

lisa price

writer
editor
graphic designer

800 east end avenue
pittsburgh, pa 15221
412.979.0780
lisa@wrinklybrain.com
www.wrinklybrain.com

entire portfolio
available online

Women & Politics in America

Introduction

Women make up a large portion of the voting-age population in the United States. This gives us a great deal of potential political power. But do we use this power? And to what degree? To what degree do women exercise our right to vote, one of the most basic foundations of political power? America's is supposed to be a representative democratic system, so women's political involvement and use of our power can manifest itself in the degree to which women hold offices at various levels of government.

Women & Voting

In 1988, the American electorate included 91.5 million women and 82.4 million men.¹ Women made up 53 percent of eligible voters, and they outnumbered men in all voting age groups except for the 18- to 24-year-old group, where the numbers were equal. In addition, in the over-65-year-old group, women constituted 60 percent of eligible voters.³ These kinds of numbers should illustrate a very powerful female political involvement, but do women use all of this political power? The first step in this type of political involvement, of course, is registering and voting.

Voter Registration

Women outnumbered men among registered voters. In 1986, of the eligible 91.5 million women, 59.5 million, or 65 percent, were registered to vote, compared to 52.2 million, or 63 percent, of the 82.4 million men.⁴ Though these numbers are indeed impressive, this means little unless women actually carry this voting potential through into action.

Voter turnout

In recent⁵ elections, voter turnout rates for women have equalled or exceeded voter turnout rates for men. Women, who constituted more than half the population, have cast between three⁶ and seven million more votes than men in every election since 1976. In the 1986 elections, for example, four and a half million more women than men went to the polls.⁷

The following chart illustrates male and female voter turnout rates for presidential elections from 1964 to 1984.

Presidential Election Year	Percent of Eligible Adults Who Voted		Millions of Eligible Adults Who Voted	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
1984	60.8	59.0	54.5	47.4
1980	59.4	59.1	49.3	43.8
1976	58.8	59.6	45.6	41.1
1968	66.0	69.8	41.0	39.0
1964	67.0	71.9	39.2	37.5

The 1984 election was the first in which the proportion of eligible women who voted in a presidential election (60.8 percent) exceeded the proportion of eligible men who voted (59.0 percent). Almost equal proportions of women and men (59.4 and 59.1 percent, respectively) voted in the 1980 election. In every presidential election prior to 1980, the voter turnout rate for women was lower than the rate for men. Even so, the number of female voters has exceeded the number of male voters in every presidential election since 1964.

The same trend holds over for non-presidential elections. As with presidential elections, the number of female voters has exceeded⁹ the number of male voters in every off-year election since 1966.

Non-presidential Election year	Percent of Eligible Adults Who Voted		Millions of Eligible Adults Who Voted	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
1986	46.1	45.8	42.2	37.7
1982	48.4	48.7	42.3	38.0
1978	45.3	46.6	36.3	33.3
1974	43.4	46.2	32.5	30.7
1970	52.7	56.8	33.8	32.0
1966	53.0	58.2	31.8	30.7

Historically, women have turned out to vote in smaller proportions than men in off-year as well as in presidential elections. In the 1980s, voter turnout rates for men and women were nearly identical. The margin between the sexes grew progressively smaller from 1966 to 1982, when it became negligible, and by 1986 the trend was showing a margin biased in the other direction—a higher percentage of women than men voted.

Women as Officeholders

Attitudes

A 1945 Gallup poll asked Americans this question: “A woman leader says not enough of the capable women are holding important jobs in the United States government. Do you agree or disagree with this?” The following table illustrates their responses.

	Agree	Disagree	No opinion
Women	38	43	19
Men	26	53	21
Overall	32	48	20

As shown, a majority of both men and women disagreed with this view, but a higher percentage of men disagreed than did women, while women were quicker to agree. People’s opinions on this subject can be important in that they can shed light on why women may or may not have credibility in offices and in political involvement.

Gallup asked a similar question thirty years later, though this time only of women: “Do you think the country would be governed better or governed worse if more women held political offices?” The chart below is a demographic breakdown of their answers.

