



Voting and Civic Engagement Among Utah Women

Setting the Stage

Utah has a strong history of women's political and civic involvement. The state was an early leader in giving women the vote, was home to the first female state senator in the nation,¹ and, as recently as 1996, had the strongest women's voter participation in the United States.² However, these factors do not give the full picture, and in 2015 the *Institute for Women's Policy Research* ranked Utah dead last in the area of political participation.³ Much of this ranking was due to the lack of women running for and serving in public office, which we will address in a future *Research & Policy Brief*, but Utah women's voter ranking and some aspects of civic involvement also have room for improvement.

This research snapshot focuses on three key areas:

- 1) Utah women's voting participation rates and national ranking when it comes to voter turnout,
- 2) Utah women's policy priorities, compared with those of Utah men and women nationwide, and
- 3) Utah women's levels of civic and community engagement, focusing on volunteer work but also exploring other ways Utah women are involved in their communities.

Women Voters in Utah

In Utah, although women's voter registration and turnout rates are slightly higher than those of Utah men, they are currently lower than women's rates in the nation as a whole. In the most recent presidential election year (2012), voter turnout among all women in Utah (not just eligible voters) was approximately 54%, compared to 58.5% for women nationally.⁴

Utah women have not always lagged in voter turnout. In the late 20th century, for three consecutive presidential elections (1988, 1992, and 1996), 76% of eligible women in Utah voted. At that point, Utah had the highest women's turnout of any state in the U.S., where the national average for women voters was 63.8%.⁵ The following presidential election year, 2000, only 59.3% of eligible Utah women voted, a big drop from 1996 but still above the national average for women, which was 56.2% that year.⁶ In 2012, only 57.1% of eligible Utah women voted, compared to the national percentage, 63.7%. That year,

Utah women's voting participation ranking dropped to 46 of 51 states (including Washington, D.C.) for registered women voters nationally.⁷ In the 16 years from 1996 to 2012, Utah's ranking for the percentage of women voting dropped 45 spots. This drastic decline was highlighted in a 2015 ranking of Utah women's political participation, wherein Utah was ranked 43 of 50 states for the percentage of women registered to vote, and 46 out of 50 for women who actually voted.⁸

Voter turnout nationally is highest in presidential years⁹ (e.g., the elections highlighted above), and Utah voters, like all Americans, cast ballots in much smaller numbers during midterm elections. Utah's decreased voter turnout is perhaps even more pronounced because Utah is one of only nine states that elects its governor during presidential election years.¹⁰ This decline holds for women, and in 2014, for example, only eight states had a lower turnout among their women voters than Utah. Three of those states also choose their governors during presidential election years. Only 37.6% of Utah's eligible women voters came to the polls in 2014, versus 43% of women nationally. Over the past 30 years, Utah women's voting participation has been steadily decreasing, and their ranking versus women nationally is also on the decline.

Over the past 30 years, Utah women's voting participation has been steadily decreasing, and their ranking versus women nationally is also on the decline.

Utah Women's Policy Priorities

According to a 2016 survey by the Utah Foundation, women in Utah are most concerned about social issues such as homelessness, poverty, crime, and the environment.¹¹ 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 Utahans' priorities as a whole.¹² Additionally, Utah women share several concerns with U.S. 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.¹³

Civic Engagement

Utah women are heavily involved in volunteer work; Utah ranks first in the U.S. (by a large margin) for percentage of residents who regularly volunteer.¹⁴ While we were unable to locate data that specifically reports on Utah women's volunteering, we know that across the nation, women's volunteer rates are 6% percentage points higher than men's (27.8% vs. 21.8%).¹⁵

While specific data for Utah women's volunteer rates (as distinct from all Utahans) is unavailable, volunteer rates for all residents of Utah are highest in the nation, at 46% (this is almost 10% higher than the second-ranked state). According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, Utah volunteers give 91.7 hours of their time annually per capita. The report states that a large majority of Utahans' volunteer service is given through religious organization (64.5%), followed by education (14.2%) and social service (8.5%) organizations. However, this high number for "religious" service does not necessarily mean that all the service given is religious in nature. Some of the main volunteer activities in which Utahans participate are teaching/tutoring (43.1%), mentoring youth (30.6%), collecting and distributing food (20.0%), and general labor (18.7%).¹⁶

Finally, in addition to their volunteering efforts, women in Utah are well-represented on non-profit boards (holding 45.8% of available seats),¹⁷ but less so on government boards and commissions (where the rate is around 30%; see 2016 Research & Policy brief for more details).

