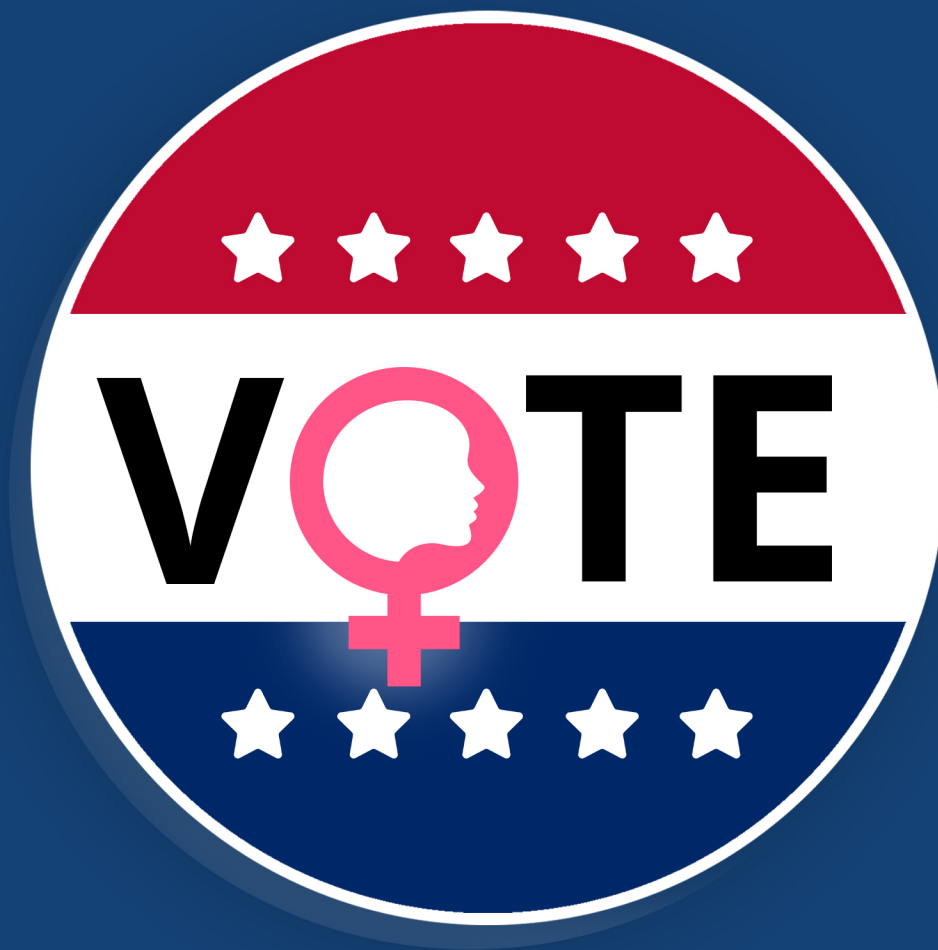


# MAY THE BEST WOMAN WIN?

Education and Bias against Women in American Politics



Anthony P. Carnevale  
Nicole Smith  
Kathryn Peltier Campbell

2019

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# MAY THE BEST WOMAN WIN?

## Education and Bias against Women in American Politics



**I**t appears that 2020 will be an unparalleled year for women in American politics. As of March 2019, six women had officially launched campaigns to be the Democratic nominee for president,<sup>1</sup> setting a record for the number of women competing for one party's presidential nomination.<sup>2</sup> But the potential for any of these candidates to become president of the United States may depend on the answer to a key question: How do Americans feel about women in politics?

We already have sufficient evidence that a woman can be elected president of the United States. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by 2.9 million votes in the 2016 election, although she lost in the Electoral College vote to Donald Trump. Despite Clinton's near victory, however, it is important to consider the evidence that bias continues to affect female politicians' chances of success.

As more women enter the political arena each year, voters' opinions about whether they are suited for political leadership have evolved. At the same time, expectations of women remain rooted in long-held stereotypes about their roles as caregivers and nurturers.<sup>3</sup> The characteristics associated with these roles are not necessarily seen as compatible with the responsibilities of the commander in chief.

