From Voting to Vice-President: 100 Years of Women’s Suffrage

On August 18th, 1920, Tennessee became the last state to ratify the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and, when the amendment was certified on August 26th, twenty-six million women became enfranchised at the stroke of a pen. However, for many millions of these women - African American, Native American, Latinx and Asian - that right was more theoretical than practical. One hundred years and 69 days later, on November 3rd, 2020 Kamala Devi Harris, a child of Jamaican and Indian immigrant parents, became the 49th Vice-President of the United States.

Using data from a variety of sources we trace the evolution of women in U.S. politics through both the activities of women as voters and as electoral candidates at the state and national level. This longitudinal analysis illuminates the striking regional variation in women’s access to the franchise and to political power.

Using data from the last 30 years, the research also provides important context to the ways in which party affiliation affects women’s participation in politics at all scales.

We use 1992, “The Year of the Woman” as our starting point as about 66% of the women ever elected to the US House and 72% of the women elected to the Senate took office after 1992. More importantly, it is considered the beginning of the last 30 years of achievements made by minority women candidates. In 1992 Carol Mosley Braun (D-IL) became the first Black woman elected to the Senate and, between 1992 and 2018, more than 80% of all the minority women who have served in Congress were elected. Overall, since 1992 there has been a steady increase in the number of women elected to state legislatures, statewide offices, the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate (CAWP).

At the state level, the proportion of women in state legislatures has increased in most regions since 1992. In 1992, women’s representation was sparse everywhere except a few states in the West and New England. Multiple states, largely in the South and along the Eastern seaboard, had fewer than 10% of their state legislative seats won by women, and several had none. By 2020 only North Dakota has fewer than 10% women in its state legislature and, even in the South where the numbers are still lower than the rest of the country, states such as Georgia have moved into the 30% range. It is notable that, as of the November 2020 election, Nevada became the first state to have a legislature with more women than men.

Unsurprisingly, given the long-standing gender gap in voting, the women in these seats are overwhelmingly Democrats, in Democratic states. Not only do Democrats tend to run more women for state (and national) legislative seats, but they are marginally more likely to get elected than Republican women. The graphic of PVI vs. Percent women in state legislatures, amplify demonstrates that Democratic leaning states have reliably more women in their state legislatures that do Republican-leaning states.

At the national scale, we see a similar set of trends. Examining elections won by women from 1992 to 2020, there is a clear increase in representation in both the House and the Senate, but again, there is a strong bias towards Democratic women winning, especially in the House. There is, however, no particular regional distribution to the high and low percentage states, although the South stands out as uniformly unfriendly to women politicians at both the House and Senate.

A final piece of the puzzle is provided by an analysis of the way that women vote. From the advent of the 19th Amendment until the early 1960s women voted the same way as men, but at a lower rate. That changed after 1964, the first time that we see women trending more Democratic and by 1980 the gender gap became more pronounced as women were not only more likely to vote Democratic than men but also began to demonstrate higher turnout than men.

In the 2020 election female turnout remained uniformly 2-3% higher than male turnout across the states, and the partisan gender gap remained substantial, although it dropped from 13% (2016) to 12%. There is little relationship between the size of the gap and state population. PVI or region. However, when we look at the difference between the way that white women and BIPOC women vote, there is a startling regional pattern that indicates a substantial (as high as 74 point) gap in the White female Democratic vote and the BIPOC Democratic vote. This gap is particularly pronounced in the South and only slightly less so in the Midwest. Closer examination of the White female vote shows numerous states in the South where the gender gap is reversed and women were more likely to vote for Trump over Biden (for women as a whole this inly happens in West Virginia). It is suggested then, that the gender gap narrowed in 2020 in White women swing back to the Republican Party, in a few selected states.