

Are Americans Ready for a Female President?

**A Closer Look at Public Support for a
Female Presidential Candidate, 1972-2010**

...

Rosalie Moss

Introduction

February 2020: women make up 23.7% of the 116th United States Congress, 28.9% of all statewide elective executive offices across the country, and 20.0% of U.S. state legislators (CAWP, 2020). There has never been a female U.S. President.

Why are women so underrepresented in political office?

Theories

- 1. Incumbency Advantage:** incumbents have an electoral advantage, and most incumbents are male.
- 2. Self-Confidence:** Women are less likely than men to believe that they are qualified to run for office.
- 3. Traditional Gender Roles:** many Americans still believe in traditional gender roles, which deem that women belong in the home.
- 4. Gender Bias:** female candidates are perceived by the public as less qualified than male candidates, regardless of actual qualifications.

Research Question

How has support by party and gender for qualified female presidential candidates changed from 1972 to 2010?

Data and Methods

Data: Public opinion data set conducted for The National Data Program for the Social Sciences at the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago.

Survey Question: “If your party nominated a woman for President, would you vote for her if she were qualified for the job?”

Survey Respondents: Nationally representative sample of U.S. adults; the number of participating respondents varied from year to year, ranging from 895 to 1920.

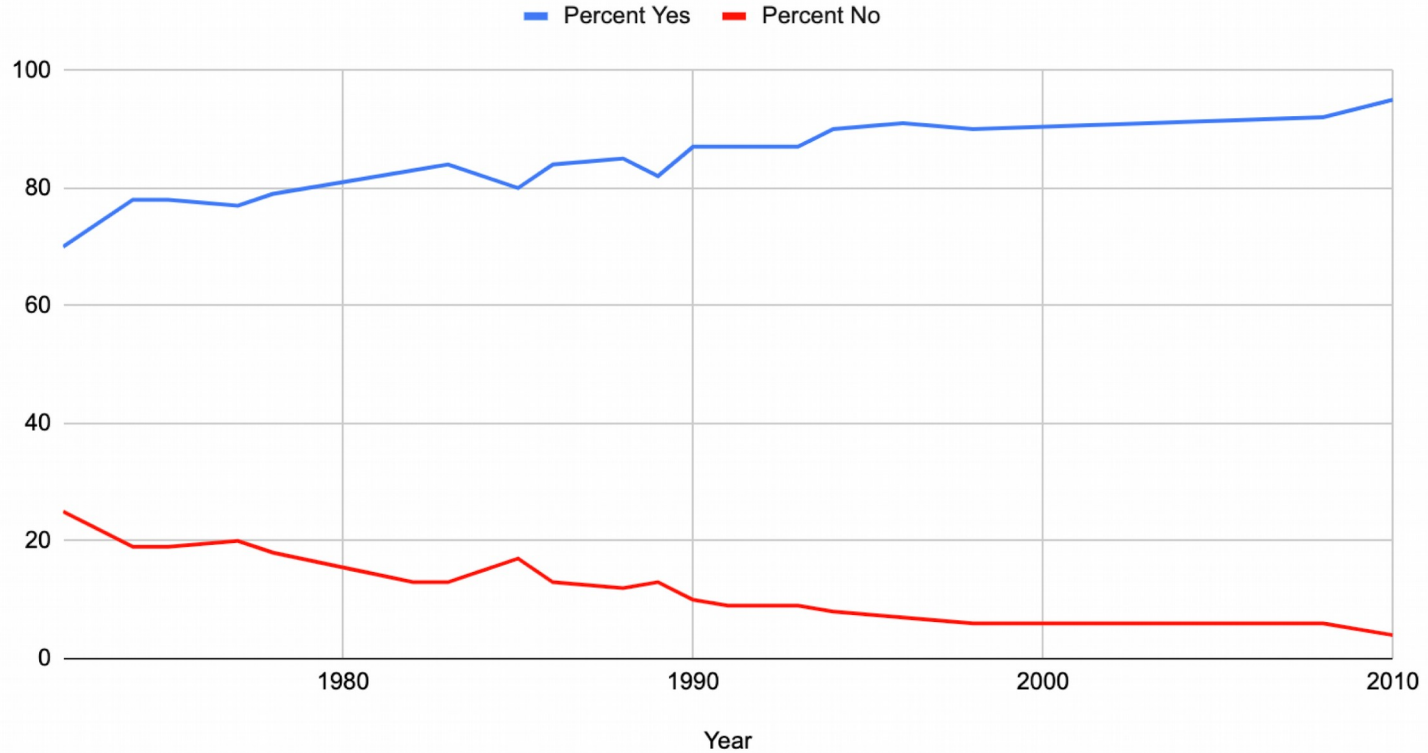
Hypotheses

Public support for female representation...

