

Executive Summary: Gendered Political Engagement Across Age Groups

By Sonia Mahajan, All In Together Community Engagement Intern

May 6, 2019

Introduction

Age and gender are salient issues when it comes to politics. In the 2018 midterm elections, young women were credited with high levels of civic engagement in particular and are expected to make an even bigger impact in 2020.¹ However, although women's election day turnout is around five percentage points higher than their male counterparts, nearly every study reviewed found that women have lower electoral, but greater civic, participation than men of their age group.² This report will examine these gender gaps in engagement in the literature and in All In Together's (AIT) data, and identify general trends in women's engagement.

For the purposes of this report, "political engagement" will be defined as any engagement with political campaigns or advocacy groups, nonprofits, charities, or any other type of engagement that impacts politics. "Civic engagement" will specifically refer to engagement with nonprofit or charity groups, while "electoral engagement" will refer to engagement specifically with political campaigns or advocacy groups.

Background

CIRCLE found that around 80% of both young men and women ages 15 to 25 thought that they could make a difference in the country's political future, and both genders were equally interested in "voice activities" such as canvassing and signing petitions.³ In recent years, this may have been aided by the fact that social media has made being "vocal" about political issues much easier, and many young adults regard this as a form of civic engagement.⁴ However, this form of engagement is gendered as well: in a worldwide study in 2015, Brandtzaeg found that men are more likely to use social media to engage in with topics related to politics, while women are more likely to use social media to engage with humanitarian and environmental issues.

This gendered divide continues in offline engagement. According to the CIRCLE study, young men are much more likely to volunteer for or donate money to a political

¹ The U.S. Census Bureau saw the largest increase in 18-to-29-year-olds in the 2018 midterm elections. Voter turnout in 2018 was up 15.7% from 2014.

² MIT Election Data & Science.

³ CIRCLE defines voice activities as those actions that allow Americans to express their views on the issues. These include, but are not limited to, attending town halls, signing petitions, and canvassing.

⁴ 2017 Millennial Impact Report.

candidate. Additionally, although young women regularly make up a greater percentage of voters than their male counterparts, 27.8% of men aged 20 to 25 are “regular voters,” compared to 24.6% of women. Young men are also more likely to take on formal leadership roles within political and activist movements. In offering a potential partial explanation of this participation gap, a recent study found that parents were much more likely to restrict girls’ political participation, particularly when it was viewed as “dangerous” and when political issues intersected with issues of race. Notably, the majority of youth are not dedicated activists: for all political engagement activities in CIRCLE’s survey, youth turnout was less than 35%.

In his 2008 research, Einolf suggested that “women tend to volunteer more than men, largely because of the fact that they work fewer hours, on average, in paid employment.” Jennings seems to confirm Einolf’s findings, suggesting that young adult women who become mothers are less likely to be engaged politically (especially in national politics),⁵ but are much more likely to become engaged in local civic life as members of organizations such as Parent-Teacher Associations.⁶ Those mothers aged 31 to 40 are 24% more likely to be engaged in school politics than in “general politics,” and those parents under 30 are 56% more likely to be engaged in school politics. This trend remains consistent at least until women are in their sixties.

While the MIT Election Data & Science Lab reports that voter turnout increases with age, numerous studies have found that age-related physical limitations often serve as a barrier to greater civic and political engagement for older adults. Thus, while older adults are quite engaged as voters, voting at the highest rate of any age group, they are less likely to volunteer for political campaigns or engage in other forms of political or civic engagement. When older women do volunteer, it is most often for associational, non-political groups.⁷ Martinez et al. have found that some older adults’ contributions may be overlooked due to narrow definitions of what volunteering constitutes. According to Einolf’s study, political engagement in older adults has been

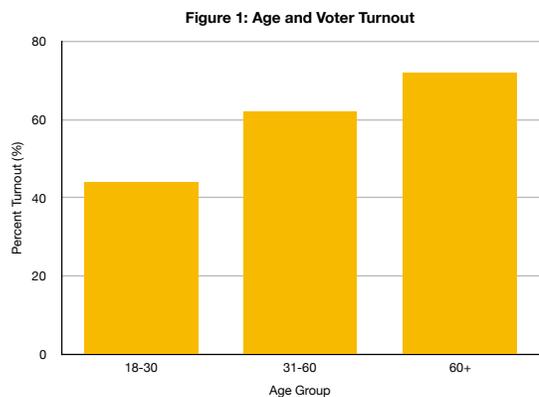


Figure 1: Data from MIT Election Data & Science Lab

⁵ Young mothers are typically in the 25 to 44 age range.

