

# Do women candidates have a harder time being elected? A political scientist explains

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Kamala Harris speaking at a Democratic rally at the University of Southern California in October 2010. Credit: Neon Tommy—Obama 68, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

In Congress this term, 25% of senators and 28% of representatives are women, near record highs for both houses, but far below equal representation with men. As Kamala Harris runs for president, will being a woman cost her votes?

To learn more about the role of gender in American politics, researchers spoke with Brian Schaffner, a political science professor and Newhouse Professor of Civic Studies. He is also a principal investigator of the [Cooperative Election Study](#), the largest academic survey focused on U.S. elections, and is writing a book about how political polarization is defined by social divisions.

## **How have attitudes toward electing women changed in America in the last 30 years?**

People are now much more open to electing women to all levels of office, including to president, although obviously we haven't seen a woman president yet. The number of women in Congress, for example, has hit historic highs, even though it's well under parity with men. There are also a lot of women governors throughout the country.

Political science research shows that when women run for office, they are at least as successful as men are. The big problem is not that voters won't vote for a woman for political office now; it's that women don't run as often as men do.

## **Why don't women run for office as much as men?**

This is not necessarily my area of expertise, but there's a lot of research that focuses on this. It shows a range of factors, from how women and men are raised differently to the types of things people have to do to run for office, like raising money—having to put yourself out there.

Also, until recently, women weren't recruited as much as men to run for office. The parties would go out and try to recruit men, because they were the people who were in their networks.

## **Are there other things that work against women candidates?**

Primary voters sometimes discriminate against women, not because they themselves are prejudiced against women, but because they think other voters are. I was a collaborator on a study in 2020 of Democratic primary voters and we found that even though they wanted a woman nominee more than they wanted a man nominee, they saw male nominees as more likely to beat Trump than a woman would. They voted for someone like Biden who they thought had a better chance.

## **To what extent is being female going to help or hinder Kamala Harris in this election?**

I'm not sure it's going to matter either way. A lot of people look at the 2016 election and think that Hilary Clinton lost because she is a woman. In my research, I found that people who agree with sexist statements voted against Clinton at high rates, while people who reject sexist statements voted for her at high rates.

One natural conclusion is that sexism cost her the election. But it turns out that sexist voters weren't going to vote for a male Democrat either. Sexist attitudes are built into the party divide, namely that the Democratic Party prioritizes an agenda for women's rights and pay equity and affirmative action, while the Republican Party rejects that.

Looking at data now, sexist voters don't dislike Harris any more than they dislike Biden—they dislike them both equally. People who reject sexist statements also like Harris and Biden at about the same rate.

What's interesting is the fact that she's a woman maybe isn't going to make that much of a difference at all in how people vote.

## Would that have surprised you 30 years ago?

Yes, I think 30 years ago you might have seen something different. Part of that is that the parties wouldn't have been as clearly sorted on issues related to sexism and women's rights as they are now.

In the present day, especially post-Trump, I think the Republican Party is now viewed more as the party that wants a traditional role for women in society. And the Democratic Party is the party that promotes a progressive role for women.

I don't think it would've been as clear three decades ago that the parties were that different when it came to what women's role in society is—and there was, more generally speaking, a greater willingness to discriminate against women running for [office](#) by stereotyping them as weak.

While it probably is not going to make much of a difference in this election, it might have mattered if Harris had to run in the primary, because those voters would have potentially thought voters in the general election would discriminate against women candidates.

## **Other countries have elected women leaders—the UK, Germany, India, and Pakistan—while the U.S. has not. Why is that?**

There could be a lot of explanations, but one is that the party organizations in those countries have a much stronger role in picking candidates than they do in the United States. In the U.S., it's up to voters in primaries. Some other countries have quotas, to have a certain number of women who are on their list of candidates.

I think you get more women in the pipeline that way, so it is easier for

women to then ascend to the top position in those countries. Here, candidates usually have to win lower offices first, and then win a primary for Congress to be a nominee for Congress. It's just a much harder road to get there.

Provided by Tufts University

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