



# Voter Turnout Among Women

## Overview

League of Women Voters of  
Texas Education Fund

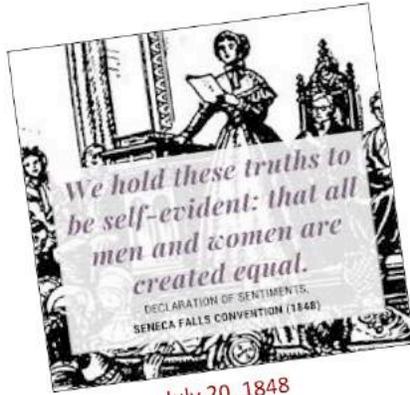
Elizabeth A. Erkel, PhD  
August 2017

Data sources available upon request.



The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, political organization of volunteers who believe that our representative democracy needs citizens involved in public decisions. Citizens can influence government policies and decisions that affect their lives by participating in politics, particularly voting and contacting their elected officials.

72 years...



July 20, 1848



August 26, 1920



August 2017

Sources available upon request

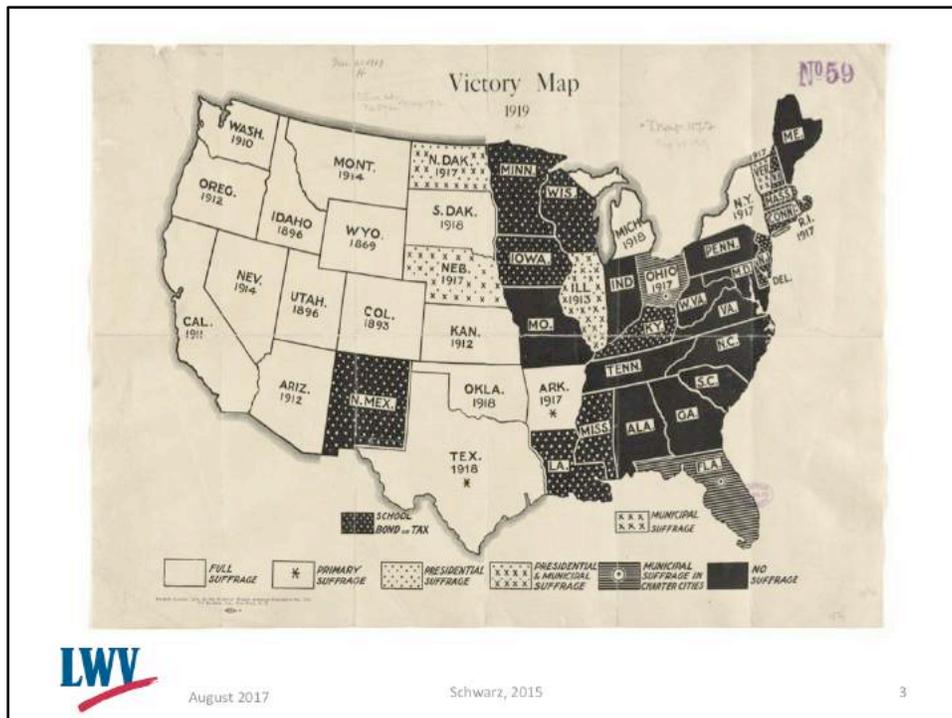
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The first Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls was attended by 300 people. Sixty-eight women and 32 men signed the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions that included the first formal demand made in the United States for woman's right to vote. Historically, the 1848 meeting at Seneca Falls signaled the formal beginning of the campaign for woman suffrage. This meeting occurred 72 years before Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby certified ratification of the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution that gained women the right to vote.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1971, August 26th has been celebrated as Women's Equality Day.<sup>2</sup>

*Sources*

1. Ryndner, 1999
2. National Women's History Project, n.d.  
Photo of newspaper from Library of Congress, n.d.



In January 1920, just prior to the ratification of the 19th Amendment, a patchwork of state suffrage laws existed.<sup>1</sup>

