Breaking the Final Glass Ceiling: The Influence of Gender in the Elections of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Michelle Bachelet

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Breaking the Final Glass Ceiling: The Influence of Gender in the Elections of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Michelle Bachelet

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The article extends the limited literature on women national leaders by providing a comparative study of two popularly elected women presidents: Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia and Michelle Bachelet in Chile. Both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf rose to power in situations that lacked the circumstances identified by current literature as mitigating gendered barriers to national leadership: neither woman was connected to politically powerful families, they were elected in presidential systems, and they were elected in countries that lag behind regional leaders in terms of women’s political inclusion. This comparison reveals important similarities in how both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf incorporated gender into their campaign strategies. Both women pursued electoral strategies that combined attempts to confront gendered disadvantages and to take advantage of specific gendered opportunities present within their political contexts. Both women drew upon their personal biographies, highlighting their education and careers, and political experience to demonstrate that they had the traditionally masculine traits associated with political leadership. In addition, they also strategically appealed to gendered beliefs about women’s unique capabilities and strengths and linked these perceived strengths to pressing political issues in both countries. Our study thus demonstrates the continuing salience of gender, even as its influence becomes more flexible and complex.

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Women national leaders have made great strides in the last few years. Angela Merkel in Germany, Portia Simpson-Miller in Jamaica, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia, were all elected in 2005 and 2006. This trend continued into 2007: Ségolène Royal in France reached the final round of the presidential elections, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was elected in Argentina, and Hillary Clinton was the first woman to be a serious contender for either the Democratic or Republican Party’s nomination for the American presidency. The recent success of women at the highest levels of political power raises questions about the current relationship between gender and politics at the level of national leaders. Have women broken the final glass ceiling of national leadership? How are current women national leaders confronting gendered cultural beliefs that in the past excluded women from positions of national political leadership? What can the analysis of recent elections tell us about the continuing impact of gender on women’s opportunities to become national leaders?

We begin to answer these questions through a comparative analysis of the elections of Michelle Bachelet in Chile and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia. We argue that gender ideology continues to be an important factor in shaping the constraints faced by women who seek national office. Gender expectations, however, no longer simply exclude women from being viable candidates. Indeed, our analysis reveals that the influence of gender in presidential elections is more flexible and complex than previously examined. Both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf pursued electoral strategies that combined attempts to confront gendered disadvantages and to take advantage of specific gendered opportunities present within their political contexts. In addition to confronting doubts about a woman’s ability to be president, both women also promoted specific arguments about why their identity and experiences as women provided them with the specific leadership qualities and skills needed to address the most salient and important issues currently faced by their respective countries. Bachelet tied her gender into arguments about her abilities to deepen Chile’s democracy through the greater incorporation of groups, like women, that were previously excluded from political power and by bringing in a new style of more cooperative political leadership. Johnson-Sirleaf used her gender to strengthen her claims about her abilities to challenge a culture of corruption and to promote peace and development. Thus, both campaigns were marked by the explicit attention that candidates paid to both the opportunities and constraints associated with their gendered identities as women.
The election of these two women provides an important opportunity to study the changing relationship between gender and national political leadership because these women lacked both the personal factors and situational contexts which have helped previous women national leaders to mitigate the perceived negative effects of their gender. First, unlike most of the women who have served as national leaders in developing countries (Jalalzai 2004a; 2004b), neither Michelle Bachelet nor Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is connected to a politically powerful man or an important political family. Indeed, they represent the only two woman elected to the presidency in developing countries without familial connections. Their rise to political prominence depended only upon their political experiences, careers, and leadership. Second, both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf were nationally elected as presidents through popular votes. This is significant as women are much more likely to rise to the position of prime minister than to the presidency. Seventy-three percent of women executives that held political power between 1960 and 2002 took office in a parliamentary system, while only 23% took power in presidential systems (Jalalzai 2004b, 93). Scholars have speculated that it is easier for women to win the respect of party colleagues and rise to power as the head of the party than it has been for women to win national votes as individual candidates (Whicker and Hedy 1999). Both women had to convince a majority of their fellow citizens of their abilities, a much more difficult path.

Finally, both women were elected in contexts often viewed as hostile to women within their respective regions. Liberia has experienced a decade and a half of conflict and political instability, which has contributed to the militarization of society and high levels of violence against women, though it has also led to the growth of a strong women’s movement. Still, women’s representation in the Liberian legislature falls below regional averages, with women holding just 12.5% of the seats in the lower house and 16.7% of the seats in the upper house (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2007). The Chilean context is also viewed as unwelcoming to women. Currently, Chile is ranked 14th out of 18 Latin American countries in terms of women’s political representation, with women holding only 15.8% of the seats in the lower house, and 5.2% in the upper house (Rios and Villar 2006). Thus, these two candidates rose to power in similar situations in which the election of a woman as president seemed least likely (i.e. women without powerful familial connections, in a presidential system, within countries lagging behind their regional leaders in terms of women’s political inclusion). The lack of the factors generally associated with female leaders brings into sharper focus the strategies employed by the two women to manage the influence of gender on their campaigns.

Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf share a number of additional similarities that allow us to hold other factors constant. First, both women were elected around the same time. Thus they shared an international context, which has
been influenced by the international women's movements and the increasing attention paid by international organizations like the United Nations to the importance of improving women's political representation. Second, both women competed in two rounds of elections, the first in which they faced a number of competitors, and the second in which they each competed against one other candidate. The second rounds, in which there were just two candidates (in both cases, one woman and one man), allowed for a greater focus on the effects of gendered beliefs on women's political opportunities. Obviously, though, there are important differences between the two countries in terms of their levels of development, political stability, and culture. These differences, however, suggest that gendered opportunities for women may be increasing in a broad array of political contexts and highlight the need to focus on the strategies women use to overcome gendered barriers and to take advantage of gendered opportunities.

The current analysis is not only timely, but also extends a rather limited literature on women national leaders. This work has been dominated by either studies that focus on detailing the careers of important individual women (e.g. Genovese 1993), or that present aggregate data on the general characteristics of women national leaders, for example: the level of education attained, the type of past political experiences, familial and marital backgrounds, and the political system in which they were elected (Jalalzai 2004a, 2004b). This literature has not examined the strategies employed by women candidates to manage gendered influences. Our more focused analysis provides new insights into the ways in which gender continues to influence women's attempts to break into the highest levels of politics. Furthermore, the focus on women national leaders in two developing countries fills a substantial research gap in terms of the general literature on women political leaders. This research has more often focused on women in developed, western countries and at the level of national legislatures rather than on women as national executives (Caul 1999; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kahn 1996; Lawless 2004). More comparative work on developing countries will promote new insights into the opportunities and constraints faced by women candidates as they navigate political contexts influenced by processes of democratization, post-colonial struggles, post-conflict institution building, and economic development, to name just a few.

