

# Are men seen as 'more American' than women?

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Protesters hold signs at the Chicago Women's March in January 2017. Credit: John W. Iwanski, CC BY-NC

Women make up [50.8 percent](#) of the U.S. population and have equal voting rights, yet are politically underrepresented. The country has never had a female president or vice president. Only 3.5 percent of Supreme Court justices have been women, and women make up only [20 percent of Congress](#).

Studies have shown that within a country, groups with more power often [feel greater ownership over it](#). Because they control actual resources, like money, and symbolic resources, like writing history, they're better able to shape the culture in their image. For example, because Christianity is the most prominent religion in the United States, Christmas is a federal holiday.

Because men hold more power than [women](#) in the United States, we wanted to explore a simple question: Would people tend to think of men as "more American" than women? And, if so, how does this influence the way American women identify with their country?

## **A masculine national ethos**

We tested these questions in [two studies](#).

First, we looked at the connection between [national identity](#) and gender-specific traits, asking 382 American adults the extent to which they thought of certain traits as "American." Among these traits, some were stereotypically feminine (helpful, friendly) while others were stereotypically masculine (outgoing, ambitious). (We used results from [previous studies](#) to designate certain traits as "masculine" or "feminine.")

We found that both men and women rated [masculine traits](#) – like "independent" and "competitive" – as significantly more American than feminine ones.

Because attaching [gender stereotypes](#) to certain traits can be relatively subjective, we also asked our subjects to simply tell us how central they thought masculinity and femininity were to American identity. Sure enough, people thought masculinity was more important than femininity.

Finally, participants listed five people they considered examples of

Americans. They could include anyone, from celebrities (Oprah) to historical figures (George Washington) to family members (my dad). The participants were seven times more likely to list a man than a woman.

Building on the results of our first study, we asked participants questions about their identity: how important their gender was to them, and how important they felt it was to be an American.

Their answers revealed that the more men identified with their gender, the more they identified as American. This association wasn't as strong for women.

## **A roadblock to political power**

Our research suggests that group memberships – in this case, gender – play a big role in determining who is viewed as a "true" American. Yes, all citizens technically have equal standing under the law. But because the nation's identity seems to elevate masculinity, the interests of women – even though they're numerically equal with men – might not be adequately represented or addressed.

And because women identify with the nation less if they think they don't fit a masculine representation of a U.S. citizen, it also might help explain why [they're more hesitant to run for political office](#).

Meanwhile, the country's preference for masculine traits could explain why the female candidates who do run face an uphill battle. In order to demonstrate patriotism, women might feel the need to act masculine. But this creates a Catch-22, with female candidates [risking backlash](#) for acting in ways that violate stereotypical expectations.

## Can this change?

One reason men might be viewed as more American is because [we see male political leaders representing the country in domestic and foreign affairs](#). For citizens, this exposure connects "male" with "America." But if more women appear as representatives of American policy and interests, ideas of national identity might accordingly shift.

Studies have shown that female politicians in the U.S. [receive less media coverage](#) than their male counterparts; those that do appear tend to be described and depicted through the lens of [gender stereotypes](#): weak and emotional, with an emphasis on their [role as a wife or mother](#) and on their [appearance](#). Rarely do they appear as independent, strong leaders.

A national ethos that incorporates the positive traits that tend to be associated with each gender could create a stronger society, in which the needs of men and women are voiced, valued and addressed equally.

We're already starting to see [more female candidates throw their hats into the ring](#). If more win – which will increase the visibility of women in the public sphere – masculinity's grip on national identity might loosen.

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