

# Madam President?

*By Lisa M. Guidone*

## Women in high-power positions head to the forefront of politics.

Chile. Germany. Liberia. Although those three countries are on separate continents, they have something in common. Each country has had a woman leading its government. Since the 1990s, more than 30 countries have chosen women as heads of government. Is the United States ready to join the pack?



That's a question many asked during the 2008 presidential election. Candidates from both the Democratic and Republican parties had their eyes set on the White House. One of the candidates in the spotlight was Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, a Democrat from New York. "I'm in, and I'm in to win," the former first lady, wife of former President Bill Clinton, said at the start of her campaign. While she was not nominated as the Democratic candidate in the election, she did become the Secretary of State in 2009.

## Leading Ladies

Does any woman have a chance of occupying the Oval Office? Six of every 10 Americans think the United States is ready for a woman president, according to a Gallup poll.

"I think it's very realistic for kids today to imagine that they'll see a woman president, and it may happen quickly," Bruce Cain, a political science professor and the director of the University of California Washington Center, told *WR News*. "There's a pretty widespread acceptance in America that women can do the job."

Though the nation has never had a female president, several women hold high positions in government today. "Pretty much every barrier has been broken except the presidency and vice presidency," adds Cain.

In 1997, Madeleine Albright was **appointed**<sup>1</sup> the first woman Secretary of State. In 2005, Condoleezza Rice became the first African American woman to hold that office. The Secretary of State is the country's top **diplomat**<sup>2</sup> and the highest-ranking member of the President's **Cabinet**, or group of close advisers.

For the first time, a woman led the U.S. House of Representatives. Democrat Nancy Pelosi from California became the first female Speaker of the House. She held that position from 2007 to 2011 and is currently the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives.

Though Pelosi points out that she wants to be judged on her abilities, she recognizes her achievement. "My becoming the first woman Speaker will send a message to young girls and women across the country that anything is possible for them," she says.

## The Struggle for Women's Rights

Given those leading role models, today's boys *and girls* have a good chance at becoming tomorrow's Commanders-in-Chief. That's remarkable, considering that fewer than 100 years ago, women

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<sup>1</sup> **appointed:** chosen for a job

<sup>2</sup> **diplomat:** a person whose job it is to represent a country in its relations with the governments of other countries

weren't allowed to vote. Women gained the constitutional right to vote when the 19th Amendment was passed in 1920.

Before 1920, women in the United States did not have the same rights men had. Not only were women denied the right to vote, but they often were not allowed to own property, go to college, or hold certain jobs.

Many women fought against those **inequalities**, or unequal treatment. Susan B. Anthony (1820—1906), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815—1902), and other **suffragists** led a national women's rights movement. (A suffragist is a person who works for someone's right to vote.)

Because of the work of those leaders and others who followed, women's role in government has changed. In 2007-8, a record number of women served in Congress: 71 of 435 representatives in the House and 16 of 100 senators. In addition, nine governors were women.

## Playing Catch-Up

Despite the advances, there is still room for growth, experts say. Although 51 percent of the U.S. population is female, women currently make up just 17 percent of Congress.

When compared with other countries, the United States falls short in the percentage of women in political office. Globally, the United States ranks 66th when it comes to women in the national **legislature**, says the Inter-Parliamentary Union. A legislature is an organized body that makes laws. Though females have made up less than 2 percent of Congress since 1789, women today are rising to the top in politics.

## Female Firsts

The changes in women's rights did not come all at once. The time line shows some political milestones for women.

**1848: Elizabeth Cady Stanton** helps organize the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York.

**1866: Stanton** is the first woman to run for the U.S. House of Representatives, even though she is not eligible to vote.

**1872: Victoria Claflin Woodhull** is the first woman nominated as a presidential candidate. She runs on the Equal Rights Party ticket.

**1873: Susan B. Anthony** is tried for illegally voting in the 1872 presidential election. The court finds her guilty and sentences her to pay a \$100 fine.

**1917: Jeannette Rankin** of Montana becomes the first woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

**1920: The 19th Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution is ratified, guaranteeing women the right to vote.