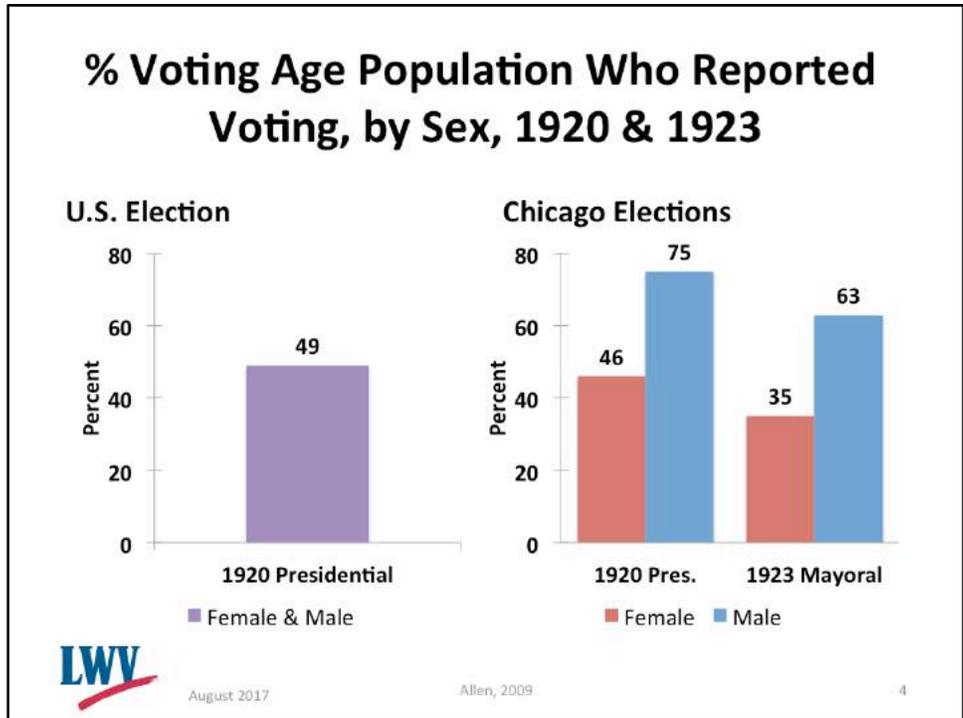
- 15 states had full suffrage, meaning women could vote in all elections.
- 21 states had partial suffrage, meaning women could vote in some elections, but not all. Texas women could vote in primary elections.
- 12 states did not allow women to vote in any elections.
- Thus women residing in 33 states gained full suffrage in 1920.

In Texas:

- Six attempts (from 1868 to 1917) to pass resolutions for a state Constitutional Amendment granting full woman suffrage had failed, lacking the 2/3 majority needed to pass a Constitutional Amendment resolution. Finally, by a simple majority of the Legislature, a law was enacted in a March 1918 special that allowed women to vote in primary elections. In 17 days, 386,000 women had registered to vote in the July Democratic Primary Election.<sup>2</sup>
- While there were nearly 650,000 voters in that primary, no record of the number of women was available.<sup>3</sup>

