

//Notas de Análisis//

Female Suffrage in USA and Switzerland

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According to the United Nations Population Fund, in October 2011 the world population reached 7 billion people, 3456.8 millions of whom are women.

In the U.S.A, the total population is 313.1 million in 2011. Of those, 158.5 million are women, which means a little bit more than a half. In this country the people eligible to vote in 2008 reached more than 218 million, 55% of whom are women.

The numbers are similar in Switzerland. With a total population of 7.7 million people, the country has 3.9 million of women – again, just a little bit more than the half –, and 54% of the Swiss eligible to vote are women (2010).

However, the current representation of women in politics around the world does not reflect the population data. At parliamentary level worldwide, the percentage of women who occupies seats as deputies or senators is 19.2% and 17.8% respectively. These means that even though the historical representation of women in politics has been rising, the number of males representatives still is overwhelmingly higher.

For reference only, the minimum percentage that is consider necessary for a fair and considerable representation of ideas that can influence the decision making is about 30%.

In January 1918 the 19th Amendment of the USA Constitution was included in the political agenda for the discussion of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The president of USA, Woodrow Wilson, recognizing the woman's support to their country during the war, urged the politicians to vote in favor of the amendment.

The Representatives passed the amendment on May 1919, and the Senate did the same on June. Thereafter, the approval was in hands of each state. More than twenty states ratified it within six months. Thirty six were needed to include the amendment into the Constitution, and Tennessee turned out to be the one which

had the final decision. After a very close vote, just one of the legislators changed his opinion and the woman's right to vote was approved.

Literally, the 19th amendment says:

“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.”

With those two simple lines, the activist women of the USA, who had been fighting for their right to vote for more than seven decades, finally achieved their goal and the history of American women in politics change forever.

On the other hand, Switzerland is the last European country that allowed its women to vote at national level. Many say that it was due to the decisions take longer to be taken in a direct democracy. But there, it took too long.

The Swiss society can be consider as patriarchal, conservative, traditional and with marked streaks sexist, which is exemplified in the traditional perception of the woman's role as restricted to 'kinder, kirche und kuche' ('children, church and kitchen'), still valid specially in German-speaking regions.

However, the active feminist movements exist since long time ago, and they fight not only for the woman's right to vote, but also for legal equality and the empowerment of women in all aspects.

By 1962, with the intention to sign the European Convention of Human Rights, the government of Switzerland asked for an exception about the legal equality of genders – specifically for the women's right to vote -. Against this, the associations pro the female suffrage protested, and the commotion forced the authorities to review that posture.

So, a referendum was decided by the government in 1968, and the public consultation took place in February 1971. Finally, the results were different. More than six hundred thousand (about 66%) Swiss men said YES to the women's right to vote, so since then all Swiss women are allowed to vote at national level.

Furthermore, on October 31 of the same year, there was a parliamentary election in Switzerland, and eleven women were elected to be part of it.

The United States of American and Switzerland differs in many aspects, such as size, population, traditions and history. However, both have also some things in common. They both took too long to allow their women to vote, granting with that a better political equality.

Their political regime is pretty similar, both are democratic countries. In the process of getting the female suffrage the USA parliament, as well as the Swiss, played a key role since the decision of including the issue into the constitutional order should, in the first instance, be approved by the legislature.

But after the parliament passed it, the next step was different within the two countries. USA led the final decision to the local governments, while in Switzerland was the people who had to finish the process. This means that in the European country the men citizens had the final word instead of the parliamentarians, who should represent the interest of all citizens, men and women.

There is then, a social matter. Switzerland is a multicultural country with a big percentage of foreigners among its residents, four official languages, and a rich history of immigration.

Nevertheless, the Swiss society is mostly conservative and traditional, in particular its regions of German´s descendants and residents, not so the French or Italians. The facts speak by themselves: in the referendum of 1959, only three cantons voted for allow the Swiss women to vote, all three were 'French'; while in the 'German' canton call Appenzell Innerrhoden, the amount of No votes was about 95%.

Another point that can be considered as a difference within the two countries concerning the female struggle, are their leaders.

Both, the American and the Swiss movement, had notorious female leaders. They were all active politicians and were deeply committed to the cause, which contributes to the organization of the movements and also to the well development of the activities.