Our comparison focuses on the choices and strategies employed by Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf within the context of their presidential bids. We each analyzed the case for our respective country of expertise (Chile for Thomas and Liberia for Adams) through an inductive analysis of primary sources. We only analyzed sources that were available for both countries and that allowed us to examine the gendered discourses surrounding the elections. Thus, our analysis is based on two major sources: (1) material in respected national and international news reports, and (2) campaign material produced by the candidates as part of their official campaigns. For the
Liberian case, we drew from independent news sources with online archives, specifically The Analyst and The Perspective, and Johnson-Sirleaf’s written campaign materials, such as fliers and campaign officials’ talking points. For the Chilean case, we also drew from international and national news reports, particularly La Tercera, and for campaign material, a complete collection of the televised propaganda spots (called franja in Chile) from the campaign. For both cases, we sampled material during both rounds of the election, focusing on material in which the candidates clearly incorporated gender into their campaign strategies.\(^1\)

Given the understudied nature of our question and the uniqueness of these two women in comparison to past women leaders, our detailed comparative study of Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf provides new insights into the interactions among gender, political leadership, and candidates’ strategic choices. While not the primary focus of the article, our analysis suggests that female candidates will place greater emphasis on feminine gender characteristics when the electorate is dissatisfied with the current political leadership. Our study also suggests that the strength and effectiveness of national women’s movements affect women’s electoral prospects. Both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf benefited from the previous work and support of women’s movements in their respective countries. We hope that future research will test the hypotheses generated in this study about the conditions under which women candidates are able to successfully employ a range of gendered strategies.

To provide a broader context for our study, we begin by locating our work within current research on women’s political leadership. Although their findings have not been drawn specifically from studies of women executives, scholars have documented the multiple ways in which gender has functioned to exclude women’s pursuit of, and ability to, achieve positions of political leadership. Recently, some scholars have begun to examine how gender helps to define what is meant by political leadership. Locating Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf in this literature reveals the changing relationship between gender and politics for women political leaders and the increasing flexibility that women leaders have in dealing with issues of gender in developing countries.

WOMEN AS NATIONAL POLITICAL LEADERS:
GENDERED BARRIERS AND CHANGING OPPORTUNITIES

Although most countries no longer simply bar women from participating in politics, gender ideology continues to create additional hurdles for women who pursue positions of political leadership. Current scholarship often groups these barriers into three categories: structural, institutional, and cultural (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Paxton and Kunovich 2003). Structural
barriers include women’s general positions within different social systems as they pertain to issues of women’s levels of educational achievement, rates of participation in the workforce, the percentage of women in poverty, and the division of child care and household responsibilities. All of these factors affect the number of women that have the “human and financial capital necessary to run for office” (Paxton and Kunovich 2003, 89).

Institutional barriers refer to the official rules of the political system. Studies of electoral institutions have found that closed-list proportional representation systems with large district magnitude provide the greatest amount of women’s representation (Goetz and Hassim 2003; Matland 1998; Matland and Montgomery 2003; Norris 1985; Reynolds 1999). Other electoral systems—especially first-past-the-post—create additional constraints for women candidates. Scholars have hypothesized that this might reflect voters’ greater unwillingness to vote for a woman and political parties’ preferences to nominate men when there is a single representative in a district (Matland and Montgomery 2003). Political parties serve as important gatekeepers that can facilitate or impede women’s access to political power by determining what kinds of experience and personal qualities matter. Parties with clear and open rules determining candidate selection and centralized selection procedures tend to provide an advantage for women (Matland and Montgomery 2003, Norris 1993). In addition, the number of women party activists and the strength of women’s organizations within the party affect women’s representation (Caul 1999; Matland and Montgomery 2003). Other institutional choices and policies also affect women’s access to political power. For example, the adoption of gender quotas has led to a rapid increase in the representation of women in many countries (Dahlerup 2006).

Cultural barriers, particularly gendered beliefs about politics, also create obstacles for women seeking national offices. Gender stereotypes affect whether women will choose to enter politics and at what level, women’s chances of becoming official party candidates, and women’s abilities to win elections. While specific gender stereotypes vary across cultures, most societies view politics as a man’s world. A report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2000) that surveyed nearly 200 female politicians from 65 countries found that the most common reason cited by these women to explain low levels of female participation was gendered beliefs about politics that linked men and politics. This widely shared perception is especially prevalent at the highest echelons of power where women continue to be largely excluded. Recent studies demonstrate a “strong and significant relationship between attitudes toward women’s political leadership and the actual proportion of women in parliament” (Inglehart and Norris 2003, 138; Paxton and Kunovich 2003). Indeed, recent studies have argued that cultural attitudes towards gender equality are a better predictor of the percentage of women’s political representation at the level of the lower house of
government than either structural or institutional barriers (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Paxton and Kunovich 2003).

The importance of gender beliefs in presenting barriers to women has been identified not only in large cross-national surveys, but also in work dedicated to examining the affect of gender in particular political campaigns, which have largely focused on the American context. Once women enter races, gender stereotypes influence how the public and the media perceive candidates and how individual candidates present themselves. Male candidates are more likely to be viewed as strong, assertive, and confident, while women are more likely to be viewed as compassionate, sensitive, and empathetic (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kahn 1996). These perceptions are important because traditionally masculine characteristics are generally viewed as more desirable leadership traits, particularly at higher levels of office (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Studies on gender stereotypes and elections have also found that the public and the media view women and men as having different areas of policy expertise. In general, men are viewed as more competent in defense, foreign policy, and economics, while women are viewed as having strengths in poverty, health care, and education (Lawless 2004). This research also suggests that men will have an advantage in elections where masculine issues are central, while women will have an advantage in elections where feminine issues dominate (Lawless 2004; Kahn 1996). In national elections, though, masculine issues—particularly national security and the economy—tend to be privileged, creating additional barriers for women candidates.

