

Women on the Ballot? Investigating how the American Public Perceives the Emotional Viability of Women to Serve in Politics since 1974*

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At current rates, the World Economic Forum estimates that it will take at least 100 years to reach gender parity in politics. Despite progress in recent years, why is it slated to take so long? Utilizing data from The General Social Survey (GSS), this paper analyzes responses from the American public between 1974 and 2022 to begin to understand how demographic factors, political views, and party identification impact perceptions of the emotional viability of women to serve in politics. This data reveals XXX.

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*Code and data are available at: https://github.com/InessaDeAngelis/Perceptions_of_Women_in_Politics

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1 Introduction

Despite changing norms and perceptions, women are largely still missing from elected office in the United States (U.S.), Canada, and across the world. In 2023, the U.S. elected a historic number of women to the House of Representatives with 125 (or 28.7%) and 25 to the Senate (or 25%) (American Women and Politics 2023). The current Vice President, Kamala Harris, is the first woman to hold this office. Although the number of women elected to the highest levels of government in the U.S. is inching toward gender-parity, progress is slow and hard fought. Women’s credibility and perceived power as politicians is impacted by gendered framing by traditional media, priming members of the public to hold biased views about their qualifications (Geus et al. 2021). Framing refers to how information is chosen, interpreted, and presented by the media, influencing the audience’s perception of it as important and shaping their own decision making procedures (Bashevkin 2009). Previous research has shown that the American public is open to voting for a female president and that gender stereotypes are playing less of a role in the construction of public image and voting behaviours (Holman 2023). However, gender stereotypes continue to be a factor in perceptions of the viability of women to serve as elected officials.

To gain a further understanding of the gendered stereotypes about the perceived emotional viability of women to serve in politics, I track responses by political party affiliation and identification, using data obtained from the General Statistical Survey (GSS) from NORC (NORC 2022b) at the University of Chicago. These perceptions of women in politics are then analyzed to understand their correlations with demographic factors such as gender and age, as well as tracking the perceptions over time.

My analysis emphasizes that perceptions of women in politics have generally improved over time since the early 1970s, with a small dip in the early 2010s.

In the remainder of this paper, I commence with the Data section which outlines the nature of the data obtained, limitations, and cleaning procedures. In the Results section, I present trends found during the analysis process. Then, in the Discussion section, I provide further insights and future areas of study. In the Conclusion, I summarize the main findings. Lastly, the Appendix contains a supplemental survey which proposes additional questions to study perceptions of women in politics.

2 Data

The data used in this paper was retrieved from the US General Social Survey (GSS) from NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC 2022b). I obtained both demographic data and data relating to the perceived emotional viability of women in politics, political party affiliation and identification, from 1974 to 2022.

2.1 Source Data

For demographic data, I obtained the following data, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic data obtained from GSS

Variable	New Name	Description	Example
age	age	Respondent’s age	32
sex	gender	Respondent’s sex	female

As noted in Table 2, I obtained this data relating to the emotional viability of women in serve in politics. The survey question for all three variables asks *“Tell me if you agree or disagree with this statement: Most men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women”* (NORC 2022a). Going forward, I will refer to this as the “women in politics question”. A further discussion of these variables can be found later on in this section.

Table 2: Perceptions of Women in Politics data obtained from GSS

Variable	New Name	Description	Example
fepol	women_in_politics	Men are better suited for politics than women	agree
fepolv	women_in_politics	Men are better suited for politics than women	disagree
fepolnv	women_in_politics	Men are better suited for politics than women	disagree

Lastly, as outlined in Table 3, I retrieved data relating to political views and party identification. The political views survey question asks “*We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I’m going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal–point 1–to extremely conservative–point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?*” (NORC 2022a). The party identification survey question asks “*Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?*” (NORC 2022a).

