



## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

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**Paper Received On:** 25 JULY 2022

**Peer Reviewed On:** 31 JULY 2022

**Published On:** 1 AUGUST 2022

### Abstract

*The contemporary era is the era of democracy. The end of World War II changed the nature of societies and polities. The advent of behaviouralism, on the one hand, and the initiation of the cold war on the other, represented a transformation in politics both internal as well as external. Democracy became the tool to test the legitimacy of governments. Hence, interdisciplinary studies on political participation assumed significance. Participation of all the stakeholders within the polity became important. The issue of the challenges and dynamics of women's political participation became important. The problem of mindsets and stereotypes proved to be hindrances to women's participation. The individual, social and political transformation is considered a way out of this. Women's participation in American politics is studied since America represents the liberal democratic model of the developed world. An attempt to understand whether there is a universality as far as women's issues are concerned is made. The conclusion drawn is that though there is an upward trend of women's participation, there is still a long way to go.*

**Keywords:** *Participation, Behaviouralism, Cold War, Stereotype, Affirmative Action*



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## Introduction

The period immediately after the end of the World War II can be described as the period of Behaviouralism. The Behavioural Revolution made the study of social sciences interdisciplinary in character. This new approach to the study of social sciences ran parallel with the onset of the Cold War. The Cold War also described as an ideological war brought to the fore the rivalries between the Liberal West and the Communist East. The battle for proving the legitimacy of the State began and the study of political participation thus, assumed significance.

The political participation of all the stakeholders within the political system was carefully studied. The role of women as important stakeholders in the political system was recognized and the issue of women's political participation was brought into focus. The question of women getting a fair share in the political, social and economic map of the world became significant.

Along with the parallel processes of the Cold War and the development of a new approach to the study of social sciences, the World War II also brought into focus the idea of democracy. It became the populist method of looking at the ideological battle that broke out between the capitalist and the communist world. Both moving forward with an agenda of developing and increasing their spheres of influence. Democracy became the anthem to prove political legitimacy and with the need to further the cause of democracy, the extent of political participation in the political system became an important branch of study.

Behaviouralism that shaped the interdisciplinary approach provided impetus to this study. It provided tools for measuring the extent and deep rootedness of democratic systems. This paper seeks to bring out the challenges faced in the study of women's participation in politics. The stereotype of the American Liberal Democratic model is widely accepted. Hence, a study of Women's participation in American politics is used as an interesting case study.

### **Concept of Political Participation**

Political participation is described as the actions of people through which they seek to influence the government. (Milbrath, 1972). Political participation begins with the base level of the right to vote and moves up the pyramidal ladder from a formal and informal, passive and active participation of people. Voting is an important aspect of Political participation, however, it is just one of the many actions that influences politics. (Verba et al, 1995). It includes not just membership of political organizations and interest groups but also includes broadly an informal level of participation through discussion forums, meetings which indicate an interest in politics. (Rush and Althoff, 1971). The ultimate form of political participation includes political recruitment which is a more direct participation into the political system/decision making process. Therefore, a distinction is made between Political participation and Political recruitment where all Political recruitment is Political participation but all Political participation is not Political recruitment.

Political participation, therefore, is the engagement of individuals with the government. (Faulks, 1999). The higher the rules of Political participation at each of these

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levels, the greater the extent and nature of democracy in the system. The 'Demos' are visible through their voices and expressions within the political landscape.

In their battle to prove the legitimacy of governments, ultimately through political participation, the question of whether all stakeholders are represented in this process was also considered. Did political participation only indicate the participation of men in governance was a question that was posed? The issue of women's participation and their role in the decision making structures and processes needed to be addressed seriously. However, before addressing the larger issue of women's participation in decision making, it becomes necessary to understand the challenges faced by women.

### **Challenges to Women's Participation**

The entire premise of looking at Political participation of women is viewed in the context of the stereotypes that affect their attitudes and behavior. The way women are perceived by the society and the way they perceive themselves is a product of this stereotyping. They guide a woman's belief and action in political structures and processes. (Blomgren, 2010). Women are often considered to be the weaker subordinated section and hence they need the protection of men. This is the traditional view of women where the State represents the masculine 'self' who is there for the welfare of the people. It maintains law and order and provides security to the people. The State is the representative of the masculine identity and hence by natural progression men became the beholders of the state. They come to represent the community that would provide protection and security to the weaker sections of the society consequently the women. Women are considered as weaker and hence, could not be a part of the governance structure. Protected structures like the family, church and other social institutions were considered to be safe for women. Politics, which involved power, was the domain of the men.

