

Topline Report

**The Pursuit of Gender Equality in American Foreign Policy:
A Survey of American Public Opinion**

November 1, 2017

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Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the following individuals for providing advice and suggestions on earlier drafts of the questionnaire and report:

Dara Kay Cohen (Harvard University)

Valerie Hudson (Texas A&M University)

Heather Hurlburt (New America)

Pierangelo Isernia (University of Sienna)

Craig Kafura (Chicago Council on Global Affairs)

Joshua Kertzer (Harvard University)

Kathleen Powers (Dartmouth College)

Jason Reifler (University of Exeter)

Thomas Scotto (University of Strathclyde)

Dina Smelz (Chicago Council on Global Affairs)

Funding for this survey was provided by the office of the University Provost under the [Tufts Collaborates](#) program.

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Executive Summary

A new representative survey of 1,000 Americans, conducted in early September, 2017, explores how the public views the role of women’s rights in US foreign policy. Eighty-five percent of those surveyed considered promoting the rights of women and girls a very high priority. Seventy-four percent agreed that the US government should actively work to promote human rights in other countries. When given a choice among the rights that the U.S. should promote, 51 percent ranked women’s rights as first or second, second only to “free and open elections” and ahead of freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and the rights of workers and unions. Two-thirds agreed that more participation by women would make the world more peaceful. Most respondents would support women’s rights overseas even if that meant less consumer choice from international trade, fewer exports, or more disagreement with America’s friends and allies. The intensity of support for women’s rights is slightly lower when these tradeoffs were presented, however, and fewer Americans said that women’s rights are a “very important goal” for U.S. foreign policy compared to the environment, a strong defense, or the U.S. economy. Still, support for government spending on these programs is also high relative to other spending priorities. Thirty-three percent of respondents said that they would be more likely to support a congressional candidate who promoted women’s rights in foreign policy, compared to only 6 percent who said they would be less likely to support such a candidate. Democrats were more likely to say that this issue would affect their choice in the 2018 election.

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Introduction

In August 1995, President William Clinton established the President's Interagency Council on Women and declared: "We are putting our efforts to protect and advance women's rights where they belong--in the mainstream of American foreign policy." In January 2013, President Barack Obama issued a presidential memorandum on the "Coordination of Policies and Programs to Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women and Girls Globally." The memorandum directed the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs to establish an inter-agency working group to coordinate government-wide implementation of policies to promote gender equality and advance the status of women and girls internationally. On October 4, 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [Senate Bill S. 1141, the Women, Peace, and Security Act](#). The bill was [signed into law](#) by President Trump on October 6, 2017. The legislation requires the U.S. to develop a comprehensive strategy to increase and strengthen women's participation in peace negotiations and conflict prevention.

One of the central premises of U.S. foreign policy has been that the "the U.S. government should actively work to promote the rights of women and girls in other countries." As the [Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee](#) said on the floor of the House: "Simply put, when women are at the negotiating table, peace is more likely. Compelling research shows that peace agreements are more likely to be reached – and to last – when women's groups are meaningfully involved."

What do the American People Think?