To succeed in positions of leadership, women often have to be strong and decisive. But in doing so, they risk being penalized for violating social norms.<sup>4</sup> Their very success in roles associated with men can have negative consequences,<sup>5</sup> including making them seem less "likable."<sup>6</sup> Research has shown that being likable is more important than any other factor to a woman's success in a political race.<sup>7</sup>

These issues are complicated by how national news outlets cover women in politics. While members of the media have engaged in public reflection about gender bias in reporting,

1 Representative Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-New York), Senator Kamala Harris (D-California), Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-Minnesota), Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Massachusetts), and Marianne Williamson (self-help author and motivational speaker).

2 Chappell, "There's Not Just One Women's Lane," 2019.

3 Carnevale et al., *Women Can't Win*, 2018.

4 Cooper, "For Women Leaders, Likability and Success Hardly Go Hand-in-Hand," 2013.

5 Heilman and Okimoto, "Why Are Women Penalized for Success at Male Tasks?" 2007; Almlund et al., "Personality Psychology and Economics," 2011.

6 Cooper, "For Women Leaders, Likability and Success Hardly Go Hand-in-Hand," 2013.

7 Barbara Lee Family Foundation, *Turning Point*, 2011.

the imbalance continues. For example, when Beto O'Rourke announced his candidacy for president, he received media coverage that dwarfed the attention paid to similar announcements by women candidates, even as some of that coverage criticized him for seeming to be unaware of his White male privilege.<sup>8</sup>

While the challenges facing women in politics are not unique to the United States, societal expectations have not stopped women from becoming heads of state in other countries, including Brazil, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United Kingdom. The first woman elected to the US Congress was Jeannette Rankin in 1916.<sup>9</sup> Women's representation as a proportion of elected officials has grown since then, but women have not yet achieved equal representation. For example, while women have made gains in the US Senate and House of Representatives, they still hold only about one-quarter of Congressional seats—a record high share, but far from an equal one.<sup>10</sup>

In politics, as in other competitive arenas, the American ideal is that in a fair contest, talent ought to rise to the top. But gender norms may be placing artificial limits on the talent pool for political leadership. Bias that weeds out potential candidates on the basis of stereotypes harms women candidates. Such bias also arguably prevents voters from electing the most capable and qualified leaders.

In this report, we explore how sex, age, income, race, and political affiliation might influence opinions regarding women's suitability to be president. We also explore whether educational attainment levels might lead to broader options for political leadership by reducing bias that could limit the candidate pool.

8 Korecki, "Not One Woman Got That Kind of Coverage," 2019.

9 Congressional Budget Office, "Women in Congress," 2018.

10 DeSilver, "A Record Number of Women Will Be Serving in the New Congress," 2018; Kurtzleben et al., "What It Looks Like to Have a Record Number of Women in the House of Representatives," 2019.

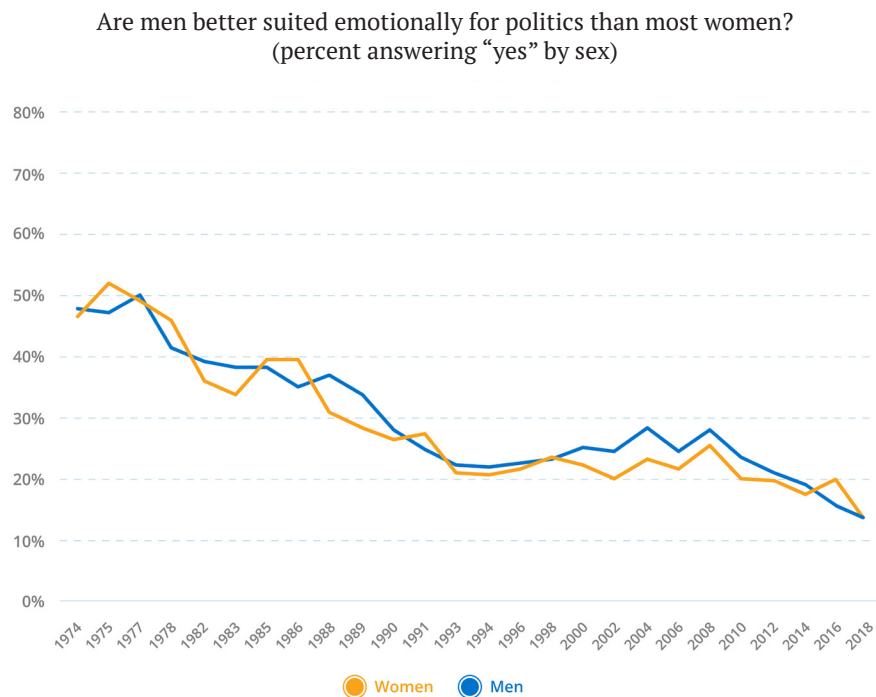
# How do Americans view women in politics?



