech Republic it seems like women are geared towards other career paths. A woman becoming involved in politics is viewed favorably in society in the minds of both men and women in the United States. However, in the Czech Republic, women are deterred from running for elected office, and worldwide, women are often unfairly treated by the media.

The United States: Review of the Research

A survey was conducted by the NORC General Social Survey. This survey showed an increase in support for female political candidates in elected offices throughout the United States. The survey also stated that once women were involved in politics, they were just as likely to win an election as men in a political race. The results have shown that both men and women have come to an agreement that if a qualified woman runs for elected office, they would be supportive of them (Dunne, 2008). The American public's views of women in politics are described as invigorating and also very insightful.

Throughout the country, as women enter political races, they often poll better than their male

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opponents. This is a result of how people in our society view women as well-educated and quite competent of holding elected office (Dunne, 2008).

In the 2000 election cycle, Hillary Clinton was one of the first major female candidates to break the traditional "norm" by being a female candidate. Clinton challenged incumbent Senator Rick Lazio for the New York senate seat. Lazio launched attacks on Clinton's personal character, which often times focused on her gender. These attacks were often "sexist", which placed Clinton in a unique position during the campaign. With New York voters looking for a change, Clinton was able to overcome the "sexist" attacks used against her (Anderson, 2002). Leaving her role as First Lady in 2000, Clinton was positioned as an outsider in the minds of New York voters. It was very clear that this was a campaign where voters desired a change. While she was viewed as qualified for the position, Clinton was often targeted by the media. Coverage during the campaign focused on her clothing and hair styles, a topic that was never an issue for her male opponent. Even with the intense coverage throughout the course of the campaign, Clinton was able to hold her own and claimed a victory against Lazio by a double digit margin (Anderson, 2002).

As First Lady, Hillary Clinton took a bold position on public policy, which was unique for the role of First Lady. The topic of women in politics does not only pertain to those running for elected office, but also those who have political spouses. Roles such as First Lady of the United States of America could be a political stepping stone, as it was for former First Lady Hillary Clinton. Clinton was an advocate for universal healthcare during her husbands presidency in the 1990's (Dunne, 2008). She was always front and center in the in the public eye. She continuously pushed the issue of universal healthcare for all Americans, which allowed her to articulate her positions on the issues. To some experts, it appears that Clinton used her role as First Lady to her

political advantage, and they believe it prepared her for “the modern political landscape” (Dolan, 2008).

A public opinion study suggested that female political leaders are often times evaluated more critically by the media due to their appearance and delivery when compared to men in the same positions. The media tends to focus on issues such as clothing styles, makeup, and hair styles of female politicians. With regards to delivery, a woman in a political conversation is often times ridiculed for being too “soft” for their overall performance. However, the same subjects are never discussed about a man in the same position (Dolan, 2008). The findings of the study suggest that the political arena can often times be unfair to female politicians. When two individuals compete for the same position, they need to be compared as equals. Often times the media can set an agenda, and this agenda can make the coverage very biased towards female politicians. With the media putting such a strong emphasis on appearance and delivery, it can often times leave women at a political disadvantage (Lundell and Ekstrom, 2008).

The United States: Conclusions of the Research

The summary of the research regarding the United States is supportive of the thesis. Women's involvement in politics is viewed favorably in the minds of both men and women, but they are often treated unfairly by the media. Most research suggests that women have come a long way over the past six decades, but in the end, the media can often times be biased towards women's involvement in politics.

The results of the study have shown that both men and women have come to an agreement that if a qualified woman runs for elected office, that they would be supportive of their candidacy. Results have also shown women are just as likely to win an election as men (Dunne, 2008). What are the qualifying factors for a woman to run for public office? For example, Hillary Clinton was able to use her time as First Lady to gain public support of her candidacy for the open New York senate seat. Through hard work and determination, Clinton was able to win the race (Dolan, 2008).

A public opinion study suggested that female politicians are often times evaluated more

critically by the media due to their appearance and delivery when compared to a man in the same position (Lundell and Ekstrom, 2008). There are numerous unanswered questions from the research. Does gender entirely factor into the equation? Does party affiliation factor into the equation of the coverage as well? The media is everywhere, and depending on what outlets air the coverage could potentially limit the credibility of this research. Media outlets have agendas, which could shape the direction of the coverage. To further enhance the credibility of the research, comparisons would have to be made across different media outlets, thus comparing coverage of women in politics across the different media organizations.

The Czech Republic: Review of the Research

Women in the European Union are often times deterred from entering the field of politics. Currently, the European Union is only represented by 16% of women in politics. The number in the Czech Republic is lower than average for most European

countries. Currently, the Czech Republic is only represented by 13.7% of women in politics, which is less than half of the original quota set forth by the communist legislators in Czechoslovakia in 1989 (Norris, 2008). The quota called for 30% of female representation in Parliament, a target was never reached. Also, women involved in politics in the Czech Republic are often times caught in a difficult position with the media. Coverage of female politicians is frequently focused on personal appearance, instead of public policy issues (Radio Praha, 2013).