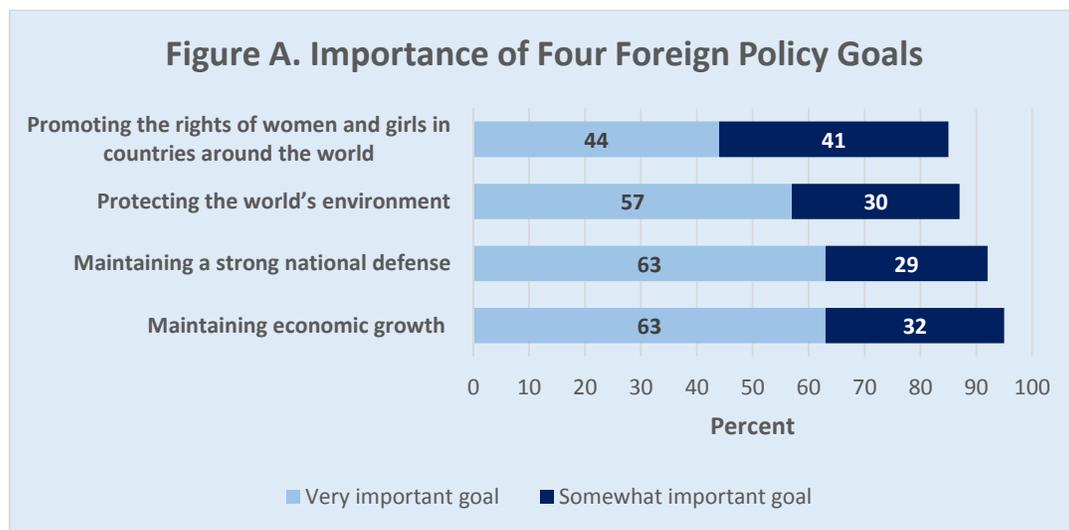
Despite almost twenty-five years of policy initiatives and the substantial commitment of Presidents, Secretaries of State, and the [Office of Global Women's Issues](#) in the U.S. Department of State, we know little about the extent of public support for the pursuit of global gender equality. Surveys by the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#) and the [Chicago Council on Global Affairs](#) show that support for pursuing gender equality as a general goal of U.S. foreign policy is quite high (almost 90 percent of Americans think it is an important or very important policy goal), but less is known about the public's views of the specific policies that the U.S. government has implemented, nor do we know the extent of the public's willingness to commit resources to the policy or to resolve tradeoffs that might arise.

The purpose of this public opinion survey is to close these gaps by asking specific questions about the pursuit of global gender equality as a priority in U.S. foreign policy.

The survey was conducted online by YouGov during the period Aug 31, 2017 through September 15, 2017. The sample includes 1,000 respondents aged 18 and older that are weighted to be representative of the national population. Additional methodological detail about sampling and weighting procedures appears at the end of this report.

The Importance of Gender Equality as a Foreign Policy Goal

We asked respondents to rate the importance of four foreign policy goals, as shown in Figure A. As is true in other surveys, all four goals are considered important by overwhelming margins – they differ only in the degree of importance. Perhaps not surprisingly, maintaining a strong defense and economic growth are considered important by the widest margin, but the importance of promoting the rights of women and girls is also very high (85 percent of respondents consider it somewhat or very important). Certainly there is no significant dissent from the view that promoting the rights of women and girls is an important foreign policy goal.