*Sources*

1. Schwarz, 2015
2. Taylor, 2017
3. Texas State Historical Association, n.d.

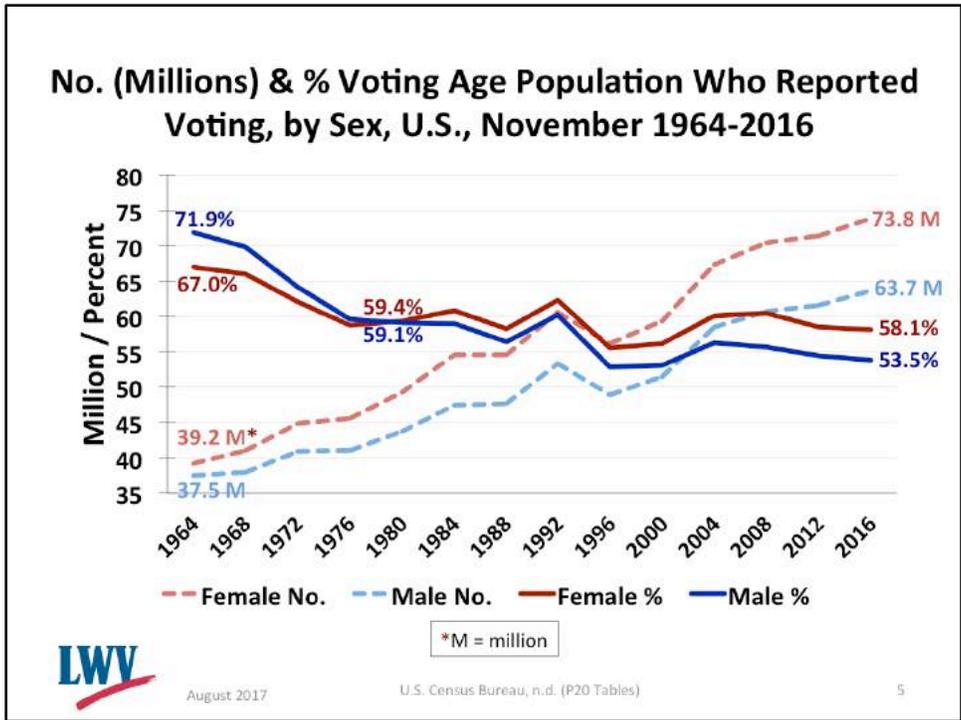


Because the U.S. Census Bureau didn't begin tracking voter turnout until 1964, and earlier data on presidential election turnout did not record turnout by sex, we don't know the voting habits of women prior to 1964. However, a 1924 study by two researchers at the University of Chicago showed that a large majority of adult women in Chicago at that time did not vote. It should be noted that women in Illinois had had the right to vote in presidential and municipal elections since 1913. The study interviewed 5,310 nonvoters\* in their homes to determine why they had not voted in 1923 mayoral election.

- One third (33%) of women respondents cited general indifference to voting or indifference to this mayoral election as their reason for not voting. Indifference among male respondents was 17%.
- One fifth of women respondents indicated that they didn't believe in voting (21%; 748) . Of these, 414 (half) said they didn't believe women should vote while 54 said their husbands objected to them voting.
  - Quotes from two who expressed anti-suffragist views included:
    - "I can't understand why women should vote. The country is much worse since women were given the right to vote. Since woman suffrage, we have prohibition."
    - "Women have no business voting. They would be better off staying at home and minding their own affairs."
- 8% of women respondents didn't know enough or were afraid to vote.

\*The sample was demographically representative of the 740,000 nonvoters in Chicago, with twice as many women as men.

