

Trends in Willingness to Vote for a Black and Woman for President,
1972-2008

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As part of the general, long-term increase in support for both racial and gender equality, public willingness to vote for a woman and a black for president has grown appreciably over time (Bobo and Dawson, 2009; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Carter, Corra. And Carter, 2009; Dolan, 2004; Falk and Kenski, 2006; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Kyrstan, 1997; Smith, 2005; Smith, 1976; Streb et al., 2008; Wilson, 2006). When Gallup first asked about voting for a black for president in 1958, 37% supported such a candidate (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Kyrstan, 1997). When the General Social Survey (GSS) (Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2009) first asked this question in 1972, 70% were willing to vote for a black presidential candidate. In 2008 support reached 92% (Table 1A). For voting for a woman for president support stood at 31% in 1936 (Smith, 1976), was 70.5% in the 1972 GSS, and reached 93% on the 2008 GSS (Table 1B).

Both the black and female presidential series in the GSS were suspended in the 1990s when support topped 90%. Voting for a black for president was dropped after it hit 90.4% in 1996 and voting for a woman for president was discontinued after exceeding 90% in 1994-1998 (Table 1A&1B). Both items were reintroduced in 2008 when the top two contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination were a black (Barack Obama) and a woman (Hillary Clinton). In 2008, both showed a gain of about two percentage points from their previous readings in 1996 or 1998 and this was in-line with the long-term trend.

Previous research in the mid-1980s had indicated that the vice-presidential candidacy of Geraldine Ferraro may have reduced support for political gender equality (Smith, 1985). From 1983 to 1985 support for three measures of political gender equality declined by 2-4 percentage points and the decrease was greatest on the voting for a woman for president (-4.1 points). The decline was larger among Republicans (-6.3 points) and smaller among Democrats (-2.0 points) and Independents (-3.3 points). Likewise, the drop was greatest among those who had voted for Reagan in both 1980 and 1984 (-11.1 points). Among consistent non-Reagan voters, support for a woman for president rose from 1983 to 1985 (+3.0 points). This earlier research (Smith, 1985) concluded that "Ferraro's candidacy suppressed support for political feminism both because of political antipathy to Ferraro and because of a reluctance by groups lukewarm on women's rights to back feminism when faced with real gains."

Table 2 looks at willingness to vote for a black for president by political party identification. With the exception of 1996, Democrats have been more likely than Republicans to indicate that they would back a black candidate nominated by their party. The Democratic edge ranged from +10.3 points in 1982 to less than 1 point in 1975 and 1990. The average across all surveys was +3.1 points or +3.5 points if 1996 is excluded. When Strong Democrats are compared to Strong

Republicans, the Democratic edge ranged from +16.8 points in 1982 to -9.3 points in 1996 and averaged +5.0 points.

While Democrats are more supportive than Republicans of a black for president, the highest level of support usually comes from independents. In 7 of 17 surveys independents leaning towards the Democrats were most supportive, in another 7 surveys independents leaning towards Republicans gave the most support, and in 1 survey independents with no partisan leaning were highest (Table 2).

The 1996 results are the only year in which both Strong Republicans were more supportive of a black for president than Strong Democrats were (-9.3 points) and all Republicans were more supportive than all Democrats were (-4.5 points). This anomaly is explained as a Colin-Powell effect. In 1995 and 1996, there was strong interest among Republicans in Colin Powell running for president. There was a peak in news stories on Powell and the presidency in 1995 and a somewhat lower, but still high level of coverage in 1996 (Google News, 2009). In polls among Republicans in September and October, 1995, Powell was the first or second choice from a list of 8-12 prospective Republican candidates (9/1995 Time/CNN/Yankelovich poll; 10/1995 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll). Powell withdrew his name from formal consideration on November 8, 1995, but as late as February, 1996, 54% of Republicans said they would "like to see Colin Powell reconsider and run for the Republican nomination for President" (Time/CNN/Yankelovich poll).