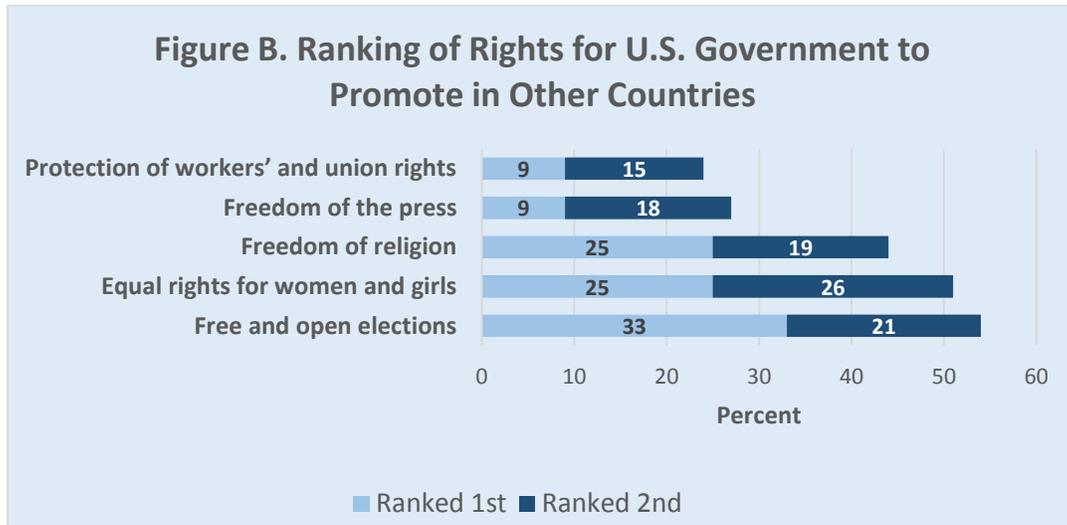


Support for Promoting Human Rights and Women's Rights

We asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that “the U.S. government should actively work to promote human rights in other countries.” Seventy-four percent of respondents agreed (28 percent “strongly” and 46 percent “somewhat”).

We followed this question with a second that asked respondents to rank the importance of different freedoms and rights that the U.S. might promote in other countries. The results (Figure B) show that respondents rank the rights of women and girls quite highly: 51 percent ranked

women’s rights as the first or second most important, second only to “free and open elections” and ahead of “freedom of religion.” Somewhat to our surprise, freedom of the press and the rights of workers and unions received lower rankings.



Finally, we asked respondents bluntly if they agreed with the statement that “the U.S. government should actively work to promote the rights of women and girls in other countries.” Consistent with the figures discussed above, an overwhelming majority of 81 percent agreed with this statement (37 percent strongly and 44 percent somewhat). Only 6 percent strongly disagreed.

Will the Participation of Women Contribute to Peace?

We noted above that the [Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee](#) stated on the floor of the House that: “Simply put, when women are at the negotiating table, peace is more likely.” This statement is supported by substantial social science research. Valerie Hudson, Patricia Leidl, Jennifer Caprioli, and many other scholars have demonstrated that societies characterized by higher gender equality are more peaceful internationally and domestically. Further, as Chairman Royce suggests, research shows that peace agreements are more durable when women are involved in the negotiating process.¹

¹ This scholarship is reviewed in Valerie M. Hudson and Patricia Leidl, *The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Another excellent review of research is provided in Marie O’Reilly, [Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies](#), (Washington: Inclusive Security, October 2015).

We asked respondents a question that was designed to test their agreement with this proposition. The question read: “Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with this statement: The world would be a more peaceful place if more women were involved in making decisions.”

Table A displays the results: 67 percent agree strongly or somewhat strongly that the participation of women would make the world a more peaceful place, with 33 percent in disagreement.

Table A

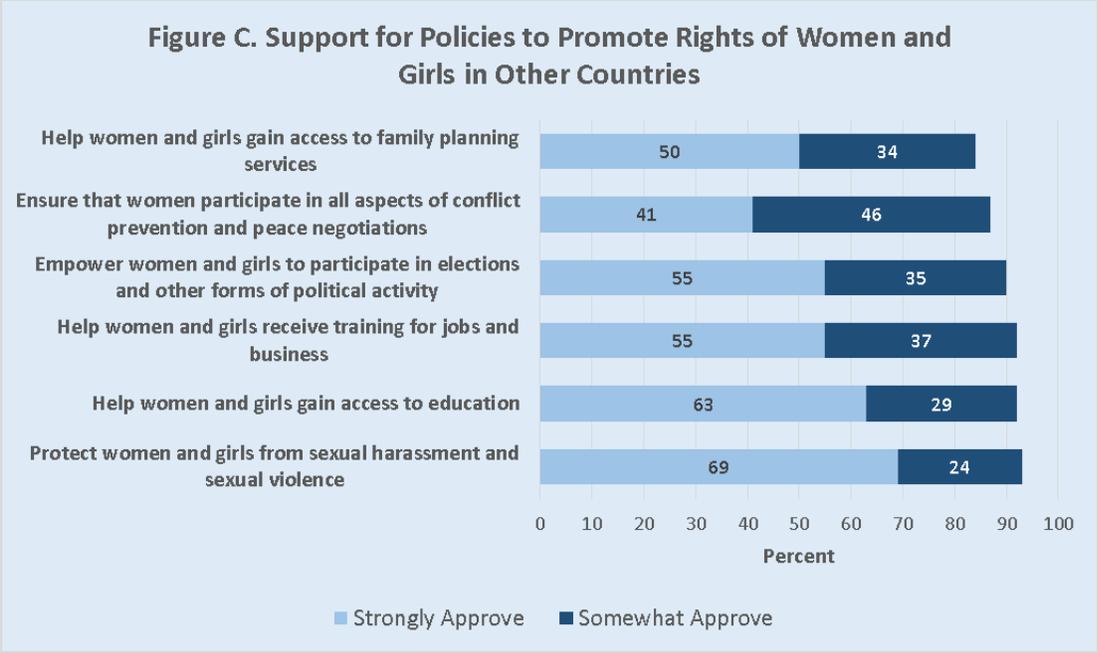
Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with this statement: “The world would be a more peaceful place if more women were involved in making decisions.”