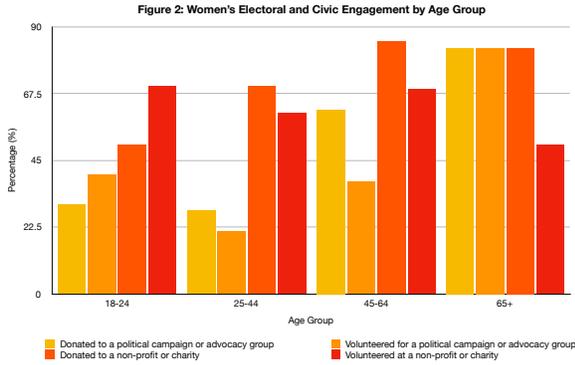
⁶ It is important to keep in mind that Jennings’ research was done in 1979; since then, there has been significant advancement in the ability of women to work and engage outside of the home.

⁷ Older women are defined differently in each study. For the purposes of this report, older women are defined as those over 65.

increasing as each cohort ages. A small part of the higher voter turnout in older women than in older men may be accounted for by the fact that women tend to live longer, and thus make up the majority of the older adult population in the United States.

AIT Data

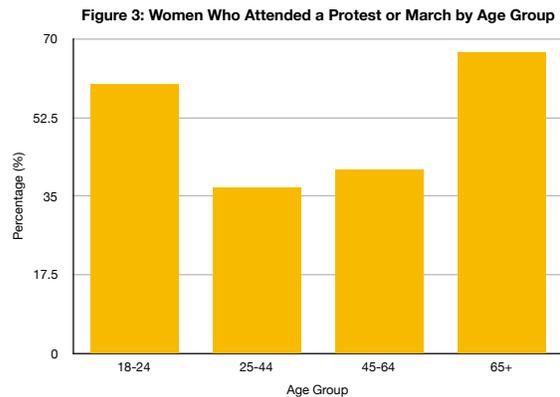
Overview



As the literature suggested, women surveyed by AIT were more civically than electorally engaged.⁸ Women were twice as likely to volunteer with a nonprofit or charity than a political campaign, and 1.7 times more likely to donate to a nonprofit or charity than to a political campaign. Women of all age groups displayed higher engagement with

nonprofits and charities rather than with explicitly political candidates and advocacy groups, except for those women aged 65 and older.⁹ Women 25 to 44 displayed the biggest gap: these women were three times more likely to volunteer for a nonprofit or charity than for a political campaign or advocacy group. Women were also around 10 percentage points more likely to engage by volunteering than by donating monetarily both electorally and civically.

Interestingly, however, the women AIT surveyed did not follow the literature's predictions with regards to age and physical limitations. Those from 25 to 44, who are likely the most able-bodied of all age groups and the least likely to suffer from parental restrictions placed on female children, were also the least likely to attend a protest or march, with only 37% of women participating in such an event in the past

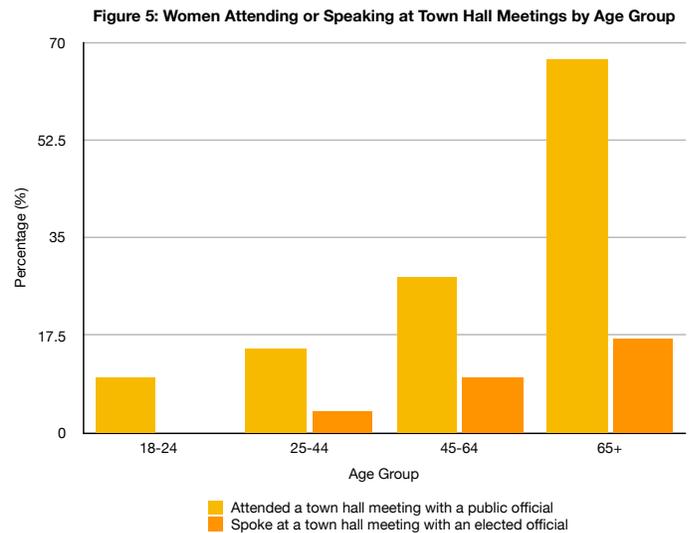
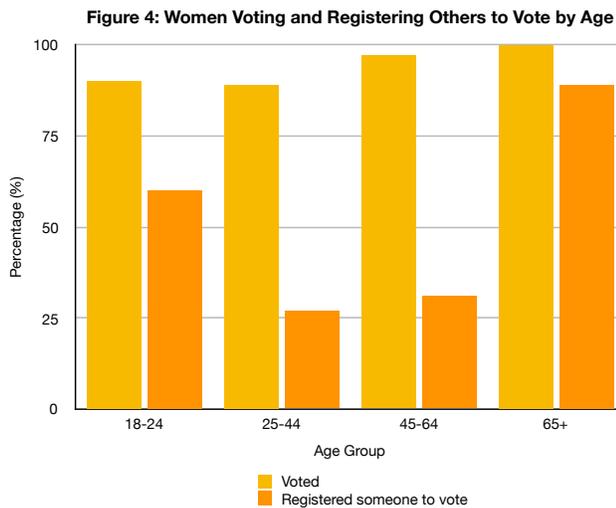