**Sex** | Bias against women in politics has declined over time, but 13 percent of both men and women still have doubts about most women’s emotional suitability for politics.

Overall, the fraction of Americans who believe that men are better suited emotionally for politics than most women has declined over the years.<sup>11</sup> Only about 13 percent of both men and women now think that women are less suited for politics than men—a change of about 37 percentage points since 1975, when the average peaked at almost 50 percent. This result is heartening yet disappointing. The change over time shows a tremendous amount of progress in the notion of equality of the sexes. By 2018, the fraction of Americans who believe that women are less suited emotionally for politics had declined by a full 5 percentage points compared to just four years earlier. That’s good news for the record number of women currently running for the Democratic nomination. At the same time, however, the mere fact that a solid 13 percent of Americans continue to think that women are less suited for politics than men could cause candidates to lose elections (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Over time, both women and men have become less likely to see men as better suited emotionally for politics than women.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the General Social Survey, selected years, 1974–2018.

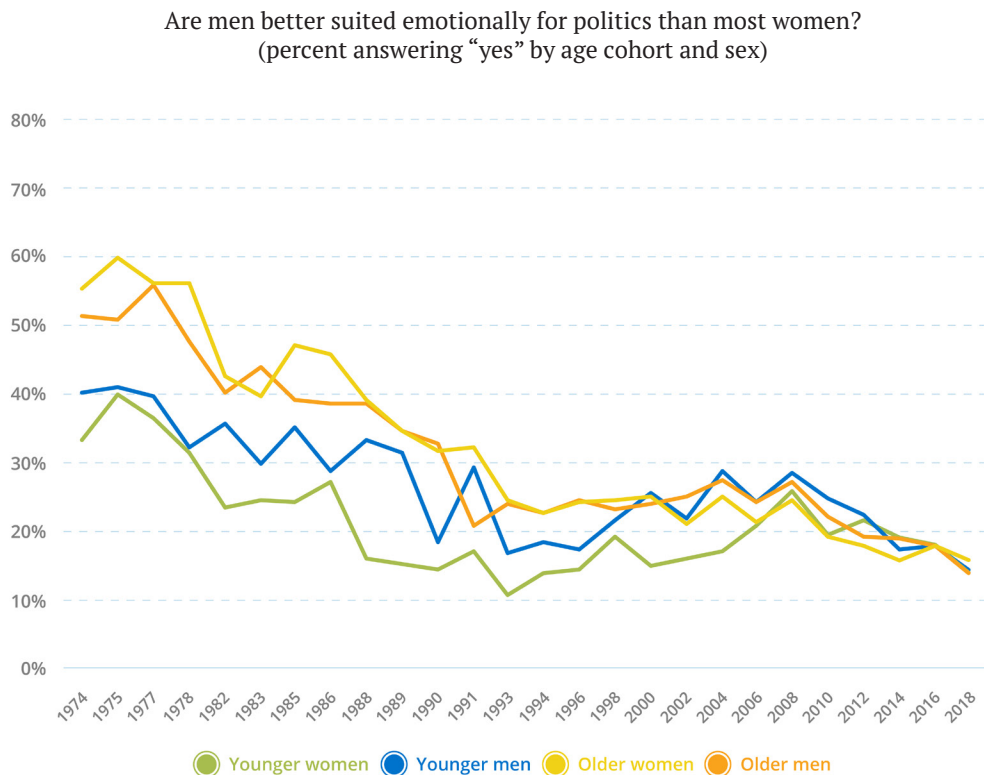
<sup>11</sup> The exact wording of the General Social Survey prompt was, “Tell me if you agree or disagree with this statement: Men are better suited emotionally for politics than are most women.”



