Elections, Gender and Bias

*Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events*

The 2020 presidential campaign is distinctive this year in the number of women running for office. Six women in total—the most women ever in the history of elections—have run or are running for President. They are:

- Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard of Hawai‘i,
- Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York,
- Senator Kamala Harris of California,
- Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota,
- Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, and
History of women and the presidential election

As of 2020, no woman has been elected President of the United States. However, many women broke barriers pursuing the office of the presidency. During the last presidential election in 2016, Hillary Clinton became the first female candidate to run at the top of a major party ticket. She served as a U.S. Senator from 2001-2009. In 2007, Hillary Clinton she ran for president on the Democratic Party ticket but lost the nomination to Barack Obama. When he was elected President, Hillary Clinton served in President Obama’s administration as Secretary of State from 2009-2013.

The first woman to run for President was Victoria Woodhull in 1872, who ran as a candidate in the Equal Rights Party. She was a suffragette and an advocate for equal rights. Margaret Chase Smith ran on the Republican ticket in 1964 and became the first woman to receive more than one vote at a major party convention. Shirley Chisholm, the first African American woman elected to Congress, ran for President in the Democratic Party primary in 1972; she won 152 delegate votes. Several other women have run over the years and two women have been on major party tickets as Vice Presidential candidates: Geraldine Ferraro, Democrat, in 1984 and Sarah Palin, Republican, in 2008.

Public opinion about women and political high office

A 2018 Pew research poll found that 45% of people in the U.S. said they personally hoped a woman would be elected president in their lifetime. About half of all women (51%) said they personally hoped this would happen, compared with 38% of men. However, the general public believes there are barriers for women who seek top leadership positions in politics. Another Pew Research Center survey reveals that two-thirds of Americans said it’s easier for men to get elected to high political offices.

- Marianne Williamson, author, politician and activist.
Sexism and the 2020 presidential election

The unprecedented number of women presidential candidates in 2020 has led to an increase in public discourse and heightened awareness about how they are perceived, treated and scrutinized as viable candidates. This election provides an opportunity to explore and understand how sexism has manifested in presidential elections.

For example, in the short video, *How sexism will influence the 2020 election*, we see some common themes about how women running for president are treated and regarded in comparison to their male counterparts. These themes include:

- "Likability" is crucial for women.
- Women are held to higher standard.
- Public perceptions of what it means to be "presidential" have an impact on how voters perceive women candidates.
- There is a double standard for how women are covered in the media.
- Intense coverage of women candidates’ personalities takes the emphasis off their policy positions.
- Women are placed on a higher pedestal when it comes to ethics, which makes it more difficult for a woman candidate to get past issues that involve being unethical.

What is sexism?

Sexism is defined as: "The marginalization and/or oppression of women based on the belief in a natural order based on sex that privileges men."

Examples of sexism can include individual and institutional forms including: the gender wage gap; stereotypical media portrayals of girls and women, sexual harassment on the street, in the workplace and at school; sexist "jokes" and memes; believing that girls and women aren't as skilled in sports and other more traditionally male-dominated fields; etc.
Age

10 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- Have you noticed anything different about the 2020 presidential election? If so, what?
- Who is running or has ran in the 2020 presidential election? What do you know about the candidates?
- To what extent has the presidential race seemed different with so many women running for President?
- Why do you think there has never been a women President elected in the U.S.?
- Who are the other candidates running in the presidential election and what aspects of diversity do they represent?
- How do you think the identity and diversity of candidates impacts elections?

Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- Have you seen any examples of sexism in the media or elsewhere regarding the presidential election? Please explain.
- Have you witnessed, heard about or experienced sexism in general? What happened and how did you feel?
- Have you ever acted as an ally when you saw sexism? What did you do or wish you could have done?

Take Action
Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Spend time getting to know the different candidates by watching the debates, reading their website and listening to interviews. Reflect on their qualifications, records and policy positions in order to determine which candidate(s) you might support or not support.

- Talk with your family about examples of sexism that you have seen, experienced or perpetuated yourself. Make a commitment to work on it and find ways to act as an ally to targets of sexism, which can include all genders as well as transgender and non-binary people.

- Help to organize a forum at school (or a committee that involves school administrators, staff, parents/families and students) to discuss how sexism takes place at school. Then, use what is learned from the forum to work on behavior and policies that creates a climate of respect, safety and inclusion for all students.

- Write a letter to family members, the school or community newspaper, elected officials or a media outlet to share your observations about sexism in the presidential election. The letter can be one that critiques the current situation or applauds their positive efforts.

Additional Resources

- Sexism and the Presidential Election  (ADL Lesson Plan)

- Stereotypes of Girls and Women in the Media (ADL Lesson Plan)

- Representing the People: Diversity and Elections

- Toward Communication Free of Gender Bias

- Teaching about Elections