Table 3: Political Party and Identification data obtained from GSS

Variable	New Name	Description	Example
polviews	political_views	Views ranked on a 7-point scale	Slightly conservative
partyid	party_identification	Republican, Democrat, Independent	Strong Democrat

2.2 Data Limitations

Since 1972, GSS has been conducting in-person interviews to track public opinion. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2021 and 2022 surveys were conducted solely online and through mixed-methods. This change in methodology resulted in several limitations, which are discussed in further detail below.

2.2.1 Survey Methodology

The 2022 GSS bridges the methodology from both the traditional face-to-face data collection processes utilized between 1972 and 2018 and the web-based collection method introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, using a mixed mode that includes face-to-face, web, and telephone surveys. Throughout 2022, the GSS conducted an experiment where the sample was divided into two parts. The first part encompassed people doing the face-to-face survey, while the second part included people doing the web and telephone survey. The content of the two parts of the data was not intended to be compared, instead comparing the two modes of collecting data. The sample divided in two for the purpose of comparing methodologies is visible in the `fepolv` and `fepolnv` variables selected for this paper. In 2021 and 2022, the GSS survey updated the variable name from `fepol` to `fepolv` and `fepolnv`, although the phrasing of the question remained the same. Despite these changes in methodology, GSS (NORC 2022a) intends for the 2022 survey to be comparable to the 2018 GSS.

Previous iterations of GSS selected respondents by quota (1972-1976), Kish grid with age ordering (1975-2018), and last birthday (2021). The 2022 GSS shifts to a Kish grid without age ordering, where adults in the household are selected by their order in the household, not age (NORC 2022a). These changes to the selection of respondents, especially considering

technological literacy among older populations may impact the survey results from 2021 and 2022.

2.2.2 Gap in 2020 Data

Data from the year 2020 is not recorded and instead spans 2020 and 2021, which is inconsistent with the typically yearly GSS. There was also a shift in methodology, as previously discussed, to address risks from the Covid-19 pandemic which changed which people were selected and how they completed the GSS questionnaire.

2.2.3 Impact on this study

Although the majority of the data utilized for this study was obtained prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2021 and 2022 responses may be impacted by the changes in methodology and political context during and following the 2020 election. 2020 was a presidential election year in the United States, which saw Joe Biden and Kamala Harris (Democrat) beat Donald Trump and Mike Pence (Republican). Paired with a changing world and policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, whether it be mass-vaccination campaigns, stimulus cheques, or relief plans, respondents' political views and party identification answers may be impacted. As well, Kamala Harris as a woman of colour on the Democrat ticket may have influenced responses to the women in politics survey question. Despite the significant methodological changes and political climate underpinning the 2021 and 2022 GSS, this will have less of an impact on long-term visualizations and trends.

2.3 Data Cleaning

Data was collected, cleaned, and analyzed using the statistical programming software R (R Core Team 2023), using functions from `tidyverse` (Wickham et al. 2019), `ggplot2` (Wickham 2016), `dplyr` (Wickham et al. 2023), `readr` (Wickham, Hester, and Bryan 2023), `tibble` (Müller and Wickham 2023), `janitor` (Firke 2023), `KableExtra` (Zhu 2021), `knitr` (Xie 2014), `ggbeeswarm` (Clarke and Sherrill-Mix 2023), `ggrepel` (Slowikowski 2023), `labelled` (Larmarange et al. 2023), `haven` (Wickham, Miller, and Smith 2022), and `here` (Müller and Bryan 2020).

After downloading and selecting the variables of interest from GSS (NORC 2022b), I performed data cleaning based on the variable definitions outlined in the GSS codebook (NORC 2022a). I removed the years in which the questions asking whether men are better suited emotionally for politics than women, political views, and party identification were not asked (the raw data set would display answers for those years as NA). I updated the respondent demographic information data set to reflect the years omitted, given that these demographic questions are asked every year.

