

A Conversation with Nancy Pelosi

Nancy Pelosi, U. S. House of Representatives Minority Leader, is the highest ranking woman in the Senate and the first woman in U. S. congressional history to head a political party. Pelosi was first elected to congress in a special election to replace Representative Sala Burton, who died in office and had requested that Pelosi run. Perspectives asked Pelosi the following questions about being a woman and a leader:

Perspectives: Marie Wilson, president of the White House Project, which works to get a woman elected president, has said that you have taken on your role in a time of both war and economic crisis, and that these are the very areas where "women are least trusted in executive positions in this country." Do you agree with this assessment and, if so, how does it affect how you approach your work?

Pelosi: The American public has not seen as many women as men in situations where they can demonstrate that they are ready to lead a world superpower. The American people should, and I think will, hear more women's voices on issues relating to the use of force and diplomacy and on the economy and on all of the tough decisions that our country must make.

We have wonderful Democratic women working on these issues in the House. Congresswoman Jane Harman of California is the highest-ranking woman on the Intelligence Committee, and Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney of New York is leading the Democratic Working Group on Homeland Security.

The more the public hears women speaking on these issues, the more it will erode the stereotype that women can be leaders on only some of the issues but men are there for the tough ones. Women are very qualified to speak with authority on any of these matters.

Perspectives: What do you feel are the qualities your colleagues see in you that made you an attractive and viable person for the job of House Democratic Leader?

Pelosi: When I decided to run for House Democratic Leader, I presented myself as an experienced legislator, skilled organizer, and leader. I have been in Congress for 16 years. I was the Ranking Democrat on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee.

As Democratic Whip, I was in charge of uniting our very diverse party during critical votes on everything from campaign finance reform and corporate responsibility to trade and homeland security. I asked my colleagues to judge me on my record and to decide who they thought was the best person to lead our party.

Perspectives: Your father was first a congressman and then mayor of Baltimore for 12 years, and your brother also was a Baltimore mayor. What were some of the lessons you learned from your family that guide you in (1) your relationships with your own children and (2) your approach to political life?

Pelosi: I was blessed to grow up in a strong, loving family, and that has of course shaped my relationships with my own children. Family is the most important part of my life, and my children are my proudest accomplishments. I love being a mother. When my four daughters and one son were all grown up, I used to wish that I could take them out into the rain, shrink them, and start all over again.

My children grew up like I did, absorbing the political process. When I was growing up, if you entered the house it was always campaign time, and if you went into the living room it was always constituent time. I learned how to organize a campaign from the street level up, how to count votes, how to build relationships, how to forge coalitions among a diverse range of constituents. It was an invaluable education.

Perspectives: Until the oldest of your five children was a senior in high school, you were a stay-at-home mom and political volunteer. Our readers are women lawyers, and the question of how to juggle caring for children with a demanding career is a major issue for readers who have or are considering having children. With your insight into both the demands of child rearing and those of a tough career, do you have any advice for these women?

Pelosi: First of all, without a doubt, women have the most important job in our country and in our society, and that is raising the next generation. There is no more important job. I was fortunate to be able to stay at home with my children when they were young. When I volunteered, my children would help as well. I went to Congress after my five children were grown, and that's my life and I love it; I wouldn't change a second of it. It is a personal decision. Every woman will have to make the decisions that are best for her.