⁸ The AIT data, while interesting to look at, are likely not statistically significant due to the small sample size. Data from 2019 Gretchen Carlson Leadership Initiative (GCLI) Regional Summits in Dallas, Texas, Twin Cities, Minnesota, and Cincinnati, Ohio, were examined. The sample size from the three cities was 126. Of those, 10 were aged 18-24, 71 were aged 25-44, 39 were aged 45-64, and 6 were older than 65. Therefore, data collected for those 18-24 and over 64 are particularly likely not to be statistically significant. AIT does not collect data on social media engagement. Additionally, AIT does not collect data from men.

⁹ This may have been due to the small sample size.

year. Women over 65, who are least likely to be physically able to attend such an event, were the most likely to have attended one within the past year, at 67%.¹⁰

The literature did hold true for other forms of civic engagement that were less physically strenuous. Older women were more likely to vote in an election, and (with the exception of the 18-to-24-year-old group) were most likely to register another person to vote. These women were also more likely to attend or speak at a town hall: while only 10% of 18-to-24-year-olds had attended a town hall in the past year, 67% of those 65 and older attended a town hall in the past year. The same held true for serving on a public board and running for elected office. Again, 10% of 18-to-24-year-olds had served on a public board, while 67% of those 65 and up had. Zero percent of respondents aged 18-24 had run for office, whereas 17% of respondents over 65 had run for office.

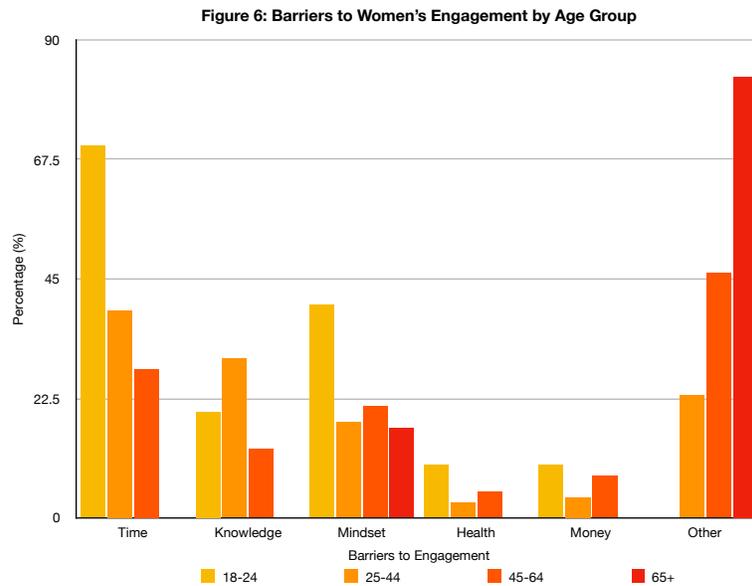


Barriers to Engagement

When surveyed about why they were not more engaged, just under half of women surveyed fell into two categories: lack of time (35%) and/or lack of knowledge (22%). A small percentage said that family responsibilities or health issues prohibited them from becoming more engaged, and two respondents said that they could not be more engaged, as one was a felon and one was a government employee. Health was not a barrier to engagement for those 65 and older, which may account for their high participation in protests and marches. Interestingly, barriers due to lack of time seem to be more prevalent for younger women than for older women. Barriers due to

¹⁰ This may be attributed to small sample size or skew in the data, as the most able-bodied older women were also likely the most able to attend a GCLI event.

