

# South America Ushers In The Era of La Presidenta

## Women Could Soon Lead a Majority of Continent's Population

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BUENOS AIRES, Oct. 30 -- Here in the land of machismo, where leaders were long supposed to conform to the standard of the strong-armed military man in epaulettes, a rising wave of leaders is working on a new 21st-century cliché: la presidenta.

The movement started at [South America](#)'s southern tip, where [Chile](#) elected Michelle Bachelet president last year. [Argentina](#) followed this week, choosing first lady Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as its first elected female president.

"Permit me to specifically address my sisters in gender, to call out to all of them who have remained alone in the home, to the female factory workers and students, the professionals and businesswomen," Fernández de Kirchner, 54, said during her first speech as president-elect. "I know we can all do great work."

The gender-specific rallying cry now seems poised to spread north. In [Paraguay](#), outgoing President Nicanor Duarte is backing former education minister Blanca Ovelar as his replacement in next year's presidential election. And in [Brazil](#), many political observers say that President Luiz Inácio [Lula da Silva](#) seems to be grooming his chief of staff and former energy minister -- a woman named Dilma Rousseff -- to carry his party's torch when his term ends in 2010.

"This term is only 10 months old," Rousseff reminded listeners during a forum at the Folha de S. Paulo newspaper this month, seeking to douse some of the rampant speculation about a possible campaign. "I'm not a candidate."

But the possibility that she could become one has South Americans confronting a prospect that just a few years ago would have seemed utterly impossible: a continent where the majority of the population is led by women.

At the same time that American voters are considering the possibility of a female front-runner in [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), people here have been trying to explain the recent surge in female candidates. The feminine political touch is tricky to define, even among the women who suggest it might be just what South America needs to confront lingering social ills such as poverty and income inequality.

Fernández de Kirchner briefly danced around the subject during her acceptance speech, obliquely referring to a woman's "special aptitudes -- not better, just special." Similarly, Ovelar has pointed out the advantages of "a woman's vision" in solving the social problems that voters in South America customarily list as their most pressing concerns.

"I think people generally just want a change," said Ana Esposito, a 55-year-old social worker in [Buenos Aires](#) province. "I also think that a woman might have a wider vision than a man, because generally women do more things simultaneously than men do -- but that's just my opinion."

Their rise to the highest seats of power has been sudden, but women have been working their way up through the region's political systems for years. Both Bachelet and Fernández de Kirchner became involved in politics during the 1970s as opponents of military governments. In the 1990s, Bachelet served as a minister of health and defense. Fernández de Kirchner was a prominent senator in the national legislature well before deciding to run to succeed her husband, Néstor Kirchner, who declined to seek reelection this year.

Marta Lagos, who conducts polls throughout [Latin America](#) and is based in Chile, said both women rose to prominence because their people were desperately seeking a new class of political elites.

Like most of the region, both Chile and Argentina were ruled by military dictatorships in the 1970s and early 1980s. And as elsewhere on the continent, the politicians who subsequently ushered in democratic rule there failed to convince voters that they were making sufficient progress against problems such as poverty and social inequality.

"When people began demanding strongly a change in elites, women suddenly became an option," [Lagos](#) said.

That said, she doesn't believe that the news is all positive for female candidates in South America. In Chile, Bachelet's approval rating has fallen to less than 50 percent, and she is often criticized for being indecisive. Lagos said she fears a backlash against future female candidates as a result.

"She is always saying that when she gets mad, people here in Chile say that she has a bad temper," Lagos said of Bachelet, "but when a man gets mad, they say he's a strong leader."

According to the World Economic Forum's ranking of 116 countries in terms of gender gaps, opportunities for women in South America still lagged behind those of women in many other parts of the world in 2006. Argentina ranked 42nd in terms of equal opportunities for women, Paraguay 65th, Brazil 68th and Chile 79th, according to the survey.

But in terms of political empowerment for women, Argentina jumped to 23rd on the list, ahead of the United States and [Canada](#). Many here credit that to a law passed in 1991 aimed at increasing female representation in the National Congress.

The number of women in Argentina's legislature more than quadrupled immediately after the law was enacted, and 11 other Latin American countries passed similar laws within the next decade.

Fernández de Kirchner was one of the women who entered Argentina's national legislature after the quotas were established; she was elected as a senator for Santa Cruz province in 1995. In 2005, two years after her husband was elected president, she defeated another woman -- Hilda González de Duhalde -- to win a Senate seat for Buenos Aires province. Her nearest rival in this week's presidential election was Elisa Carrió, also a former legislator.

Fernández de Kirchner is often compared to Clinton, another lawyer, senator and former first lady. During a television appearance with an interviewer after the election, she wished Clinton well on her campaign to acquire another title that Fernández de Kirchner has now captured.

"Why not?" she said. "Another woman wouldn't be bad."