



Voting and Civic Engagement Among Utah Women: A 2019 Update

Setting the Stage

In 2016, the Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) released a research snapshot called “Voting and Civic Engagement Among Utah Women,”¹ the first in the Utah Women Stats research snapshot series. At the time, despite having a strong history of women’s political and civic involvement, Utah had fallen to the bottom of national rankings in terms of women’s political participation.² That same year, due in part to having a woman presidential candidate from a major party for the first time, women’s political engagement was a critically important topic throughout the country. The first day of the Trump administration in 2017, hundreds of thousands of women marched in Washington DC and in numerous other cities across the nation,³ including Salt Lake City,⁴ protesting and seeking to raise awareness of various issues. Since that time, the level of political engagement among women in Utah and the US has stayed relatively high, as has civic engagement, which is a critical element of change for municipalities, counties, and states across the nation.

This research snapshot focuses on three key areas:

- 1) Women’s voting participation rates in Utah and the US in recent elections, by various demographic factors;
- 2) Other issues related to women’s voting, policy priorities, and political engagement; and
- 3) Utah women’s levels of civic and community involvement, including volunteer work and associated activities.

Women Voters in Utah and the US

Women in Utah have a strong history of political engagement; in fact, Utah was the first place where US women voted under an equal suffrage law, in 1870.⁵ Utah was also the first state to elect a female state senator (who beat her own husband in that election),⁶ and as recently as 1992, Utah women had the highest voter turnout in the nation at 76%.⁷ However, over the following years, Utah women’s voting rates took a dramatic downturn, and in 2006 Utah ranked 51st in the nation (50 states plus Washington DC) for the percentage of women voting (all percentages in this report refer to the adult population, ages 18+).⁸ Utah’s national ranking in this category stayed near the bottom for the next several elections, but in 2016 Utah

women climbed to 35th in terms of voting, and in 2018 took a substantial jump to 11th in the nation (see Table 1 for rankings of eligible voters).⁹ The high turnout in the midterm election of 2018 (which occurred among both men and women in Utah) was likely due to a closely contested US House race and several high-profile ballot initiatives.¹⁰

Table 1: Voter Participation Rates for US and Utah Women from 2006–2018

	US Women	Utah Women	Ranking (out of 51)
2006	48.6%	36.8%	51
2008	65.7%	58.0%	48
2010	46.2%	39.0%	48
2012	63.7%	57.1%	45
2014	43.0%	37.6%	43
2016	63.3%	63.0%	35
2018	55.0%	60.5%	11

Source: US Census Bureau, Voting and Registration Tables, 2006–2018.

It should be noted that in 2016, the most recent presidential election year (the table reflects the disparity between midterm and presidential election voting rates), 91.3% of the total US population was eligible to vote (i.e., US citizens), and 70.3% of those citizens were registered to vote, yet only 61.4% actually voted. That year in Utah, the percent of the population that was eligible to vote was higher, at 93.9%, but just 71.0% of these citizens were registered to vote, and 62.7% actually voted.¹¹ Hence, in both Utah and the US as a whole, a significant fraction of eligible voters did not exercise their right to register, let alone vote. Midterm elections usually show a much lower turnout (45.5% in 2010 and 41.9% in 2014 for all US eligible voters), but 2018 showed much higher overall voting rates, both in the US (53.4%) and in Utah (57.6%).¹² So the spike upward in Utah women’s voting rates in 2018 also occurred throughout the rest of the nation. But much work remains to be done. For example, although Utah women’s voting registration rates have been on an upward trend generally, in 2018 there were 316,000 women in Utah who are citizens but were not registered to vote.¹³

Census data highlight other distinctions among demographic categories describing eligible women voters in the US (these data are not available at the state level). For

example, women's voting rates vary by race and ethnicity. In 2018, 58.4% of White, non-Hispanic women voted, along with 54.9% of Black women, 43.3% of Hispanic or Latina women, and 41.4% of Asian women.¹⁴ Additionally, women's voting rates vary by marital status, and in 2018, voting participation rates for US women were as follows: 62.2% married (spouse present), 54.9% widowed, 54.5% divorced, 47.3% married (spouse absent), 43.6% never married, and 41.6% separated.¹⁵ Finally, women are more likely to vote as their education levels increase. In 2018, 41.6% of high school graduates, 53.2% of those with some college or an associate degree, 61.3% of those with a bachelor's degree, and 68.6% of those with an advanced degree voted.¹⁶ Understanding these demographic factors can help advocates target specific populations in their efforts to increase both registration and voting participation among eligible women voters.¹⁷

Exit Polls and Other Surveys

In addition to census data, which are indispensable in terms of understanding women's voting behaviors, other data, including exit polls and opinion surveys, can also yield valuable information. The Utah Colleges Exit Poll has been collecting data since 1982 on voters' thoughts and voting choices on Election Day. The 2016 presidential election was particularly notable in part because both major candidates were among the least popular in history.¹⁸ In fact, in the 2016 Utah Colleges Exit Poll, 37.2% of women and 38.7% of men responded that they were mainly voting *against* the opponent of the candidate they chose, rather than voting *for* their candidate.¹⁹ These polls revealed other interesting correlations that emerged along gender lines in terms of which factors influenced voters' choices in 2016. Women were more likely than men to say that government regulation, national security, illegal immigration, and Obamacare were "very important" in deciding how to cast their votes.²⁰ Further, Utah women showed a somewhat greater distrust in the election process overall; women were more likely than men to respond that they were "not at all confident" their vote was counted correctly in the general election, whereas men were more likely than women to respond that they were "very confident." Finally, and not surprisingly, Utah women were more likely to say that regardless of how they felt about Hillary Clinton personally, that the election of a woman as president would be "very important" in American history (43.6% of women vs. 30.9% of men replied "very important"). Conversely, 26.0% of men and 20.1% of women responded that electing the first female president would be "not at all important."²¹

When Utah voters were asked about the election of a woman president, 43.6% of female respondents said it would be "very important" in American history, versus 30.9% of male respondents.