Though goals have been set for equal representation of female politicians in the media, this has yet to happen in most European countries. A major hurdle for female politicians is the biased media coverage they receive. Media outlets often times cover public policy as a “masculine affair” in the Czech Republic, which often leads to lower public support for women who are involved in politics. Female politicians are often times ridiculed by the media for their personal appearance. The media has been known to comment on female politicians choices of clothing styles and even colors from time to

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time. Whether it is intended or unintended is not the focus, but rather why are “sexist” comments such as these are primarily focused on women who are involved in politics (Lundin, 2010). With such a small percentage of women in politics, it can be hard to rise to a position of power (D. Sindelar, personal communication, August 12, 2013). Government in the Czech Republic consists of the House and Senate. With few women being involved in politics, they are often left in positions of low power. Appointments to committees is common, but these committees are often times dominated by men. Furthermore, the way Czech news outlets cover women in politics furthers the position of “traditional” roles of women in society (Norris, 2008).

A study, conducted by Harvard University, suggested that women in politics have a major obstacle to overcome in order to achieve equal representation in the current political field in the Czech Republic (Norris, 2008). The study also suggested media representation can be more critical, and differ tremendously from the coverage of men in the same position. Women are judged more critically, especially about their personal appearance. Personal appearance includes clothing styles and hair styles, which are rarely an issue for men in the same position. Also, women in politics are often ridiculed for their delivery tone. At times they are ridiculed for being too soft spoken and emotional, something that can quickly earn undesired negative attention from the media. In comparison, men in the same position are ridiculed for issues regarding public policy. Standards are entirely different for two people in similar positions (Lundin, 2010).

Other obstacles for female politicians include both cultural and structural issues of the current political system. In a culture where women are often guided into fields such as social work or education, it can be hard to earn an equal level of respect in the current political field. With a political structure that is controlled by men, women's involvement in politics is frequently limited to positions of little or no power. Barriers are high for female politicians in the Czech Republic, and breaking the traditional gender roles has not been a quick process (Norris, 2008).

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In societies that view women's role more traditionally, it is often hard to gain political traction in the field. Without political

traction, it is difficult to gain enough support to succeed in a crowded field. Thus, many women are deterred from running for political office. In most cases political races consist largely of men in the Czech Republic, though it is not unheard of for women to get involved in the political field (Lundin, 2010).

The Czech Republic: Conclusions of the Research

The summary of the research regarding the Czech Republic is supportive of the thesis. In the Czech Republic, women are deterred from running for elected office. However, when a woman becomes involved in politics, they are often unfairly represented by the media. The research suggested that women are geared into other career paths such as social work and education, which are more traditional jobs for women to have in the Czech Republic.

In 1989, the communist legislators in Czechoslovakia put forth a quota for the number of required female politicians in elected office, which was set at 30%. Currently, the Czech Republic is only represented by 13.7% of women in elected office, which is less than half of the original quota (Norris, 2008). The field of politics is viewed as a “masculine affair” in the Czech Republic, which deters many women from entering the political arena. Following more traditional career paths such as social work, education, or household duties are among the most common jobs for a woman in the Czech Republic (Lundin, 2010).

Women in politics are often criticized for their appearance and delivery tone, which is a major gender barrier they must surmount in order to be successful. With such strong support for male politicians, a female politician is often left at a political disadvantage (Norris, 2008). The media's coverage of a woman and of a man are quite different. A woman is often times criticized for their clothing and communication style, when a man in the same position is covered more from public policy perspective (Lundin, 2010). Are women at a political disadvantage entirely because of their gender?

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Does party affiliation have anything to do with news coverage of politicians in the Czech Republic?

To further investigate this topic, comparing the coverage of women in politics across the different media outlets in the Czech Republic would need to be done. Different media organizations could potentially have different views about women, which could hinder the coverage of female politicians in the Czech Republic.

Women in politics today are treated completely different all around the world. In the United States, it is viewed favorably for women to enter the field of politics by both men and women. For example, Hillary Clinton has played a significant role in American politics over the last twenty years. Clinton was a strong advocate for universal healthcare as First Lady and this made her unique from others before her. Clinton furthered her political agenda and ran for the senate in New York in the 2000 election cycle. The media coverage was intense, and oftentimes unfair. Clinton was able to hold her own, and win the race. Women in the United States have come far over the last sixty years, especially with regards to public policy.

However, women in the Czech Republic are deterred from entering the political field, and instead are guided into other job markets. Following more traditional job career paths, women in the Czech Republic choose jobs in fields like education, social work, and household work. With such a strong male dominance in the political field, female politicians have their work cut out for

them in the political field. Earning enough support to win is oftentimes difficult, and the media representation adds another challenge. The coverage of women in politics is often biased, and differs greatly from the coverage of men. Does the media represent women in politics fairly? Why does their coverage differ so greatly from men? A woman involved in politics is often left in a position of low power, which makes it a challenge to become a key policy maker. Future research is needed to address a major question: What is necessary for a women in the Czech Republic to move into a position of higher power in the political field?

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