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Kamala Harris and the ‘Politics of Presence’ of Women in US Politics

Interview with Kira Sanbonmatsu

Femina Politica: Professor Sanbonmatsu, the United States considers itself to be the oldest democracy in the world. In stark contrast to this is the fact that it is only 100 years ago, in 1920, that women gained suffrage. And for Black women it was not until the 1960s that they could actually use their political rights. With regard to what is called descriptive representation, currently (January 2021) the United States ranks number 67 on the IPU’s world ranking of women in parliaments. Why is this the case? And why has the rise in numbers been so slow?

Table 1: Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments

Rank	Country	Lower or single house (% W)
1	Ruanda	61.3
2	Cuba	53.4
3	United Arab Emirates	50.0
7	Sweden	47.0
11	Finland	46.0
49	Germany	31.5
67	United States of America	27.3

Source: <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking> (ranking as of 1 January 2021)

Sanbonmatsu: The United States has a weak record on women’s officeholding when world rankings are considered. One of the reasons that the United States lags behind other nations is the nature of our electoral system. The absence of proportional representation has made it more difficult for women to translate their participation in the political parties into candidacies. In addition, incumbents have significant electoral advantages. Meanwhile, as you note, with slavery in place at the nation’s founding, race and racism have generally meant that Black women and other women of color confront a host of obstacles to full political participation. Interestingly, however, women are approaching gender parity in officeholding within the Democratic party today.

Femina Politica: After the November 2020 election there is a record high of women and of women of color in the Congress: 118 out of the 435 members in the House of Representatives are women – 48 of which are women of color – plus 24 female Senators, four of which are women of color. In your book “A Seat at the Table” you write that women and especially women of color in Congress are very aware of their status and that their perspectives bring in intersectional realities. Against this background, what do you expect from the new Congress? What are the potential implications for Congress’ working and for legislative activities?

Sanbonmatsu: Almost all of the women of color serving in the new Congress are Democrats. Because Democrats hold the presidency and control both chambers of the U.S. Congress, the perspectives of women of color are much more likely to be incorporated into public policy than in the Trump administration. In addition, Vice President Kamala Harris will cast the tie-breaking vote in the U.S. Senate. The unified Democratic government combined with the high number of women of color serving in Congress provides an unprecedented opportunity. At the same time, the Democratic advantage in the U.S. House of Representatives is narrow [221 Democrats: 211 Republicans; FP],¹ and the parties hold equal numbers of seats [50:50; FP] in the U.S. Senate.

Table 2: Women in the U.S. Congress in 2021

	No of seats	Women in %	women Democrats (n)	women Republicans (n)
House of Representatives	435	27.1	89	29
Senate	100	24	16	8
Congress (both chambers)	535	26.5	105	37
Black women			24	--
Latinas			11	2
Asian/Pacific Islander women			7	2
Native American women			2	--
Middle Eastern/North African women			1	--
Multiracial women			1	1

Source: CAWP 2021.

Femina Politica: The United States is an incredibly divided country and this is reflected in Congress. Do you expect bipartisan cooperation among female House Representatives and Senators? Or is the partisan polarization continue to be detrimental for female politicians?

Sanbonmatsu: The United States is indeed divided and the parties remain very polarized. A new group of Republican women won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in November, some of whom are very supportive of Trump. Thus we will see serious policy disagreements along party lines. In addition, the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol worsened divisions within Congress. At the same time, I expect that women will be able to find ways to work together on some issues in the coming years as they have in the past.

Femina Politica: With the new US government now in power for the first time a woman, even more so: a woman of color, Kamala Harries, achieves the position as Vice President. What does this mean in terms of symbolic representation? Do we rather over-rate or underestimate this aspect?

Sanbonmatsu: Vice President Kamala Harris is already having a large impact on the country symbolically. And because she will cast the tie-breaking vote in the U.S. Senate, she will be more visible and influential than is typical for the vice president. President Biden has also emphasized that he sees Harris as his partner in the administration. Thus, we should not underestimate the important role she will play politically and the likely impact her presence will have at the symbolic level. Women of color, and Black women in particular, have long been the base of the Democratic

party. But they rarely hold major leadership roles. As a Black woman and a woman of South Asian descent, Harris signifies what is possible for all women and especially women who have been marginalized throughout U.S. history. Moreover, Harris is the daughter of immigrants. All of these aspects of her identity are celebrated within the Biden-Harris administration, making for a stark contrast with the race, gender, and immigration policies of the Trump administration.

Femina Politica: Aside from Vice President Harris, this U.S. government is in general the most female and most diverse executive ever in power. Will this affect the work of the governments and its policies?

Sanbonmatsu: Issues that are more important to women than men are often brought to the agenda by women legislators. It's likely that the women serving throughout the Biden administration will bring perspectives that resonate with women in the public. The presence of more women in major positions can potentially make Congress and the executive branch more accessible and welcoming to women voters. At the same time, it's important to remember that women are a large and diverse group and that women in government will not speak with one voice.

Femina Politica: Fighting the Corona pandemic is *the* most salient issue on the administration's agenda. Do you see that gender and racial effects of the pandemic are taken into account and, if yes, in which way?

Sanbonmatsu: To date, the major ways that President Biden has departed from Trump's handling of the pandemic are his embrace of science and his willingness to use the power of the federal government to combat the pandemic. Biden has also committed the administration to address the ways that the pandemic affects marginalized groups, with a particular emphasis on racial disparities.

Femina Politica: The presidential inauguration speech was remarkable in addressing the ubiquitous problem of structural racism. Where do you see that this will include intersectional concerns of women of color, thus gender-based discrimination?

Sanbonmatsu: President Biden has primarily addressed policy issues through a singular lens, whether that be a race-based or gender-based lens. But he has also addressed intersectional aspects of policy. Biden has enlisted experts on racial, gendered, and raced-gendered issues by selecting Harris as his running mate and appointing other women of color to positions in his administration – including appointments to non-traditional positions.

Femina Politica: After the election is before the election. And Kamala Harris has illustrated in her political career that she is a woman of ambitions. If you were to

advise Vice President Harris, what would you recommend to her in order to be more successful than Hilary Clinton to become the first female US president in 2024?

Sanbonmatsu: Given the turmoil of the 2020 presidential election, I would advise any Democratic candidate running in 2024, including Harris, to combat voter suppression² and disinformation in order to be successful. Mobilizing voters of color will also be important. If Biden does not run for reelection in 2024, Harris would most likely enter the race for the Democratic nomination as the frontrunner.

Thank you very much for the interview.

Kira Sanbonmatsu is Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University and Senior Scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at the Eagleton Institute of Politics. Her research interests include gender, race/ethnicity, parties, public opinion, and state politics. Her most recent book “A Seat at the Table”, co-authored with Kelly Dittmar and Susan Carroll, is about women in Congress.

Notes

- 1 Currently, three seats are still vacant; <https://pressgallery.house.gov/member-data/party-breakdown> (as of 29 January 202)
- 2 Anmerkung der Redaktion: „Voter suppression“ wird als Begriff für Regularien verwendet, die darauf abzielen, für bestimmte sozialen Gruppen (v.a. people of color) die Wahrnehmung des Wahlrechts zu erschweren oder zu verunmöglichen; vgl. www.bpb.de/internationales/amerika/usa/314474/hindernisse-auf-dem-weg-zur-wahl.

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