INTRODUCTION

During the fall of 2023, Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) researchers conducted a statewide study to establish a baseline for public perceptions related to the awareness, understanding, and attitudes about challenges that Utah women and girls face (see Background & Methods for details). The study was created to support the work of 18 areas of focus (spokes) within the movement called A Bolder Way Forward, which is dedicated to helping more Utah girls and women thrive. One of the 18 areas of focus is political and civic engagement, and this summary shares findings that illuminate present circumstances and establishes a baseline to track progress.

BACKGROUND

According to the latest UWLP report titled "The Status of Women in Utah Politics: A 2024 Update," there has been some progress the past decade with women being elected to and serving in elective offices at the local and state levels. Yet, Utah continues to lag behind the nation. Although Utah has always ranked high in volunteerism, evidence shows that Utah women have not been represented well in decision-making roles at the municipal, county, and state levels. The four political and civic engagement questions (survey items) asked in this new study provide additional insight that will guide decisions to increase the percentage of women in these roles. Although these items focus on Utahns' understanding and perceptions, the findings are important to generate societal change.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participants responded to each survey item using a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=neither disagree nor agree, 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree). For Sample 1 (non-probability), 2,651 Utahns responded to these four questions, and for Sample 2 (representative) there were 650 participants (Total=3,301).

1. Family: The first survey item was "If a woman were to serve in a political role, it would negatively impact her family." The statistical mean was 2.61 (SD 1.68) for the non-probability sample and 3.02 (SD 1.70) for the representative sample. There are wide standard deviations, which mean that responses were spread. In the combined results, although 66.7% of respondents disagreed at some level, 531 people (16.0%) agreed, while 569 (17.2%) were neutral. The combined demographics are summarized below.

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Gender: Women's agreement levels were significantly lower than men's (2.69 and 2.91, resp.).

Age: There were no significant agreement differences by age.

Education: Respondents with only some high school or a high school diploma/equivalency disagreed less, while those with graduate degrees disagreed significantly more.

Marital Status: Agreement levels were similar in all categories.

Income: There were no significant differences in income ranges.

Children: Respondents with no children disagreed significantly more than those with children.

Race & Ethnicity: Black respondents disagreed significantly less than other races, and Pacific Islanders selected the strongest disagree choices.

Religion: Agnostics and atheists had significantly stronger disagreement, while those who selected "very active" had less.

Employment: There were no significant differences, but full-time students had the strongest disagreement.

Residency: There were no significant differences among categories.

Counties: The Millard, Sevier, Juab, Beaver, & Piute group of counties had significantly less disagreement than all others.

2. Well Suited: The second survey item was "Women are well suited for elected political positions." The statistical mean was 6.44 (SD 1.03) for the non-probability sample; and 5.62 (SD 1.37) for the representative sample. With both samples combined, 1,981 (59.9%) participants selected "strongly agree," and another 994 (30.1%) chose "agree" or "somewhat agree." There was overwhelming agreement that women are well-suited for political roles. The demographics for this question are summarized below.

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Gender: Women's agreement levels were significantly higher than men's (6.28 and 5.76, resp.)

Age: There were no significant differences, although respondents in the 50–54 category had the highest mean and 70+ the lowest.

Education: The most agreeable participants were those with graduate (6.48) and bachelor's (6.19) degrees.

Marital Status: Agreement levels were similar in all status categories.

Income: The higher the income level, the stronger the agreement.

Children: There were no significant differences between those who had children or not or among those who had children in various age groups.

Race & Ethnicity: Those who identified as Hispanic and White had the strongest agreement levels.

Religion: Those who selected agnostic and atheist had the strongest agreement to this item.

Employment: The highest agreement levels were from full-time students and those currently employed.

Residency: There were no significant differences among categories.

Denotes statistically significant differences within the demographic categories.

Counties: The counties with the highest agreement included Summit/Wasatch and Salt Lake, while the lowest agreement came from the Millard, Sevier, Juab, Beaver, and Piute grouping and Box Elder counties.

