



# Perspectives

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# On Women & Politics

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## TRAILING THE THIRD WORLD

In America, women in government are few and far between. Although women are gaining positions in government, there is a fact that remains constant over time. There is on place on earth -- in America or anywhere else -- where women have equal representation with men in government. In fact, instead of an incremental rise in the number of women holding office, there was a dramatic drop in the number of women holding legislative positions worldwide during the mid-80s and mid-90s. The reason, according to Joni Seager, author of *Women in the World*, is that there were sweeping political changes in Eastern Europe and the former USSR which resulted in a sharp drop in women's representation in the governments of those states.

As of 2008, a document produced by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women ranked nations based on the percentage of women in government. Leading the pack and ranked #1 -- having a higher percentage of women in government than any other nation in the world -- is Finland. The United States captured

#31, a position it shares with Malawi. For your edification, Malawi is a small nation in east Africa, wedged between Zambia and Mozambique. It has a population of 15,447, 500. Formerly a British Protectorate called Nyasaland, Malawi gained its independence in 1964. Malawians have a life expectancy of 51.9 years and over 11% of the adult population is infected with HIV/AIDS. The average annual income is \$900 and 53.7% of the population lives below the poverty level.



As interesting as the US tying with Malawi at #31 is a look at many of the countries closer to the top of the heap: Norway, Sweden, France, Spain and Switzerland might not surprise you. But what about South Africa, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Trinidad and Tobago, Cape Verde, Burundi, Botswana, Uganda, Gambia...I could continue but you get the picture. Admittedly, many of the Scandinavian and Western European countries have a legislative quota; Finland's law requires that each government decision-making body be made up of at least 40% women.

We Americans do not particularly like quotas, and to be honest, the quota system is quite controversial in other countries as well. The electorates in Poland and Latvia have voted down quota initiatives in the last few years. Would a quota similar to Finland's pass in America? I doubt it. But maybe it should be considered because there's more bad news. The Inter-Parliamentary Union of the UN

ranked the US #71 in the listing of countries' percentage of women in national legislative bodies. We are trumped on this list by Cuba, Angola, Nabibia and Viet Nam, among others.



The UN takes the position that a **critical mass** of at least 30% women in all government levels is required in order for government policies to begin to reflect women's priorities, to begin to change governmental style and organizational culture. Academic studies indicate that when that critical mass is achieved and more women hold more of the key decision-making roles, governments tend to focus more on the "root cause" of issues such as education, child care, housing and social services. And since the Cold War ended, economists have come to realize that wealth is much more than per-capita gross domestic product; it encompasses quality of life as well. The World Economic Forum's annual gender gap ranking looks at health and survival rates, economic opportunity, educational attainment and "gender empowerment", which is the ratio of women to men in national government. The top four over-all in 2007 -- Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland -- are also the top four in terms of the ratio of men to women in their national parliaments. The US doesn't even come in the top ten in the gender gap ranking list.

Does this say anything about the United States, or is this merely a collection of interesting facts? I, for one, say that it does say something about the United States. It tells us that women don't run for political office and don't actively seek appointive office. A policy paper recently published at Brown University demonstrated that when women run for office, they perform just as well as men. But the Brown researchers found a substantial gender gap in political ambition: men tend to have it, women do not.

Underrepresentation of women in America is a result of the fact that women don't run. Consider that the next time you want to complain about the dearth of women in public office. Then do something. ***RUN!***

If you would be interested in attending a seminar on "Applied Politics for Women", please contact me at [lydia@sig.msstate.edu](mailto:lydia@sig.msstate.edu).



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