Table 4: Summary statistics for the number of observations across the surveys from 1974 to 2022

mean	max	min	sd
1322	2503	660	458

Between 1974 and 2018, the variable for the women in politics question was `fepol`. However, with the implementation of the online only survey in 2021 and the mixed-methodology survey in 2022, `fepolv` and `fepolnv` were introduced to replace `fepol`. Consequently, employing the `rbind()` function which combines groups of rows together, I merged together the `fepol`, `fepolv`, and `fepolnv` responses into one new variable labelled `women_in_politics`. There appears to be no pattern or clear methodology behind why the women in politics question was asked some years over others, as sometimes the question was asked two or three years in a row, then not asked in a subsequent year, before repeating the sequence. Starting in 1994, the women in politics question was asked bi-annually, except in 2020 due to Covid-19 impacting the surveying process.

The political views and party identification questions were asked slightly more frequently between 1974 and 1994, including in some years that the women in politics question was not. The responses from 1976, 1980, 1984, and 1987 were removed to ensure consistency between the two data sets. Similar to the women in politics question, the party affiliation and political views were asked bi-annually starting in 1994, except in 2020 due to Covid-19.

2.4 Respondent Demographic Information

During face-to-face interviews, interviewers traditionally coded the `sex` variable based on their observations. However, it was not possible to make this determination with telephone and web administered surveys, so respondents were asked their sex recorded at birth and their current gender identity. GSS then re-coded these responses into one variable: `sex`.

During the data cleaning process, I renamed the `sex` column to `gender`, with the value 1 updated to “Male”, and the value 2 updated to “Female” based on the GSS codebook (NORC 2022a).

Despite the changing survey methodology, respondents were still asked to identify their age in the web and mixed-method surveys. See Table 5 for a sample of the cleaned respondent demographic information.

2.5 Perceptions of Women in Politics

Despite the changing variable names to account for newer survey methods, the question asking whether men are emotionally better suited for politics than women harkens back to the 1970s,

Table 5: Sample of Cleaned Respondent Demographic Information

Year	Age	Gender
1974	21	Male
1974	41	Male
1974	83	Female
1974	69	Female
1974	58	Female
1974	30	Male

Table 6: Sample of Cleaned Women in Politics Data

Year	Women in Politics
2016	Agree
2016	Disagree
2016	Disagree
2016	Disagree
2016	Disagree
2016	Disagree

despite the strides being made toward gender equality in American politics. The phrasing of the question asking whether men are better emotionally suited is a leading question which is biased and primes the respondent to think about women in a specific way. Women are framed by traditional media and those on social media as being emotional, high strung, and not possessing “manly” leadership skills, so asking whether men are more emotionally suited over women reinforces traditional media framing and stereotypes (Courtemanche and Connor Green 2020) (Bashevkin 2009). The media never asks men about their emotions or covers their behaviour in the public eye through the lens of being emotional and the same should be expected for the media coverage of women in politics. GSS should consider asking future respondents in future iterations of the survey about leadership qualities, relevant experience, and ability to address crucial policy areas. Questions such as these are addressed in the supplement survey in the Appendix.

Although this women in politics question is biased, the survey data can present interesting trends which will be discussed later in this paper. See Table 6 for a sample of the cleaned data.

Table 7: Sample of Summarized Political Preferences

Year	Political Views	Party Identification
1974	Extremely Liberal	Strong Democrat
1974	Moderate	Not Strong Republican
1974	Slightly Conservative	Not Strong Republican
1974	Slightly Liberal	Independent, Close to Democrat
1974	Liberal	Strong Democrat
1974	Moderate	Not Strong Democrat

Table 8: Number of respondents by gender 1974-2022

Gender	Number of Responses	Percentage
Female	20609	55.7%
Male	16346	44.2%
NA	50	0.1%

2.6 Political Preferences

During the data cleaning process, I renamed the `polviews` column to `political_views`, with the value 1 updated to “Extremely liberal”, 2 updated to “Liberal”, 3 updated to “Slightly liberal,” 4 updated to “Moderate”, 5 updated to “Slightly conservative”, 6 updated to “Conservative”, and 7 to “Extremely conservative” based on the GSS codebook (NORC 2022a).

