Coming of Age: Female Attorneys in Politics

Bret Bryce
Coming of Age: Female Attorneys in Politics

Bret Bryce

[There shouldn't be] all these college educated women in Little Rock, running around sticking their nose into politics when they ought to be home. In Perry County, we keep 'em barefoot and pregnant' so they can't run around, and give 'em a cow to milk' so they don't have time for these things. (Tolchin 122)

-Arkansas Legislator, 1970s

The Women's Rights Movement has made enormous strides in the last century. From being second class citizens without the right to vote at the beginning of the century, the American woman is now an influential and powerful legislative member of the nation. The influx of female attorneys into the professional and political world has been an influential step in the emergence of the female politician.

In the early history of our country, women played a backseat role to men in almost every aspect of life. In her
book *The Rise of Public Woman*, Glenna Matthews writes:

The Anglo-American common law tradition made a married woman legally invisible, her identity subsumed under that of her husband. Only if she obtained “feme sole” status could she control property or dispose of her own income. She could not serve on a jury. Her ability to write a will was severely circumscribed. Thus, even if she could be considered a “public woman” owing to her participation in market activities, she lacked the same legal means for protecting her interests as those of a man of an equivalent social station. (6)

Women could not vote nor hold public office until 1920. With these legal restraints, women were severely limited.

In addition to legal discriminations, women were also subject to intense social pressures. Women have traditionally been kept from pursuing prestigious jobs and education by social norms. This has happened for two reasons. First, women were not admitted often into institutions of higher learning, and, when they were admitted, they were not as numerous as the men. Those who did graduate found very few doors opened to them as a result of discrimination from potential employers (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 105). Secondly, the framework of our country in the early twentieth century held certain positions for women and others for men. Women were conditioned to believe that most jobs were to be occupied by men, while a few positions were proper for women to fill. Women traditionally held what were known as “pink

ghetto” occupations such as clerical work, nursing, elementary education, and low-paying service jobs (109). When women did pursue traditionally “male occupations,” they were viewed as radical and unorthodox. Sigmund Freud thought such women suffered from “penis envy” and needed psychiatric help (Tolchin 91).

In the past, these legal, social, and psychological barriers presented a seemingly insurmountable hurdle for women. Today, however, female activists have made enormous strides for women’s rights. Some women have been modern-day pioneers, starting from humble beginnings and reaching the pinnacle of professional and political achievement. Many of these women have been attorneys. Female attorneys have been catalysts in the Women’s Rights Movement. I will highlight some of the most influential female attorneys in politics and explain why they have been so successful in the political world.

Many men have a problem with women in positions of power. Perhaps this is because men and women are so different from one another. Men and women do indeed have differences, both physical and emotional. Maybe men feel that women, being true to the stereotype, are too emotional to be effective leaders. One woman in a state legislature says the following about the local town chairman, “I think our local town chairman . . . [has] a little difficulty accepting women, [and] probably finds them a little hard to work with” (Diamond 94). This attitude is likely indicative of political leaders at all levels of government. Indeed, Mayor Moon Landrieu of New Orleans was quoted as saying, “Women do the lickin’ and the stickin’ while men plan the strategy” (Tolchin 13).
book *The Rise of Public Woman*, Glenna Matthews writes: The Anglo-American common law tradition made a married woman legally invisible, her identity subsumed under that of her husband. Only if she obtained “feme sole” status could she control property or dispose of her own income. She could not serve on a jury. Her ability to write a will was severely circumscribed. Thus, even if she could be considered a “public woman” owing to her participation in market activities, she lacked the same legal means for protecting her interests as those of a man of an equivalent social station. (6)

Women could not vote nor hold public office until 1920. With these legal restraints, women were severely limited.

In addition to legal discriminations, women were also subject to intense social pressures. Women have traditionally been kept from pursuing prestigious jobs and education by social norms. This has happened for two reasons. First, women were not admitted often into institutions of higher learning, and, when they were admitted, they were not as numerous as the men. Those who did graduate found very few doors opened to them as a result of discrimination from potential employers (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 105). Secondly, the framework of our country in the early twentieth century held certain positions for women and others for men. Women were conditioned to believe that most jobs were to be occupied by men, while a few positions were proper for women to fill. Women traditionally held what were known as “pink ghetto” occupations such as clerical work, nursing, elementary education, and low-paying service jobs (109). When women did pursue traditionally “male occupations,” they were viewed as radical and unorthodox. Sigmund Freud thought such women suffered from “penis envy” and needed psychiatric help (Tolchin 91).