## Age | Older women used to be the most uncomfortable of all groups with women in politics, but that has changed.

In the 1970s, both older men and women (defined as those over age 35) were much more likely than their younger counterparts (those ages 18 to 35) to believe that women are less emotionally suited to run for political office. In 1974, the disparity between younger and older women was 21 percentage points (with 34% vs. 55%, respectively, saying men are better suited emotionally for politics than women), but by 2018, the gap had almost disappeared, with only 13 percent of younger women and 16 percent of older women reporting that men are more suited for politics than women. This indicates that people of all ages are more tolerant today than earlier generations. During the 1970s, the cohort showing the greatest skepticism of women’s leadership was older women. Older women generally continued to outpace older men in their negative viewpoints of women in politics until the 1990s, when viewpoints across age cohorts began to converge (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. While older respondents once indicated much stronger bias against women than younger respondents, both their biases and the age gap have decreased.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the General Social Survey, selected years, 1974–2018.



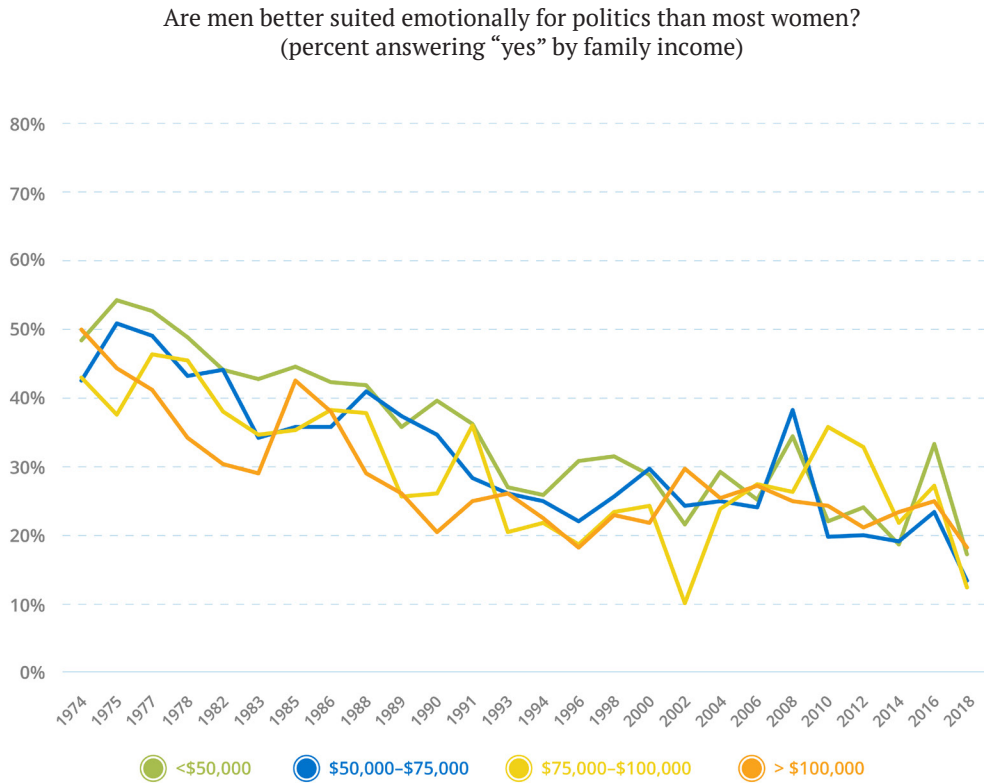


## Family Income

Family income level does not generally predict people's views of women in politics, although those with lower family incomes held more negative views than those with higher family incomes until 2002.