“mindset” included embarrassment or fear, unwillingness to go to events alone, or a feeling that one cannot have a real effect on politics.



Conclusions

While women who attend such events are clearly interested in becoming more politically engaged, most of these women are still participating more in forms of engagement typically associated with women—civic and nonprofit associations—and are not breaking into areas typically dominated by men—political campaigns and advocacy—at quite the same rate. However, women of all age groups displayed high rates of voter turnout, with the oldest women the most engaged on average. While women should continue taking these actions, it is also important for them to engage in new ways. Breaking down barriers to engagement, such as lack of time and knowledge, and dispelling shame or embarrassment associated with engaging politically, is a vital next step in promoting women’s political engagement.

Appendix

Respondents to AIT Survey

Total number of respondents: 126

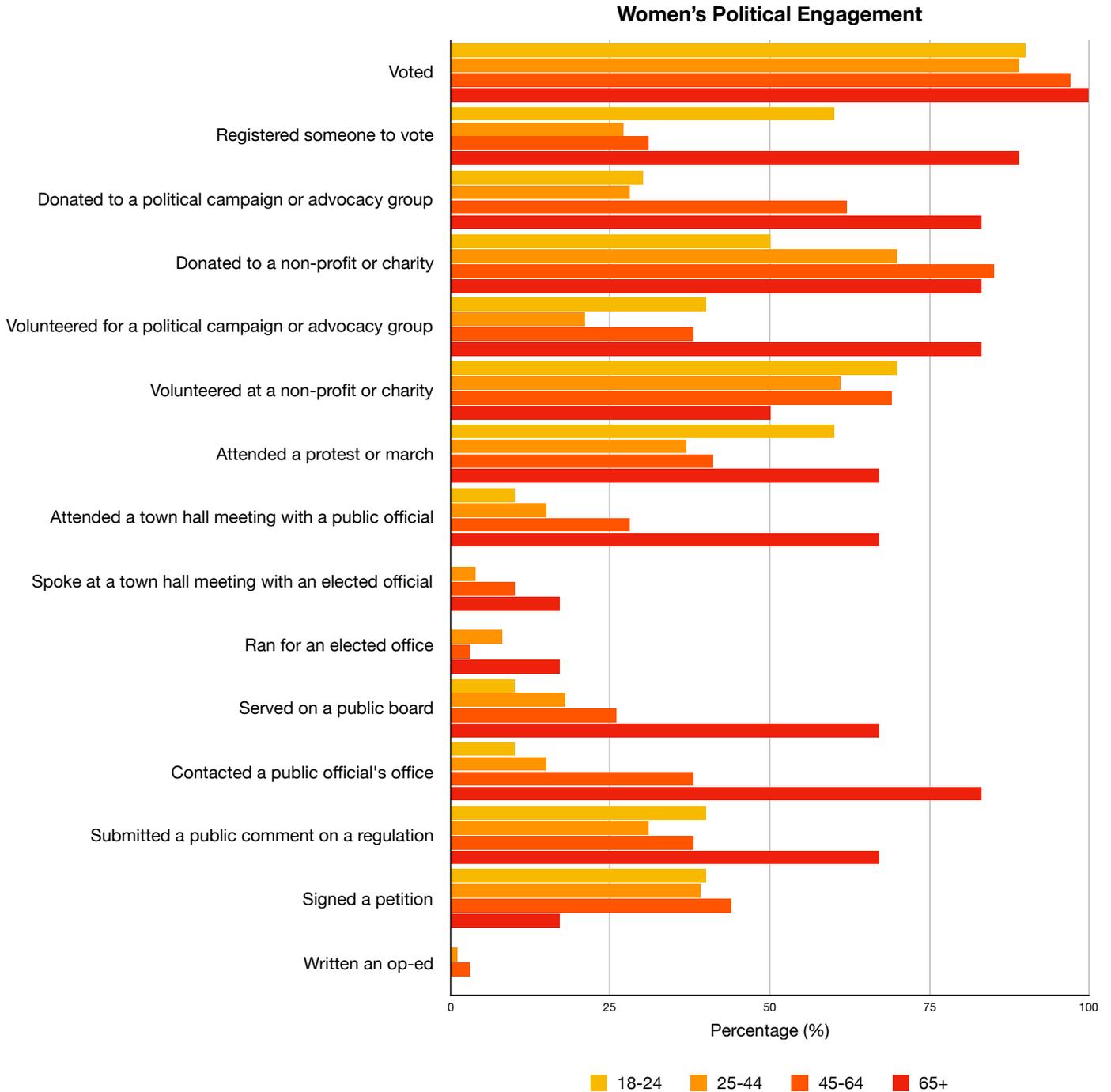
Aged 18-24: 10

Aged 25-44: 71

Aged 45-64: 39

Aged 65 & up: 6

Figure 7: Complete AIT Women's Engagement Data



Sources

- Achieve, and The Case Foundation. "The Millennial Impact Report." The Millennial Impact Report. 2017. Accessed May 03, 2019. <http://www.themillennialimpact.com/>.
- Brandtzaeg, Petter Bae. "Facebook Is No "Great Equalizer." Social Science Computer Review 35, no. 1 (2016): 103-25. Accessed May 3, 2019. doi:10.1177/0894439315605806.
- Einolf, Christopher J. "Will the Boomers Volunteer During Retirement? Comparing the Baby Boom, Silent, and Long Civic Cohorts." Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly 38, no. 2 (2008): 181-99. Accessed May 3, 2019. doi:10.1177/0899764008315182.
- Gallup, Inc. "Record-High 77% of Americans Perceive Nation as Divided." Gallup.com. November 21, 2016. Accessed May 03, 2019. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/197828/record-high-americans-perceive-nation-divided.aspx>.
- Gordon, Hava Rachel. "Gendered Paths to Teenage Political Participation." Gender & Society 22, no. 1 (2008): 31-55. Accessed May 3, 2019. doi:10.1177/0891243207311046.
- Jennings, M. Kent. "Another Look at the Life Cycle and Political Participation." American Journal of Political Science 23, no. 4 (1979). Accessed May 3, 2019. doi:10.2307/2110805.
