

Women Voters Can't Be Trusted (1972) by Gloria Steinem



Men in politics have made a lot of of assumptions about the way women vote:

- that we vote like our husbands if we're married, or like our fathers if we're not;
- that, given our choice of male candidates, we'll choose the sexually attractive one;
- that we're much less likely to vote for a woman candidate than men are;
- that we consider politics a male province, and so are less likely to get into the process, to form political opinions, or to vote at all;
- that black women are less concerned than white women with issues of sex discrimination, and more turned off by the Women's Liberation Movement as a whole;
- that women are more conservative than men, and possibly even more violent and vengeful ("the real haters," as Richard Nixon once put it);
- finally, and somewhat paradoxically, that the 19th Amendment didn't amount to much, because the women's vote is never going to make a fundamental difference anyway.

Women have tended to go along with these assumptions. After all, they fit our popular image as nonpolitical, limited people; an image we have internalized so well that we may accept it as true of women as a group, even though we have disproved it in our individual lives. The truth is that these ideas have been acted upon with little proof of their accuracy, and often with no serious study at all.

In the early days of opinion-taking, pollsters went to offices and factories where few women were present, or went door-to-door asking for "the man of the house." Modern pollsters talk to women, but often fail to analyze sex-as they would, say, age or economic level-for its possible influence on opinion. Religion, marital status, ethnic origin, geographic region, education, parents' voting habits, property ownership, urban vs. rural or suburban life-style, blue collar vs. white collar: all are more likely to be studied for their effect on voting habits, both by politicians and by scholars, than are political differences based on sex.

Some prominent women have taken positive pride in ignoring the women's vote, or insisting there was no such thing. After all, if men were the acknowledged political grown-ups, then any difference from them was the measure of our immaturity. Why prove male-female opinion differences when they were bound to be used against us? Better to get "educated on the issues," so we could prove ourselves by voting exactly like men. True, brave women fought for and earned the right to vote 52 years ago, but too few of their sisters had the ego strength to believe their cultural differences from men might have a positive value-ever.

We are just beginning to look un-ashamedly at how we think, whether it is like, or different from, men. We are just beginning to flex our muscles, and figure out what kind of political force we might be.

Do We Want To Get Into Politics?

In their first Presidential election in 1920, only a third of the eligible female voters actually went to the polls. However, the rate of increase in women voters has been three times that of men over the past 20 years. Among the young, urban, and educated, the voting turnout of some groups of women has already surpassed their counterpart males. According to pollster Louis Harris, who has been looking at all the variables, women will probably remain the voting majority for the rest of the century. "Once you let a force like that loose," notes Mr. Harris, whether with pleasure or fear it's impossible to tell, "I would suggest that it can never be bottled up again."

For the past two years Philip Morris has commissioned Louis Harris to do a large-scale yearly survey of women's opinions, a device to promote their women-directed cigarette, Virginia Slims. The 1971 poll betrayed its Madison Avenue origins with questions about love and skirt lengths. But the 1972 version, composed and analyzed by Carolyn Setlow, is one of the rare and valuable studies of female opinion in many areas, politics included.

According to the Harris-Setlow poll, three out of five women questioned felt that women should be more active politically (a greater desire for increased activity than men evidenced for themselves), but only one in six women was actually active.

In general, women in the Harris-Setlow poll seemed to be painfully aware of what needed to be done, but were still pessimistic and unsure about trying to do it themselves: they felt that becoming "really active in politics" meant neglecting husbands and children; they resented being given "the dirty work" in politics; and one woman in four believed men in politics were actively keeping women out.

Majorities of both sexes in this '72 poll were in favor of "new organizations to strengthen women's participation in politics." (The National Women's Political Caucus, this year's political emphasis by the National Organization for Women, and the new feminist caucuses inside the various bodies of the Republican and Democratic parties seem to be happening at the right time.) By a whopping eight to one, women felt there had been too few women delegates at both Republican and Democratic Presidential conventions in the past.

Women aren't very optimistic, though, about their futures as political decision-makers. Approximately half of the women questioned in the Harris-Setlow poll said women were discriminated against as candidates, as well as for top jobs in government. The fact that only 37 percent of the women seriously thought a woman could become President within the next ten years may reflect simple realism.