In the past, these legal, social, and psychological barriers presented a seemingly insurmountable hurdle for women. Today, however, female activists have made enormous strides for women’s rights. Some women have been modern-day pioneers, starting from humble beginnings and reaching the pinnacle of professional and political achievement. Many of these women have been attorneys. Female attorneys have been catalysts in the Women’s Rights Movement. I will highlight some of the most influential female attorneys in politics and explain why they have been so successful in the political world.

Many men have a problem with women in positions of power. Perhaps this is because men and women are so different from one another. Men and women do indeed have differences, both physical and emotional. Maybe men feel that women, being true to the stereotype, are too emotional to be effective leaders. One woman in a state legislature says the following about the local town chairman, “I think our local town chairman . . . [has] a little difficulty accepting women, [and] probably finds them a little hard to work with” (Diamond 94). This attitude is likely indicative of political leaders at all levels of government. Indeed, Mayor Moon Landrieu of New Orleans was quoted as saying, “Women do the lickin’ and the stickin’ while men plan the strategy” (Tolchin 13).
Such are the prejudices that women have had to overcome. Some women have been more effective in overcoming them than others.

Women attorneys have had considerable success in gaining political respect and power for themselves and for women in general. Female attorneys are politically successful in part because they have an extensive background in logical reasoning and know how to argue persuasively. One anonymous legislator said:

I think perhaps [women] have to be more logical than you would expect another fellow to be because there may be a bit of a hangover of the idea that women are emotional, and so you may have to be a little more logical to overcome the possibility of being accused of emotionalism. . . . I don't make any big pitches because I still feel that to be unemotional and logical is—I try to appeal to people through logic. That is the best way to do it. . . . Maybe that is one reason that I have had as much success as I do, because I have always deliberately tried not to behave as a woman but just as a senator. (Diamond 95)

Women who know how to communicate effectively with men, that is, on the unemotional level, have experienced considerable political success. Thus, with training in logic, women can better express themselves and break down some of the barriers that may separate themselves from their male counterparts.

Female attorneys also work well with male legislators because the majority of these men are themselves attorneys. In fact, over forty-five percent of both houses of 1993 U.S. Congress members were lawyers (Barrone and Ujifusa). In most legislative bodies, from Capitol Hill to the town assemblies, law is the most common profession among members. As more women enter the law profession more women are being elected to Congress. In 1970, when women composed three percent of the legal profession, four percent of all state legislators were women. In 1988, when women constituted twenty percent of the legal profession, seventeen percent of all state legislators were women. Out of the twenty-four female members of Congress newly elected in 1992, eleven had master's or legal degrees (Darcy 108). In the current Congress, seven (or thirteen percent) of the fifty-six females in the House of Representatives are lawyers (U.S. House of Representatives). In the Senate, one (or eleven percent) out of the nine female senators is a lawyer (U.S. Senate). It seems clear, then, that as more women enter the legal profession, increasing numbers of women are proving to be effective and powerful leaders in legislative positions.

One of the greatest pioneers among female politicians is Patricia Schroeder. She was a representative for Colorado from 1973-97, the longest period any woman has ever served in the House. She received her bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota in 1961 and her law degree from Harvard in 1964. Schroeder was an antiwar activist during the Vietnam War. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1973, she sat as the chair of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and
Such are the prejudices that women have had to overcome. Some women have been more effective in overcoming them than others.

Women attorneys have had considerable success in gaining political respect and power for themselves and for women in general. Female attorneys are politically successful in part because they have an extensive background in logical reasoning and know how to argue persuasively. One anonymous legislator said:

I think perhaps [women] have to be more logical than you would expect another fellow to be because there may be a bit of a hangover of the idea that women are emotional, and so you may have to be a little more logical to overcome the possibility of being accused of emotionalism.

... I don't make any big pitches because I still feel that to be unemotional and logical is—I try to appeal to people through logic. That is the best way to do it. ... Maybe that is one reason that I have had as much success as I do, because I have always deliberated tried not to behave as a woman but just as a senator. (Diamond 95)

Women who know how to communicate effectively with men, that is, on the unemotional level, have experienced considerable political success. Thus, with training in logic, women can better express themselves and break down some of the barriers that may separate themselves from their male counterparts.