There are, however, a few who believe that men and women are equal. There is no difference between them and hence, differential treatment is not required. They believe that all parts of the society have a right to participate and if all are given the opportunity to participate, then there will be a diversity of opinion which will eventually lead to a more inclusive society that respects diversity. (Phillips, 1995). The more realistic approach of looking towards the challenge of women's participation is that there is a discrimination involved in looking at the problem of women. Women are not treated as equal partners but the way to resolve this problem is by taking corrective action rather than deconstructing the whole system. Corrective action like education, resocialisation, employment introduced at the

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right levels will produce substantial equality between men and women. Corrective action, however, has to take place at the level of the individual, the society and the polity.

At the individual level, it involves creating an awareness among the women about their exploitation. The woman is unaware about her worth. Traditional mindsets are rigid that treats us as a part of the male and hence, lacking an independent personality and identity. Women have internalized their exploitation. It is generally believed that men make knowledge and women keep traditions. This mindset has to change.

Through the individual level of creating self-worth among the women, need is also there for creating an awareness among the men about the attitudes and behaviour towards women. Women are not subordinate and should not be treated as such is an understanding that needs to develop among men as well. A resocialisation of the community needs to take place where all the agencies of political socialization like the family, school, the workplace need to look at women through the empowerment prism.

At the social level, social norms and traditions develop. Strategy is to ensure that women be included in the process of knowledge. Education play a key role here. Women must get an opportunity to learn and express. This is possible only through education. Along with this, it is also necessary that they go out to work and acquire experience in the outer world. This would bring a fresh perspective to the interpretation of traditions and customs thus enabling women to create knowledge which is important.

It is also necessary to empower women politically. Though a high level of political participation is witnessed among women, the ladders are at the lower levels. As we climb the ladder of political participation upwards the participation of women becomes lesser and lesser. In the spheres of political recruitment the participation of women is very less. It is against this back drop that it is interesting to note the political participation of women in American politics.

### **Women in American Politics: A Case Study**

America is considered to be the greatest democracy in the world. The American tradition of openness is well recognized. As a front runner in initiating the behavioural revolution and encouraging the studies on political participation to indicate the success of democracies, a study of the extent and nature of women's participation in American politics is significant.

When the foundations of the American constitution were laid in 1776, it had one serious flaw. The Americans denied all political and legal rights to two major groups within

the society- the women and the slaves. In America, it was only in 1920 with the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment act that women were granted the right to vote. When a new group seeks to enter the political system, three things can happen. (Verba, 1992). The group will be denied entry and rejected, it may be integrated or it may transform the established system.

When we consider the role of women in American politics, we notice that women were certainly not rejected from expanding their role. The ever expanding role of women as voters, as political office bearers is a testimony to that. As far as the question of whether women have been accepted within the traditional system or have in any way changed the nature of polity, it must be said that still a lot of activities that the women undertake are within the traditionally established parameters. However, it would also be wrong to suggest that they have in no way affected the polity. Whenever a new group of participants enters the political system they bring about certain changes. Government has to take note of their demands. Programs have to be undertaken to suit the articulated interests.

### **Historical Background**

Long before women were given the right to vote, they had evolved as political actors. In the traditional sense, electoral politics is considered to be at the base of political participation. As already discussed, political participation includes any collective action for the redistribution of power and resources within the state system. Going by this premise, women's participation in politics began by the 18<sup>th</sup> century itself. Initially in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, women used to participate through informal means like personal connections. Family friendships based on shared status, privileges, oppression was the basis for political participation. Later around the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women started forming organisations and associations of their own. The first single sex organization to be established in the USA was the WCTU (Woman's Christian Temperance Union) (Tilly and Gurin, 1992) Women became members of several voluntary associations. They were mostly concerned with matters like education, health, nursing etc. These early organisations were not openly directed to the political system but they did have political overtones. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a number of women's organisations were formed. In 1917, the NAWSA (The National American Women Suffrage Association) was formed. This was the follow up of the first convention of women held in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York. This convention called for the enfranchisement of women. In 1890 the women of Wyoming got the right to vote and in 1896 the women of Utah, Colorado and Idaho. Finally all these movements, protests petitions resulted in the 1920 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act. (Rendall, 1985).