	Percent
Strongly agree	26
Somewhat agree	41
Somewhat disagree	23
Strongly disagree	10
Total	100

Support of U.S. Government Policies to Promote the Rights of Women and Girls

The volume of policy activity in the [Office of Global Women’s Issues](#) has [increased significantly](#) over the years, but we know little about the level of public support for these initiatives. We designed a series of questions to assess public support in six areas that have been the focus of U.S. government programs in a number of countries. We asked respondents the following question: “Here is a list of the types of policies that the U.S. government has used to promote the rights of women and girls in other countries. For each one, please indicate your approval or disapproval of the policy.” The results are shown in Figure C.

Support for these policies is very high. In all but one policy area, 50 percent or more strongly approve of the policy, and an average of 90 percent approve strongly or somewhat. As was true of the general goal of promoting the rights of women and girls, public approval of programs in specific areas is high, and there is no significant dissent to these initiatives.



Support for Promoting Women’s Rights When the Possibility of Tradeoffs is Mentioned

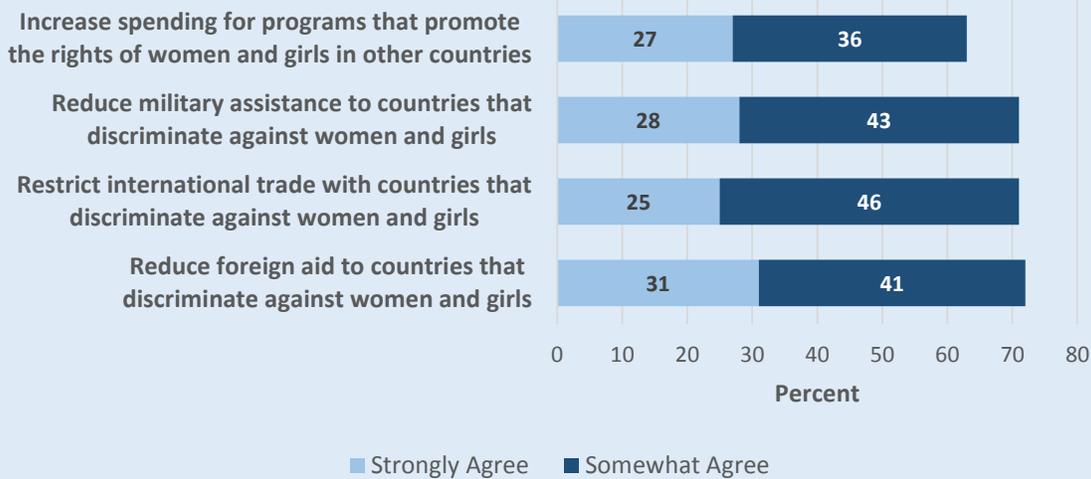
It is clear that support for the pursuit of gender equality and even for specific programs is quite high in the abstract, but it is important to assess the level of support when potential tradeoffs involving other foreign policy goals are mentioned. We designed a series of three questions to evaluate support when potential policy tradeoffs are mentioned. These questions asked respondents if they favored certain actions in relation to countries that discriminate against women and girls. A fourth question asked simply if respondents favored increased spending for programs that support women and girls. The question asked: “Here is a list of the types of actions that the U.S. government could take to help promote the rights of women and girls in other countries. For each action, please note your level of agreement or disagreement with that action.”