It is important to emphasize that while gender stereotyping occurs in all cultures, the specific stereotypes associated with men and women vary across societies. While the American literature, for example, has found that men tend to be viewed as having greater policy expertise in farm policy and agricultural matters (Kahn 1996), this association does not necessarily travel to Africa, where women have traditionally played a far more significant role in agricultural production. Gender stereotypes not only influence how voters and the media perceive and respond to candidates but also how the candidates present themselves. Stereotypes affect candidate behavior as they consciously or unconsciously respond to expectations. Women candidates must take into account both the general beliefs about women and politics, but also the specific political context of the time and their own personal strengths and capabilities.

The importance of gender in shaping the political arena has therefore been well-documented. Unfortunately, the particular relationship between gender and political leadership, especially at the national level, has not often been the focus of scholars interested in gender or in political leadership. This critique pertains to both the lack of attention given to women as national leaders (Jalalzai 2004a, 2004b) and the lack of attention given to gender as a general characteristic and analytical tool for studying all political
leaders (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995). As Michael Genovese comments: “studies of political leadership have been remarkably non-gender specific. This is due primarily to a tacit assumption, usually made by male scholars, that leaders are men!” (Genovese 1993, ix).

Not only are men assumed to be leaders, but the role of gender in defining the connection between men, masculinity, and political leadership has also been taken for granted. The limited attention given to analyzing gender as a crucial factor in understanding larger questions of political power and leadership is particularly troubling because of the complex, multilevel, and relational aspects of leadership. Political leadership is a combination of personal, situational, institutional, and national factors intersecting in a particular time-specific context. As Genovese and Thompson (1993, 2) note:

Leadership is a complex phenomenon revolving around influence—the ability to move others in desired directions. Successful leaders are those who can take full advantage of their opportunities and their skills. Institutional structures, the immediate situation, the season of power, the political culture, regime types, and the dynamics of followership define the opportunities for the exercise of leadership. The leader’s style, political acumen, character traits, and personal attributes provide a behavioral repertoire, a set of skills. Opportunities and skills interact to determine the success or failure of attempts to lead and influence.

Given the amorphous, situational, and relational qualities of political leadership, Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995) argue that gender is an especially important factor in analyzing political leadership. Due to gendered beliefs, for example, most cultures consider different levels of aggression acceptable for men and women. Gender also plays a major role in shaping not only the socialization of individual candidates, but also the perceptions of individual leaders’ traits and the political, cultural, and situational factors in which a particular leader operates. This means that “the lives and careers of those women who have headed nations offer a unique vantage point on the role of gender in political life” (Genovese and Thompson 1993, 3).

Our analysis of Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf suggests that women political leaders must have the ability to manage the influence of gender on multiple levels. In the countries we studied, it was neither the case that men and women were perceived the same in terms of political leadership, nor the case that gender was simply a static background belief about men’s and women’s relative strengths, interests, and characteristics that always disadvantaged women in comparison to men. Instead, gender’s influences on understandings of political leadership were both fluid and complex, with newer beliefs existing alongside more traditional definitions. We explore the general conditions that Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf confronted in Chile and Liberia in the following section.
GENDER AND THE NATIONAL CONTEXTS IN CHILE AND LIBERIA

Given the previous findings, neither Chile nor Liberia would seem to be particularly propitious countries for the rise of a woman president. Neither Chile nor Liberia promotes women’s leadership in terms of institutional design or a cultural openness to women leaders. Liberia’s recent history of conflict and political instability has created an environment that is hostile to women in many ways, though it has also contributed to the rise of an active and effective women’s movement that helped propel Johnson-Sirleaf to power. Since Samuel Doe took political power in a 1980 coup d’état, Liberia’s history has been marred by instability, authoritarianism, corruption, human rights abuses, and ethnic tensions. Charles Taylor’s 1989 invasion launched a seven-year civil war, pushing the country further into political turmoil. The conflict led to the militarization of society, taking a huge toll on the civilian population in general and on women in particular. It broke down social networks as thousands of people fled their homes. Women not only faced ordinary threats of living in a conflict situation but also suffered from gender-specific forms of violence, especially rape. In August 1996, a ceasefire agreement was finally reached which paved the way for the elections that Taylor overwhelmingly won. Taylor’s victory in the 1997 presidential elections has frequently been attributed to the widespread belief that if he did not win the election, he would not honor the peace agreement and would launch another civil war. Despite his victory, however, fighting resumed in 1999. The negotiation of a peace agreement in 2003 led to Taylor’s flight to Nigeria, the installation of a transitional government, and the organization of the 2005 presidential and legislative elections.

During the transitional period from 2003 to 2005, women in Liberia mobilized to secure the transitional government’s commitment to gender quotas. A group of Liberian women presented a resolution to the transitional government that would require all political parties to include at least 30% women on their candidate lists. The transitional government, however, did not include this provision in the election reform law adopted on December 14, 2004. Article 15.2 of the Guidelines Relating to the Registration of Political Parties and Independent Candidates adopted by the National Elections Commission in January 2005, however, included a gender quota, stating: “Each political party shall ensure that 30% of the candidates nominated for public elective offices by that political party shall be women” (Republic of Liberia 2005). The quota was not enforced and women made only limited gains in the 2005 legislative elections. Women’s representation in the Liberian legislature (12.5% in the lower house and 16.7% in the upper house) remains far behind other post-conflict African states that are now regional leaders in this regard such as Rwanda (48.8%), Mozambique (34.8%), South Africa (32.8%), Burundi (30.5%), Tanzania (30.4%), and Uganda (29.8%). Despite the existence of a strong women’s
movement, Liberian women have not yet been able to secure the same kinds of commitments to increasing women’s political representation that women’s movements in other postconflict African states have obtained.

Elections for Liberia’s House of Representatives are based on a majoritarian system with single-member districts. The 64 members of the House are directly elected for six-year terms. The 30 members of the Senate are also directly elected using a first-past-the-post electoral system; however, the two candidates with the highest number of votes in a county are elected to the Senate. The candidate with the most votes in the county is elected for a nine-year term, while the candidate who comes in second is elected for a six-year term. Liberia’s first-past-the-post electoral system does not facilitate women’s representation. For the presidency, Liberia has a two-round system. If no candidate wins a majority of votes in the first round of elections, then the two candidates with the most votes compete in a second round of elections (Republic of Liberia 2004).