## **Socio-Economic Environment**

One of the reasons for the changing role of women within the political system was the changing socio-economic environment. Apart from the function of housekeeping, the women also had to act as bread earners. Industrialisation was the order of the day. It brought with it its own problems. Women also joined the labour force. The state, too, gradually started accepting welfare responsibilities. Issues of interest to women like education, health etc. came within the ambit of the state. Thus, women started becoming more involved in political activities. (Janeway, 1973).

### **Period from 1920-1960**

The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment act conferred upon the women a special role. They had to now act as responsible citizens of the state. It was generally assumed that once women got the right to vote, they would actively use this right and overall voting percentages would shoot up. However, after the initial euphoria women showed a certain lethargy. Women were getting socialised into the political process. They were still developing and integrating into the political values and beliefs. Habits of voting still had to be acquired.

The World War II brought about many attitudinal and behavioural changes. Women joined the labour force on a large scale. They broke into the traditional male bastions and assumed membership of trade unions. However, discrimination against women still prevailed. By 1960, majority of women were working. It was against this background that the second women's rights movement took place in 1960.

### **Post 1960 Period: Party Politics as a Case Study**

It was only after the second women's rights movement that a large influx of women in the polity took place. If we take party politics as a case study till the 1960s, both the major parties- the Democrats and the Republicans decided to grant almost equal representation to women. The aspect that needs careful consideration however is whether the role assigned to them also show semblance of equality. (Nodia and Scholtbach, 2006).

It was generally felt that women's participation was due to Affirmative Action (word used in the executive order no. 10925 signed by President J.F.Kennedy) on the part of the men. This feeling was more prevalent among the women than men. Women believed that the men acted as gatekeepers either welcoming them or keeping them out. (Deering, 1989).

One of the important questions that needs to be addressed is whether women can be regarded as a distinctive group in politics? Women, it must be said, cannot be regarded as a distinct group within the polity. Women are not a homogenous group. They are brought up in

the same society as men. Hence, they are also divided on the basis of religion, language ethnicity. (Lovenduski, 2005).

As far as women centered issues are concerned, women generally act as a separate bloc. However, here too cracks in the façade are visible. On other issues women generally display similar preferences as men.

One of the problems pervading women's participation in American politics is that there is a divide between the common women and the feminists. A common woman who participates in the political process and who also is in a majority, is still governed by traditional patriarchal values. They have not been able to break free of all these barriers. Women in American politics have to still 'act like the boys'. The feminists were not given much opportunity to participate. They were not as openly welcomed and therefore they could not contribute to change the polity. Hope however is not lost.

### **Conclusion**

An assessment of women's participation in politics has to be both quantitative and qualitative. The number of women participating and influencing the political structures and processes formally and informally are definitely increasing. There is safety and hope in numbers but only to a limited extent. Numbers surely indicate a positive upward trend of women's participation but they can also be misleading. Therefore, along with quantity, qualitative analysis is also significant to truly grasp the real picture. Qualitative indicators will suggest whether women have imbibed the spirit of participation. The roles they are assigned in politics will have to be gauged. It can be suggested that in qualitative participation of women, there is still a long road to tread.

Since the 1980s, however, more and more women are actively participating even in leadership roles in America. There are a growing number of women in the Congress. Going by the 1993 records, we see senators like Dianne Feinstein, Democrat from California, Barbara Roberts, Democrat from Oregon, Ruth Ginsberg is a Supreme Court judge, Kay Hutchinson, Republican from Texas, Janet Reno, Attorney general. The nomination of Geraldine Ferraro as the democrat candidate for Vice President elections, nomination of Hillary Clinton as Presidential candidate and the eventual election, as Vice President of Kamala Harris in the present government is a sign of the changing times. This can be seen as a symbolic victory for the women. However, a woman president in America is still a chimera on the horizon.

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