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# Can A Woman Win The Presidency?



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Leadership Strategy

*I write about leadership that defies convention.*



Senator Kamala Harris at She the People voter forum in Houston, Texas © 2019 BLOOMBERG FINANCE LP

Victoria Woodhull spent election day in 1872 in the Ludlow Street Jail, which derailed her plans to vote for herself for president of the United States — which she was bent on pulling off even though women wouldn't get the right to vote for another 50 years. Though she had been formally nominated by the Equal Rights Party, a party she was chiefly responsible for creating, there were factors beyond her imprisonment that impeded her success. Besides women not having the right to vote, at 31 years old she was four

years shy of the Constitution's minimum age requirement and her reputation as a spiritualist and free love advocate placed her too far out on the fringe even for the likes of Susan B. Anthony and other suffragettes.

Over the nearly 150 years since, there have only been a few dozen women who have thrown their hat into the ring, and only one who won the nomination of a major political party.

Hillary Clinton's loss to both Barack Obama in 2008 and Donald Trump in 2016, and the overwhelming female representation among 2020 Democratic candidates begs the question, is the United States ready to elect a woman for its highest office?

"A woman actually did win the popular vote, let's not forget," says Gloria Feldt, the co-president of [Take the Lead](#), a non-profit dedicated to achieving gender parity by 2025, addressing the fact that Clinton won the popular vote by 2.87 million votes. And, it seems we may never know the full impact Russia's interference in our 2016 elections had on the outcome.

"The biggest question is the extent to which outside foreign interference will continue to be an issue," explains Lauren Leader, co-founder and CEO of [All in Together](#), a non-profit that encourages, equips, educates, and empowers voting-age women to participate fully in America's civic and political life. In fact, Kirstjen Nielsen resigned from the Department of Homeland Security amid concerns of continuing Russian interference, and Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney [admitted](#) that even mentioning Russian interference, let alone addressing the issue, "wasn't a great subject" to bring up around the president.

Though the United States considers itself the leader of the free world, it is not leading when it comes to gender equality, ranking 51st overall in its progress toward gender parity, according to the World Economic Forum's [2018 Global Gender Gap Report](#).

The report scores 149 countries in four categories, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Not surprisingly, the United States ranked even lower, 98th, in its political empowerment of women.

In a country in which women make up more than 50% of the population and earn more than half of the college degrees, yet still have not closed the pay gap, nor its promotion gap — if we can call it that — it's no wonder a woman has not been promoted to the highest office of the land.

And in the 2020 election cycle, when it is so critical for the Democrats to defeat Trump, perhaps now is not the time, which may explain the strong early polling and fundraising numbers of Joe Biden. When he entered the race, one could almost hear the collective albeit inaudible sigh of relief among voters of a certain demographic who now had a white male alternative to the largely female slate of candidates.

“The concept of electability is deeply troubling because it's rooted in the belief that only a man can beat another man, when in fact, women across the country have a record of defeating male opponents at every level of government,” explains Na'ilah Amaru, national trainer for VoteRunLead, who had the exclusive honor of nominating Hillary Clinton at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. “The 2018 mid-terms reflected the changing face of political candidates and the impact of the changing electorate.”

“Yes, the country is ready to elect a woman but that doesn't mean the process to get there won't be challenging,” says Lauren Leader. First, there is bias in the media “that skews every aspect of the coverage from overlooking the women candidates to painting them in more negative terms.”

“Female candidates are judged on their 'likeability' more so than their competence and qualifications for the office they're seeking,” adds Amaru.

And, there's bias in the electorate. Leader adds, "The polls showing voters think women are less electable or less able to beat Trump are the evidence."

The fact that Hillary won the popular vote by a large margin proves that a woman is indeed electable, and even more so since the 2016 election.

"There is a fervent desire for change and to see more women and diversity in our politics," says Marianne Schnall, author of "What Will It Take to Make a Woman President? Conversations About Women, Leadership & Power" and founder of [WhatWillItTake.com](http://WhatWillItTake.com), evidenced by the historic wins in the 2018 midterm elections in both the House and Senate.

"There is fresh energy to be harnessed as women are mobilizing in all kinds of powerful ways, as organizers, voters, and donors – women everywhere are marching, running for office, sharing our stories through #metoo and rising as a growing social, political and cultural force to be reckoned with."

The problem is not that a woman cannot win the presidency. The problem may be that many voters are simply not convinced. Overcompensating to beat Trump at all costs, the electorate may very well choose the safest, least interesting candidate, the one less representative of our diverse citizenry, and as a result, the one arguably less likely to beat Trump.

"A woman who knows how to articulate a clear, simple vision AND stand up to Trump will be a much more formidable candidate than, say, Joe Biden, yet another older white man. Power always goes to the insurgent. Think Obama, Trump, Ocasio-Cortez," says Gloria Feldt.

While, unlike her predecessor Victoria Woodhull, Clinton did not spend election day in jail – despite her detractors' "lock her up" chants – running a woman challenges the very ethos that elected Trump in the first place. And maybe that's a good thing. After all, sometimes it takes two or three swings to topple something as ingrained as white male privilege.

The only thing standing in the way of running a woman against Trump is our fear that a woman cannot beat Trump. The evidence does not support this, however. We don't know the extent to which Russian interference, Comey's eleventh hour letter about the Clinton investigation (while the FBI's investigation into Trump's Russia ties was kept on the down low), or Clinton's handling of battleground states affected 2016's outcome, but we do know that her loss irrevocably changed the electorate, and as a result, the face of local, state and federal politics.

Now is not the time to play it safe. Now is the time to pick a candidate who captures the hearts, minds and renews the hope of the American people, whether it be a person of color, gay or yes, even female. After all, there must be infinitely more than 18 million cracks in that glass ceiling by now, and its time has come.



**Melanie Fine**

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