Liberia’s party system is weak and highly personalized. Political parties are frequently associated with an individual and are not strongly institutionalized. The lack of an institutionalized party system did not directly benefit Johnson-Sirleaf, though the fact that neither an incumbent nor a former warlord contested the 2005 presidential election provided an opening. For the most part, parties lack significant ideological difference; instead they tend to draw from different regional strongholds. Since political parties are closely identified with individuals, the nomination process is generally not competitive. Johnson-Sirleaf, for example, represented the Unity Party in both the 1997 and 2005 presidential elections. She stepped down from her position in Liberia’s transitional government in March 2004 to accept the Unity Party’s nomination.

Alongside institutional barriers, Liberian women also face cultural and structural obstacles. Women’s literacy rates lag significantly behind those of men. While 58.3% of men are literate, just 45.7% of women are (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2004). Domestic violence remains widespread. Historically, women have not only been excluded from political power but also from the most profitable arenas of the economy including cash crop production, timber, and mining. Politics remains a masculine realm, and there are few women role models for young women to look to as mentors. While women are increasingly challenging these gender norms, the legacies of men’s domination of these spheres continue to disadvantage women. However, women’s mobilization in support of peace during the conflict has also led to new roles within society. In the post-conflict environment, women are drawing on the organizational and leadership skills obtained during the conflict to shape new laws, norms, and institutions. Moreover, in the 2005 elections, Liberians were frustrated with the political status quo and were looking for a leader who could ensure peace and stability. The fact that
women played a critical role in the peace building process provided an opportunity for Johnson-Sirleaf.

Chile’s national context has also been unfavorable for women’s participation in formal politics in many ways. Under former dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990), massive human rights violations were committed including the practice of disappearing political opponents and dissidents, torture, detention, and forced political exile. During this time, Chilean women were actively involved in a broad range of social movements that confronted the military dictatorship, including human rights, women’s movements, and various movements arising from Chilean shantytowns. This activism was a crucial part of the eventual re-establishment of democracy (Baldez 2002; Chuchryk 1994).

With the return of democracy, many women activists pushed for changes to the political system that would incorporate women’s more active involvement into the reconstituting sphere of formal politics. They were partially successful, most notably in the establishment of the Servicio Nacional de la Mujer [National Women’s Service], or SERNAM by the first government of the Concertación [Coalition], the center-left coalition composed of the Christian Democratic Party, the Socialist Party, the Party for Democracy, and the Social Democrat Radical Party.

SERNAM has served as voice for gender equity issues within the bureaucracy and the state and has been actively involved in promoting gender equity by backing successful campaigns to change women’s legal status by criminalizing domestic violence, improving married women rights, and the rights of women workers. SERNAM, however, does not have the status of a cabinet ministry, and many activists complain that projects that promote gender equality, but touch on controversial issues such as “reproductive rights, sex education in the schools” and sexuality are not given political support (Franceschet 2005, 4). The Catholic Church remains a powerful social institution and one that many members of the Concertación are loath to cross because of a shared history of resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship, the protection the Church offered to dissidents under Pinochet, as well as its continuing influence and power within Chilean society.

Increasing women’s participation in elected office or within Chile’s powerful political parties remains problematic (Franceschet 2005; Macauley 2006). Chile lags behind most other countries in Latin America in terms of women’s representation, a trend that began with the return to democracy. In 1990, only five women were elected to the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the government, which represents only 5.8% of that body. Over the past 16 years, women’s representation has grown slowly, reaching 15 women or 12.5% in 2002, and in 2005, 19 women (15.8%) were elected. The numbers are even lower in the upper house, the Senate, where since 1990 there has been either one woman (2.6% during the years 1990–1997) or two women (5.2% during 1998–2006) (Hardy 2005; Rios and Villar 2006).
Chile thus remains below the median of Latin American countries (20%) and considerably lower than the regional leaders, Argentina (35%) and Costa Rica (36%), where gender quotas have propelled large gains for women (Ríos and Villar 2006, 13). Even at lower levels of government, women continue to be vastly outnumbered by men, making up only 12.4% of the possible mayoral positions and 21.2% of the local town councils (Hardy 2005, 35).

The current electoral system, a binominal majoritarian system, is part of the problem. Each district is assigned two seats, but for a party list or political coalition to win both seats, it must receive double the votes received by the highest vote getter of the opposition party list. This system places extra pressure on candidate selection. Women are often passed over due to the belief that male candidates are more appealing to voters and a preference for incumbent candidates, the majority of whom are men (Franceschet 2005). Previous to the 2005 election, the Concertación decided on presidential candidates through internal negotiations on the part of party leaders. Responding to criticisms about the non-democratic nature of the selection process for presidential candidates, the Concertación instituted an internal primary system for the first time for the 2005 election. Interestingly, the nomination was contested by two women, both of whom had been popular ministers for President Lagos: Soledad Alvear, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Bachelet, a former Minister of Health, and later Defense. Bachelet was nominated first as the candidate for a coalition between the Socialist Party, the Party for Democracy, and Social Democrat Radical Party, and then as the official candidate for the Concertación after Soledad Alvear, the primary candidate for the Christian Democrats, withdrew her nomination. Alvear, facing internal disputes within her party, had been unable to compete with Bachelet’s political popularity and support among the general Chilean populace as seen in successive opinion polls (Gamboa and Segovia 2006).

Notwithstanding the recent rise of Bachelet and Alvear, the continuing dominance of men within political parties has meant that Chilean political leaders since the return of democracy have been men and formal politics is dominated by masculine gender ideologies that help limit women’s participation. Politics continues to be associated with men and masculinity and women continue to have to “transgress” ideas of acceptable behavior to engage in politics. Women in Chile complain of being ignored in political parties unless they are willing to act in traditionally “masculine” defined ways (aggressive and competitive) and women political activists continue to be open to charges of acting selfishly and neglecting their duties toward their families (Franceschet 2005). The Chilean women’s movement has politicized questions of women’s political exclusion and the masculine bias in cultural understandings of politics and political leadership. Furthermore, as in Liberia, a general sense of frustration with the political status quo meant that the idea of change was particularly salient.
In sum, despite their differences, both the Chilean and the Liberian national contexts were similar in terms of many of the challenges and opportunities faced by women candidates. In both countries, appropriate gender behavior often excludes women from political leadership and places restraints on women’s participation that are not shared by men. Politics generally remains associated with men and masculine behavioral traits. Beyond important cultural factors, which are not unique to either country, women face particular difficulties in both countries that are associated with recent history and the structure of political institutions. In Liberia, the recent political conflict and the generalized militarization of the country pose particular difficulties for women. In Chile, the challenges that women face are related to the ways in which politics was re-institutionalized after the return to democracy. Within the broader regional context, both Chile and Liberia lag behind other countries. There is little to suggest that either country was particularly ready to elect a woman president. However, the past importance of women’s movements, which had politicized issues of women’s political inclusion, and a desire for change in political leadership, provided opportunities for both women.

