



Voting and Civic Engagement Among Utah Women: A 2021 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 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 In 2019, UWLP released an update of this report,³ which showed some improvement in voter participation rates for both the United States and for Utah women. Since 2016, the level of political engagement among women in Utah and the United States has grown, and civic engagement—a critical element of change for municipalities, counties, and states—has remained high. Importantly, Kamala Harris was elected the first female vice president, which made 2020 a historic year for women in the US. Additionally, Utah elected former state Senator Deidre Henderson its second female lieutenant governor.

This research snapshot focuses on three key areas:

- 1) Women’s voting participation rates in Utah and the US in recent elections, by various demographics;
- 2) Other issues related to women’s voting, policy priorities, and political engagement; and
- 3) Utah women’s 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 women citizens were the first in the US to vote under an equal suffrage law in 1870.⁴ Utah was also the first state to elect a female state senator (elected over her own husband in the same race),⁵ and as recently as 1992, Utah women had the highest voter turnout in the nation at 76% (all percentages in this report refer to the adult population, ages 18+).⁶ However, by 2006, Utah women’s voting rates plummeted to 51st (50 states plus Washington DC).⁷ Utah’s ranking in this category stayed near the bottom for the next several elections, but in 2016, Utah women climbed to 35th, and in 2018 they took a substantial jump to 11th in the nation (see Table 1 for rankings of eligible voters).⁸ The high turnout in the mid-

term 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.⁹ In 2020, 66.6% of eligible female voters in Utah voted, the highest percentage achieved over a 14-year period.

Table 1: Voter Participation Rates for US and Utah Women from 2006–2020

	US Women	Utah Women	Ranking (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
2020	68.4%	66.6%	33

Source: US Census Bureau, Voting and Registration Tables, 2006–2020.

It should be noted that in the most recent presidential election year, 2020, the country had the “highest voter turnout in the 21st century, with 66.8% of citizens 18 years and older voting in the election,” a total of 155 million people.¹⁰ Utah ranked 33rd for the percentage of eligible women who voted, with the District of Columbia ranking first with 86% female voter turnout and West Virginia ranking last with 56% female voter turnout.

In 2020, 92% of the US population was eligible to vote (i.e., US citizens of voting age); 72.7% of those citizens were registered to vote, and 66.8% of registered voters went to the polls. In Utah, the eligible population was higher than the national percentage at 93.9%, but only 63.3% of these citizens were registered to vote, and of those, 63.6% voted.¹¹ Since the 2014 election, Utah’s voter turnout has continued to improve, likely because of expanded vote-by-mail elections.¹²

Census data describe additional distinctions among demographic categories of eligible women voters in the US (reported data only; state-level data are unavailable). For example, women’s voting rates vary by race and ethnicity. In 2020, 70.8% of White, non-Hispanic women reported

voting, along with 62.2% of Black women, 44.1% of Asian women, and 41.3% of Hispanic or Latina women.¹³ Additionally, women's voting rates vary by reported marital status. In 2020, 67.5% married (spouse present), 64.5% divorced, 63.3% widowed, 48.7% married (spouse absent), 56.0% never married, and 46.5% separated.¹⁴ Finally, women are more likely to vote as their education levels increase. In 2020, 77.1% of those with an advanced degree, 73.9% of those with a bachelor's degree, 67.3% of those with some college or an associate degree, and 53.2% of high school graduates voted.¹⁵ Understanding demographic factors can help advocates target specific populations in efforts to increase both registration and voting participation among eligible women voters.¹⁶

Exit Polls and Other Surveys

In addition to crucial census data, exit polls and opinion surveys also yield valuable information. The Utah Colleges Exit Poll collected data from 1982–2016 on voters' thoughts and ballot choices on election day. The 2016 presidential election was particularly notable in part because both major candidates were, at the time, among the least popular in history.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Other interesting correlations emerged along gender lines in that election. Women were more likely than men to say that government regulation, national security, illegal immigration, and Obamacare were “very important” in deciding how they cast their votes.¹⁹ 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 report that regardless of how they felt about Hillary Clinton personally, 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.”²⁰

National polls (both early and exit polls) for the 2020 presidential election showed that women voted at higher rates than men. Some women were motivated by the prospect of seeing the first woman vice president, and women were more likely than men to consider coronavirus response important to their vote.²¹

Along with exit polls, surveys reveal Utah women's policy priorities. A 2020 Utah Foundation survey of citizens' priorities found that K–12 education, healthcare, and state taxes and government spending were the top priorities for

women, while public health/pandemic, taxes and government spending, and healthcare were the top priorities for men. Specifically, the top ten policy issues for Utah women voters are as follows:

- 1) K–12 education
- 2) Healthcare (costs or access)
- 3) State taxes and government spending
- 4) Jobs and the economy
- 5) Public health/COVID-19 pandemic
- 6) Housing affordability
- 7) Politicians listening to voters
- 8) Police (support or reform)
- 9) Managing growth
- 10) Racial inequality or racism²²