The results are displayed in Figure D.

Respondents are willing to support programs designed to promote the rights of women and girls even if the policy raises the prospect of reducing consumer choice from international trade, reducing exports, or increasing disagreement with friends and allies.² Exactly 71 percent strongly or somewhat agree with actions to restrict trade or reduce foreign aid or military assistance to those countries that discriminate against women and girls. However, it is notable that the

² The question on restricting international trade stated “even if that means we will be selling fewer goods and buying fewer goods from other countries.” The questions on reducing foreign aid and military assistance stated “even if it causes some disagreement with friends and allies.”

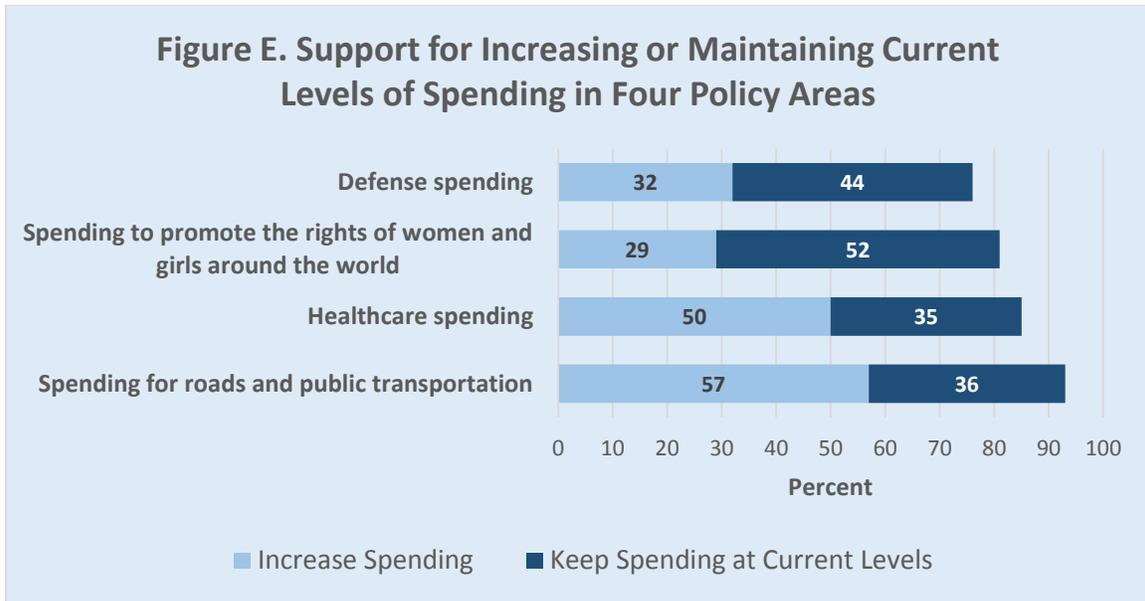
Figure D. Agreement with Actions that U.S. Government Could Take to Promote the Rights of Women and Girls in Other Countries



intensity of agreement when tradeoffs are mentioned is less than support for the general goals and policies discussed in earlier sections of this report: 28 percent agrees “strongly” with these actions, which is lower than the level of strong agreement or approval registered in questions about the policy goal in general. Still, 67 percent of respondents agreed that spending for programs that support women and girls should be increased (26 strongly and 41 percent somewhat). In summary, perhaps as might be expected, potential policy tradeoffs do slightly weaken support for policies that promote women’s rights, but that support remains high even when tradeoffs are mentioned. In addition, opposition to these actions is very low.