Conclusion

Finding ways to increase Utah women's voter participation and civic engagement will strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and the state as a whole. The following list provides additional resources or information on this topic:

- [Real Women Run](#)
- [United Ways in Utah](#)
- [Utah Commission on Service and Volunteerism](#)
- [Utah Foundation Reports](#)
- [Utah League of Women Voters](#)

- [Utah Women & Leadership Project Reports](#)
- [Utah Women's Networks and Groups](#)
- [YWCA Utah](#)

¹ MacKay, K. L. (2005). Women in politics: Power in the public sphere. In P. L. Scott & L. Thatcher (Eds.), *Women in Utah history: Paradigm or paradox?* (pp. 360–393). Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

² Davidson, L. (1996, March 13). Utah women are tops in voter turnout tallies. *Deseret News*. Retrieved from [Utah Women are Tops in Voter-Turnout Tallies](#)

³ Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2015). The best and worst states overall for women in 2015. IWPR #R466. Status of Women in the States. Retrieved from [The Best and Worst States Overall for Women in 2015](#)

⁴ Hess, C., & Williams, C. (2014, May). The well-being of women in Utah: An overview. Institute for Women's Policy Research & YWCA Utah. Retrieved from <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/the-well-being-of-women-in-utah-an-overview>

⁵ Davidson, L. (1996, March 13).

⁶ United States Census Bureau. (2010, last revised). Voting and registration in the election of 2000. Table 4a. Retrieved from [Voting and Registration in 2000 Election](#)

⁷ United States Census Bureau. (2013, May). Voting and registration in the election of November 2012. Report Number: P20-568, Table 4B. Retrieved from <http://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/tables/p20/568/table04b.xls>

⁸ Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2015). The status of women in Utah, 2015: Highlights. IWPR #R455. Status of Women in the States. Retrieved from [The Status of Women in Utah, 2015: Highlights](#)

⁹ Desilver, D. (2014, July 24). Voter turnout always drops off for mid-term elections, but why? *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from [Voter turnout always drops off for midterm elections](#)

¹⁰ Davidson, L. (2014, November 27). Utah had 3rd lowest voter turnout among states. *Salt Lake Tribune*. Retrieved from [Utah had 3rd lowest voter turnout among states](#)

¹¹ Utah Foundation. (2016, March). 2016 Utah priorities project: Part I: Survey of voters' issues and concerns. Report number 739. Retrieved from [2016 Utah Priorities Project: Survey of Voter's Issues and Concerns](#)

¹² Utah Foundation. (2016, March).

¹³ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. (2016, February 17). Winning women in 2016: Findings from a web survey of American adults. Retrieved from [Winning Women in 2016](#)

¹⁴ Frohlich, T. C., & Lieberman, M. (2015, March 23). States volunteering the most (and least). *24/7 Wall Street*. Retrieved from <http://247wallst.com/special-report/2015/03/23/states-volunteering-the-most/4/>

¹⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016, February 25). Volunteering in the United States, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>

¹⁶ Corporation for National and Community Service. (2014 data). Volunteering and civic engagement in Utah: Trends and highlights overview. Retrieved from <https://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/UT>

¹⁷ Utah Women and Leadership Project. (February 24, 2014). The status of women leaders in Utah non-profits. Brief No. 2. Retrieved from: http://www.uvu.edu/uwlp/docs/uwlp_brief_2014_no._2.pdf

Acknowledgement: This snapshot is possible through the generous donations of the LDS Foundation, Rich & Leann Crandall, and the Woodbury School of Business at Utah Valley University.

Copyright © 2016 Utah Women & Leadership Project