

Five minutes with Susan J. Carroll on women in politics: “There’s no question that some of the barriers are starting to come down, but others still remain”

*With the seeming inevitability of Hillary Clinton’s nomination in 2016, the next presidential election may be the first in history to result in a woman president. To coincide with an recent [event at the LSE](#), USAPP editor, **Chris Gilson** and Democratic Audit’s **Sean Kippin**, spoke to Professor **Susan Carroll**, author of *‘More Women Can Run: Gender and Pathways to the State Legislatures’* on the likelihood of a Clinton presidency and on the challenges faced by aspirant female politicians and established woman leaders.*



1) What do you think are the most important barriers to women achieving office in US politics?

There are a number of barriers. One is a lack of political opportunities, which we emphasize a lot in studying US politics. Incumbents get re-elected at very high rates, so there aren’t that many open seats, and many of the districts are safe for one party, or the other – that’s both at the Congressional level, and at the state legislative level. There aren’t all that many great opportunities, so people have to take advantage of them when they come up. But of course when they occur, there is always a line of men waiting to run as well. So women have to compete against the men, and challenging an incumbent is also very, very difficult.

Another issue, and it’s one that I highlight in my research, is that women are much more likely than men to need to be encouraged to run for office. They need to be recruited. There’s not enough efforts along those lines. Parties give a lot of lip service to the idea – they talk about it a lot, but I think that the efforts fall short, in the same way as in organisations. Organisations do some encouragement – they do what they can – but they don’t have a lot of resources, so they’re somewhat short too. It does help at the national level, that we have on the Democratic side, [Emily’s List](#), which does a lot to support women candidates, fund them, and also give them technical expertise, give them networks and contacts. But those are the candidates that have already proved their viability.

On the Republican side, there are similar efforts and groups, but not nearly as strong as Emily’s List. At the state level, the efforts are much weaker, so that’s a problem as well. Some people say that political ambition is a problem – that women aren’t ambitious enough, and need to step up more. The scrutiny that’s given to public life has, I think, been a deterrent to women, to their lives. Because when you run for office in the United States, everything is exposed, and women worry a lot about what that means for their family situations to have everything come into public view. It’s less about their own personal selves, I think, than that their children, or their spouses might be subjected to scrutiny. Fundraising is also a deterrent – it costs a lot to run for office in the US. It varies across the states – certainly at the national level, it’s very expensive. In California, to run for a state legislative seat, it costs almost as much as it does to run for Congress in most of the country. So some of the states are extremely expensive, and others not so much so. But money’s an issue.

2) In 2008 voters were willing to consider a woman Vice President in the form of Sarah Palin, and in 2016 as a potential President. Does this show that some progress has been made in terms of attitudes towards women in politics?

Well we shouldn’t count our chickens before they hatch, because Hillary Clinton was the frontrunner going into 2008, as well, and I think she’s not counting her chickens before they hatch. She’s certainly the frontrunner at this point, both for the Democratic nomination and for the presidency – according to the polls, she’s out in front. It’s a question of whether or not Hillary Clinton’s made progress, or whether there has been progress made for women across the board. If she’s elected president, then there’s no question that that would be a major step forward for

women, but there's still a lot of barriers to women at the highest level. On the Republican side, we're not sure if we're going to see a single woman enter into this race. At this point, it doesn't look like it – we don't know who the Republican contenders are going to be. But there aren't names of women being put out there. So one really wonders, how much progress has been made at that level?

Now, there's no question that some of the barriers are starting to come down, but other things still remain. There's still questions about whether women can be tough enough. I think that's not a question for Hillary Clinton, she proved her toughness in the last election, so that's not such a barrier. But whether they can be tough enough, whether they have the credentials. Their credentials are never seen as

equal, even when they are. They're seen as somehow less qualified. And we just don't have enough women at the gubernatorial level – we only have women governors in five states. If you look where most presidents have come from, it's been the gubernatorial level. We have a few more – 20 – in the Senate, but it's not a huge pool of people, and presidents almost always come from the Senate or the gubernatorial level, so we don't have a big bench.

3) The 114th Congress has more than 100 women for the first time in history – is this a sign of progress or does it show that women's representation is still woefully behind where it needs to be?

Both – the glass is both half full and half empty. We've made strides – we are now almost at 20 percent of women in Congress, if you count both the House and the Senate, but that still means that only one in every five members of Congress is a woman. Since 1992, which was the so-called year of the woman, when there was a bump up in the numbers, because up until that point there had been really very little progress. Since then, we've seen incremental increases with each election in the numbers. So the numbers are creeping up, but for many of us, those increases are way too small, and way too slow.

4) Some political parties in the UK are experimenting with all women candidate shortlists. Do you think there's a case for the introduction of all women candidate shortlists to the US?