GENDER AS A FACTOR IN THE 2005 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

The importance of both women’s political trajectories was clearly evident in how each woman presented herself as the best person to lead her country. As argued previously, gender ideology is a factor that influences both the general context in which political candidates pursue political office and voters’ and the media’s perceptions of candidates. Both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf crafted their political messages in contexts in which the dominant gender ideology offers different advantages and disadvantages to male and female candidates. The two women responded to the argument that women were not capable of being president by drawing on their personal and political biographies to present themselves as competent within traditional definitions of politics. They also skillfully incorporated cultural beliefs about women’s unique capabilities and strengths. Importantly, they linked their arguments about their particular strengths as women to their abilities to achieve the larger political goals of their country. For Johnson-Sirleaf, this included her argument that as a woman she was better able to confront corruption and promote demilitarization. Bachelet argued that her election would deepen processes of democratization, diminish political exclusion, and promote societal reconciliation. The next section is built on comparing the strategies that the two women employed as they sought to both mitigate the costs associated with their gender and to capitalize on the advantages.
Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf Confront Gendered Constraints

One of the strategies that Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf employed to confront the linkages between masculinity and political leadership was to present themselves as leaders who could take on masculine characteristics. For example, coverage of Johnson-Sirleaf frequently emphasized masculine traits. Just as Margaret Thatcher was Britain’s “Iron Lady,” Johnson-Sirleaf is frequently referred to as Liberia’s “Iron Lady.” At rallies, supporters waved signs with the slogan: “Ellen, she’s our man.” Describing Johnson-Sirleaf, Wrong (2005, 27) notes: “It’s a safe bet that Johnson-Sirleaf got to the top by using ‘masculine’ political skills to master a male-dominated system. Hardly an establishment outsider, this former finance minister has adapted to her society’s reality, rather than obliging it to adapt around her ‘feminine strengths’. . . . In this context, it’s interesting how many commentators remark of Johnson-Sirleaf—and it’s meant as a complement—that the future president is ‘not really a woman.’”

Johnson-Sirleaf confronted traditional stereotypes by highlighting her education and past political and professional experience in areas traditionally dominated by men. She has a Master’s in Public Administration (MPA) from Harvard University. After completing her degree in 1971, she returned to Liberia and held several positions in William Tolbert’s government, including Minister of Finance. Following Doe’s assumption of power in 1980, Johnson-Sirleaf was briefly imprisoned. After her release, she fled Liberia and took a position with Citibank in Nairobi, Kenya. She later left Kenya for the United States. During her exile from Liberia, Johnson-Sirleaf held a number of high-level posts in multinational corporations (Citibank and HSBC Equator Bank) and international organizations including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank where she was a Senior Loans Officer. Following Liberia’s first civil war, Johnson-Sirleaf returned to Liberia to contest the 1997 presidential election. Though she enjoyed the support of the international community, she came in a distant second to Charles Taylor, receiving just 9.5% of the vote.

Both newspaper articles and campaign materials detailed these numerous high-level appointments in previous governments and international organizations. Johnson-Sirleaf used her past professional experiences to distinguish herself from her major opponent, George Weah, who did not complete secondary school and who was frequently characterized as politically inexperienced. Johnson-Sirleaf, in contrast, was described as “a Harvard-educated economist and former World Bank official” (Polgreen 2005, A1) and “a Harvard-educated banker” (Wrong 2005, 27). An article in The Analyst, an independent Liberian newspaper published by the Liberian Analyst Corporation, stated: “The 66-year-old former World Bank official, a former Minister of Finance, and a political activist for several years spanning three
successive Liberian government administrations, came to this year’s race for president almost on the pedestal of domestic and foreign political commentators as a ‘serious candidate’ the world would like to do business with” (“Meet the Runoff Candidates” 2005). Another article noted: “Johnson-Sirleaf . . . has the pedigree to provide stiff competition to Weah. She is a veteran to Liberian politics, having served as minister of finance in William Tolbert’s True Whig government in the 1970s. She has run in at least two other presidential races in the past” (“The Iron Lady Takes Over” 2005). Her experience as a former Minister of Finance and as an official at the World Bank was particularly important given Liberia’s dire economic situation. This experience allowed her to present herself as the candidate with the knowledge and connections necessary to address Liberia’s economic situation quickly. In short, both media coverage and her campaign highlighted her experience in areas traditionally thought of as demanding masculine skills and dominated by men.

