

Women's Political Leadership Around the World

A comparison between women's political representation in the U.S. and abroad

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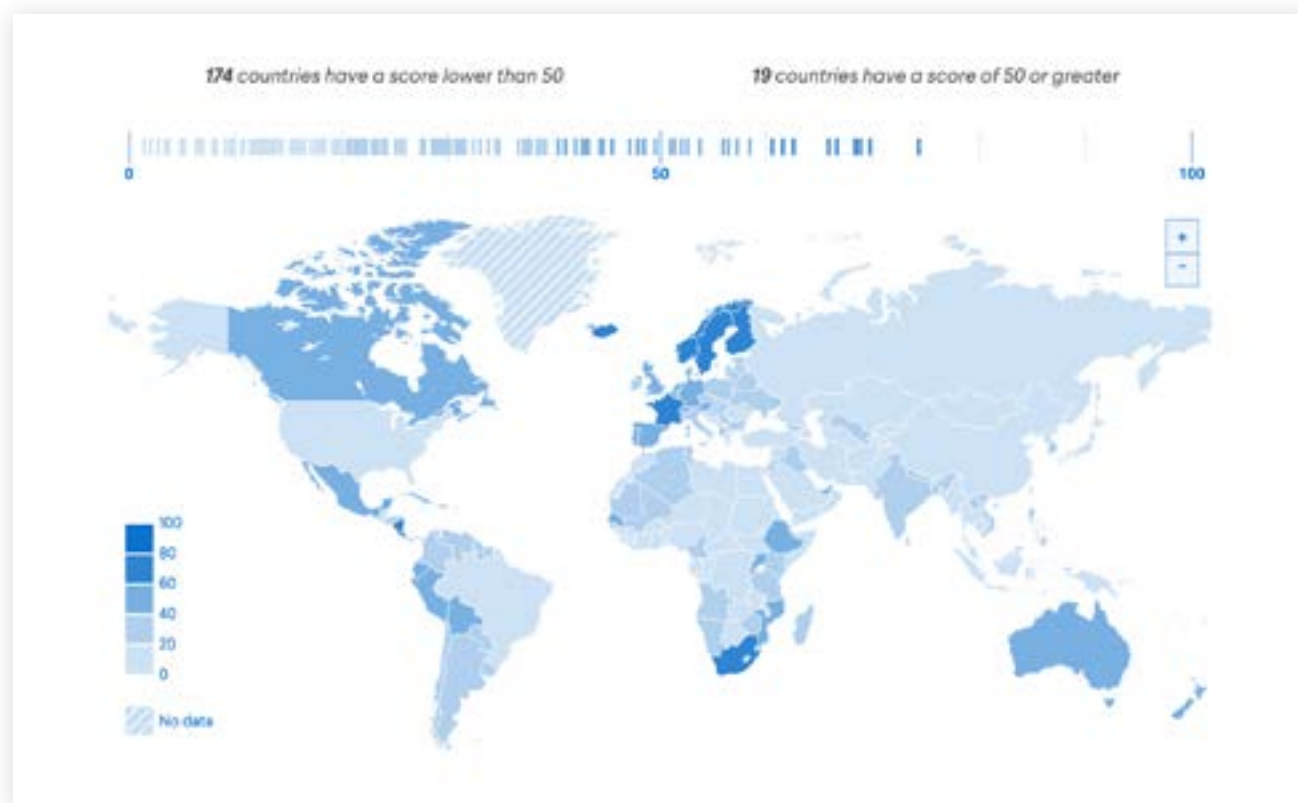
States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right ... to participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government.

– UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Part II, Article 7

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When we think about women's political leadership both here in the United States and around the world, we quickly realize just how much work we still need to do. While gains have been made in some areas, the number of women elected and appointed to office in the U.S. doesn't begin to compare with many of our peer countries.