In Utah Foundation's 2016 survey, women were more concerned than men on social issues; however, in the most recent survey, men and women agreed on four of the top five issues: health care costs, state taxes and government spending, jobs and the economy, and public health/COVID-19 pandemic. K–12 education was women's top priority, but it did not appear in men's top five. Politicians listening to voters made the fifth spot for men but was seventh for women. In a 2015 survey conducted by Envision Utah, Utah women's and men's responses showed similar overlap, with the top four concerns of both being jobs and economy, air quality, water, and education.²³ Further, Utah women share several concerns with women nationally, specifically public education and taxes; a 2016 study showed that US 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.²⁴

Finally, another report from Utah Foundation's 2016 priority series shed light on ways Utah women (especially Republican women) may be missing opportunities to influence the policy priorities of their party. 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 guiding policy direction. Surveys showed that delegates of both parties in Utah tend to be more polarized in their positions than general voters from their respective parties. However, the discrepancy is magnified in terms of gender priorities in the Republican Party; women comprised 56% of Republican voters in 2016, but only 24% of Republican delegates were women, compared to 55% and 47%, respectively, for Democrats.²⁵

Volunteering and Civic Engagement

In addition to voting and advocating for public policy, one of the key ways residents can become involved in their communities is through volunteer work. For the past 14 years in a row, Utah has ranked first in the nation for percentage of residents who regularly volunteer at 51%—a full 20 points higher than the national average of 30.3%.²⁶

Nationally, women's volunteer rates are six percentage points higher than men's (27.8% vs. 21.8%),²⁷ and the gap holds for Utah as well. A 2013 report from UServeUtah showed Utah women's volunteerism rates above men's (46% versus 40.1%, respectively).²⁸ Utah also ranks first in the nation for its parent volunteer rate at 63.5%.²⁹ Utah rankings solely for mothers are unavailable, but nationwide, 43.2% of all mothers volunteer, and, more specifically, 46.7% of working mothers volunteer.³⁰

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, at least 1.15 million Utahns gave 133.9 million volunteer service hours in 2018, the monetary value of which is an estimated \$3.2 billion.³¹ The report does not break down the data 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%).³² 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%).³³ In addition to volunteerism and service, in 2020, Utah was ranked the most charitable state in the US.³⁴

A 2018 UWLP report shows that Utah women, in addition to volunteering efforts, 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 However, Utah women are less likely to serve on government boards and commissions, holding only 32.7% of active positions in 2019—up 4.6% from 2016. In many cases, very few women apply for open seats. Almost 23% of boards and commissions have no female appointees, and 17.4% have a female-member majority.³⁶ There is definitely room for improvement in terms of women's engagement in those crucial areas of influence. Finally, Utah women are increasingly becoming directly involved in philanthropic giving through giving circles or clubs, which empowers them to direct their charitable donations in specific, targeted ways.³⁷

Engaging in the political process through public meetings (e.g., town halls, hearings, etc.) is another way for individuals to be civically engaged. Public meetings provide an opportunity for individuals to interact directly with their elected officials and can be a "significant indicator of the level of participation in political and community life, as well as the links between individual citizens and their local leaders."³⁸ According to the Utah Foundation, "In 2019, Utah reported the nation's third largest level of participation in public meetings."³⁹ Indeed, it was estimated

that in 2019, 15% of Utahns participated in a public meeting, well above the national average of 10%.⁴⁰ With the COVID-19 pandemic, many public meetings in 2020 shifted to virtual meetings, giving people the opportunity to engage in the public meeting process in a more convenient way, from the comfort of their homes.

Perhaps the highest form of civic engagement comes from running for and holding public office. The 2021 UWLP brief on the status of women in Utah politics shows that Utah women remain underrepresented in statewide elected office, the state legislature, county commission and council seats, mayoral offices, and city councils.⁴¹ Still, 2020 was a record-setting year for women running for office in the US and in Utah, and, while Utah has no women serving in US Congress, multiple Utah women are running for a national senate seat in 2021. Research has found that when women do decide to run for office, they are elected at the same rate as men.⁴²

Conclusion

As 2020 was a banner year for women's voting and civic engagement across the country and in Utah, now is the perfect time for stakeholders to build on this momentum and drive positive change moving forward. Research shows that girls and young women who participate in civic affairs, including engaging with organizations such as those listed in the UWLP "Community & Civic Engagement" toolkit,⁴³ are more likely to become women who vote.⁴⁴ 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 2019 survey conducted by Better Days 2020.⁴⁵ Educational institutions, government organizations, and nonprofits can play a vital role in increasing Utah women's voter participation and other types of community engagement through funding and promoting relevant initiatives, programs, and awareness campaigns. As women's civic participation has the potential to influence every aspect of society, these efforts will ultimately strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and in the state as a whole.

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