During the campaign, Bachelet’s opponents openly questioned her leadership abilities and claimed that Bachelet did not have the necessary qualities needed to be president (Thomas 2007). For example, an article in the populist, center-right La Tercera on January 15, 2006 recapping the presidential campaign noted that one of the most common phrases used to describe Bachelet was “No da el ancho” [“She does not have the weight”] meaning that she did not have the political experience or the personal capabilities to be president. To counter these gendered attacks on her leadership abilities, Bachelet stressed her experience and professional training in traditionally masculine professions—as a doctor, a military and foreign policy expert, and a cabinet minister. After returning to Chile in the late 1970s after accompanying her mother into political exile, Bachelet completed her medical degree from the University of Chile. During the 1980s Bachelet worked as a doctor with a nongovernmental organization that provided healthcare to children of parents who had been detained and disappeared. With the return of democracy in the 1990s, Bachelet began working for the Ministry of Health, eventually being appointed Minister of Health by President Lagos in 2000. Bachelet highlighted her educational training and background as the Minister of Health in the campaign. For example, in her television campaign ads, she was shown inspecting hospitals and talking to patients. These spots showed her not only able to take decisive action on behalf of her patients, but also showcased her knowledge and past experience relating to issues of healthcare, an important topic in the campaign. Her extensive educational training was also featured in a campaign spot showing Bachelet surrounded by reporters asking her questions. She fielded and answered questions in Spanish, English, German, and French. The ad showed her poised and calm in the midst of a mob of cameras and flashes, able to think quickly, and move among multiple languages. The overall message was that Bachelet was more than prepared to assume her position as a world leader given her background and skills.
Bachelet also drew upon her experience as a popular Minister of Defense to bolster her credentials of being able to take charge and lead. Many Chileans' fascination with Bachelet began when she was appointed Latin America's first female Minister of Defense in 2002 because of her unique personal history. Her father, Alberto Bachelet Martínez, had been an Air Force brigadier general who had supported the constitutionally elected government of Salvador Allende. After the military coup, her father was arrested, imprisoned and tortured by the military government and died on March 12, 1974 while in military custody. In 1975, Michelle Bachelet and her mother, Ángela Jeria, were also detained and subjected to torture before being released through the intervention of family and forced to flee Chile, first to Australia and then to East Germany (Subercaseaux and Sierra 2005). Bachelet's personal history helped in her success in consolidating civilian-military relations, strengthening civilian control over the military, and promoting reconciliation over the issues of past human rights abuses (Insunza and Ortega 2005). In addition, her response as Minister of Defense to severe flooding north of Santiago gained her national attention when she joined members of the military in their deployment to rescue those stranded in the flood. National news media covered her activities and prominently featured pictures of her in army amphibious vehicles accompanied by high-ranking officers (Insunza and Ortega 2005, 231–33). These photos were part of the campaign, as were images of Bachelet inspecting troops, wearing camouflage, and riding in army tanks. Her campaign noted that as Minister of Defense, she had been in charge of the Chilean Armed Forces with its all male leadership. As she remarked, “I was Minister of Defense and nobody thought that I was soft like a jelly” (Powers 2006).

In short, both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf presented themselves as capable leaders by showing how they had excelled in stereotypically masculine pursuits. Both women stressed their training and experience in fields dominated by men. For Johnson-Sirleaf, that was finance and politics, for Bachelet, it was medicine, civil-military relations, and politics. Both women thus followed a pattern that has been observed in political contests at lower levels in the United States where women attempt to confront stereotypes regarding their leadership abilities and competence by stressing their expertise and experiences (Kahn 1996, 131–32). From our comparison, it would seem that Johnson-Sirleaf confronted more blatant concerns about her ability to govern because of her sex. Therefore, her supporters often countered these challenges by presenting her as not limited by her sex, as an “Iron Lady,” or even a man. In contrast, while concerns about Bachelet’s abilities were also based in gender stereotypes, they tended to be more implicit and her responses tended to stress her professional training and experience. Michelle Bachelet was never referred to as an “Iron Lady” by the media or her campaign even though she was presented as willing and able to make hard decisions.
Additionally, the need to highlight past political experience might be especially important in Bachelet’s and Johnson-Sirleaf’s cases because of their lack of familial ties to the traditional political elite of their respective countries. Unlike other national women leaders like Indira Gandhi in India, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Corazon Aquino in the Philippines, Violetta Chamorro in Nicaragua, Mireya Moscoso in Panama, and Janet Jagan in Guyana who were connected to prominent political men, neither Bachelet and nor Johnson-Sirleaf are the daughters or wives of politically powerful men. Bachelet divorced her first husband, the father of her first two children, had a third child with a man she never married, and ran as a single mother. Johnson-Sirleaf is also divorced, her ex-husband is deceased, and she did not have any strong familial political connections. Instead, both women highlighted how their careers and political experience provided them with the leadership skills that have been traditionally associated with male presidential candidates.

Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf Take Advantage of Gendered Opportunities

Attempting to conform to cultural beliefs that linked leadership qualities and masculine traits was only one strategy pursued by Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf. In addition, both women explicitly argued that being a woman meant that they brought unique skills and perspectives to the job. In these arguments, they often highlighted positive characteristics such as the general beliefs that women are more democratic, possess participatory leadership styles, are selfless and more dedicated to the interests of others, and are less susceptible to political corruption. They sought to emphasize the advantages that they possessed because of their experiences as women.

In an interview with The Perspective, a US-based news magazine published by the Liberian Democratic Future (LDF), Johnson-Sirleaf states:

I am proud to be a woman. Sometimes I like to tell people that I have a strong personality, that I am a technocrat, or a politician who happened to be a woman. I believe that there are certain attributes in a woman that give her some advantages over a man. Women are usually more honest, more sensitive to issues and bring a stronger sense of commitment and dedication to what they do. Maybe because they were mothers, and being a mother you have that special attention for the family, for the young, for children. . . All in all I am glad I am a woman and I think in Liberia today, it is time for women to show what they can do. (Dukulé 2005)

In another interview, Johnson-Sirleaf stated: “Women are the ones who truly have the heart to care and serve. Perhaps because of the role that nature
has bestowed on us. A woman is naturally crafted to take care of the children and keep the home together and our constitution is patterned towards selfless service” ("Biggest Challenges Ahead" 2005). Supporters referred to her as “Ma Ellen,” and throughout the campaign, Johnson-Sirleaf highlighted the fact that she is both a mother and grandmother. These quotations emphasize women’s roles as wives and mothers and fit within traditional gender frameworks that view women as both the caretakers of their immediate families and the larger national family. Johnson-Sirleaf’s party made this link explicit in a press release that described Johnson-Sirleaf “as a mother who cares deeply about the children and youth of this country” ("Ellen Receives Nationwide Support" 2005). While Johnson-Sirleaf’s campaign highlighted traditionally “female” issues such as education and caring for the country’s youth, she did not limit her campaign to these issues. Instead, campaign talking points highlighted how a wide variety of issues, including peace, reconstruction, and development would benefit from having a woman president.

Johnson-Sirleaf thus crafted a gendered persona consistent with many of the frames associated with women in politics, including women as agents of change, women as peacemakers, and women as less corrupt than their male counterparts (Norris 1996). Johnson-Sirleaf’s presentation of herself in terms of these issues was repeated in the press coverage. An article in The Analyst notes: “She is unperturbed by her gender in a male-dominated arena, arguing that despite the traditional bias which treats females as subservient creatures, women have been found to be more trustworthy, diligent, and conscientious in public office” ("Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf" 2005). In the same article Johnson-Sirleaf is also quoted as saying:

Africa is ready for a female president; women have the education, the character, the competence, and the integrity to lead the nation. Today, many African women are proving their leadership abilities, both in private and public sectors, making giant strides and succeeding as CEOs. Sooner or later, people will realize that both genders own this world together.