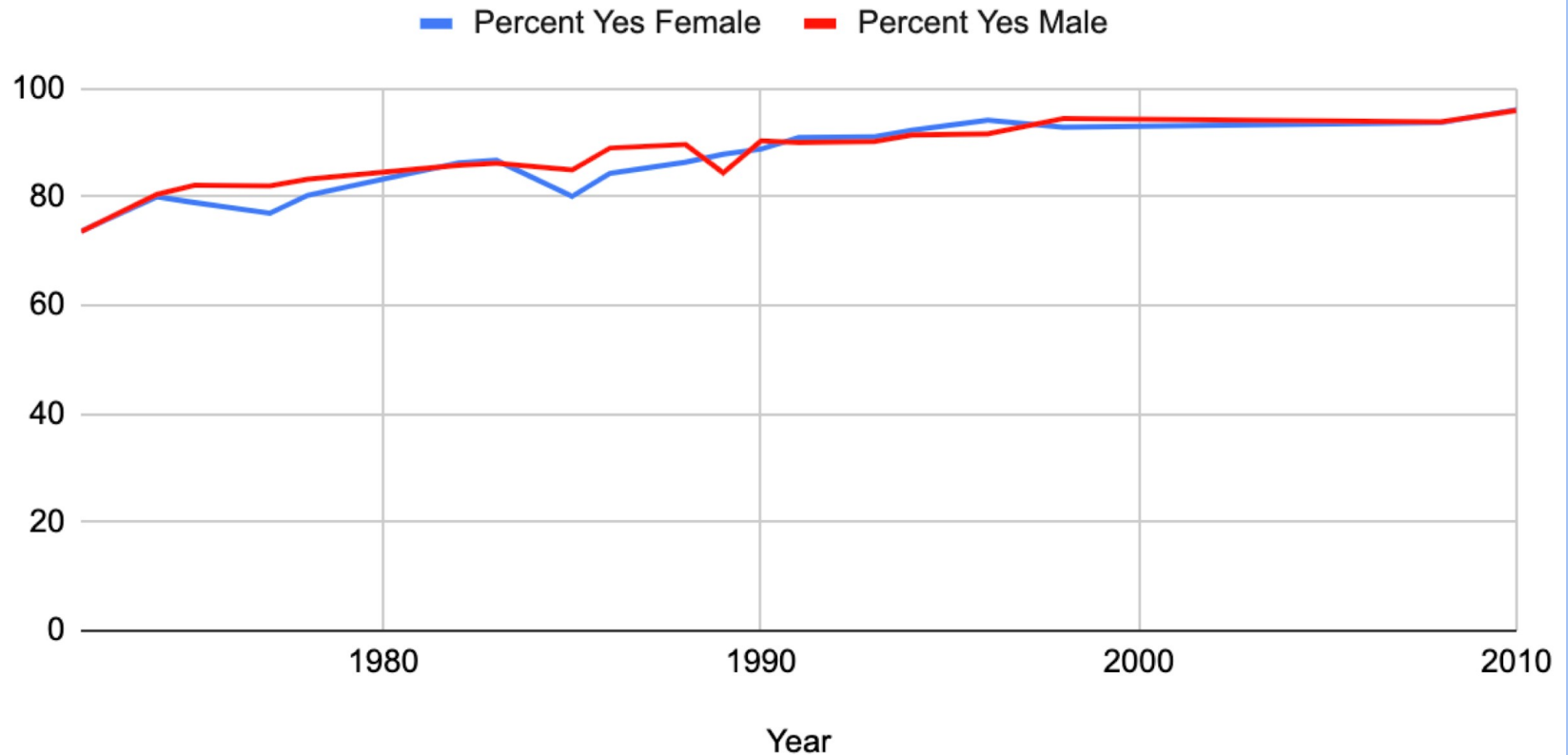
1. Has increased over the 40 years being studied (1972-2010).
2. Is higher among women than among men.
3. Is higher among Democratic women than among Republican women.

