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# Voting and Civic Engagement Among Utah Women

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## Voting and Civic Engagement Among Utah Women

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 (MacKay, 2005), and, as recently as 1996, had the strongest women's voter participation in the United States (Davidson, 1996). However, these factors do not give the full picture; and in 2015 the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2015) ranked Utah dead last in the area of political participation. Much of this ranking was due to the lack of women running for and serving in public office, but Utah women's voter ranking and some aspects of civic involvement also were found to have room for improvement. As engagement in the community can be a key indicator of social health, while also providing opportunities for emotional and intellectual growth, these issues deserve attention. 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 women and men nationwide, and
3. Utah women's levels of civic and community engagement, focusing on volunteer work but also exploring other ways in which 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 2012 presidential election, voter turnout among all women in Utah (not just eligible voters) was approximately 54%, compared to 58.5% for women nationally (Hess & Williams, 2014).

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 (Davidson, 1996). At that point, Utah had the highest women's turnout of any state in the United States, where the national average for women voters was 63.8%. 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 (United States Census Bureau, 2002). In 2012, only 54.0% of eligible Utah women voted, compared to the national percentage, 58.5% (United States Census Bureau, 2013). That year, Utah women's voting participation ranking dropped to 46 of 51 states (including Washington, D.C.) for registered women voters nationally (United State Census Bureau, 2013). 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 (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2015).

Nationally, voter turnout is highest in presidential years (e.g., the elections highlighted above) (DeSilver, 2014); and Utah voters, like all Americans, tend to cast ballots in much smaller numbers during midterm elections. Perhaps, Utah's decreased voter turnout is even more pronounced because Utah is one of only nine states that elects its governor during presidential election years. This turnout decline holds for women; for example, in 2014, only eight states had a lower turnout than Utah among their women voters. Three of those states also choose their governors during presidential election years (Davidson, 2014). Only 37.6% of Utah's eligible women voters came to the polls in 2014, versus 43% of women nationally (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Over the past 30 years, Utah women's voting participation has been steadily decreasing, and the 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. 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 Utahns' priori-

ties as a whole (Utah Foundation, 2016). 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 (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 2016).

### Civic Engagement

Utah women are heavily involved in volunteer work; Utah ranks first in the United States (by a large margin) for percentage of residents who regularly volunteer (Frohlich & Lieberman, 2015). 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%) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

While specific data for Utah women's volunteer rates (as distinct from rates of all Utahns) are unavailable, volunteer rates for all residents of Utah are highest in the nation, at 43.2%—almost 10% higher than the second-ranked state. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, Utah volunteers give 75.6 hours of their time annually per capita. The report states that a large majority of Utahns' volunteer service is given through religious organization (65.4%), followed by education (15.2%) and social service (6.8%) 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 Utahns participate are teaching/tutoring (48.3%), mentoring youth (30.6%), collecting and distributing food (20.3%), and general labor (18.3%) (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2014).

Finally, in addition to their volunteering efforts, women in Utah are well-represented on non-profit boards (holding 45.8% of available seats) (Madsen, Backus, Jones, & Fischer, 2014), but less so on government boards and commissions where the rate is around 30% (Madsen & Goryunova, 2016). Utah women's involvement in

their communities, both through political activity (including voting) and through civic engagement such as volunteering and serving on boards, can improve aspects of their social, emotional, and intellectual health. Overall, finding ways to support women in such efforts will strengthen the positive impact of women in communities and the state as a whole.

The following list provides additional resources or information about women's voter participation and civic engagement:

- 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

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