Furthermore, during the data cleaning process I renamed the `partyid` column to `party_identification`. I then changed value 0 to “Strong Democrat”, 1 to “Not Strong Democrat”, 2 to “Independent, Close to Democrat”, 3 to “Independent”, 4 to “Independent, Close to Republican”, 5 to “Not Strong Republican”, 6 to “Strong Republican”, and 7 to “Other”, based on the GSS codebook (NORC 2022a). See Table 7 for a sample of the cleaned data.

3 Results

3.1 Respondent Demographics

Between 1974 and 2022, there were 37,005 responses recorded for GSS surveys which specifically asked the women in politics, political views, and party identification questions. Of these respondents, 20,609 (55.7%) identified as female, with 16,346 (44.2%) identifying as male, and 50 (0.1%) opting not to share their **gender** (see Table 8).

Table 9: ?(caption)

	youngest	oldest	average
1	18	89	46.52271

Table 10: Women in Politics

Women in Politics	Gender	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	Female	5118	13.8%
Agree	Male	4377	11.8%
Agree	NA	8	0.0%
Disagree	Female	15491	41.9%
Disagree	Male	11969	32.3%
Disagree	NA	42	0.1%

The age of survey respondents ranged from 18 to 89, with the highest number of responses per age falling within the 25-43 age range (see ?@tbl-age_summary).

3.2 Perceptions of Women in Politics

Despite the biased wording of GSS' women in politics survey question, respondents largely disagreed that men are generally more emotionally suited than women to serve in politics. 74.3% of respondents, spanning 1974-2022, disagree with the question, while 25.7% agree. We can see in Table 10 that women disagree with the question at a higher rate (41.9%), compared to men (32.3%). Table 10 also highlights that women agree with the question at a slightly higher rate than men (13.8% compared to 11.8%). 8 people (0.0%) agreed with the question without sharing their **gender**, while 42 people (0.1%) disagreed.

3.3 Political Views

Responses to the women in politics question varies by political views, with people who identify as having more liberal views disagreeing and people with more conservative views agreeing. Liberal views refers to anyone who self-identified in GSS as having **slightly liberal**, **liberal**, or **extremely liberal** views. Conservative views accounts for anyone who self-identified as having **slightly conservative**, **conservative**, or **extremely conservative** views.

As outlined in Table 11, we can see that 8,625 people (81.4%) who self identify as holding liberal views disagree with the women in politics question, while 1,965 people (18.6%) agree. Table 12 highlights that 8,472 people (67.8%) who self identify as holding conservative views disagree with the women in politics question, while 4,015 people (32.2%) agree.

Table 11: Responses to Women in Politics by Political Views- Liberal

Women in Politics	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	1965	18.6%
Disagree	8625	81.4%

Table 12: Responses to Women in Politics by Political Views- Conservative

Women in Politics	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	4015	32.2%
Disagree	8472	67.8%

Lastly, we can see in Table 13 that among people who self identify as holding moderate views, 10,405 people (74.7%) disagree with the women in politics question, while 3,523 people (25.3%) agree.

The number of people with liberal views who disagree with the question that men are emotionally better suited for politics than women is comparable to the hypothesized number, while the people with conservative views who agree is not as high as anticipated.

3.4 Party Identification

Responses to the question whether men are more emotionally suited for politics than women varies by American political party affiliation. People who self-identify as aligning with the Democrats disagree at a higher percent than people who self-identify as aligning with the Republicans. Aligning with the Democrats refers to anyone who self-identified in GSS as **Strong Democrat**, **Not Strong Democrat**, or **Independent**, **Close to Democrat**. Aligning with the Republicans accounts for anyone who self-identified as **Strong Republican**, **Not Strong Republican**, or **Independent**, **Close to Republican**. **Independent** refers to people who self identify with neither the Democrats or Republicans and **Other** accounts for people who align with a third party or candidate.