Views of men's and women's emotional suitability for politics vary by family income level, but the differences among groups have not been consistent over time. In the late 1970s, Americans with relatively high family income levels (\$75,000 and above) were more likely to adopt more tolerant viewpoints of women in politics than those with family income levels below \$75,000. Today, family income is no longer a reliable predictor of people's views of women in politics. Across all groups, respondents have become more tolerant over time (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. People from all income groups have shown more tolerance of women in politics over time.**



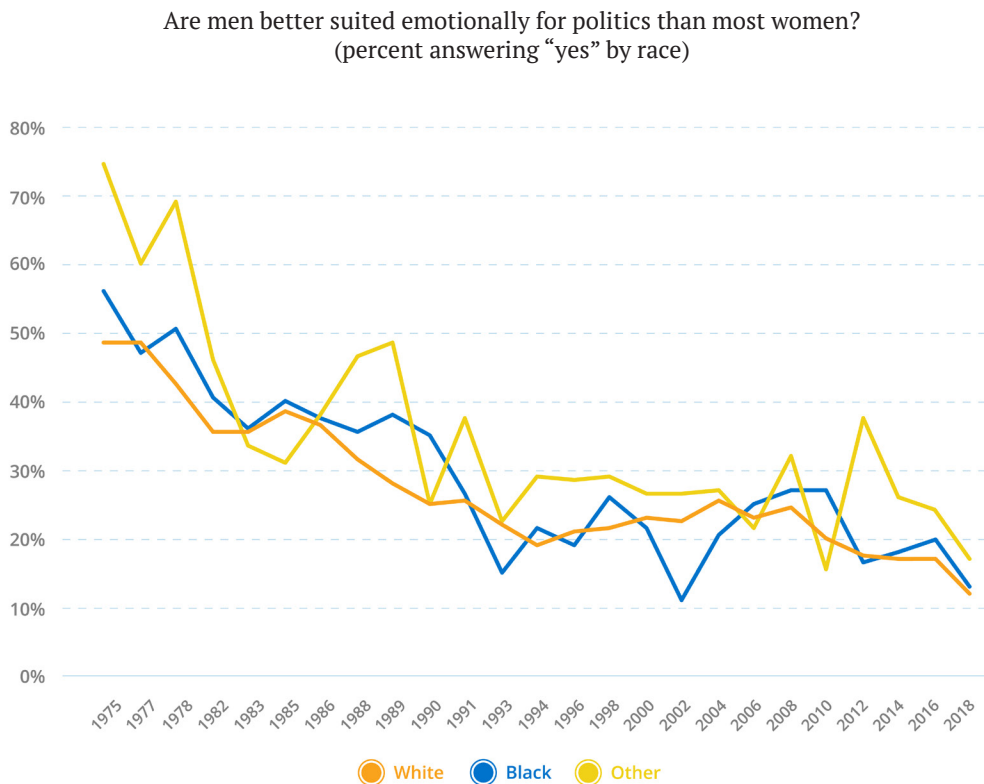
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the General Social Survey, selected years, 1974–2018.



## Race | Blacks are more likely than Whites to believe that women are less suited emotionally for politics than men.

Blacks have generally been more likely than Whites since the 1970s to have unfavorable opinions of women’s suitability for politics, with some exceptions. For example, a noticeable reversal in the relative trends occurred in the early 2000s, when a smaller share of Blacks than Whites said that they were biased against women political candidates (Figure 4).<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 4. Blacks have generally been more likely than Whites to say men are better suited for politics than most women, although that trend reversed for a short period in the early 2000s.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the General Social Survey, selected years, 1974–2018.

12 Our analysis does not include data from 1974 because data collection in that year did not include an “other” category with differentiable data.