We have a problem in the United States talking about "quotas" – we can't use that word. Of course, quota systems have done a lot to promote the representation of women in a number of different countries. Having women on a party list is certainly a form of quotas, but we can't use that word freely because of the history of affirmative action in the United States. So the minute the subject comes up people assume that it represents unfair advantage.

That said, oddly enough, we do have some quotas in American politics: we have gender quotas for delegates in the US Democratic Party, for example. There are also some states where they have equal representation of men and women on certain boards commissions. Also, there is a history within the party structures themselves of women being equally represented on platform committees – the major committees of the parties. So it isn't like we don't have it but we don't use the word.

It's very difficult to see how you might implement it in the United States. Our system of elections is so different [than in the UK], it's really district and candidate driven rather than party driven. And so, people get elected less based on their party and more on the composition of their districts so we don't have lists of that kind. So I can't foresee it happening.

5) Does the fact that the two party system is so ingrained in US politics have an impact on how women are represented?



Credit: Brent Danley (Creative Commons: BY-NC-SA 2.0)

It's hard to know because we've never really had anything else other than a two party system. I think that there would be more opportunities if there were more parties of different ideological stripes. Certainly there have been more opportunities in recent years in the Democratic Party than the Republican Party, so one would presume that if you had a party that was further to the left, as in many other countries, there might be more opportunities. Those parties then put pressure on the other parties, so I think more competition is always good. But in the U.S. we're stuck – it's not going to change. We have a two party system, and it's going to stay that way.



Credit: We Are Women (CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0)

6) The Republicans control a large number of the state legislatures – do you think that it is a case of the Democrats winning back those institutions, and then that will lead to more women in office? Or will the Republican Party eventually embrace larger numbers of female candidates?

That's an interesting question, because what's happened at the state legislative level is that over the past couple of decades, the Republicans have taken control over more legislatures, and there are more Republican legislators now. But those opportunities haven't opened up so much for women. The representation of women in the Republican Party has actually been pretty flat over time, despite their great gains across the board – if you look at the national picture. However, there are those within the Republican Party, a lot of the Republican women themselves who serve in office, are trying to push more women in, and recruit more women. There is a little bit of an ideological problem, because we have the gender gap, and so more women in the U.S. identify with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party, and the ideology of the Democratic Party, so there's a smaller pool on the Republican side. But, the Republicans aren't taking advantage of their pool – the Democrats aren't taking advantage of their pool either, by the way. So I don't think it's a matter of sitting around and waiting for a switch back to the Democratic side, but that more has to be done on the Republican side. There needs to be more infrastructure in terms of recruiting and supporting women candidates on the Republican side.

7) Do you think first of all whether Hillary Clinton can win the Presidency in 2016, and what challenges she's likely to have to face and overcome in order to do so?

I do think she wins, but it's an uphill battle. If you look at the demographic changes that have happened in the US, I think things look good for any Democratic candidate and although we don't know who the Republican candidate is going to be, it's a very narrow path for the party as a whole to win the presidency – the opposite of congressional elections. However in Presidential elections, the growth of the Latino population more than anything else makes things easier for the Democrats. So too does the increasing tendency of younger voters to identify with the Democrats.

So I think Hilary Clinton has a really good opportunity and I think some of the things she faced the last time will not be a problem this time. Things like proving herself to be sufficiently experienced. Almost no one doubts that she is sufficiently experienced to be President. She has also proved her toughness. In this election she needs to do more to talk about the historic nature of having a woman president.

And I think she needs to do more to talk to women voters. I think the people who ran her campaign [in 2008] weren't keen on her doing that, and it wasn't until her concession speech really that she talked about being a woman. In fact, she did quite the opposite. This time she needs to find a way to look like you're an agent of change: that's very difficult to do when your name is Clinton, and you've already run.

But I think talking about the historical element gives her more of a claim to being the 'change' candidate. I think this time she'll face questions about her age, and I do think that's a gendered thing. She will be 69 in 2016, and

Ronald Reagan was older than that when he was first elected. There are already questions being raised. [Kentucky Senator] Rand Paul has been raising a lot of questions about her age and focusing on that, so we can expect that to be an issue. Rush Limbaugh asked whether we “really want to see a women age in office” – how awful that would be!

She also just became a grandma, and we’ve heard questions being raised about whether this will take her attention away from the job at hand. Mitt Romney has 23 grandchildren, and no one ever raised that question about him. But I think she’ll actually take the grandma issue and use it as a way to connect with voters and make her more likeable, warmer and relatable. What Americans really want – and this is what we famously hear – is a President that you can have a beer with – and that’s going to be her challenge. Strangely enough, that is part of American politics!

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1A6dgY6>

About the interviewee

Susan J. Carroll – *Rutgers University*

Susan J. Carroll is Professor of Political Science and Women’s and Gender Studies at [Rutgers University](#) as well as Senior Scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) of the Eagleton Institute of Politics.



- CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 2014 LSE USAPP