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## **Women in Power: A Comparison Between the United States and Brazil.**

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Transcript of talk “Women in Power: A Comparison Between the United States and Brazil.” *The Forum*. March 25, 2024 at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University.

By Pedro A. G. dos Santos, Associate Professor of Political Science at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University.

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### **Introduction**

Good afternoon to everyone. I am glad to share today a comparison of women’s representation between Brazil and the US. This was a presentation I did in Brazil as part of my Fulbright Distinguished Scholar work in the country. I thought this would be a good talk to share here as well.

### **In this talk**

I will begin by discussing in detail the numbers of women in various positions of power in each country, providing the socio-political context for these figures. I will also delve into the historical evolution of the number of women in lower houses of each country, emphasizing how institutional characteristics may explain why both countries do not have a more significant number of women in these institutions. I will conclude my remarks by sharing a bit about my research focus here in Brazil: political parties committing fraud that leads to candidacies receiving very few votes.

### **Suffrage**

Before discussing the current numbers, let’s take a step back in time and talk about suffrage in both countries. The suffrage movement in the United States and Brazil shared notable similarities and differences, shaping the role of women in politics. In both countries, the movement began in the late 19th century and gained momentum in the early 20th century.

In the United States, prominent figures like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the suffrage movement. The photo I took at the Women’s Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls, New York, captures the site where the first women’s rights convention took place in 1848. The efforts of these women and some allied men culminated in the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granting women the right to vote in 1920.

In Brazil, suffrage was also a hard-fought battle. Bertha Lutz, Alzira Reis, and Leolinda Daltro are some of the names associated with this movement, facing challenges similar to their North American counterparts. However, Brazil only granted women the right to vote in 1932, with the approval of the new Electoral Code.

Despite the different timelines, connections between women in both countries are evident. Brazilian suffragists closely followed events in the United States, seeking inspiration and learning from the struggle of American women. Several American suffragists, such as Carrie Chapman Catt and Sophonisba Breckinridge, visited Brazil at the invitation of feminists in the country. This exchange of ideas and experiences contributed to the construction of a global

movement for women's suffrage, highlighting solidarity and the importance of collaboration among women from different parts of the world in the pursuit of political equality.

Another similarity between the two movements was the near-total exclusion of Black women from the retelling of suffrage history and the presence of racism in both countries. In the United States, Black women played a crucial role in the suffrage movement, although they were often marginalized by white leaders. Figures like Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells were powerful voices in the fight for women's suffrage, facing not only gender discrimination but also systemic racism. The struggle for gender equality often intersected with the fight against racial oppression, underscoring the complexity of the intersections between race and gender.

In Brazil, Black women also played a significant role in the suffrage movement, although their contributions were not always properly recognized. Black women such as Antonieta de Barros and Laudelina de Campos Melo were pioneers in the fight for suffrage, facing not only sexism but also structural racism. Their stories underscore the importance of acknowledging the specific struggles faced by Black women within the broader context of the suffrage movement in both countries.

The intersection of gender and race was an essential factor in the narrative of these movements, illustrating how Black women encountered unique challenges and were often excluded from central discussions. Nevertheless, their fundamental contributions played a crucial role in the fight for gender equality and the expansion of political rights in both countries.

### **Current Numbers: Comparing Brazil and the United States**

Let's analyze the current numbers of female representation in positions of power in Brazil and the United States. The data I'll discuss comes from various sources, but I'll highlight four that provide valuable information.

1. Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University: CAWP maintains comprehensive databases and conducts extensive studies. Rutgers University is renowned for having top female professors and researchers in the field of gender and politics, making it a notable choice for studying this area.
2. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU): Their data is crucial, especially when comparing different countries. It provides insights into women's representation in executive positions and national parliaments.
3. Instituto Alziras and Gênero e Número (Gender and Number): These Brazilian sources offer detailed perspectives on female representation.

These sources are essential for understanding the current status of women in positions of power in both countries. Now, let's delve deeper into these numbers, considering the social and political contexts in which they exist.

### **Municipal Elections**

The comparison at the municipal level between Brazil and the United States presents significant nuances due to distinct governance structures. In Brazil, the structure of municipal executive and legislative power is more uniform. In the U.S., the constitution does not specifically address

municipalities, granting them considerable flexibility for organization. In my city, Saint Cloud, in the state of Minnesota, we have seven members on the city council, with four representing specific districts and three elected “at large,” competing in a joint district composed of three seats. Additionally, we have a mayor. However, some U.S. cities may not have a mayor, with the president of the city council acting as the executive. The power dynamics between local executive and legislative branches also vary considerably.