Source  
Allen, 2009

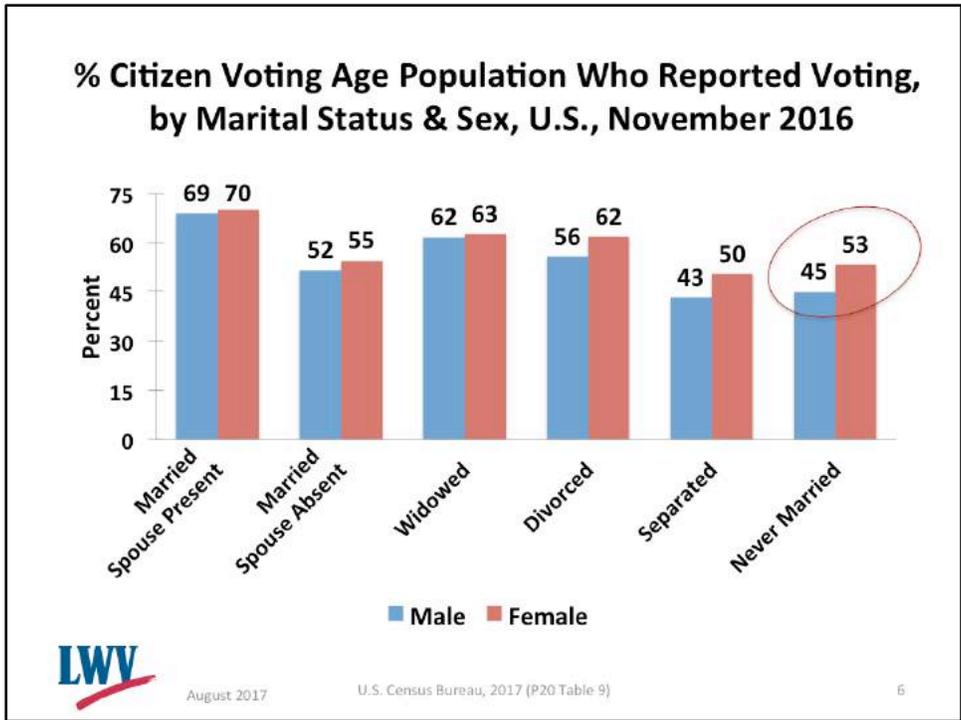


The dashed lines beginning at the lower left in the graph show that more women than men have reported voting since 1964 when the Census Bureau began tracking voter turnout by sex. This makes sense because females outnumber males by the teenage years.

- But in measuring the rate of voter turnout, the proportion of men that voted was higher than women until 1980. 1980 was the first presidential election in which the number and proportion of women who voted was higher than that for men. Again, the gap has widened over time, with women in 2016 voting at nearly a 5% higher rate than men.
- However, it should be noted that the proportion of men and women who vote has declined substantially—less so among women than men, but nevertheless, a serious concern:
  - 9% among women
  - 18% among men

**Data Sources**  
U.S. Census Bureau, n.d. (P20 Tables)

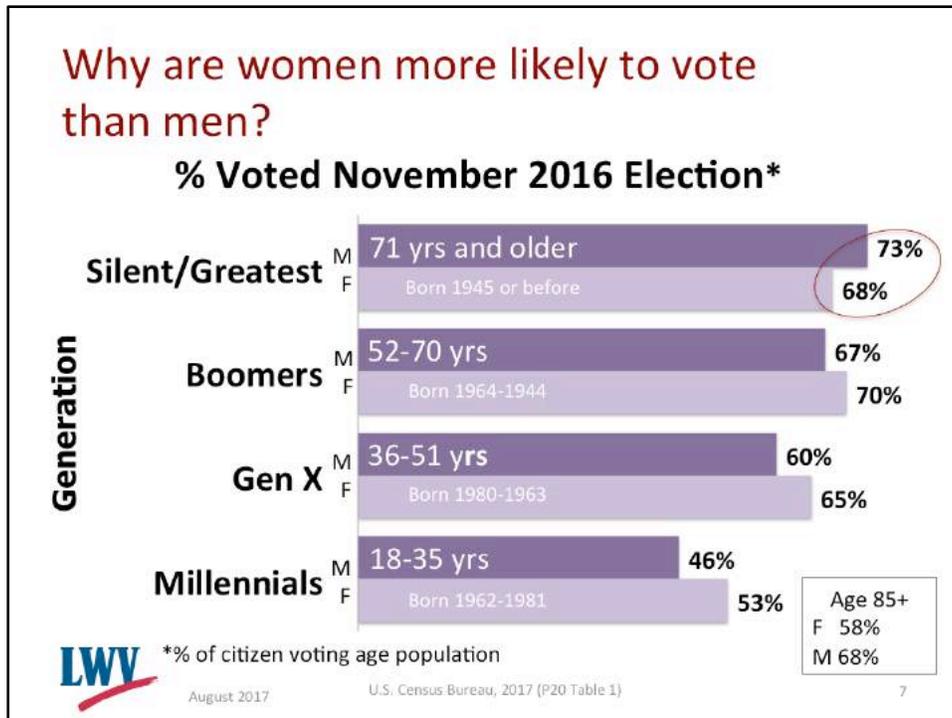
**Note**  
The Census Bureau did not report voting among the *citizen* voting age population (CVAP) until 1978. And voter turnout by sex among the CVAP was not reported until 1996.



The biggest divergence in voter turnout between men and women is among those never married: Single women vote at an 8% higher than single men. No wonder campaigns target single women!

**Data Source**

U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 (P20 Table 9)



So what explains the higher turnout among women than men since 1980? There have been many studies over many years, but there is no agreement among political scientists, just speculation.