	Better	Worse	No Difference	No Opinion
By race:				
White	35	20	25	10
Nonwhite	49	16	19	16
By education level:				
College	39	11	43	7
High school	37	20	34	9
Grade school	31	31	20	18
By region:				
East	36	21	32	11
Midwest	39	23	32	14
South	30	21	24	14
West	41	10	38	11
By age:				
18-24	41	8	44	7
25-29	25	23	46	6
30-49	38	18	34	9
50+	36	26	24	14
By income level:				
\$20,000+	32	20	37	11
\$15,000-19,999	36	18	38	8
\$10,000-14,999	32	24	36	8
\$7,000-9,999	44	16	37	3
\$5,000-6,999	33	22	36	9
\$3,000-4,999	39	17	29	15
under \$3,000	37	20	16	27
By political affiliation				
Republican	27	22	38	13
Democratic	41	19	30	10
Independent	35	20	37	8
All:				
Overall	36	20	34	10

Overall, about a third of the women answered that they thought the country would be better off with more women governing it. Women who were not white were more likely to think so than were white women. The higher the level of education a woman had completed, the more in favor she was of greater female leadership, although many college-educated women felt things would be no different than with male leadership. Income level and region seemed to have little influence on answers. Women younger than 30 years old were likely to see little difference, though the youngest respondents, those between 18 and 24 years old, were also likely to see female leadership in a favorable light. Finally, Democrats were most in favor of women in political office.

Those who answered “better” gave the following reasons:

Percent	Reason
33	women would be more conscientious and reliable
28	government would be better balanced with both male and female viewpoints
15	less corruption—women would not be manipulated as easily as men
7	consumers would be better protected; women would be in greater sympathy with poor
5	moral issues would be better handled; women would think more about social justice than political power
3	less likelihood of war; women would be better able to arrive at peaceful solutions to international problems.

and those who answered “worse” gave the following reasons:

Percent	Reason
36	women don’t belong in government
24	men can do a better job of governing; it’s a man’s job
20	women would be too soft, overly sensitive on tough issues
11	women would be too flighty, inconsistent
6	women would not be business-minded

Why is this important? Women’s as well as men’s views can show us whether women’s activity in politics has gained popular legitimacy; that is, the degree to which the public feels still that a woman’s place is in the home is the degree to which women will be considered a valid and impor-

tant part of America's political systems. If women don't believe in their own abilities, or the abilities of their peers, then men will be far slower to believe in them as well.

Presidential Candidacy

The Gallup organization has for decades been conducting surveys on America's readiness for a female in various elected offices. The wording of the surveys differ from year to year, but all ask if one would vote for a woman. Every year listed includes the stipulation that the woman be qualified or best qualified for the job, except 1958. In addition, every year except 1937 and 1958 include the specification that the woman be nominated by one's party, or the party whose candidate one most often supports. The following table summarizes responses divided by sex.

Year	Yes		No	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
1937	41	27	59	73
1945	37	29	51	58
1949	51	45	46	50
1955	57	47	40	48
1958	55	51	41	44
1963	51	58	45	37
1971	67	65	33	35

These numbers illustrate an interesting trend. Men's willingness to vote for a female presidential candidate has increased steadily over the years. Women's opinions, on the other hand, appear to fluctuate quite a bit, though the overall trend seems to be increasing acceptance. The biggest problems with these data are that the intervals in between survey years are not regular, and that there were no more recent poll results available in the more than 15 years since the last survey listed.

Non-presidential Candidacy

Most of the data available is on attitudes toward female presidential candidates, but there have been some polls done on vice presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial candidates. Unfortunately, these surveys

were few and far between—results follow for the 1970 poll on voting for a woman for Congress and a 1945 survey concerning governorships.