"There are many signs that women are now playing for keeps in politics more than any time in the past," said a sobered Louis Harris, in a speech assessing this poll's results "and that this activism will accelerate. . . . Clearly, these results point to a condition of growing confidence, determination, and bitterness that combine to make a potential explosion of woman-power in American politics."

Do We Vote Like Our Husbands?

The Princeton class of '62 [all male] was polled ten years after graduation. In an unusual gesture, a similar opinion poll was sent to their wives. "Politically, the Princeton man is a liberal Republican," the study concluded, but the wives were "more liberal politically." When asked if their wives shared their political views, however, a full 88 percent of the men answered, "Yes."

Perhaps the depth of that chasm is proof of political scientist Marjorie Lansing's finding that education politicizes women more than men. Most of the Princeton wives had at least a B.A. In the more representative sample taken from the Harris-Setlow poll, 64 percent of the female respondents said that women didn't vote the way their husbands told them to. (The highest percentage of negatives came from married females, who should know.) Women also have ideas about exactly how their votes differ from those cast by men.

In the Harris-Setlow poll, 71 percent of the women questioned believed that "women are more sensitive to the problems of the poor and underprivileged than men are." A majority of women believed that "women attach greater value

to human life" and "have more artistic ability and appreciation of the arts than men do." A majority of both men and women were convinced that a woman president would be less likely to take the country into war.

Women also believed that females were more pacifist than males; cared more about protecting consumer interests; found war less justifiable under any circumstance; and were generally less hardened to the suffering of other people. These cultural differences, the women respondents said, would be evident in decisions made by a woman in office.

Summing up both the 1971 and 1972 polls, Louis Harris agreed. "Women are voting differently from men," he said. "They are more inclined now to vote and to become active not only for their own self-interest, but for the interest of society, the world, and most of all, out of compassion for humanity."

Are We More Conservative Than Men?

Culturally, women tend to think like conservers of life. Sometimes that makes us conservative in the conventional sense, and sometimes it pushes us to the left, making us very radical indeed.

In 1968, for example, women were worried about war and leery of Nixon. All the post-election polls concluded that women voted less for Nixon or Wallace than men did, but women voters were still not turning out in the same proportion as men. If they had, Humphrey would have won in 1968.

In spite of our generally more liberal voting, we have less party loyalty than men, black or white, and react less to labels of "liberals" or "conservatives." We seem to look at the issues, the character of the candidates, and then decide.

Thirty-nine percent of the women questioned in the Harris-Setlow poll are sympathetic to Women's Liberation groups, but 49 percent are still worried and put off by them, citing such words as "radical," "revolutionary," or "aggressive" to describe their fears. But overall, as Louis Harris sums it up, "the cause of advancing women's status has literally leaped forward among women since a year ago." In the 1971 Louis Harris-Virginia Slims poll, most women opposed "efforts to strengthen and change women's status in society," though by a narrow margin of 42 to 40 percent. One year later, the trend was sharply reversed. By 48 to 36 percent, most women now support the forces of change.

Apparently, we are becoming less "conservative." Even about ourselves.

Are Black Women Against the Women's Liberation Movement?

One unmissable trend in all available polls is that black women are even more interested in changing their status as women than white women are. White women say "Yes" to change by 45 to 39 percent in the Harris-Setlow poll, but among black women, the positive balance is 62 to 22 percent. Furthermore, black women come out stronger on just about every feminist issue, whether it's voting for a woman candidate, ending violence and militarism, or believing that women are just as rational as men, and have more human values.

Black women are also more favorably disposed to the phrase "Women's Liberation" than white women are, in spite of the white or middle-class connotations often given it by the press: 67 percent of black women reacted favorably to it, as opposed to 35 percent of white women. Perhaps most surprising, black women more often put white, feminist leaders on their list of "greatly respected" women than white women did.

There's No Such Thing as a Women's Bloc Vote. Or Is There?

All the available polls show one thing very clearly: women are changing more rapidly than any other group. We are just beginning to act forcefully, and to express the ways in which we are culturally different from men; the more humane, less violent values of the women's culture.

Even a small difference can be crucial when it involves 51 percent of the population. It may only take a few thousand people in each state to change an election. In most countries, 5 percent of the population is the activist group that makes social change.

We've been voting differently for quite a long time, but we've been delivering our votes for nothing.

Now, women want something in return. 1972 is just the beginning.