As a campaign t-shirt stated: “All the men have failed Liberia—Let’s try a woman.” This slogan tapped Liberians’ frustrations with the political status quo and perceptions that women are less corrupt than their male counterparts and bear less responsibility for their country’s violent conflicts.

This strategy was particularly effective in winning the support of Liberian women. Although there is a lack of reliable polling data, analysts generally attribute Johnson-Sirleaf’s victory to high turnout by women. Women’s organizations such as the Liberian Women Initiative endorsed Johnson-Sirleaf (Horace 2005). In an attempt to increase women’s participation, the Ministry of Gender and Development undertook a voter registration drive that increased the percentage of registered voters who were women.
Breaking the Final Glass Ceiling

from under 30% to over 50% in less than a month (National Elections Commission 2005).

Bachelet also carefully crafted her image to highlight the strengths that her gender presented within the Chilean political context. She drew upon her personal experience as a divorced single mother of three to argue that she was connected to everyday Chilean women through their common experiences of raising a family, often alone. As she said in one of her campaign spots: she works, she gets up and makes breakfast for her family, and takes her youngest daughter to school. It was because of these experiences that she had greater insight into the real problems faced by many Chileans. These experiences also made her aware of the discrimination faced by many Chileans and she argued that her candidacy symbolized the inclusion of not only women, but other groups that had been left out of politics after the return to democracy. She vowed to make the Chilean government more inclusive, pledging to appoint a cabinet with equal numbers of men and women and old and new political faces.

Bachelet also attempted to portray her leadership style, a style her campaign and her opponents characterized as feminine, in a positive light. She claimed that rather than having the traditional masculine style that was formal and authoritarian, her style was grounded in her experiences as a woman and was more open, participatory, and about working for consensus rather than imposing her will. This more feminine style represented a more democratic style of leadership. She claimed, “Chileans are looking for a new kind of leadership, one that a woman symbolizes” (Contreras 2005). The type of leadership that women embody, according to Bachelet, is partly based on a “different kind of ethics than men. Usually the woman tries to find a win-win solution. They are more interested in considering the process then men, who are interested mainly in the results. It’s not a thing about being hard or soft. Women can be firm, but they can also be caring, nurturing—you can do both things, depending on what is needed” (Powers 2006). Bachelet argued that she encapsulated the best of both masculine and feminine styles. She could be decisive and capable as well as nurturing and supportive.

Bachelet’s attempt to reframe gender issues in ways that benefited her candidacy can be seen in one of the first television advertisements that aired during the second round of the campaign in January. In it, Bachelet began by addressing “those that do not want to vote for her because she is a woman.” Bachelet then goes on by noting all the positions of leadership that Chilean women hold. She says:

Strength knows no gender, and neither does honesty, conviction or ability. I bring a different kind of leadership, with the perspective of someone who looks at things from a different angle. Let us change our mentality; when all is said and done, a woman President is simply a head of government who doesn’t wear a tie.
This statement directly addresses the concerns about her leadership. She explicitly compares herself to Chilean women in general and draws on the leadership qualities embodied in the diversity of Chilean women. To doubt her leadership is to doubt the capabilities of both women in general as well as particular women known by the viewer. She then goes on to claim that while certain leadership qualities such as strength, honesty, conviction, and abilities are not the exclusive purview of men, her experiences as a woman do allow her to bring a new type of leadership and a different perspective into politics, a perspective that has been excluded (Chile Reports 2006). Both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf presented themselves as more approachable and in touch with the everyday lives of their fellow citizens. Johnson-Sirleaf’s campaign documents referred to her by her first name, proclaiming “Ellen for President.” Bachelet was also commonly referred to by her first name, and her campaign capitalized on her image as warm and approachable.

Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf pursued strategies that were highly cognizant of the ways in which gender ideology shaped the political context of the campaign. Both attempted to challenge connections between masculinity and political leadership by first portraying themselves as capable leaders in terms of traditional characteristics and then by challenging the connection between masculinity and political leadership by highlighting the particular benefits they possessed as women. In doing this, they presented themselves as women leaders who understood the everyday needs and interests of Chilean and Liberian citizens. Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf also highlighted the aspects of traditional beliefs about feminine characteristics that were particularly salient in the present political context. For Johnson-Sirleaf, this meant highlighting her incorruptibility, for Bachelet, her commitment to a more participatory democracy and greater inclusion.

CONCLUSION

The rise of Michelle Bachelet and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf captures the changing relationship between gender and politics and the increasing opportunities for women at the highest level of politics. Their elections reveal that gendered beliefs about politics and political leadership have become more complex, presenting advantages and opportunities for women leaders along with maintaining barriers and disadvantages. This greater complexity can be seen in the dual strategies pursued by both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf. Like previous women national leaders, they had to prove that they had the traditionally masculine traits associated with political leadership, but unlike most previous women leaders, they also had greater opportunities to incorporate qualities and characteristics associated with women, thus challenging and broadening the definition of political leadership in their respective countries. Furthermore, Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf were able to incorporate what
were understood to be feminine characteristics into their campaigns without presenting a relationship to powerful political families, which they both lacked, as the grounds for their candidacy. Unlike many previous women leaders in the developing world, they did not claim that their only interests in politics were driven by their roles as wives, widows, or mothers or that these roles provided them with the ultimate qualifications for the position of president.

The comparative examination of Bachelet’s and Johnson-Sirleaf’s campaigns also raises important questions for future research on women national leaders. Given the increasing flexibility and complexity of the gendered influences to which women national leaders must respond, there is clearly a need for more work identifying the particular political factors which might create gendered opportunities and constraints for future women candidates. While we lack the space to explore this question fully, to conclude, we briefly discuss two factors that emerged as political opportunities in these cases. First, our analysis shows that female candidates may place greater emphasis on positive aspects of gender differences and will be more successful when the electorate is dissatisfied with current political leadership. Second, both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf benefited from the past successes of their countries’ national women’s movements.

Clearly, for most countries having a women as president represents a change from past political leaders. This dissatisfaction with past (male) political leaders was particularly evident in the Liberian case. Johnson-Sirleaf capitalized on this opening with the campaign slogan “All the men have failed Liberia—Let’s try a woman.” She incorporated gendered beliefs about women’s abilities into her political appeals that provided her with advantages over her male competitors. Specifically, she highlighted ideas about women’s greater commitment to the general interests of the community and women’s greater commitment to peace and non-violence. These beliefs presented clear differences between past male political leaders and the changes that Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf argued that she embodied.