- One explanation is the generational divide and changing social norms over time:
  - Reluctance to vote was a vestige from the pre-suffrage/anti-suffrage era that remained through the 1950s: Older women were of the generation that thought voting was the prerogative of men.<sup>1</sup>
  - Even during the 2016 Presidential Election, the oldest generation of women were less likely to vote than men, with the oldest women less likely to vote than men of the same age.
    - These older women grew up in the 1940s and 1950s when women supposedly had less interest in politics and there were few women holding political office to serve as role models.<sup>2</sup>
- The slow increase in voter turnout among women in the years following the 19th Amendment could have been anticipated when you think about how hard it is to change ingrained behavior.
  - In fact, the lag time in registering and voting “is typical of any newly enfranchised group. A period of socialization must normally” take place. Why would we have expected newly registered female voters to turnout at a higher rate than men if only half of men turned out to vote “with all their political power, knowledge and experience?”<sup>1</sup>

**Sources**

1. Crocco & Brooks, 1995
2. Costain, 1998

**Data Source**

U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 (P20 Table 1)

## Why are women more likely to vote than men?



Other explanations for a higher turnout among women include:

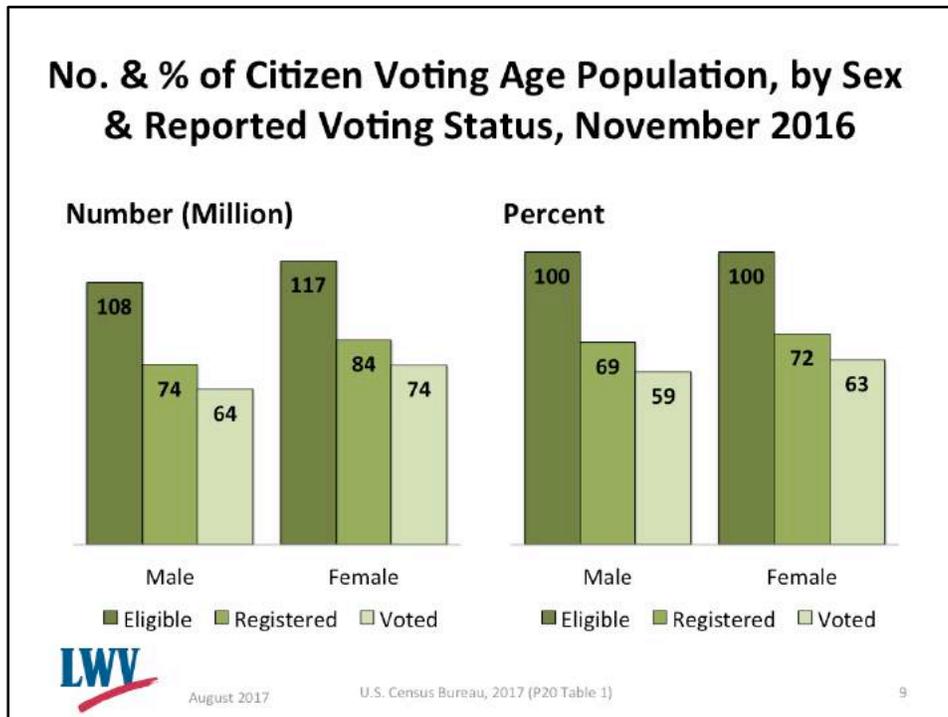
- Expansion of women in the labor force, including more professional women<sup>1,2</sup>
- Increase in single, financially independent women, often as heads of households<sup>2</sup>
- Women as primary caregivers, dealing “with government in their day-to-day lives more than men do”<sup>3</sup>
- A difference in attitudes on public policy issues that began with the second wave of the women’s movement in the 1960s<sup>2,4</sup>
  - Women are more supportive of education, healthcare, and a government safety net<sup>2</sup>
  - However, women do not vote as if they were unified in their self-interests.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that women have made real progress in the number of those voting and holding political office.<sup>5</sup>

- However, some argue that the higher voter turnout among women is because their turnout rate has declined less than turnout among men.<sup>1</sup> As we saw earlier, while voter turnout
  - declined 18% among voting age men from 1964 to 2016,
  - it declined 9% among voting age women during the same period.