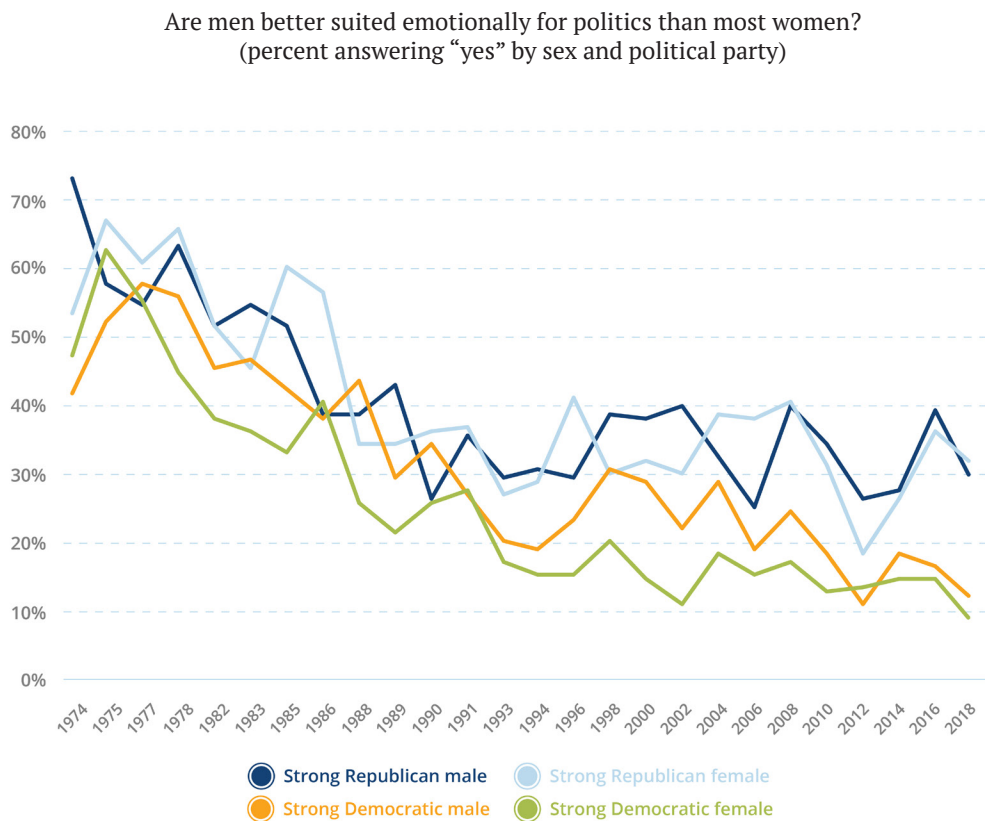
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## Political Affiliation

Strong Republicans are more likely than strong Democrats to believe that men are better suited emotionally for politics than most women.

Outcomes by political party show greater bias against women in politics by respondents who identified as strong Republicans. In 1974, almost 3 of every 4 males who identified as strong Republicans believed that women were less suited emotionally for politics than men. They were much more likely to feel that way at the time than strong Republican females or strong Democrats of either sex. Among those groups, 54 percent or less felt women were less suited emotionally for politics than men. This discomfort with women in politics declined for all groups over the decades, but in 2016, strong Republicans and strong Democrats diverged. By 2018, strong Republicans of both sexes were almost three times as likely as strong Democrats to show bias against women in politics (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Strong Republicans are more likely than strong Democrats to favor men in politics.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the General Social Survey, selected years, 1974–2018.