3. Civic Activities: The third survey item was "I understand how to get involved in civic activities." The statistical mean was 5.17 (SD 1.63) for Sample 1 and 4.57 (SD 1.59) for Sample 2. For this question, 51.4% in the non-probability and 32.1% in the representative sample selected "agree" or "strongly agree," indicating a significant difference between the samples. Overall, if the results were generalized to the broader Utah population, at least one-third of residents do not know how to become involved in their communities. See the combined demographic findings below.

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Gender: There was not a significant difference among agreement levels for women (4.97) and men (5.12).

Age: Generally, the older a respondent was, the stronger their agreement with the statement.

Education: The more education, the stronger the agreement.

Marital Status: Although there was not a significant difference, married participants had the strongest agreement.

Income: Higher income levels had stronger agreement.

Children: Parents were significantly more likely to have stronger agreement compared to nonparents, but not when they had children between 0 and 5 years old in the home.

Race & Ethnicity: Black and White respondents were likely to select that they strongly agreed, while American Indian participants had the lowest statistical mean.

Religion: There were no significant differences among religious affiliations. Regarding religious activity levels, the more active the respondent was in their affiliation, the higher the agreement.

Employment: There were no significant differences among the employment categories.

Residency: There were no significant differences in the agreement level and length of time living in Utah.

Counties: The counties with respondents who had the highest agreement included Summit/Wasatch, the Millard, Sevier, Juab, Beaver, and Piute grouping, and Washington.

4. Engagement: The final survey item was "I engage in efforts important to the wellbeing of my community." The statistical mean was 5.50 (SD 1.37) for Sample 1 (non-probability) and 4.59 (SD 1.50) for Sample 2 (representative). In the first, 80.1% of respondents agreed at some level with the statement, while in Sample 2, the percentage was lower (55.8%), and 24.8% neither agreed nor disagreed. See the summary of demographics for all participants below.

DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Gender: Women's agreement levels were significantly higher than men's (5.24 and 5.06, resp.).

Age: Participants 35 years of age and older were significantly more likely to agree with the statement.

Education: The more education, the stronger the agreement.

Marital Status: There was no significant differences among marital status categories.

Income: The higher the income level, the stronger the respondents agreed that they were engaged in efforts important to the wellbeing of their community.

Children: Parents were significantly more likely to agree that they were engaged in efforts, particularly when their children were at least 6 years of age.

Race & Ethnicity: Those who identified as Pacific Islander or White more strongly agreed that they were engaged, and Asians were the least likely to agree they were engaged in the community.

Religion: There were no significant differences among religious affiliations. However, the higher the religious activity level, the stronger the agreement.

Employment: Full-time students had the strongest agreement, and unemployed individuals had the lowest.

Residency: The longer that respondents had lived in Utah, the more strongly they agreed they were engaged in efforts.

Counties: The counties with residents who agreed the strongest included Summit/Wasatch, the ten rural eastern county grouping, the Millard, Sevier, Juab, Beaver, and Piute grouping, and the Tooele, Morgan, and Rich grouping. The lowest, although still "somewhat agree," included Iron, Salt Lake, Utah, and Weber counties.

CONCLUSION

This summary highlights key findings related to four political and community engagement questions. Respondents from across the state participated in the study (see Background & Methods for the demographic details of both samples). The findings illuminate current perceptions of Utahns related to women in politics and civic engagement.

Although the topic of Utah women in politics has been often discussed in the news media, progress is still needed. Research has shown that men and women often have different priorities, with women focusing more often on the needs of children, families, and social programs within society. In addition, having women more equally engaged in civic activities and community roles at all levels within society will become even more critically important in years to come. As men and women lead more equally in all public roles, the needs of all Utahns will be better served.

For questions and information:
- uwlp@usu.edu
- utwomen.org
- abolderwayforward.org

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