– Tiffany Gardner, ReflectUS CEO



Council on Foreign Relations, Women and Foreign Policy Program, Women's Power Index. Rachel B. Vogelstein and Alexandra Bro. January, 2020.¹

¹ See Council of Foreign Relations "Women's Power Index" at <https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index>

Introduction

In 2020, the Council on Foreign Relations created the “Women’s Power Index” which analyzes the United Nations’ 193 member states on their progress toward gender equality in political leadership. The index calculates a political parity score for all 193 UN member states. In order to earn the ideal score of 100 at least 50 percent of political representation at all levels of government must be held by women.² Additionally, the index ranks countries from greatest political parity to least. The United States ranks 106 out of 193 countries with a political parity score of a mere 18 – alongside Afghanistan, Somalia and South Sudan.³

While it is true that women in the United States are running for political office in unprecedented numbers,⁴ when one compares the United States female political representation on a global scale, it falls drastically behind.

This information sheet compares gender equality in political leadership in the United States to countries in six regions around the world (The Americas, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA and Asia), to determine what can be learned from countries doing well and to provide inspiration for what can still be achieved.

EUROPE



² See Ibid

³ See Ibid

⁴ During the 2018 midterm elections we saw a record-breaking number of women running for office, with nearly 60 percent more women declaring their plans to run for the House and Senate compared to the 2016 election. See <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/03/08/women-rule-midterms-443267>.

Europe has achieved high political gender parity numbers across the region.

With a record-breaking number of women elected to political positions, 2019 was an incredible year for women in European politics. Four women were elected as heads of state. Zuzana Caputova became the first female president of Slovakia,⁵ Mette Frederiksen was elected as Denmark's prime minister,⁶ Sophie Wilmès became Belgium's first female (interim) prime minister,⁷ and Sanna Marin became Finland's third female prime minister.⁸ There are now 11 female heads of state in Europe, more than any other region in the world.⁹ Another significant step towards gender parity in European politics was the nomination of Ursula von der Leyen as president of the European Commission¹⁰ and Christine Lagarde as president of the European Central Bank.¹¹



Ana Brnabić is the current prime minister of Serbia. She is the first woman and openly gay person to hold the position. In 2019, Brnabić was ranked by Forbes Magazine as the 88th most powerful woman in the world and the 19th most powerful female political leader.¹²

⁵ See The New York Times at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/15/world/europe/zuzana-caputova-slovakia-president.html>.

⁶ See Forbes at <https://www.forbes.com/profile/mette-frederiksen/#26c5c8c41395>.

⁷ See <https://www.politico.eu/article/sophie-wilmes-belgium-coronavirus-response-accidental-prime-minister/>.

⁸ See New York Times at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/10/world/europe/finland-sanna-marin.html>.

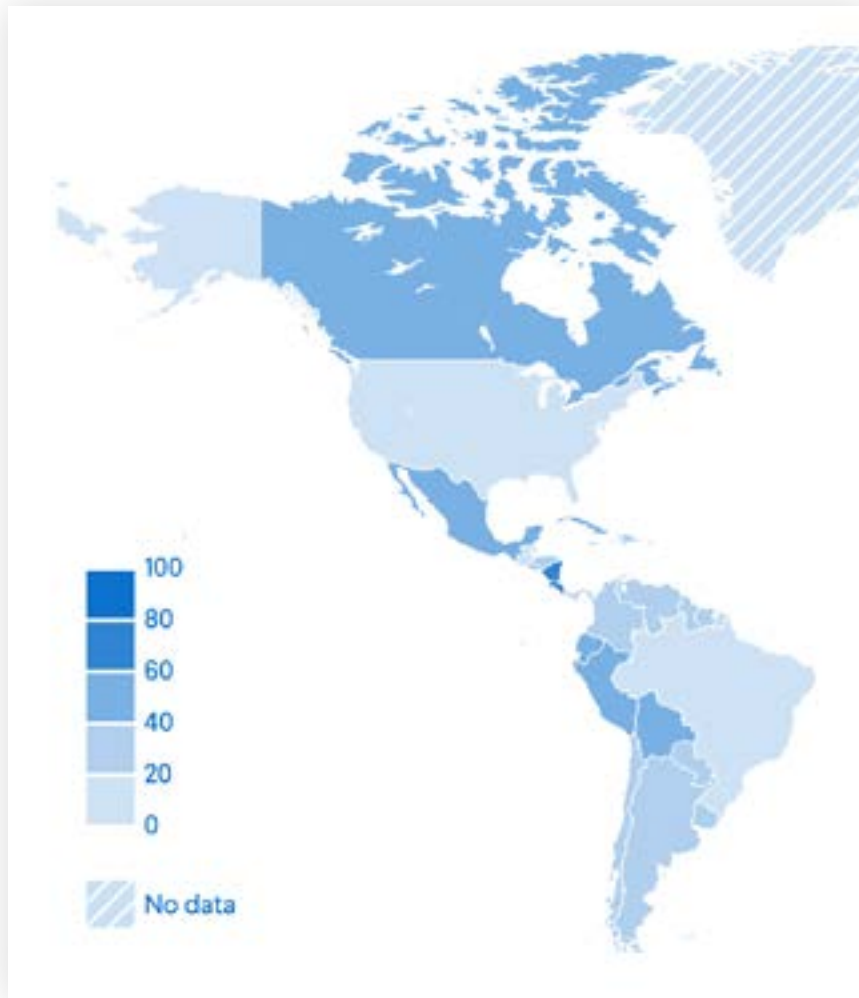
⁹ See Ibid.