Along with exit polls, surveys are powerful tools to understand Utah women's policy priorities. A 2016 survey by the Utah Foundation reported that women in Utah are more concerned than men are about social issues such as homelessness, poverty, crime, and the environment.²² Specifically, the top ten policy issues for Utah women voters are as follows:

- 1) K-12 education
- 2) Healthcare
- 3) Air quality
- 4) State taxes and government spending
- 5) Crime
- 6) Homelessness and poverty
- 7) Water supply and quality
- 8) Jobs and the economy
- 9) The environment
- 10) Partisan politics

In contrast to Utah men who are, as a group, more likely to be concerned about property and sovereignty issues, Utah women's focus on social issues is more closely aligned with Utahns' priorities as a whole.²³ However, in a 2015 survey conducted by Envision Utah, Utah women's and men's responses showed more overlap, with the top

four concerns of both being jobs and economy, air quality, water, and education.²⁴ Additionally, Utah women share several concerns with US women in general; one recent study showed that women list (1) equal pay, (2) public school funding, (3) lower taxes, (4) paid sick leave, and (5) campaign reform as their top five issues.²⁵

Finally, a 2016 report from the Utah Foundation also shed light on ways Utah women (especially Republican women) may be missing the opportunity to have

their perspectives on policy priorities fully recognized. As Utah is one of the few states that maintains a caucus convention system, delegates hold a very powerful position in choosing candidates and thereby policy direction. Surveys showed that delegates (both Republican and Democrat) in Utah tend to be more polarized in their positions than general voters from their respective parties. However, this discrepancy is magnified in terms of gender priorities in the Republican Party; women comprised 56% of Republican voters in 2016, and only 24% of Republican delegates were women.²⁶

Volunteering and Civic Engagement

In addition to voting and advocating for public policy, one of the key ways citizens can become involved in their communities is through volunteer work. For the past 13 years in a row, Utah has ranked first in the nation for per-

centage of residents who regularly volunteer, at 51% (a full 20 points higher than the national average of 30.3%).²⁷ Nationally, women's volunteer rates are six percentage points higher than men's (27.8% vs. 21.8%),²⁸ and this gap seems to hold in Utah as well. A 2013 report from UServeUtah showed Utah women's rates above men's: 46% versus 40.1%.²⁹ Utah also ranks first in the nation for its parent volunteer rate, at 63.5%.³⁰ Utah rankings solely for mothers are unavailable, but nationwide, 43.2% of all mothers volunteer, and, more specifically, 46.7% of working mothers volunteer.³¹

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, in 2018 more than 1,152,208 Utahns gave 133.9 million hours of their time in volunteer service. The monetary value of this service was an estimated \$3.2 billion.³² The report's details surrounding volunteer work are not broken down by gender, but it shows a large majority of Utahns' service is given through religious organizations (41.24%); followed by "other" (22.05%); sports, hobby, cultural, or arts (21.20%); and educational or youth service (7.24%).³³ However, this high number for "religious" service does not necessarily mean that all of the service given is religious in nature. Some of the main volunteer activities in which Utahns participate are teaching/tutoring (46.48%); mentoring youth (43.36%); collecting, preparing, distributing, and serving food (31.64%); and engaging in general labor/supplying transportation for people (31.14%).³⁴

In addition to their volunteering efforts, women in Utah are well-represented in the leadership of nonprofit organizations, holding 57.4% of chief executive positions and 45.3% of total available board seats.³⁵ Utah women are less likely to serve on government boards and commissions, holding only 28.1% of active positions, and in many cases, very few women are applying for open seats.³⁶ There is definitely room for improvement in terms of women's engagement in that specific area of influence. Finally, Utah women are increasingly becoming directly involved in philanthropic giving through giving circles or clubs; through this method women are empowered to direct their charitable donations in specific, targeted ways.³⁷

Conclusion

Research shows that girls who participate in civic affairs, including engaging with organizations like the ones listed in the box that follows, are more likely to become women who vote.³⁸ Furthermore, education (e.g., learning about Utah women's rich history of political and civic activity), is a key driver of further engagement, support, and advocacy for women's involvement in the public arena, as was demonstrated by a recent survey conducted by Better Days 2020.³⁹ Educational institutions, nonprofits, and government organizations play a vital role in increasing Utah women's voter participation and other types of civic

engagement. This will in turn strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and in the state as a whole.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- 1) [Action Utah](#)
- 2) [Better Days 2020](#)
- 3) [Just Serve](#)
- 4) [Real Women Run](#)
- 5) [United Ways in Utah](#)
- 6) [Utah 211](#)
- 7) [Utah Commission on Service and Volunteerism](#)
- 8) [Utah League of Women Voters](#)
- 9) [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#)
- 10) [Utah Women's Networks and Groups](#)
- 11) [Women's Leadership Institute](#)
- 12) [YWCA Utah](#)
- 13) [Voterise](#)

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