### Sources

1. Crocco & Brooks, 1995
2. Walton, 2010
3. Rampell, 2014
4. Center for the American Woman and Politics, 2012
5. Center for the American Woman and Politics, 2017

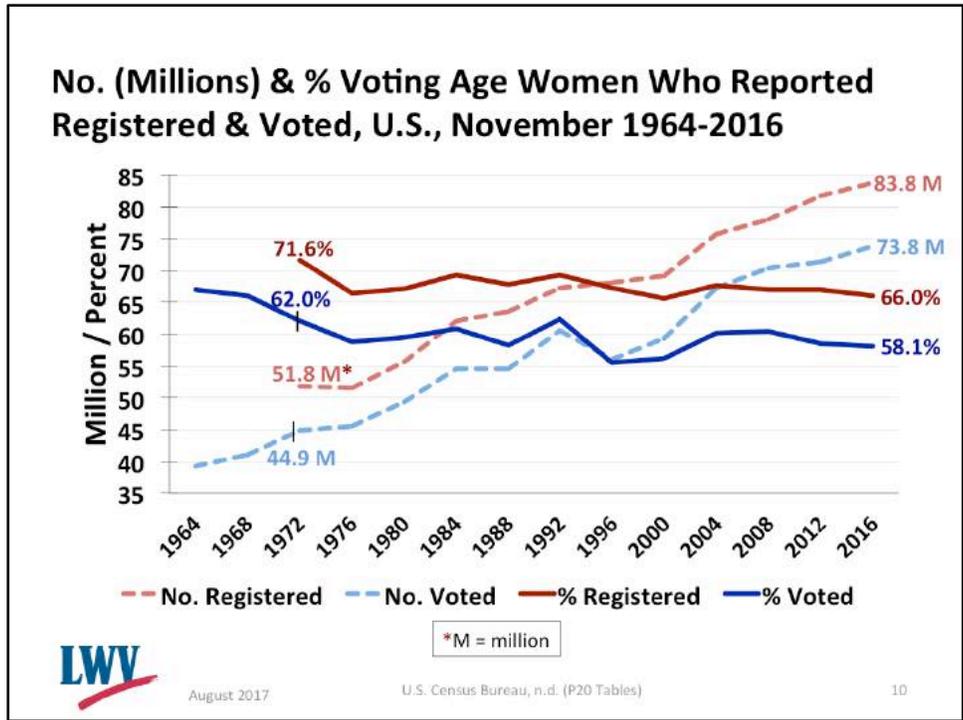


So far we have only looked at patterns of voter turnout. But what about voter registration among those eligible to vote?

- Citizens make up approximately 92% of the voting age population in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>
- Of the citizen voting age population:
  - About 1.3% cannot vote because they are ineligible felons.
  - More than half (52%) are women.
- The chart on the left shows that:
  - There are about 9 million more women than men eligible to vote.
  - An estimated 10 million more women than men were registered to vote.
  - And an estimated 10 more million women than men voted.
- The chart on the right shows that while the difference in numbers is large (9-10 million)
  - The difference in the rate of voter registration and turnout is relatively small:
    - 3% higher among women for registration and
    - 4% higher among women for voting.
- The key take-away is that there are many more citizens, regardless of sex, that need a higher level of voter engagement
  - If there were approximately 225 million citizens eligible to vote, nearly 87 million could have but didn't vote.<sup>2</sup>

**Data Source**  
U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 (P20 Table 1)

- Notes**
1. Estimated voting age population = 245.5 million
  2. Using a more precise measure of voter turnout, McDonald (2017) estimated that there were over 230 million eligible to vote and 92 million that did not vote.



Focusing now on women, how have the long-term patterns of voter registration and voter turnout changed?