¹⁰ The Guardian at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/16/ursula-von-der-leyen-elected-first-female-european-commission-president>.

¹¹ The New York Times at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/business/what-does-ecb-do-president.html>.

¹² Forbes at <https://www.forbes.com/profile/ana-brnabic/#10c2855ba8d4>.

THE AMERICAS



The Americas have fairly high political parity scores across the region. Costa Rica ranks highest in the world, with a political parity score of 74.¹³ Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Bolivia all have a current female head of state, and 14 countries in the region have had a female head of state since 1946, when the index begins tracking this figure.¹⁴

Across Latin America countries have used affirmative action laws to close the gender gap in political leadership. Argentina, for instance, passed the first gender quota law in 1991, requiring political parties to nominate women for at least 30 percent of the open positions in Congress.¹⁵ Women, consequently, now hold more than 35 percent of the legislative seats in Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and Nicaragua.¹⁶

¹³ See Note 1.

¹⁴ See Ibid

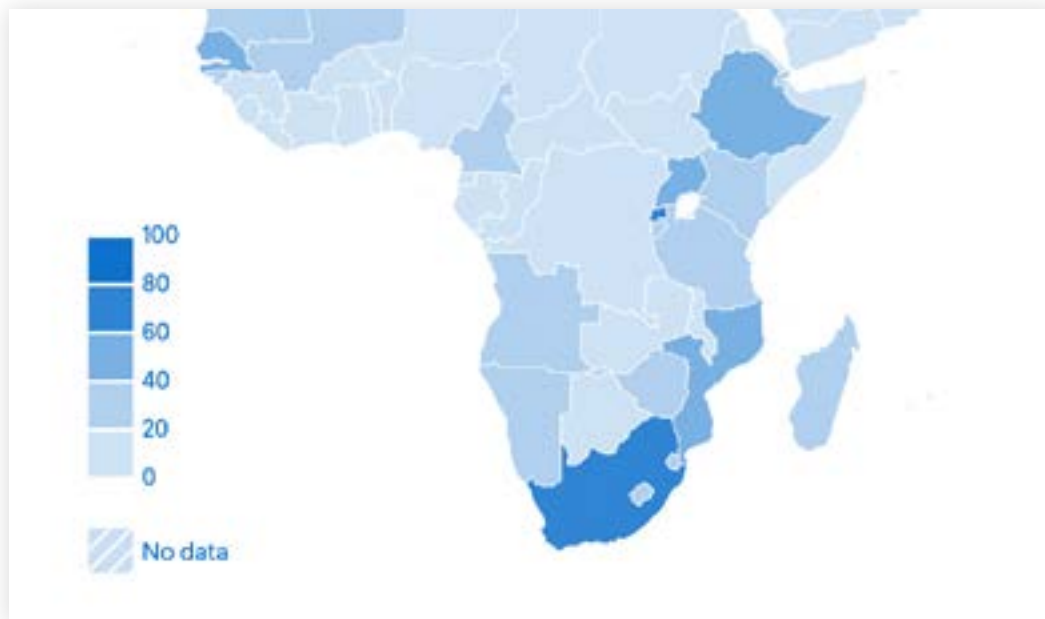
¹⁵ See <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ar/en/news/releases/argentina-passes-law-gender-parity-political-representation>.