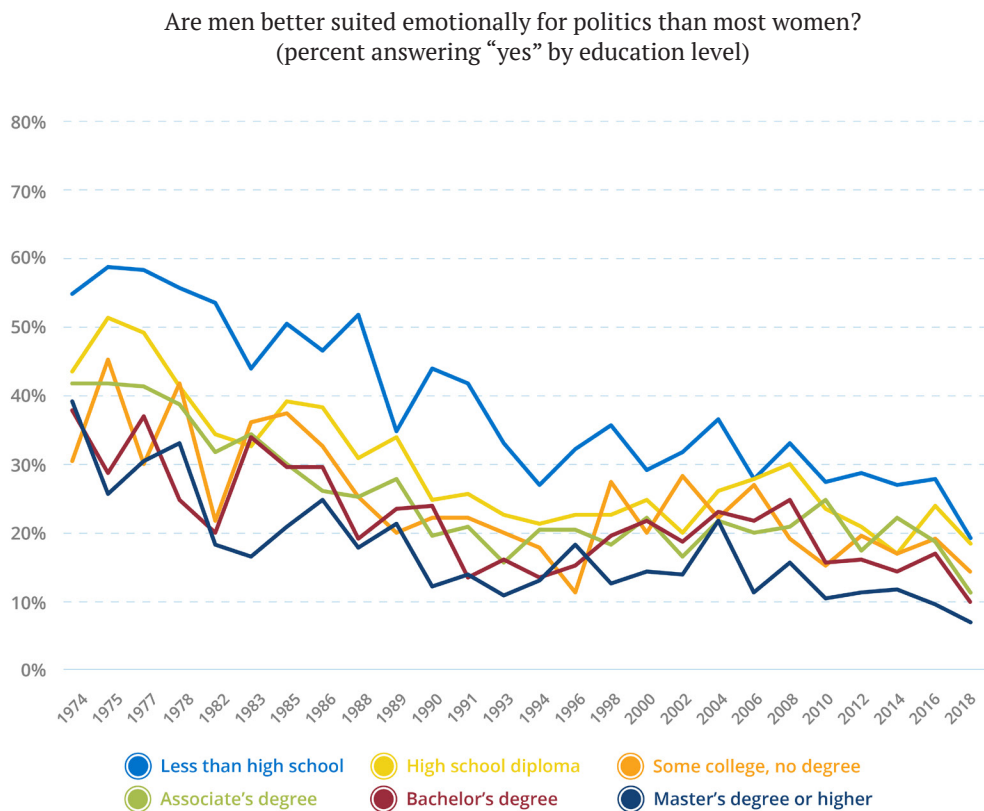


## Education

People with higher levels of educational attainment have more favorable views of women in politics.

Tolerance for women in politics has increased over time, with notably greater approval among groups with higher levels of education. In 1974, fairly high percentages of men and women at all levels of education (ranging from 31% to 55%) held a negative view of women's suitability for politics. However, over time, those numbers fell, and a pattern emerged across education levels. By 2018, respondents with higher levels of education were more likely than their less-educated peers to believe that women are suited emotionally for politics. Nineteen percent of Americans with less than a high school diploma said that men are generally better suited emotionally for politics than most women, compared to 7 percent of respondents who had a master's degree or higher. Americans with less than a high school diploma are almost twice as likely as those with a bachelor's degree—and nearly three times as likely as those with a master's degree or higher—to doubt women's emotional suitability for politics (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Over time, a correlation has emerged between higher levels of education and less bias against women in politics.**



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of the General Social Survey, selected years, 1974–2018.

## Women can win in politics, but the playing field still isn't level.



**B**ias against women in politics has been on the decline over the past four decades. That's a good sign for the women throwing their hats in the ring for the 2020 election. But in races as close as those of the recent past, even a small bias can make a big difference.

Education level was a consistent factor in predicting bias against women in politics in 2018, second only to political affiliation. The more educated respondents were, the less likely they were to indicate that men are better suited emotionally for politics than women. While age had been a significant predictor of bias against women in the past, the age gap in responses had narrowed to less than 3 percentage points as of 2018.

These findings offer support for the common belief that education is an antidote to intolerance, at least when it takes the form of bias against women in politics. In addition, they indicate that across education levels and factors like sex, age, income, and race, bias against female politicians has declined over time. But women who run for office still start with a 13 percent deficit compared to men. The role that sexism plays in politics is shrinking, but it's still too substantial to ignore.

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