In Chile, while Bachelet ran as the official candidate for the Concertación, she also presented herself as a candidate that represented a real break from the traditional political elite. Her first round campaign slogan “Continuity and Change” captured both sides of this equation, the continuity of popular social programs, but change in political leadership that would address growing concerns about corruption and the growing elitism of the political leaders. Bachelet clearly played up the idea of her being the first woman to hold the presidency (a very recognizable symbolic change) and was the first candidate of the Concertación to make gender equality a political priority. She also promised to bring in new voices, and represented a generational break with the previous three presidents (Patricio Aylwin, Eduardo Frei, and Ricardo Lagos) who had all been political leaders before the military coup. Bachelet, instead, represented a new cohort that had gained
the majority of its political experiences either in the struggle against Pinochet or after the return of democracy. Therefore, both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf benefited from their abilities to present themselves as representing a new direction within a general political context in which there was growing discontent with traditional politics and political leaders (although at different levels in the two cases). This would suggest that it might be easier for women candidates to win in countries that have not previously elected a woman if they are running as a candidate representing political change during a time when change is desired. Furthermore, Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf were able to highlight their outsider status partly because of their lack of familial connections to past political leaders. For example, it would be harder for a woman like Hillary Clinton to run as a political outsider given her connections to her husband, past President Bill Clinton. Conversely, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner clearly benefited from her connection to her husband Nestor Kirchner, given that many Argentines wanted to continue his political policies and she was seen as his political heir.

Second, our analysis suggests a connection between women’s movements and political opportunities for women. Both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf’s portrayal of their gendered advantages incorporated beliefs about women’s roles and political skills that had been legitimated by women’s movements. In the Chilean case, during the struggle for democracy, the Chilean women’s movement had made a connection between women’s equal political participation and full democratization (Chuchryk 1994; Valenzuela and Marshall 1983). Bachelet’s argument that as a woman she would decrease political exclusion and increase opportunities for political participation for women as well as other excluded groups drew explicitly on this connection. Furthermore, her campaign commitment to appointing the first presidential cabinet with gender equity to push for gender quota legislation, which has been resisted by Chile’s political parties, explicitly appealed to women who had had been active in the women’s movement. While Bachelet was not herself a leader of the national women’s movement, she clearly drew upon rhetoric and symbolism that linked her to this movement and its political goals. The enthusiastic support she received from many women and women’s groups during her campaign reflected this strategy.

Women’s movements shaped the Liberian context in a way that provided openings for Johnson-Sirleaf as well. In particular, Liberian women have taken a leading role in the peace process. Organizations like the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and the Mano River Women’s Peace Network (MARWOPNET) played a critical role in the Liberian peace process and established peace as a women’s issue (Bekoe and Parajon 2007). The work of these organizations linked women with peacebuilding in Liberia. Johnson-Sirleaf’s campaign, particularly given her links to domestic
and international women’s movements, was able to seize upon this association of women with peacebuilding. Thus, the Liberian women’s movement created a context in which many of the ideas disseminated by the Johnson-Sirleaf campaign resonated with the population. Johnson-Sirleaf’s campaign could seize upon the discourses popularized by these successful organizations to emphasize her strengths and to differentiate herself from her competitors. Moreover, the Liberian women’s movement directly contributed to Johnson-Sirleaf’s victory by leading a successful drive to increase the number of women registered voters.

In both Chile and Liberia, national women’s movements have helped to legitimize women’s greater participation, questioned the linkage between men and politics, and promoted changing beliefs about women’s leadership abilities. Thus, the particular ways in which women’s movements have changed the cultural context shapes the political opportunities of individual women like Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf. In both cases, these two women successfully incorporated particular beliefs legitimated by women’s movements about women’s political strengths and abilities into their campaign. Future research should thus examine in greater detail how past and present women’s movements might provide particular openings for women presidential candidates. In the previous analysis, the past success of the women’s movements strengthened beliefs about women’s commitment to peace and democracy that proved highly beneficial to both candidates. Less successful women’s movements might hinder women candidates’ abilities to present positive aspects of their gender.

Furthermore, the perceived successes and failures of Bachelet’s and Johnson-Sirleaf’s presidencies will certainly shape the gendered opportunities and constraints within their respective countries that women following in their footsteps are likely to encounter. In their campaigns, both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf increased expectations about what having a woman president would mean, but once in office, they face entrenched political interests and institutional arrangements that make radical change difficult. It is possible that their political failures, unlike those of male presidents, will not be ascribed to them as individuals, but used to strengthen cultural resistance to increasing women’s political power. Therefore, there is a need for continuing scholarship on Bachelet’s and Johnson-Sirleaf’s administrations and what can be learned by analyzing the effects of these two women national leaders on the gendered context of politics.

The proceeding analysis of the electoral strategies of both Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf uncovers the importance of the abilities of both women to manage and make the most of their gender. Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf were actively involved in the political development of their respective countries. They helped to shape their countries’ pasts by confronting authoritarian regimes. In the process, they gained extensive political experience that they could draw upon in their campaigns. The comparison of the political
contexts of the two leaders also reveals that while women are gaining the kinds of political experiences that are traditionally associated with leadership, women are also increasingly willing to challenge the traditional association of masculinity and political leadership. Bachelet and Johnson-Sirleaf show that women who seek to change traditional ideas of leadership to better recognize the skills and characteristics often associated with women can be elected—even in contexts generally considered to be hostile to women. Finally, our research leads us to believe that even as beliefs continue to change, gender will remain a salient factor shaping the context in which all people, both men and women, pursue political office. Indeed, rather than gender becoming less important, it seems that the ability to understand and incorporate strategies that confront gendered disadvantages while promoting gendered advantages is a crucial skill for women who are interested in being elected to the highest level.

NOTES

1. To maintain as tight of a comparison as possible, we chose to exclude sources that were not available for both countries. In particular, this limited our use of public opinion polls and polling data about the relationship between gender and politics generally (such as found in the World Values Survey) and about perceptions of the particular candidates as this type of data was either not available or not reliable in the Liberian case.
2. From 1996–1997, Ruth Perry served as the chair of a six-member Council of State appointed to oversee Liberia during the transition to new elections and thus became Africa’s first female head of state. However, she was not elected, and the Council was seen as more of a symbolic institution.
3. Pham, Peter. 2006. Personal communication.

REFERENCES