**1932: Hattie Wyatt Caraway** of Arkansas is the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate.

**1964:** U.S. Republican Senator **Margaret Chase Smith** is the first woman to have her name placed in nomination for the presidency on a major-party ticket.

**1968: Shirley Chisholm** becomes the first African American woman elected to Congress. In 1972, she is the first African American to run for president.

**1981: Sandra Day O'Connor** is the first woman justice appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

**1984: Geraldine Ferraro**, a Democrat, runs for vice president on a major-party ticket, the first woman to do so.

**1997: Madeleine Albright** becomes the first woman appointed Secretary of State.

**2005: Condoleezza Rice** becomes the first African American woman appointed Secretary of State.

**2007: Nancy Pelosi** is sworn in as the first female Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. According to this article, the following women have all served as U.S. Secretary of State EXCEPT

- A Hillary Clinton
- B Condoleezza Rice
- C Nancy Pelosi
- D Madeleine Albright

2. "Because of the work of those leaders and others who followed, women's role in government has changed. In 2007-8, a record number of women served in Congress: 71 of 435 representatives in the House and 16 of 100 Senators."

Which of the following describes the relationship between these two sentences?

- A The sentences compare two things.
- B The second sentence describes the effect of the first sentence.
- C The second sentence shows the cause of the first sentence.
- D The sentences show both sides of an argument.

3. Why does the author include the 4<sup>th</sup> section titled "Playing Catch Up"?

- A to compare the number of women in political office in the United States with other countries
- B to demonstrate that women in the U.S. still need to be encouraged to enter politics
- C to explain what a legislature is and where the U.S. rank internationally
- D to list the ways women can make more progress

4. Read the following sentence from the passage: "Pretty much every barrier has been broken except the presidency and vice presidency," adds Cain.

In this sentence, the word **barrier** means

- A career
- B obstacle
- C fence
- D decision

5. Which statement best describes the central idea of this passage?

- A The United States lags behind other countries with women leaders.
- B Suffragists organized a national women's rights movement leading to more opportunities.
- C Women in the United States have overcome inequalities to rise to top political jobs.
- D The 1920s were a pivotal year for women in the United States since they gained voting rights.

6. Review the time line within the passage. What political milestone did Sandra Day O'Connor achieve?

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7. How does the article support the points the author is making about women's advancement in U.S. politics? Cite specific examples.

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8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

\_\_\_\_\_ the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed, women in the United States were able to vote.

- A Before
- B After
- C Finally
- D Next

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Increasing numbers of female politicians are reaching the top ranks of jobs in American government thanks to work of suffragists and other female political leaders during the past century.

Who? female politicians

(are doing) What? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

10. **Vocabulary Word:** appointed: chosen for a job.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Teacher Guide and Answers

**Passage Reading Level:** Lexile 990

**Featured Text Structure:** Descriptive – the writer explains, defines or illustrates a concept or topic

**Passage Summary:** “Madam President?” describes how some American women in recent years have risen to the highest positions in U.S. government. The passage focuses on those leaders and their achievements while exploring whether the United States is ready for a female president. In addition, the passage examines women’s struggle for equal rights in the United States and how their role in government has changed over time.

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6. Review the time line within the passage. What political milestone did Sandra Day O'Connor achieve?

**Suggested answer:** She became the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. [timeline]

7. How does the article support the points the author is making about women's advancement in U.S. politics? Cite specific examples.

**Suggested answer:** The article describes how several women have ascended to very high positions in U.S. government in recent years. In 1997, Madeleine Albright became the first woman of secretary of state. In 2005, Condoleezza Rice became the first African American woman to hold that position. Today, Hillary Clinton holds that role. In addition, Nancy Pelosi became the first female speaker of the House in 2007. During 2007-08, women held a record number of seats in Congress. The time line also highlights the many advances women have made in politics over the years. [paragraphs 2, 5, and 6; time line]

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Who? female politicians

(are doing) What? **reaching the top ranks of jobs in American government**

Why? **thanks to the work of suffragists and other leaders during the past century**

10. **Vocabulary Word:** appointed: chosen for a job.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.