This diversity of arrangements makes empirical analyses of factors influencing women’s election challenging. The difficulty in compiling comprehensive data in the U.S. also hinders a more detailed comparison. Nevertheless, it is notable that, like Brazil, women tend to have a more significant presence in smaller and less prosperous cities.

I will delve into the dynamics of party politics in more detail in the upcoming slides, but it’s essential to discuss another peculiarity. In Brazil, municipal elections follow a logic similar to state and federal elections, with parties – and especially party leaders – playing a crucial role in political strategies and candidate selection. In the United States, there is a culture of depoliticization in local elections, with exceptions in some larger cities. What I mean by this is that the dominant political parties – the Democrats and Republicans – do not directly involve themselves in local elections, not even endorsing candidates. This likely benefits women, who do not need to compete for party resources and can run based on public policy issues rather than ideology. This may explain why there are more women in city councils and serving as mayors in the United States.

This complexity underscores the importance of considering local contexts and specific structures when analyzing gender representation in municipal governments. These differences not only enrich the analysis but also highlight the need for adaptive and context-sensitive approaches when examining the variables that influence women’s representation in local leadership.

### **State Level**

Party and electoral dynamics in the state legislatures in the United States also differ from Brazil. Except for the state of Nebraska, all states have a bicameral system at the state level, with the equivalent of state representatives and senators. Brazil only has one chamber at the state level, called State Assemblies. The number of women has grown in the U.S. over the last 20 years, both in the legislative and executive branches. The low number of female governors in Brazil can be partially explained by party dynamics, especially the state leadership positions that are dominated by men, and the power that comes from the state executive. Comparing Brazil to the U.S., the position of governor holds more power in Brazil, which can influence decisions about candidates in a historically patriarchal system. The higher number of women governors in the U.S. may pave the way for more women presidential candidates in the country, as nearly half of all American presidents served as governors before being elected president.

It’s worth noting that Brazil has a gender quota law for women in elections for municipal, state, and federal legislatures, something that does not exist in the United States. The growth of women in the American legislature is a recent phenomenon, occurring over the past 20 years, but it has happened without much space for affirmative actions like those established in Brazil.

### **Federal Legislative Elections**

In federal legislative elections, we see two different electoral systems that highlight the importance of these institutions in gender dynamics. In Brazil, we have an open-list system with more than 30 parties, which generates tremendous competition and high expenses during elections. Despite several attempts to close loopholes that parties use to circumvent the law, our quota law for women does not work very well. The historical domination of men in politics is exacerbated by local dynamics where party leaders are mostly men, protecting their own space and that of their allies.

In the United States, only two parties have real chances on the national stage, and the primary system diminishes the power of parties in selecting candidates. With a single-district system and variations in rules across states, the electoral dynamics also favor men, although this dynamic is gradually changing.

### **History of Federal Legislative Elections**

It is interesting to observe the evolution of women in the federal chambers and the notable difference between the United States and Brazil, especially starting from the significant year of 1992, known as “The Year of the Woman” in U.S. legislative elections. Before 1992, both countries had a minuscule number of women in the legislature. Between 1953 and the 1980s, women who were part of political dynasties dominated, including a significant number of wives and widows of politicians. In Brazil, the return to democracy opened up space for women, and in 1986, the number of elected female representatives increased from 8 to 26, the largest proportional increase in history. However, progress remained stagnant for years, even with the establishment of the quota law in 1996. In 2021, I wrote an article in the *European Journal of Politics and Gender* that delves into this history in more detail.

In the United States, the nomination of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991 involved a sexual harassment accusation against Anita Hill, a law professor. The frustration of women with Clarence Thomas’s confirmation led to the largest increase in women in the chamber’s history in the U.S., with 103 women elected, 90 of them Democrats. Progress since then has been remarkable, and the United States is now approaching what researchers call the “critical mass,” reaching approximately 30% of women in the legislative power. The year 2022, with elections in both countries, saw the highest number of elected women in the history of both nations.

This positive trajectory is worthy of celebration, although it is important to recognize that there is still a long way to go, especially in Brazil, to achieve gender parity in politics. It is crucial to remember that the electoral systems differ between the two countries, although both share the similarity of expensive election campaigns. The advances made in the United States and Brazil deserve recognition; however, we have not yet reached the desired parity in political representation, especially in the Brazilian context.

Currently, in 2023, seven countries have 50% or more women in the legislative power, and 28 countries have 40% or more. It is worth noting that just two decades ago, no country achieved the 50% or more mark for women in power, and only two surpassed the 40% mark of female representation in their national legislatures.