Female attorneys also work well with male legislators because the majority of these men are themselves attorneys. In fact, over forty-five percent of both houses of 1993 U.S. Congress members were lawyers (Barrone and Ujifusa). In most legislative bodies, from Capitol Hill to the town assemblies, law is the most common profession among members. As more women enter the law profession more women are being elected to Congress. In 1970, when women composed three percent of the legal profession, four percent of all state legislators were women. In 1988, when women constituted twenty percent of the legal profession, seventeen percent of all state legislators were women. Out of the twenty-four female members of Congress newly elected in 1992, eleven had master's or legal degrees (Darcy 108). In the current Congress, seven (or thirteen percent) of the fifty-six females in the House of Representatives are lawyers (U.S. House of Representatives). In the Senate, one (or eleven percent) out of the nine female senators is a lawyer (U.S. Senate). It seems clear, then, that as more women enter the legal profession, increasing numbers of women are proving to be effective and powerful leaders in legislative positions.

One of the greatest pioneers among female politicians is Patricia Schroeder. She was a representative for Colorado from 1973-97, the longest period any woman has ever served in the House. She received her bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota in 1961 and her law degree from Harvard in 1964. Schroeder was an antiwar activist during the Vietnam War. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1973, she sat as the chair of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and
Families in 1991. She was also co-founder of the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues in 1977.

An influential member of Congress for twenty-four years, Schroeder used her quick wit and humor to combat the prejudices she faced. In addition, she received much attention for her dual role as politician and mother of small children. When beginning a speech, instead of passively defending herself, she would state, “Hi there, I’m that radical you’ve heard all about, who doesn’t shave under her armpits and leaps over barricades screaming obscenities. I keep both children in the freezer, and my husband is short, has feathers, and goes ‘cluck, cluck’” (Tolchin 87). When people would meet her family, they were quite surprised to see how normal and happy they were. When she moved her family to Washington, her husband worked in her office on a voluntary basis. One senior Congress member chastised Schroeder, pointing out that spouses cannot be employed by members of Congress. Schroeder responded, “I don’t give him any money, I just let him sleep with me” (87).

With her personality and strong leadership skills, Schroeder paved the way for many other female attorneys to follow in her footsteps. Among the most influential and powerful female attorneys in the 106 Session of Congress are Diana DeGette (D-Colorado), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), Deborah Pryce (R-Ohio), and Senator Carol Moseley-Brown (D-Illinois).

Diana DeGette is a synergetic leader from the state of Colorado. A graduate of New York University Law School, she had extensive experience in civil rights law and employment litigation before she was elected to Congress. DeGette is a Democratic Whip and sits on the influential Commerce Committee. She has been involved heavily in health care reform for children, and she helped pass legislation that allows doctors to independently enroll children patients in Medicare, a potential enrollment of 3 million children. She has also been involved with legislation concerning tobacco regulation and environmental cleanup. Her legal background certainly aids her in dealing with these issues, especially since she has been involved with environmental law in the private law sector. (U.S. House of Representatives).

Sheila Jackson Lee is another prominent female attorney and politician. A graduate of the University of Virginia Law School, Sheila was elected president of her freshman democratic congressional class. She is a member of the House Committee on the Judiciary and serves on the Commercial and Administrative Law Subcommittee. She has played a pivotal role in the passage of legislation concerning human rights for minorities, women, and children. Sheila is one of several African-American female attorneys currently serving in Congress (U.S. House of representatives).

Deborah Price is a Republican representative from Ohio. She graduated from Ohio State University in 1973 and from Capital University Law School in 1976. Deborah is the seventh-ranking Republican in the House. She is the House Conference Secretary and is the fourth-ranking Republican on the powerful Rules committee. She has earned the nickname “Price: the Peacemaker” for her honest and fair leadership and mediation (U.S. House of representatives).
Families in 1991. She was also co-founder of the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues in 1977 (Microsoft).