Paralleling the analysis by political party identification, Table 4A examines willingness to vote for a black for president by past presidential vote and, among non-voters, past presidential preference. It shows greater support for a black for president in 1993 and 1994 among 1992 Democratic voters (respectively + 8.1 and +3.7 points) and non-voters preferring the Democrat in the 1992 election (respectively +7.2 and +5.8 points). Then in 1996, the Colin-Powell effect reverses the pattern among voters (-1.5 points) and erases the Democratic edge among non-voters (+0.1 points). Based on the 2004 election Democratic voters were slightly more supportive of a black for president than were Republican voters (+1.5 points) and among non-voters, the Democrats led Republicans by a larger margin (+7.7 points). These results are consistent with those based on political party identification.

While 1996 shows the clear impact of a high profile black candidate on the partisan pattern of responses, 2008 does not. The Democratic edge in 2008 is smaller than average and shows no signs that Obama's candidacy boosted support among Democrats or suppressed support among Republicans.

Table 3 shows that Democrats are generally more supportive than Republicans are of a woman for president. In 14 of 18 surveys Democrats are more supportive than Republicans and the average edge is

+3.7 points. When Strong Democrats are compared to Strong Republicans, Democrats again lead in 14 of 18 surveys and the average margin is +4.7 points. The Democratic edge is especially large in 1985, 1986, and 2008 (respectively +7.8, +6.6, and +8.7 points for all Democrats vs. all Republicans and +12.8, +14.3, and +10.8 points for Strong Democrats vs. Strong Republicans). These three dates correspond to the two surveys immediately following Ferraro's 1984 candidacy and the 2008 survey conducted during Clinton's run for the Democratic nomination.¹

Table 4B indicates that Democratic voters and Democratic non-voters in the 1992 and 2004 elections were more supportive of a woman for president than their Republican counterparts. The edge in 2008 among voters was greater than the average in 1993-1998 (+7.7 vs. + 4.8 points). This is consistent with the pattern shown based on political party identification.

As with voting for a black for president, support is highest among independents. In 13 of 18 surveys independents leaning towards Democrats led, in 2 cases Republican-leaning independents were first, and in 1 case independents with no partisan leaning were highest (Table 3).

While the presidential vote question tries to inoculate against partisanship by asking respondents to consider only prospective, hypothetical presidential candidates of their own political party, people do not ignore actual and likely candidates and reply only in abstract, incorporeal terms. The dip in support for a woman for president among Republicans in the mid-1980s following Ferraro's vice-presidential candidacy, the Republican support for a black president in 1996 in response to a possible Powell candidacy, and increased edge of Democrats over Republicans in 2008 in supporting a woman for president in the midst of Hillary Clinton's run for the Democratic nomination, all represent how specific personalities have both attracted and repelled support along partisan lines. Only the lack of an Obama bounce in 2008 deviates from this pattern.

¹ In the Ferraro case the two surveys were in 1983 and 1985, well before her nomination and then after her and Mondale's defeat in the 1984 election. In the Obama/Clinton case, the relevant survey was conducted during the contest for the Democratic nomination. It was in the field from April to early September, with about 42% of the interviews done before Obama secured a majority of delegates in the first week in June. Since 95.6% of cases were collected before McCain's surprise choice of Sarah Palin for vice president on August 29, 2008, her candidacy could not appreciably influence attitudes.

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Table 1

Trends in Willing to Vote for a Black/Woman for President

A. Black for President

	1972	1974	1975	1977	1978	1982	1983	1985	1986	1988
Vote	70.4	80.2	78.0	75.3	82.0	83.4	81.9	82.0	85.5	79.0
Not Vote	23.4	15.5	16.4	20.7	14.3	11.7	14.0	13.8	11.9	16.0
DK	6.1	4.1	5.6	4.0	3.8	4.9	4.1	4.2	2.6	4.9
	1337	1477	1325	1359	1520	1504	1592	1526	1466	978
	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	2008			
Vote	79.6	84.8	87.5	85.0	88.2	90.4	92.4			
Not Vote	15.4	11.1	9.1	9.9	8.8	6.7	5.4			
DK, etc.	5.1	4.1	3.4	5.1	3.0	2.9	2.2			
	1007	933	1012	1078	1956	991	1332			