Results

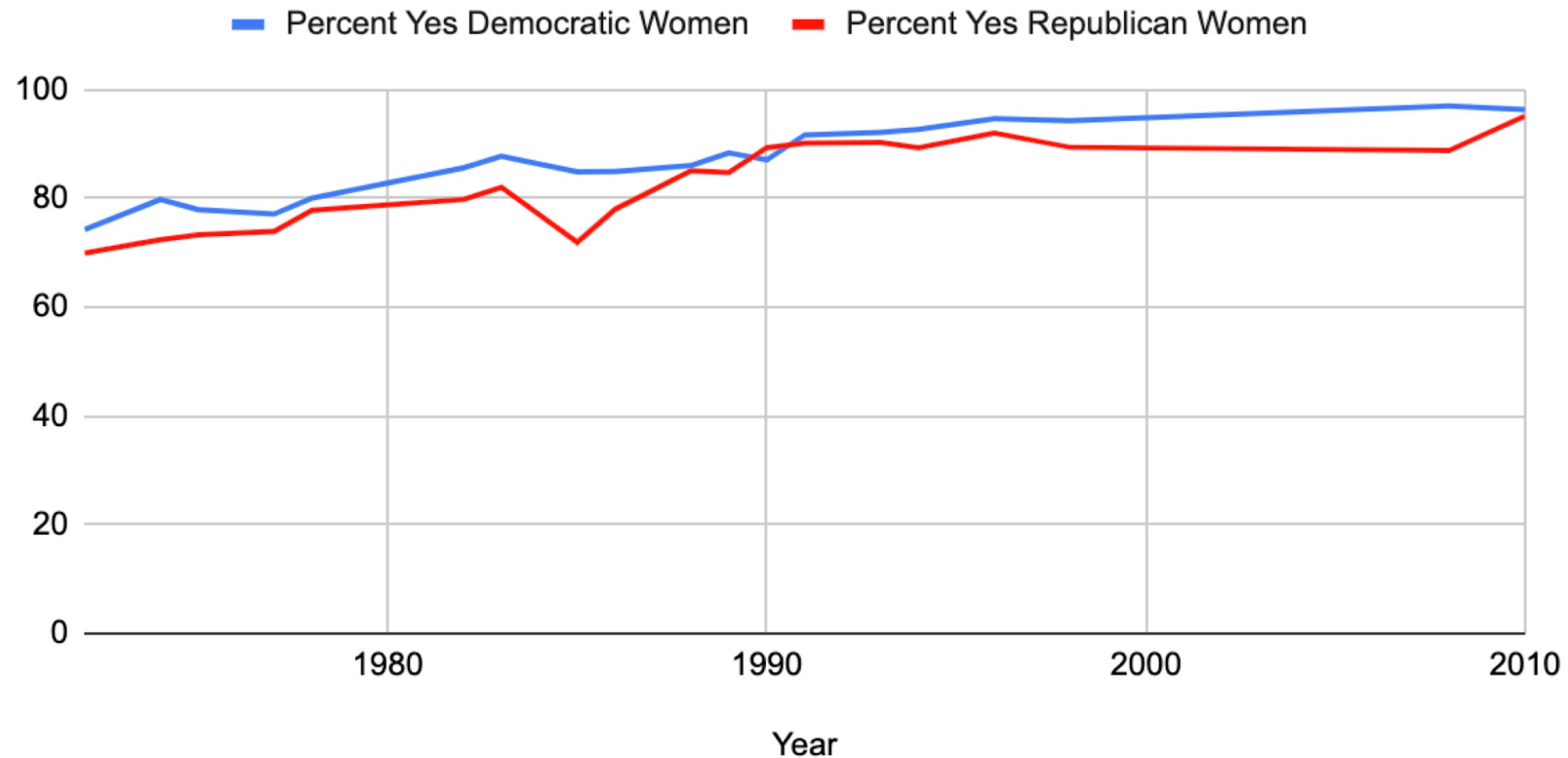
Public Support for a Female Presidential Candidate, 1972-2010