These numbers indicate a significant movement toward gender equality in global politics, although challenges remain. The positive changes observed so far serve as an incentive to continue working toward more inclusive and equitable political representation worldwide. Regarding the impact of political parties in the Brazilian and American contexts, let's explore further:

- **Brazil:** The Brazilian political landscape is characterized by a multitude of parties, making it challenging for voters to understand the true agendas of each party and candidate. Despite the establishment of a quota law for women, progress has been slow.
- **United States:** In contrast, the U.S. has a two-party system dominated by the Democrats and Republicans. While this simplifies the electoral process, it also limits the diversity of perspectives. Both countries face unique challenges related to gender representation, and the role of political parties plays a significant role in shaping the landscape.

In the US and Brazil, do political parties make a difference?

### **Federal Legislators per party**

The chart of female deputies in Brazil is based on data developed by Malu Gatto and Debora Thome for the +Representatividade project, adapted for this discussion. It presents the absolute numbers of seats occupied by women in the Chamber of Deputies. Among the 23 parties represented in the House, five will have exclusively male representatives: PATRIOTA, PSC, PROS, PTB, and PV. Some parties have reduced proportions of female representation: PSDB, PP, and PSD, with 7.7%, 8.5%, and 9.5%, respectively.

Left-leaning parties such as PSOL, PCdoB, and REDE have higher proportions of women in their caucuses, with 58.3%, 50%, and 50% female representation, respectively. Additionally, CIDADANIA also demonstrates a notable commitment to female representation, with 40% of women elected to their caucus.

Historically, left-leaning parties tend to have a proportionally larger presence of women in their caucuses. However, until the current legislature, the PT (Workers' Party) recorded lower rates of female representation among its elected deputies. In the current term, this situation has changed, with women occupying 26% of the party's caucus.

In the PL (Liberal Party), the largest right-leaning party in terms of seats in the House, women will occupy 17% of the seats, highlighting a marked difference compared to the left-leaning parties mentioned earlier.

In the American context, with only two parties having representation at the federal level, and like Brazil and several countries in the Americas and Europe, the more left-leaning party has a higher representation of women. The Democrats, a center-left party with more progressive factions, have 92 women, or 43% of the party's seats. The Republicans have 23 women, or 15% of the party's seats. This disparity also repeats in state elections, but with variations by state. These observations highlight the disparities in gender representation among different political parties in Brazil and the United States, emphasizing the influence of ideological orientations on the proportions of women in party caucuses. These changes and trends can provide valuable insights into the role of political parties in promoting gender equality in politics.

## **Senators**

The history in the Senate is a little more complicated and interesting in both countries. In Brazil, only the PSD and PT have more than one female senator, with six and two, respectively. Seven other parties have one female senator each, while five have none. The unexpectedly high number of female senators from the PSD is a surprise, and honestly, I don't have a good explanation for this discrepancy.

In the U.S., Kyrsten Sinema was elected as a Democrat but later became an independent in 2022. She is the only independent woman in the Senate, joining two male senators. Among Democrats, 29% of the seats are held by women, while among Republicans, 18% are women. The Senate is viewed with more prestige and represents a more stable position, with an eight-year term.

In both countries, patriarchal institutions, especially the formal and informal dynamics within political parties, tend to prioritize these positions for men who are already well-established within the parties or men with political capital. Since there are fewer Senate candidacies, parties have more influence over who ultimately becomes the party's candidate.

These dynamics in both the House and the Senate have shown changes in both countries, but these changes tend to be driven by certain parties.

## **Women in the National Executive**

There's a phrase in the United States that still confuses me to this day: "Is the country ready for a woman president?" Every time a woman seems to have a better chance, like Hillary Clinton in 2016, this question resurfaces. It epitomizes the patriarchal political system, implying that something needs to happen for the country to be "prepared" for a woman in the highest office. After Hillary Clinton came close to being elected, we now have Kamala Harris as vice president. In Brazil, we had Dilma Rousseff elected in 2010, reelected in 2014, and then removed from the presidency in 2016. I co-authored a book with Farida Jalalzai about Dilma's government in relation to female empowerment and disempowerment. I can tell you more about the book later. The presidency remains a challenging glass ceiling for women to break worldwide, and it's not very different in Brazil and the United States.