The Priority of Spending on Programs to Support Women and Girls

Given the divisive nature of budgetary politics in recent years, the high level of support for increasing spending for programs to support women and girl’s rights might seem surprising. For this reason, we asked respondents for opinions of four federal spending categories using a familiar question format (“increase spending, keep spending at current levels, or decrease spending”). Responses are shown in Figure E.



The results are surprising in several ways. First, spending for roads and public transportation receives the highest level of support, even exceeding support for healthcare spending. Second, support for spending on behalf of women and girls around the world is very high – increasing or maintaining current levels of spending receives a similar level of support as healthcare spending.

The picture is somewhat different if we examine only the percentage of respondents who support increased spending (as compared with maintaining current levels). Public transportation and healthcare spending are clearly most popular (57 and 50 percent favor an increase). Given sampling error, levels of support for increasing defense spending and spending on behalf of women and girls is approximately the same (32 percent for defense and 29 percent for women and girls). Although it is not shown in Figure E, the percentage of respondents who prefer a decrease in defense spending is slightly higher than those who want to decrease spending on behalf of women and girls (24 percent and 20 percent respectively).

In summary, as is true of most questions on support for gender equality in foreign policy reported here, support for spending to promote the rights of women and girls is high, and it compares favorably with other categories of public spending. Also notable, support for cutting spending on behalf of women and girls is low.

The Salience of Women’s Rights in Foreign Policy in the 2018 Congressional Elections

Will the high level of support for women’s rights translate into votes during next year’s midterm elections? In our sample, 35 percent of respondents plan to vote for a Democratic candidate in next year’s election, 25 percent for a Republican, 4 percent for “someone else,” and 19 percent are not yet sure. Seventeen percent do not plan to vote.

A separate question asked “would you be more likely to vote or less likely to vote for a candidate who supports policies that promote the rights of women and girls in other countries? Or would it not affect your vote at all?” The answer for all respondents is shown in the last column of Table B: the plurality response is that support for gender equality would not make a difference (46 percent), but 33 percent responded that it would make them more likely to vote for a candidate, compared to only 6 percent who responded “less likely.” The balance of opinions that could affect an election thus favors candidates who support gender equality policies. Perhaps most interesting, among those who have not made up their minds (“not yet sure”), 20 percent would be more likely to vote for candidate who favors policies to pursue global gender equality. Finally, it is notable that very small percentages of voters would be *less* likely to vote for a candidate who supports global gender equality policies.

Table B

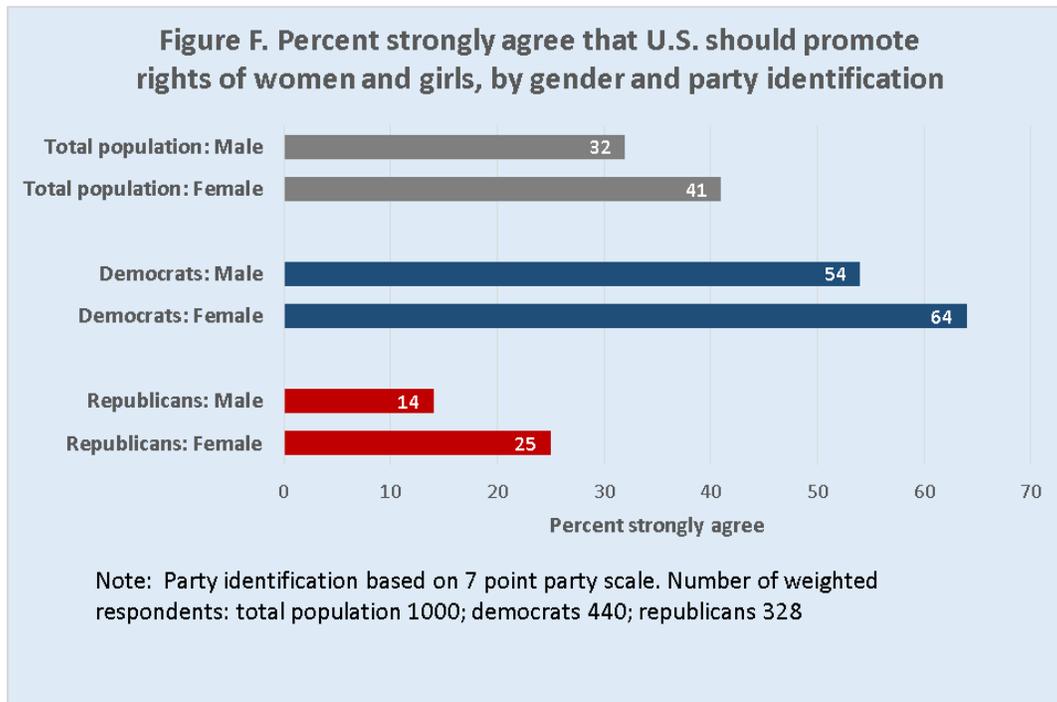
Looking ahead to the elections for Congress next year (2018), would you be more likely to vote or less likely to vote for a candidate who supports policies that promote the rights of women and girls in other countries? Or would it not affect your vote at all?