B. Woman for President

	1972	1974	1975	1977	1978	1982	1983	1985	1986	1988
Vote	70.5	77.7	78.8	77.8	80.7	83.9	83.8	80.5	84.2	86.1
Not Vote	24.7	19.6	19.2	19.1	17.0	13.1	13.0	16.6	13.1	11.3
DK, etc.	4.8	2.7	3.0	3.1	2.3	3.0	3.2	2.8	2.7	2.6
	1610	1478	1489	1525	1532	1504	1596	1529	1466	981
	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	1998	2008		
Vote	82.1	87.8	87.6	86.6	90.4	90.7	90.7	92.9		
Not Vote	12.8	9.2	8.3	9.3	7.3	6.5	6.1	6.0		
DK, etc.	5.1	3.1	4.2	3.9	2.2	2.8	3.1	1.1		
	1014	940	1008	1078	1960	1966	1879	1332		

Source: General Social Survey

Question Wordings: If your party nominated a (Negro/Black/African-American) for President, would you vote for him if he were qualified for the job? [Negro used in 1972; Negro/Black in 1974-1982; Black/Negro in 1983-1991; Black/African-American in 1993+.

Interviewers were allowed to use the racial term most common in their locality.]

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

Table 2

Willing to Vote for a Black for President by Party Identification

	1972	1974	1975	1977	1978	1982	1983	1985
Strong Democrat	63.5	80.7	70.8	69.6	76.2	84.5	82.4	85.9
Democrat	71.4	82.5	79.0	76.2	82.3	85.9	80.7	82.3
Independent/Dem.	79.0	86.8	86.0	79.5	86.7	89.2	90.1	88.7
Independent	76.9	87.3	76.7	79.6	86.2	85.1	75.9	84.0
Independent/Rep.	79.8	80.1	80.5	81.3	86.8	85.2	84.9	82.5
Republican	70.3	75.6	73.6	78.0	80.3	79.4	82.9	81.0
Strong Republican	59.2	67.0	79.8	59.7	72.9	67.7	75.4	72.5
Dem. - Rep =	+4.3	+13.7	-9.0	+9.9	+3.3	+16.8	+7.0	+13.4
Democrat	68.5	81.8	75.9	73.7	80.2	85.3	81.4	83.7
Republican	66.5	72.8	75.3	71.9	78.2	75.0	80.2	77.6
SDem.- SRep. =	+2.0	+9.0	+0.6	+1.8	+2.0	+10.3	+1.2	+6.1
	1986	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996
Strong Democrat	84.0	79.6	83.3	86.9	90.0	90.0	93.2	86.9
Democrat	88.7	77.8	82.6	83.4	89.9	88.2	88.6	89.2
Independent/Dem.	88.3	82.3	83.8	88.1	91.9	82.4	90.8	90.4
Independent	83.9	77.1	68.7	83.8	82.0	77.1	86.9	87.1
Independent/Rep.	91.4	83.9	77.9	85.8	86.9	90.2	85.6	95.2
Republican	84.6	77.7	80.4	83.2	89.0	80.6	87.2	90.6
Strong Republican	75.5	76.4	78.5	85.7	81.9	88.1	86.6	96.2
SDem. - SRep. =	+8.5	+3.2	+4.8	+1.2	+8.1	+1.9	+6.6	-9.3
Democrat	86.7	78.6	82.9	84.7	89.9	89.0	90.4	88.3
Republican	81.3	77.2	79.7	84.1	86.4	83.4	87.0	92.8
Dem.-Rep. =	+5.4	+1.4	+3.2	+0.8	+3.5	+4.6	+3.5	-4.5
	2008							
Strong Democrat	91.7							
Democrat	94.6							
Independent/Dem.	92.9							
Independent	87.3							
Independent/Rep.	97.4							
Republican	92.3							
Strong Republican	90.9							
SDem. - SRep. =	+0.8							

Table 2 (continued)