- Jennings, M. Kent, and Gregory B. Markus. "Political Involvement in the Later Years: A Longitudinal Survey." American Journal of Political Science 32, no. 2 (1988): 302. Accessed May 3, 2019. doi:10.2307/2111125.
- Marcelo, Karlo Barrios, Mark Hugo Lopez, and Emily Hoban Kirby. "Civic Engagement among Young Men and Women." 2007. Accessed May 3, 2019. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED495763>.
- Martinez, Iveris L., Donneth Crooks, Kristen S. Kim, and Elizabeth Tanner. "Invisible Civic Engagement among Older Adults: Valuing the Contributions of Informal Volunteering." Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology 26, no. 1 (2011): 23-37. Accessed May 3, 2019. doi:10.1007/s10823-011-9137-y.
- Martinson, Marty, and Meredith Minkler. "Civic Engagement and Older Adults: A Critical Perspective." The Gerontologist 46, no. 3 (2006): 318-24. Accessed May 3, 2019. doi:10.1093/geront/46.3.318.
- MIT. "Voter Turnout." MIT Election Lab. 2016. Accessed May 03, 2019. <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voter-turnout>.
- Parker, Kim, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Renee Stepler. "2. Americans See Different Expectations for Men and Women." Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. July 24, 2018. Accessed May 03, 2019. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/12/05/americans-see-different-expectations-for-men-and-women/>.
- Peterson, Steven A. "Biosocial Predictors of Older Americans Political Participation." Politics and the Life Sciences 5, no. 02 (1987): 246-51. doi:10.1017/s0730938400002227.
- Smith, Aaron, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, Henry Brady, Aaron Smith, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady. "The Internet and Civic Engagement." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. February 11, 2014. Accessed May 03, 2019. <https://www.pewinternet.org/2009/09/01/the-internet-and-civic-engagement/>.
- Strate, John M., Charles J. Parrish, Charles D. Elder, and Coit Ford. "Life Span Civic Development and Voting Participation." The American Political Science Review 83, no. 2 (1989). Accessed May 3, 2019. doi:10.2307/1962399.
- U.S. Census Bureau. "Behind the 2018 U.S. Midterm Election Turnout." The United States Census Bureau. April 22, 2019. Accessed May 03, 2019. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/behind-2018-united-states-midterm-election-turnout.html>.