## **Women in Cabinet**

The number of women ministers of state (or cabinet members) has also grown significantly in both countries. In both countries, left-leaning parties (the PT in Brazil and the Democrats in the U.S.) have influenced this growth. In Brazil, in fact, only the PT has brought a non-embarrassing number of women to the ministries. President Dilma Rousseff appointed more women ministers than all the presidents of the democratic era before her combined. My colleagues Malu Gatto, Kristin Wylie, and I wrote about this in 2022 in the *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, arguing that coalition presidentialism in Brazil hinders the entry of women into ministries, as almost all appointed female ministers were part of the portfolios directly appointed by the presidency, rather than those negotiated with allied parties. Today, we see this dilemma again, with female ministers likely losing space to make room for nominations from parties allied to President Lula. In the U.S., this dynamic does not exist, but there are still different interests within each party. It is worth noting that Donald Trump appointed 26% women to ministries. Comparative research theorizes about a concrete floor, where presidents cannot bring fewer female ministers than the previous government. Although this does not materialize in party changes, in the U.S., it can be said that there is a concrete floor within the parties. Since Reagan in the 1980s, Republicans have

not had less than 18% female ministers, and since Clinton in the 1990s, Democrats have not had less than 30% female ministers.

### **The Judiciary**

I will briefly discuss the judiciary because it is not an area I study extensively. I want to make a quick comment to say that today, the U.S. Supreme Court has four women, accounting for 45% of the seats, while in Brazil, we have only two female ministers, representing 18%. The judiciaries of the two countries have very different dynamics, so a direct comparison is not ideal. However, I think it's important to talk about some recent appointments in the U.S.

Judge Amy Coney Barrett, appointed by Donald Trump, was partially nominated because she is a conservative woman and due to her stance on abortion. Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, nominated by President Biden, became the first Black woman on the court. President Biden made it clear from the beginning that his nomination would be a woman. This demonstrates that discussions about descriptive representation are present in decisions made by both right-wing and left-wing presidents. It is impossible today not to consider gender as something to be at least discussed when important nominations like these occur, as was the case before Cristiano Zanin's appointment here in Brazil

### **Women with no votes**

I would like to conclude this presentation by introducing the project I was able to explore thanks to the support of the Fulbright Foundation. The phenomenon of women with few or no votes in Brazil's legislative elections.

The phenomenon that occurs is unique to Brazil and is a consequence of the electoral system and party strategies developed by party leaders, who are mostly men. However, similar phenomena occur in various places around the world, in situations where gender dynamics directly influence actions that undermine women's and other minorities' political participation.

The theoretical basis for thinking about low-vote candidacies is influenced by an American phenomenon: the "sacrificial lambs." This phenomenon is observed in districts or states where a political party is in an unfavorable position (sometimes due to gerrymandering, or district manipulation to minimize opposition votes) or where victory is considered unlikely.

These "sacrificial" candidates often face a series of challenges, including limited funding, lack of substantial party support, and fewer visibility opportunities compared to their stronger competitors. In many cases, their candidacy is seen as a pragmatic strategy to ensure that the party has a presence in all districts or states, even if that presence is symbolic and unlikely to result in victory. Claro que sacrificial lambs podem ser homens ou mulheres, mas pesquisas mostram que especialmente nos anos 80 e 90 a proporção de mulheres que faziam esse papel era muito maior que homens, especialmente se considerarmos que até os anos 90 o número de mulheres na maioria das esferas de poder era menos de 10%.

In Brazil, the media and political power use the term "laranja" (orange) to describe fraudulent candidacies. However, what my research with political scientists and legal researchers has shown is that not all low-vote or no-vote candidacies are fraudulent. Even the fraudulent ones can serve distinct purposes, especially to circumvent quota laws and transfer electoral funds from female candidates to other politicians within the party. We also find the use of the term "laranja"

problematic because it describes a phenomenon that focuses on women, portraying them as fruit. This dehumanizes women and, in a way, places blame on the female candidates, when in reality, the blame lies with the parties.

Both the “sacrificial lambs” in the United States and the low-vote candidacies in Brazil raise critical questions about the transparency of the electoral system and the quality of political representation in both countries. These candidacies undermine public trust in democratic institutions and compromise effective women’s participation in politics. The Brazilian case is particularly serious, as electoral fraud poses greater challenges to the quality of democracy in the country. These two phenomena underscore the ongoing importance of political reform and strengthening democratic institutions to ensure a transparent, fair, and representative electoral system where all citizens can actively participate in the political and electoral process.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this exploration of gender representation in Brazilian and American politics highlights the complexities and challenges shaping these nations. From the suffrage movement to the rise of women in positions of power, we see significant progress, albeit accompanied by questionable practices such as “sacrificial lambs” and “laranja” candidacies. These situations underscore the ongoing need to strengthen our democracies, promote electoral transparency, and advance toward gender equality. By joining our efforts to dismantle barriers, create opportunities, and value diversity, we can shape a more inclusive and equitable political future for all.

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