If your party nominated a woman to run for Congress from your district, would you vote for her if she were qualified for the job? (1970) ¹⁴			
	Yes	No	No opinion
By sex:			
Men	83	13	4
Women	84	13	3
By education level:			
College	92	5	3
High school	82	15	3
Grade school	78	17	5
By age:			
21-29	83	11	6
30-49	83	14	3
50+	84	13	3
All:			
Overall	84	13	3

This compares with the 1971 presidential candidate survey in a very interesting way. Only 67 percent of women polled that year said they would vote for a female for president, but 84 percent said they would vote for a congresswoman from their district. Time is an unlikely factor in this difference, since the interval between the two polls was only one year.

If the party you most often support nominated a woman for governor of this state, would you vote for her if she seemed qualified for the job? (1945) ¹⁵			
	Yes	No	No opinion
By sex:			
Men	52	40	8
Women	60	30	10
All:			
Overall	56	35	9

The differences in willingness to vote for women for these two positions is obvious; the causes are not, necessarily. The span of 25 years between the polls is certain to have something to do with it, simply because views change dramatically over time, especially views on women during those decades. Whether the differences in level of responsibility of the two positions in question had an additional effect is something unknowable from these data. What we can see is that in 1945, the gubernatorial poll showed 60 percent of women and 52 percent of men willing to vote for a female governor, while only 37 percent and 29 percent¹⁶, respectively, were willing to vote for a female presidential candidate.

Reality

According to Mary Ames Booker's *Members of Congress since 1789*¹⁷, as of that writing, a total of only 115 women had been elected or appointed to either house of Congress throughout its history. One hundred one served in the House of Representatives, arguably the less prestigious of the two, while only 13 served as Senators, and one, Margaret Chase Smith, a Republican from Maine, had served in both chambers. In 1985, women held 4.7 percent, or 25, of the 535 seats in the United States Congress: two in the Senate and 23 in the House. The partisan split was nearly down the middle, with half¹⁸ being Republicans and half being Democrats, with no Independents. As of the writing of the 1989 Congressional Quarterly Report, women held only five percent of the seats in all of Congress.¹⁹ As of this writing, there has never been a woman elected to the Presidency or Vice Presidency of the United States, though there have been many candidates for both offices.

Conclusion

Since women won the right to vote in 1920, we have come a long way. Although some women had been elected to lower offices or moved into their husbands' seats upon their deaths, women's legitimacy in public office has had to fight a long battle for credibility. There are undoubtedly still Americans, men and women alike, who would still today not vote for a woman, perhaps for any office. As the suffragettes argued, though, it is a necessary component of a representative democracy to represent all the people, of all sexes, races, creeds, and so on. Therefore, the trends of growing numbers of women voting and holding public offices at higher levels and higher rates are promising signs for the future of women in politics.

Notes

1. "Women and the Vote—1988: Women's Impact at the Polls," National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women, Washington, DC, 1989.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. I originally wrote this paper in 1989. I hope to publish an updated version; meanwhile, while I research updates, I have used the past tense to indicate that the statistics may have changed since the original writing.
6. "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1986" and preceding years, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, United States Bureau of the Census.
7. "Women and the Vote—1988."
8. "Voting and Registration."
9. "Voting and Registration."

10. George Gallup. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion*. New York: Random House, 1972.

11. Gallup, 1975.

12. Unfortunately, because we have neither a demographic breakdown for the earlier survey nor the male counterparts to the above 1975 responses, it is difficult to compare the two, but one can look at the overall figure for 1975 and compare it with the women who responded in the 1945 survey. Obviously, about the same number of women agreed that more women should be holding public office, but with the introduction of the “no difference” category for the later survey, disagreement dropped and many—just over one-third—of the respondents in the later survey reported that they felt there would be no difference between female and male leadership.

13. After 1937, a “no opinion” or “undecided” category was included, so all percentages may not total 100 percent.

14. Gallup, 1970.

15. Gallup, 1945.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Third edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1985, pp. 4-5.

18. “Women and the Vote—1988: Historical Perspective.” National Commission on Working Women of Wider Opportunities for Women. Washington, DC, 1989.

19. *Current American Government*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1989, pp. 112-13.

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