	by Vote Intention 2018					
	Democrat (%)	Republican (%)	Other (%)	Not yet sure (%)	Nonvoter (%)	All respondents (%)
More likely to vote for candidate	65	16	34	20	8	33
Less likely to vote for candidate	6	13	3	4	1	6
Would not affect vote	27	71	6	61	27	46
Don't plan to vote	3	1	4	15	65	15
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

The Importance of Party and Gender

We noted above that the goal of promoting global gender equality is endorsed by a large majority of Americans, but there is some variation in the percentage who endorse the goal “strongly” or “somewhat.” Although Presidents of both parties have pursued the policy since it was announced by President Clinton in 1995, Figure F below shows that there are large differences in the percentage of Republicans and Democrats who endorse the policy “strongly,” and there are differences among women and men in both parties. The figure displays the percentage who

“agree strongly” that “the US government should actively work to promote the rights of women and girls in other countries.” Among Democrats, the policy is supported strongly by a majority of both women and men, but among Republicans of both genders the percentages are much smaller. The pattern is very similar for other questions described in this report. Large majorities of both parties agree or approve of gender equality policies, but Democrats (and women) are more likely to endorse them “strongly.” We will be investigating these and other differences among demographic groups in future reports on this survey.



Summary

Previous surveys have found that a large percentage of Americans support the pursuit of gender equality as a priority in U.S. foreign policy, but there has been little survey research that measures support for specific policies. Our survey reveals that large percentages of Americans support specific policies (such as helping women and girls gain access to education or empowers them politically), and similarly high percentages are willing to tolerate tradeoffs with other policy goals. The intensity of support for women’s rights is slightly lower when these tradeoffs were presented, however, and fewer Americans said that women’s rights are a “very important goal” for U.S. foreign policy compared to the environment, a strong defense, or the U.S. economy. Still, support for government spending on these programs is also high relative to other spending priorities. Finally, although a small percentage of Americans would be swayed in their

voting behavior by gender equality policies, small percentages can affect elections, and the balance of opinion on gender equality policies favors candidates who support those policies.

Methodology

The survey was conducted online by YouGov during the period Aug 31, 2017 through September 15, 2017. YouGov administered the survey online to 1,799 respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 1,000 general population respondents and 500 respondents age 18-30 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and political interest.

We also collected an oversample of 500 respondents age 18-30. We will describe the results from this youth sample in future reports.

Margin of error: +/- 3.65%.

Survey mode: Web-based interviews

Questions not reported: 38 questions covering global issues, domestic and international violence, gender equality, personal values, ethnocentrism, childhood socialization, presidential approval, 2016 presidential vote choice, and 2018 Congressional generic ballot.