¹⁶ See Note 1.



In 2018 **Carolina Hidalgo Herrera** was elected president of Costa Rica's legislative assembly. Ms. Herrera is a lawyer and member of Partido Accion Ciudadana party (PAC). She is the first female PAC member to be elected to this position. She is the third woman in Costa Rica's history to preside over Congress.¹⁷

SUB-SAHARA AFRICA



While women in Sub-Saharan Africa often face structural and cultural barriers to political leadership, countries like Rwanda and South Africa have some of the most progressive laws on gender political equality in the world. In 2003, for example, Rwanda's constitution was reformed so that all decision-making factions of the government have a quota of 30 percent women.¹⁸ Consequently, 24 of the 80 seats in the Lower House of Parliament must be held by women.¹⁹ In 1998, South Africa's Municipal Structures Act of 1998 required that 50 percent of political parties' listed candidates be women and their Congress voluntarily allocated 50 percent of parliamentary seats for women.²⁰

¹⁷ See <https://qcostarica.com/two-young-women-will-lead-congress/>.

¹⁸ See <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/8/feature-rwanda-women-in-parliament>.

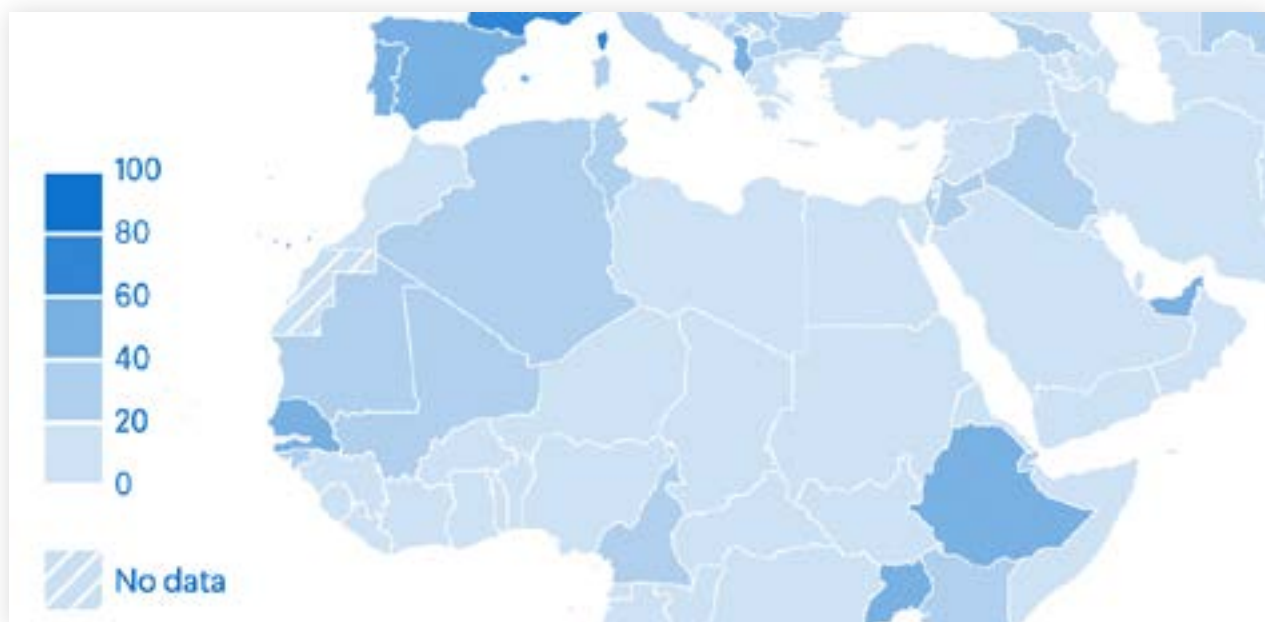
¹⁹ See *Ibid.*

²⁰ See <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2019-july-2019/african-women-politics-miles-go-parity-achieved>.