	2008
Democrat	93.1
Republican	91.8
Dem.-Rep. =	+1.3

Table 3

Willing to Vote for a Woman for President by Party Identification

	1972	1974	1975	1977	1978	1982	1983	1985
Strong Democrat	69.5	71.4	73.4	72.4	73.9	78.8	82.0	83.1
Democrat	69.7	80.2	80.3	81.0	84.0	86.0	86.5	83.0
Independent/Dem.	78.5	87.0	85.4	80.2	86.0	90.5	85.7	87.7
Independent	76.5	88.3	76.3	76.9	77.1	85.9	78.3	75.3
Independent/Rep.	73.1	76.2	85.1	83.3	82.9	89.1	92.8	85.7
Republican	64.7	73.4	69.3	81.0	85.6	81.1	81.8	78.6
Strong Republican	70.0	65.9	76.1	65.5	65.4	72.5	80.8	70.3
SDem. - SRep. =	-0.5	+5.5	-2.7	+6.9	+8.5	+6.3	+1.2	+12.8
Democrat	69.6	76.7	77.4	77.5	80.5	83.2	84.8	83.1
Republican	66.5	71.0	71.2	75.8	79.7	77.9	81.4	75.3
Dem.-Rep. =	+3.1	+5.7	+6.2	+1.7	+0.8	+5.3	+3.4	+7.8
	1986	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996
Strong Democrat	87.3	87.2	80.3	86.6	83.5	89.6	91.8	91.6
Democrat	84.0	84.3	82.4	85.1	89.4	92.8	92.7	93.7
Independent/Dem.	92.2	91.5	89.6	92.3	95.7	87.5	93.9	94.5
Independent	81.2	84.5	78.2	85.3	88.5	85.0	89.6	87.3
Independent/Rep.	89.3	85.1	78.1	90.9	85.5	89.8	90.6	93.0
Republican	82.2	87.2	82.3	89.6	90.1	82.1	86.7	88.9
Strong Republican	73.0	82.6	83.3	87.1	82.3	82.1	89.2	86.1
SDem. - SRep. =	+14.3	+4.6	-3.0	-0.5	+1.2	+7.5	+2.6	+5.5
Democrat	85.4	85.5	87.6	85.7	87.0	91.4	92.3	92.8
Republican	78.8	85.5	82.6	88.7	87.2	82.1	87.6	87.8
Dem.-Rep. =	+6.6	0.0	-1.0	-3.0	-0.2	+9.3	+4.7	+5.0
	1998	2008						
Strong Democrat	91.2	97.3						
Democrat	92.2	95.9						
Independent/Dem.	93.6	97.2						
Independent	86.9	88.0						
Independent/Rep.	91.9	93.2						
Republican	91.0	88.6						
Strong Republican	86.9	86.5						
SDem. - SRep. =	+4.3	+10.8						

Table 3 (continued)

	1998	2008
Democrat	91.8	96.6
Republican	89.6	87.9
Dem.-Rep. =	+2.2	+8.7

Table 4

Willingness to Vote for a Black and Woman for President
by Past Presidential Vote

A1. Willing to Vote for Black by Vote in 1992

	Voters			Who Would Have Voted for		
	1993	1994	1996	1993	1994	1996
Clinton	90.8	91.6	91.0	87.2	90.3	88.6
Bush	82.7	87.9	92.5	80.0	84.5	88.5
Perot	91.6	85.4	92.3	77.9	84.6	89.4

A2. Willing to Vote for Black by Vote in 2004

	Voters	Who Would Have Voted for
	2008	2008
Kerry	96.1	93.3
Bush	94.8	85.6

B1. Willing to Vote for Woman by Vote in 1992

	Voters				Who Would Have Voted for			
	1993	1994	1996	1998	1993	1994	1996	1998
Clinton	92.7	93.4	92.8	92.5	90.4	91.4	95.7	93.4
Bush	86.1	86.9	89.4	90.0	81.3	84.0	86.9	90.3
Perot	86.3	94.9	96.3	96.6	84.7	90.2	88.3	86.9

B2. Willing to Vote for Woman by Vote in 2004

	Voters	Who Would Have Voted for
	2008	2008
Kerry	98.1	94.5
Bush	90.4	87.8