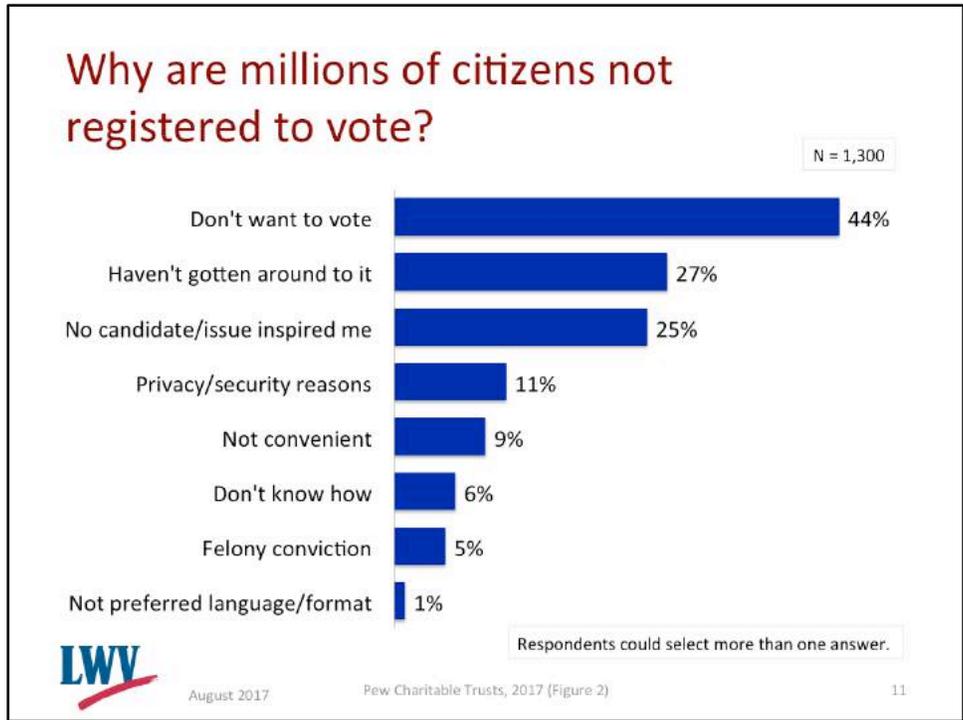
- The dashed lines beginning at the lower left of the graph show that the number of women that reported that they registered and voted increased substantially since 1972 when the Census Bureau began reporting voter registration by sex.
- But the rates of self-reported voter registration and turnout among women have fluctuated over time and actually declined over the long term. Since 1972:
  - Voter registration among women declined nearly 6%.
  - And voter turnout declined nearly 4% (9% since 1964).

**Data Source**

U.S. Census Bureau, n.d. (P20 Tables)

**Note**

The Census Bureau did not report voter registration by sex until 1972. Voting age population is used as the denominator for the graph because the Census Bureau didn't report registration and voting data for the citizen voting age population by sex until the 1996 Presidential Election.



### So why are millions of citizens not registered to vote?

The Pew Charitable Trust conducted a Voting Frequency Survey during the spring of 2016 among over 3,500 citizens.<sup>1</sup> They found that:

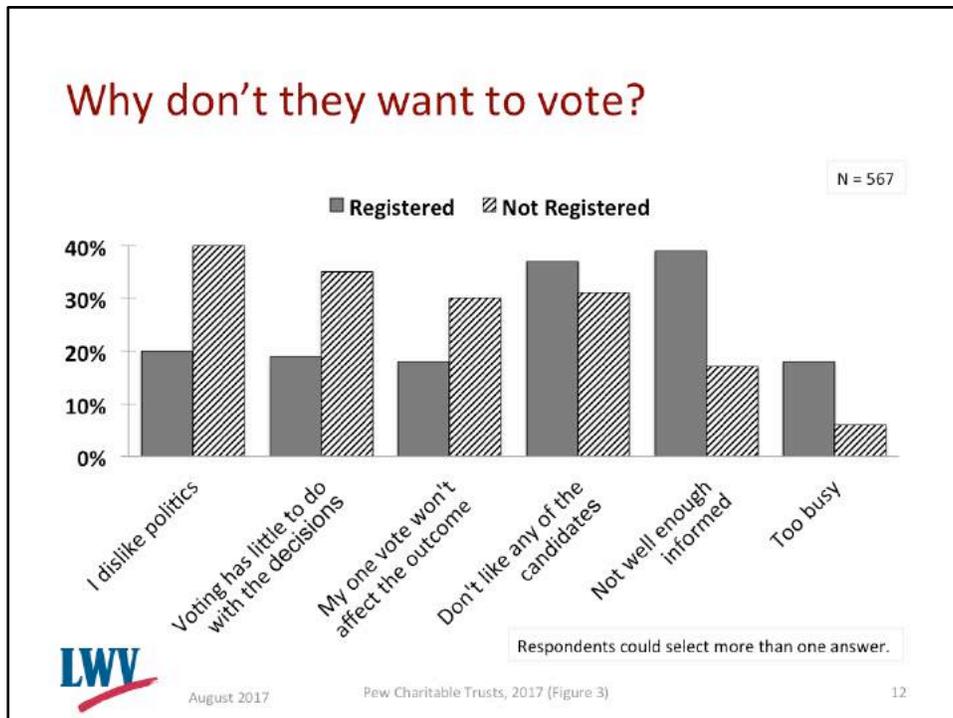
- 62% of unregistered respondents had never been asked to register.<sup>2</sup>
- The most common reason selected for not becoming registered was “I don’t want to vote, so I don’t need to register.”