Sahle-Work Zewd is the current and first woman to be elected President of Ethiopia. Her trailblazing political career includes being the second woman in her country to be appointed as an ambassador, serving as the permanent representative of Ethiopia to the African Union and serving as the permanent representative to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.²¹ In 2019, Forbes Magazine named her the 93rd most powerful woman in the world.²²

MENA (MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA)



While there is much work to do in this region regarding women's political representation, Arab women are making progress. Women in Bahrain, for instance, now comprise a record-breaking one-third of the foreign ministry personnel.²³ In 2019, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud became the first female ambassador to represent Saudi Arabia.²⁴ Similarly, in Lebanon, Raya Al-Hassan became the first female Interior Minister in the Arab world.²⁵

²¹ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45976620>.

²² See <https://www.forbes.com/profile/sahle-work-zewde/#2d3f8b7f4a31>.

²³ See <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2019/02/24/Princess-Reema-bint-Bandar-Saudi-Arabia-s-first-female-ambassador>.
<https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/bahrain/women-make-up-one-third-of-bahrains-foreign-ministry-1.61470509>

²⁴ See <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2019/02/24/Princess-Reema-bint-Bandar-Saudi-Arabia-s-first-female-ambassador>.

²⁵ See <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/raya-al-hassan-as-first-female-arab-interior-minister-i-need-to-act-as-a-role-model-1.824661>.



In 2019, Dr. Amal Azmi Jadou became the first female Undersecretary of the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After studying international relations and diplomacy abroad, Dr. Jadou began her career in the Palestinian Authority in 2005. She has held a number of important political and diplomatic posts during her career, including serving as senior advisor to the Palestine Mission in Washington D.C., serving in the President Office of the Palestinian Cabinet and becoming the Assistant Foreign Minister for European Affairs.²⁶

ASIA



Asia is a very large region with a diverse religious, political and cultural context. Consequently, women's political participation varies greatly across the region. Yet, to date, more than a dozen women have headed governments in Asia, including several who have governed predominantly Muslim nations.

²⁶ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/a-new-generation-of-arab-women-leaders/>
<https://www.bethlehem.edu/BU-in-News-2019-09-16-dr.-amal-jadou-becomes-first-female-undersecretary-of-palestine-mofa>



In 2017, **Halimah binte Yacob** was elected the first woman president in Singapore's modern history, as well as the first ethnic Malay and second Muslim president. She has held the positions of Minister of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Minister of Social and Family Development, and was elected as the first female Speaker of Parliament in 2013.²⁷

UNITED STATES

During the 2018 midterm elections, female candidates ran in record-breaking numbers and won a historic number of seats in Congress and Governorships. Yet, even with these wins, women make up just 26 percent of the Senate and 23.2 percent of the House of Representatives.²⁸ They make up 18 percent of governors.²⁹ Consequently, despite the historic wins of 2018, the United States still does not meet the global average of 24.1 percent of female political representation at the highest levels of government.

The United States is a global leader in many ways. U.S. democracy continues to inspire nations and political movements around the world. Yet, U.S. political leadership is only as strong as it reflects and represents the desires, hopes and dreams of all Americans. Equality in women political representation will bring the U.S. greatly toward ensuring a government that represents all Americans—reflecting us all.

ReflectUS

ReflectUS is a national, nonpartisan coalition working to increase the number of women in office and achieve equal representation across the racial, ideological, ethnic, and geographic spectrum. ReflectUS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. To learn more, visit: www.reflect.us

Special Acknowledgements: Ella Asnin, ReflectUS Intern

²⁷ See <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/who-is-halimah-yacob-singapore-s-first-female-president-9206546>.

²⁸ See <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-us-congress-2020>.

²⁹ See *Ibid.*