Table 14 reveals that 13,869 people (77%) who self identify as being affiliated with the Democrats disagree with the women in politics question while 4,146 people (23%) agree with

Table 13: Responses to Women in Politics by Political Views- Moderate

Women in Politics	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	3523	25.3%
Disagree	10405	74.7%

Table 14: Responses to Women in Politics by Political Views & Gender

Women in Politics	Gender	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	Female	975	9.2%
Agree	Male	988	9.3%
Agree	NA	2	0.0%
Disagree	Female	4999	47.2%
Disagree	Male	3619	34.2%
Disagree	NA	7	0.1%

Table 15: Responses to Women in Politics by Party Identification- Democrat

Women in Politics	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	4146	23.0%
Disagree	13869	77.0%

the question.

As illustrated by Table 16, 8,853 people (68.2%) who self identify as being affiliated with the Republicans disagree with the women in politics question while 4,121 people (31.8%) agree with the question.

Table 17 shows that 4,294 people (79.2%) who self identify as being Independent from a political party disagree with the women in politics question while 1,128 people (20.8%) agree with the question.

Finally, Table 18 demonstrates that 486 people (81.8%) who self identify as being affiliated with a third party disagree with the women in politics question while 108 people (18.2%) agree with the question.

Table 16: Responses to Women in Politics by Party Identification- Republican

Women in Politics	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	4121	31.8%
Disagree	8853	68.2%

Table 17: Responses to Women in Politics by Party Identification- Independent

Women in Politics	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	1128	20.8%
Disagree	4294	79.2%

Table 18: Responses to Women in Politics by Party Identification- Other

Women in Politics	Number of Responses	Percentage
Agree	108	18.2%
Disagree	486	81.8%

4 Discussion

5 Conclusion

Appendix

The supplemental survey is available here: <https://forms.gle/EFj72QiGS3fo186z5>

5.1 Survey Preamble

The General Social Survey collects information and maintains a historical record of respondents' attitudes, experiences, concerns, and practices. In order to strengthen the understanding of perceptions of women in politics, these questions are designed to better understand what socio-economic, cultural, and political factors and conditions contribute to a person's notion of whether women are fit to serve in elected political office, lead efforts to advance specific policy agendas, and increase the number of women elected to all levels of government.

This survey is voluntary and responses are anonymous. If you decide to participate, you can skip questions and withdraw at any time. Individual responses will be recorded in my data set using a user identification number.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Please contact inessa.deangelis@mail.utoronto.ca if you have questions or require any further information.

5.2 Survey Questions

(1) If you identify as a visible minority, what is your specific group?

-Black

-Chinese

-Filipino

-Japanese

-Korean

-South Asian-East Indian

-Southeast Asian

-North African

-Arab

-I do not identify as a visible minority

-Other (please specify)

(2) What town or city do you live in?

(short answer text)

(3) What state do you live in?

(short answer text)

(4) How often do you engage with politics and political content?

-Daily

-A few times a week

-A few times a month

-Rarely

-Never

(5) Where do you go to seek out political content?

-Social media

-Traditional media

-Events

-Other

(6) Does the gender of a candidate matter more than their political affiliations?

-Yes

-No

-Indifferent

(7) Does the gender of a candidate matter more than their political ideology?

-Yes

-No

-Indifferent

(8) Does the gender of a candidate matter more than their policies?

-Yes

-No

-Indifferent

(9) What is the most important factoring when deciding which candidate to support in an election?

-Gender

-Personal characteristics

-Leadership skills

-Ideology

-Political affiliation

-Policies

-Other

(10) Do you think women possess the leadership skills required to serve in elected office?

-Yes

-No

(11) Do you think women can effectively manage political policies?

-Yes

-No

(12) Is the current political climate supportive of women seeking elected office?

-Yes

-No

-Somewhat

5.3 Submission Message

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your answers will help expand our understanding of perceptions of women in politics.

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