An influential member of Congress for twenty-four years, Schroeder used her quick wit and humor to combat the prejudices she faced. In addition, she received much attention for her dual role as politician and mother of small children. When beginning a speech, instead of passively defending herself, she would state, “Hi there, I’m that radical you’ve heard all about, who doesn’t shave under her armpits and leaps over barricades screaming obscenities. I keep both children in the freezer, and my husband is short, has feathers, and goes ‘duck, cluck’” (Tolchin 87). When people would meet her family, they were quite surprised to see how normal and happy they were. When she moved her family to Washington, her husband worked in her office on a voluntary basis. One senior Congress member chastised Schroeder, pointing out that spouses cannot be employed by members of Congress. Schroeder responded, “I don’t give him any money, I just let him sleep with me” (87).

With her personality and strong leadership skills, Schroeder paved the way for many other female attorneys to follow in her footsteps. Among the most influential and powerful female attorneys in the 106 Session of Congress are Diana DeGette (D-Colorado), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), Deborah Pryce (R-Ohio), and Senator Carol Moseley-Brown (D-Illinois).

Diana DeGette is a synergetic leader from the state of Colorado. A graduate of New York University Law School, she had extensive experience in civil rights law and employment litigation before she was elected to Congress. DeGette is a Democratic Whip and sits on the influential Commerce Committee. She has been involved heavily in health care reform for children, and she helped pass legislation that allows doctors to independently enroll children patients in Medicare, a potential enrollment of 3 million children. She has also been involved with legislation concerning tobacco regulation and environmental cleanup. Her legal background certainly aids her in dealing with these issues, especially since she has been involved with environmental law in the private law sector. (U.S. House of Representatives).

Sheila Jackson Lee is another prominent female attorney and politician. A graduate of the University of Virginia Law School, Sheila was elected president of her freshman democratic congressional class. She is a member of the House Committee on the Judiciary and serves on the Commercial and Administrative Law Subcommittee. She has played a pivotal role in the passage of legislation concerning human rights for minorities, women, and children. Sheila is one of several African-American female attorneys currently serving in Congress (U.S. House of representatives).

Deborah Price is a Republican representative from Ohio. She graduated from Ohio State University in 1973 and from Capital University Law School in 1976. Deborah is the seventh-ranking Republican in the House. She is the House Conference Secretary and is the fourth-ranking Republican on the powerful Rules committee. She has earned the nickname “Price: the Peacemaker” for her honest and fair leadership and mediation (U.S. House of representatives).
Carol Moseley-Brown is the sole female attorney currently serving in the Senate. She is also the first African-American woman ever to be elected to the Senate. Brown graduated from the University of Chicago Law School and served as Assistant U.S. attorney from 1973-1977. She is the first permanent female member of the Finance Committee and is also a member of the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committees. In the 103rd Congress, she has introduced fourteen bills, seven of which have become law (U.S. Senate).

These and many other women are respected and influential members of Congress. Earlier women have paved the way for these modern pioneers, who continue to blaze trails of their own. Today, women can become successful attorneys and politicians when they discard the old patriarchal notion that they are better off “barefoot and pregnant.” Those who do so may find themselves prominently positioned on Capitol Hill, formulating policies by which men have to live. The time is gone when President Nixon said to a thirteen-year-old girl who expressed an interest in politics, “You’re too pretty, you’ll probably get married instead” (Tolchin 14). Now women have shown that they can do both. Those women who are bright, talented, and persistent will continue to be effective leaders for generations to come.

Works Cited


Representatives).

Carol Moseley-Brown is the sole female attorney currently serving in the Senate. She is also the first African-American woman ever to be elected to the Senate. Brown graduated from the University of Chicago Law School and served as Assistant U.S. attorney from 1973-1977. She is the first permanent female member of the Finance Committee and is also a member of the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committees. In the 103rd Congress, she has introduced fourteen bills, seven of which have become law (U.S. Senate).

These and many other women are respected and influential members of Congress. Earlier women have paved the way for these modern pioneers, who continue to blaze trails of their own. Today, women can become successful attorneys and politicians when they discard the old patriarchal notion that they are better off “barefoot and pregnant.” Those who do so may find themselves prominently positioned on Capitol Hill, formulating policies by which men have to live. The time is gone when President Nixon said to a thirteen-year-old girl who expressed an interest in politics, “You’re too pretty, you’ll probably get married instead” (Tolchin 14). Now women have shown that they can do both. Those women who are bright, talented, and persistent will continue to be effective leaders for generations to come.

Works Cited