**Notes**

1. 3,763 respondents.
2. 61% among registered respondents.

**Data Source**

Pew Charitable Trusts, 2017 (Figure 2)



In general, the Pew Voting Frequency Survey found that:

- “The unregistered are more likely to indicate a broad distaste for the electoral system” such as:
  - An aversion to politics
  - or that “voting has little to do with the way decisions are made”
- On the other hand, registered voters who don't vote or vote infrequently “have election-specific motives” such as
  - “disliking the candidates” or
  - “not knowing enough about the issues”
- The study concluded that:
  - “The unregistered differ in many ways from those who vote frequently: [Without going over the details of the responses,] They are less interested in politics, less engaged in civic activities, and more cynical about their ability to understand and influence government.”
  - “[However], more than 40% of the unregistered cared who would win the presidency in 2016, and some indicated that they would be motivated to register in the future, though many also feel that the voting process does not affect the way governing decisions are made. These findings suggest that opportunities exist to engage segments of the unregistered population . . . .”

**Source**

Pew Charitable Trusts, 2017 (Figure 2 et al.)

**Voter turnout among women**

Meaningful progress ...  
Significant challenges



**LWV**  
August 2017

13

So . . . what have we learned from examining voter turnout among women?

What two scholars at Columbia University said in 1995 is still pertinent today:

- “From the standpoint of participation . . . women have made real progress.”
  - Nevertheless, with politics devalued and the electorate alienated, women’s political strides may simply be . . . [a] success in an arena whose stature is on the decline.”
  - While the declining status of politics has “little to do with women directly, the question of what the future holds for American political life must concern all citizens.”
  - Perhaps the greatest political reform women could contribute . . . would be an effort to [engage] disaffected citizens [in] the voting process, the lifeblood of the democratic way of life.”

**Source**  
Crocco & Brooks, 1995



The League believes that:

- “Voting is the most powerful way for citizens’ voices to be heard. It’s a chance to stand up for what matters most to citizens and to have an impact on the issues that affect [all of us, our communities, and our future].”
- “Educated and informed voters are the key to our democracy . . . The League works year-round to register, inform, and mobilize voters . . . .”
- “The need to engage citizens in our democracy is great.”

Source  
Zia, 2017



But engaging voters is not:

- "... merely a matter of reminding them that Election Day is near.
- "... just a matter of putting election-related information in front of them.
- "... telling people why they should [register or] vote . . . ."

Engaging a voter is personal interaction that:

- Connects something in common between you and the individual,
- Builds on the individual's preexisting level of motivation to vote, and
- Makes the voter feel wanted at the polls.

In-person invitations convey the most warmth and work best. Next best are personalized telephone calls or personalized chatty posts on social media.

*Source*

Green & Gerber, 2015, pp. 99 & 156-157

Just like Rosie the Riveter . . .



August 2017

16

Just like Rosie the Riveter, we can engage disaffected citizens in the voting process.

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