However, the American female leaders, although they were largely convinced of the injustice of gender inequality, none of them had high-level education. The abolitionist Elizabeth Cady

Stanton was a writer, but she never took college studies. Lucretia Mott was a school teacher; and Susan B. Anthony just dedicated her entire life to the fight for women's rights. Except for Stanton (she was a lawyer's daughter), they didn't come from high educated families.

Meanwhile, the most famous leader of the Swiss movement for women's right to vote, Josi Meier had a different background.

Her real name was Josephine Johanna Meier, but was also known as the 'Grand Old Lady'. She died in 2006 at the age of eighty. Meier, who also came from a poor family, graduated as a lawyer in 1952, but had been defending women's right for a long time. When the right to vote for women was finally awarded in 1971, she became one of the members of the Lucerne cantonal parliament, and some month later she was among the eleven women elected as parliamentary representatives. Moreover, Meier took place in the Senate some years later and in 1991 became the first woman ever to be the Senate's speaker.

It is worth comparing also the opposition that the movements had to face in both countries. The resistance to the women's right to vote, in USA as in Switzerland, had the objective of stop the progressive movements, defended the traditional order of the society and, as Nicole Herz (1992) describes, "Antis' had to re-define the scope of woman's sphere and put government back into the male's sphere".

Furthermore, the opposition in USA and in Switzerland used to use the same arguments to fight against the change. The religious beliefs were common among the opposition movements. The 'God word' and the biblical commandments that assure women were made to be men's support, good wives and exemplary mothers, dedicated to their homes and children, were some of the weapons of the anti-suffragist. Coming from conservative education, they believed that 'women belong to the kitchen' and there they must remain. Political issues were thought to be rude and complicated so only men should handle it, women would lose their femininity if they involved in politics.

Other of the arguments was that the basis of the family, and therefore of society, was the women's homemakers, so if women get their right to vote, then they would had less time to do it and the families would lose their foundations, so the society would derail.

Finally, there is one last fact that both, USA and Switzerland, had in common. It was the influence of an external factor into their government decision of do something about the right to vote for women. In the USA it was the World War I. In Switzerland, the Cold War.

During the First World War (1914 – 1918) the American women began to be part of the work force of the country while the men went to fight in the battlefield. Doing this, women helped to sustain the USA economy developing their labor in traditional male occupations. After that, they used it as a weapon and strong argument for their struggle for suffrage right. If they were strong enough to work as men, their opinion should also be important enough in politics as men's. The men and the government must recognized it, and they had not any strong argument against the women's claim anymore.

On the other hand, the Swiss government was afraid about the national security during the Cold War. Given the geopolitical situation and the small size of Switzerland, the Communist could saw it as a strategic war point. For that reason, the government thought in expand and strengthen its military force, including women into it. Again, the Swiss women, as the Americans, argued that the demand of their labor force should be compensated by granting the right that they had been fighting for.

Moreover, in Switzerland there was also another factor that there was not in USA. The integration with the European region, materialized in the signing of the European Convention of Human Rights, needed the government to catch up its settings, so the legal equality should be guaranteed. The willing of being part of the region in such a difficult time as the Cold War, pushed the Swiss government to move forward in the woman's right to vote issue.

The United States of America, as well as Switzerland, witnessed the long struggle for the female right to vote but, what are the current results of it? How much equality have today those countries in political terms? Have their women real participation in politics nowadays?

According to the Interparliamentary Union ranking, in 2010 Switzerland was positioned as the 26th country with more women in parliamentary, while USA was in the 70th position with only 89 women among 532 legislators.

Although some researchers suggest that the American women are more likely to participate in elections by making use of their right to vote than men; the USA politics still have a lot to improve in order to eliminate the gender gap in political area.

On its part, Switzerland has less inequality in politics, but still is not absolutely equal. The Swiss Executive Branch is comprised of seven members, all with equal decision power, and one of them is named, by rotation, Federal President. The first woman elected as President was Ruth Dreifuss, who took place of the position in 1999.

In 2010 for the first time, three women were occupying high political positions in the Swiss government simultaneously. Moreover, in September 22 of the same year, after one more woman was elected as minister, the Executive was composed by four women and three men, marking the first time ever that the Swiss government has a female majority.

To sum up, unlike USA, which has never had a woman as President; Switzerland seems to be more progressive when it comes to high positions in politics nowadays.

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