Support for a Female Presidential Candidate by Gender, 1972-2010



Support for Female Presidential Candidate Among Women by Party, 1972-2010



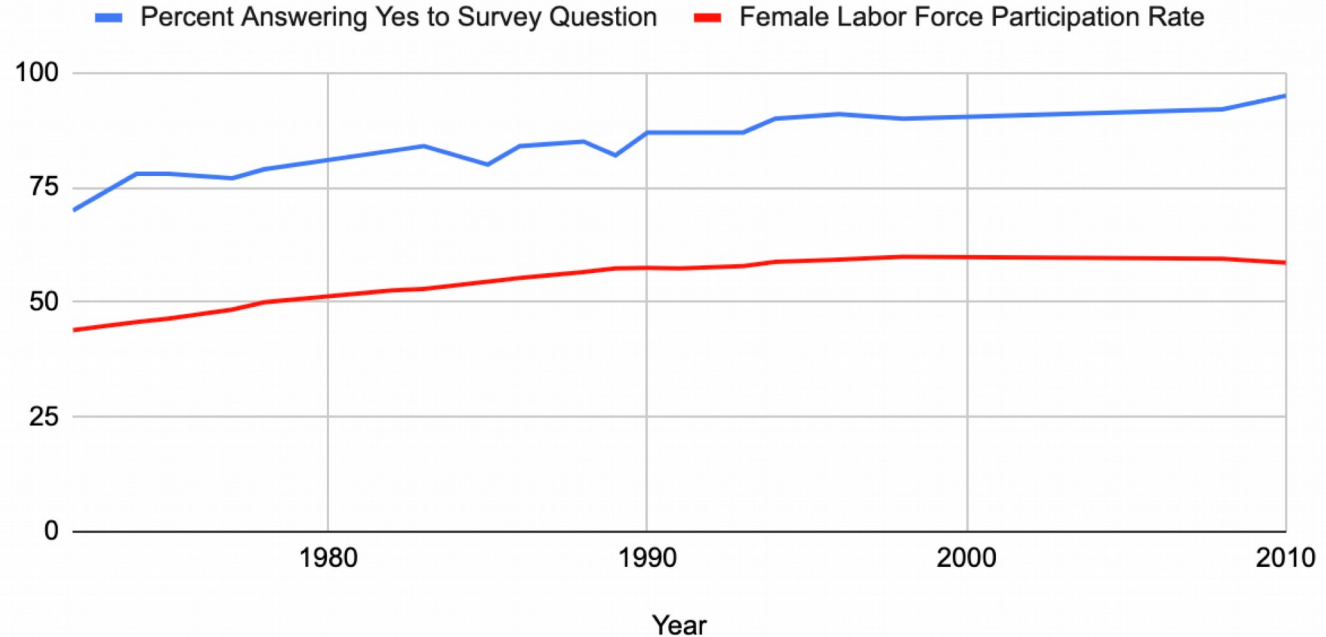
Discussion: Key Findings

The first hypothesis—that public support for female candidates has increased in the period from 1972 to 2010—is supported by the data.

Discussion: Key Findings

The data suggests that there is a correlation between public support for a female presidential candidate and female labor force participation rate, and between public support for a female

Percent Answering Yes to Survey Question and Female Labor Force Participation Rate



Discussion: Key Findings

The second hypothesis, that support for a female presidential candidate will be higher among women than among men in most years from 1972 to 2010, is not supported by the data.

Potential Explanations:

- Sexism and beliefs about traditional gender roles have eroded among men at a faster rate than they have among women
- Social desirability bias: survey respondents answer questions in a way they deem socially acceptable or appropriate, rather than with an honest answer.
- Acquiescence bias: respondents agree with statements or questions in a survey regardless of their content.

Discussion: Key Findings

The third hypothesis—that support for a female presidential candidate is higher among Democratic women than among Republican women—is supported by the data, although the difference in support between the two groups is minimal.

But the trends do not support my hypothesis that the difference between Democratic women and Republican women in support for a qualified female presidential candidate became sharper beginning in the mid-1980s.

If public support for a qualified female presidential candidate is so high, then why have we never had a female president?

Conclusion

The continued prevalence of sexism in determining vote choice in presidential elections suggests that the American people are not as willing to vote for a female candidate as they say they are.

Why?

- Due to social desirability bias and acquiescence bias, respondents might not answer survey questions truthfully.
- It is possible that a large percentage of the public would support a qualified female presidential candidate in theory—as shown by the data—but not in practice.
- Subconscious biases might prevent respondents from voting

Conclusion: 2016 Presidential Election

Evidence from the 2016 elections indicates that sexism and gender bias, either consciously or subconsciously, continue to play a large role in presidential elections.

Although political party identification was the strongest predictor of vote choice, high levels of hostile sexism and traditional views about a woman's role served as very strong predictors of voting for Trump.

It is evident that sexist notions about women played a large role in explaining why Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 presidential election.

Support for a qualified female presidential candidate might be strong on paper, but in reality,

Conclusion: Implications for the Future

Regardless, the fact that public support for a qualified female presidential candidate has risen dramatically over the forty years being studied is significant and is a positive sign for the future of female political representation.

If these trends continue, then perhaps the day we finally elect a woman as U.S. president is not too far off.

