

# Biased Beliefs May Be Impeding U.S. Women's Progress in Political Leadership

Thu, 08/22/2024 - 15:30

|

Anita Raj, Priyanka Patel, Clare Daniel, Aidan Smith, Namratha Rao, Jakana Thomas  
[newcomb@tulane.edu](mailto:newcomb@tulane.edu)

[View PDF](#)



*August 22, 2024*

Women's representation in elected office is at an all-time high in the United States, both in [Congress](#) and in [state legislatures](#) across the country. We also have seen strong women contenders for the highest office in the nation, the U.S. presidency,

from both political parties this election year. Unfortunately, [women remain under-represented at every level of government](#).

Our nation lags woefully behind on gender parity in politics, [ranking 63rd in the world](#) according to the World Economic Forum. Even with [the significant increases in the number of women elected to Congress in 2018](#), women make up only [29% of the House of Representatives and 25% of the Senate](#) — far from gender parity.

### **Why does gender inequality in political representation matter?**

Women elected officials are more likely than their male counterparts [to introduce and enact bills](#), and they are more likely to build legislation on key areas affecting women and families, such as child care, health care, paid family leave, and sexual harassment in the workplace. Where women have higher political representation, [abortion rights](#) are more likely to be protected.

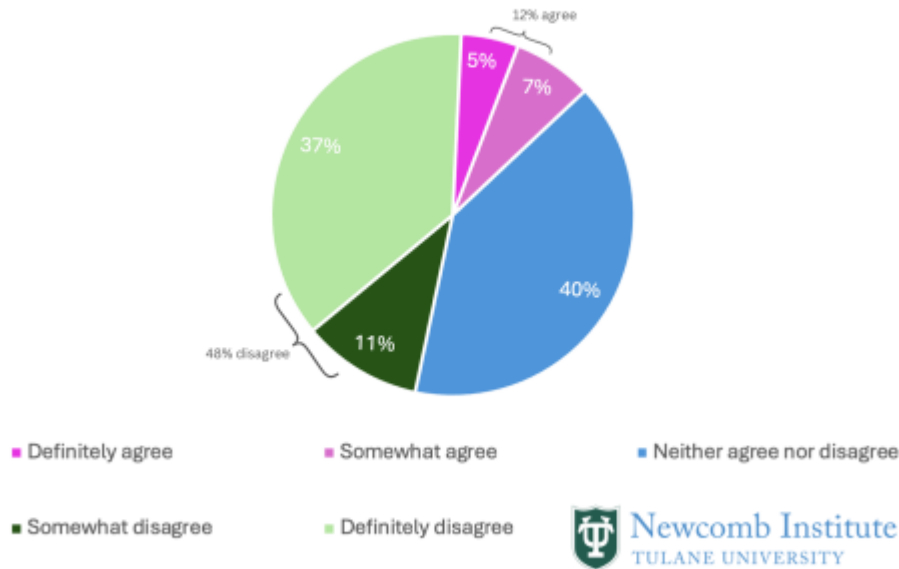
Women care about political engagement; [they register to vote and cast their vote at higher rates than men](#). Many in the U.S. believe that [gender biases restrict women's political leadership](#), including assumptions that many voters in the U.S. would not elect a woman to higher office. Acceptability of women in political leadership affects both opportunities for women and interest from women to seek office. Less clear are the actual beliefs on this in the U.S.

### **What are U.S. beliefs about women in political leadership?**

We sought to clarify beliefs regarding this issue using [a national survey with more than 3,000 adults](#), in partnership with survey research firm, NORC, at the University of Chicago.

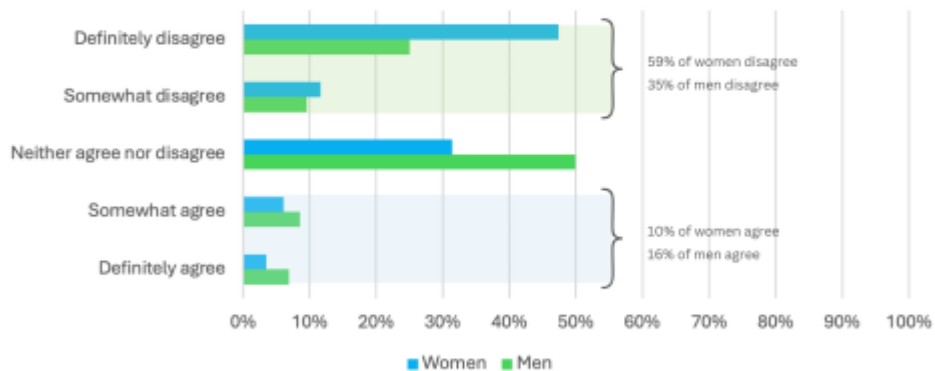
From April and May 2024, our survey asked U.S. adults how much they agree or disagree with the following statement “*On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.*” This item has been used by the [World Values Survey](#) to assess this belief in other country contexts.

Figure 1.  
Level of Agreement with Statement: *On the whole, men make  
better political leaders than women do*  
U.S. Adults, 2024



We found: *The minority of U.S. adults — only about 12% — agree (definitely or somewhat) that men make better political leaders than women.* (see Figure 1.) This is quite a bit less than what is seen globally with this question, where analysis on this question from data collected in 80 nations found that [half of the world agrees](#) with this view. It is also slightly lower than what was found in the [U.S. in 2017 — 16%](#), the last time this question was asked of the nation. However, it remains [higher than what is seen in most comparable high-income nations](#), such as New Zealand and the Netherlands (6%, respectively) as well as the United Kingdom (9%). Further, while 48% of U.S. adults disagree with this statement (definitely disagree: 37%; somewhat disagree: 11%), this means that 52% are not in disagreement with the statement that men make better political leaders than women do, being either neutral (40%) or in agreement (definitely agree: 5%; somewhat agree: 7%) with it.

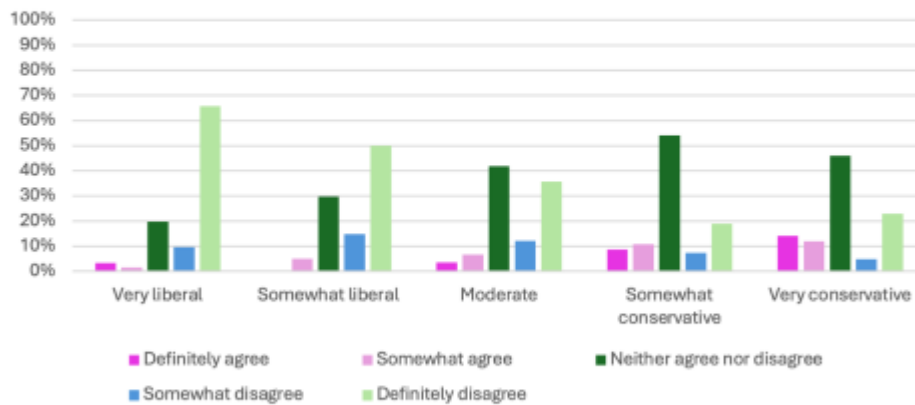
Figure 2. Gender Differences in Level of Agreement with Statement:  
*On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do*  
 U.S. Adults, 2024



## Gender and political leanings affect beliefs on women’s political leadership.

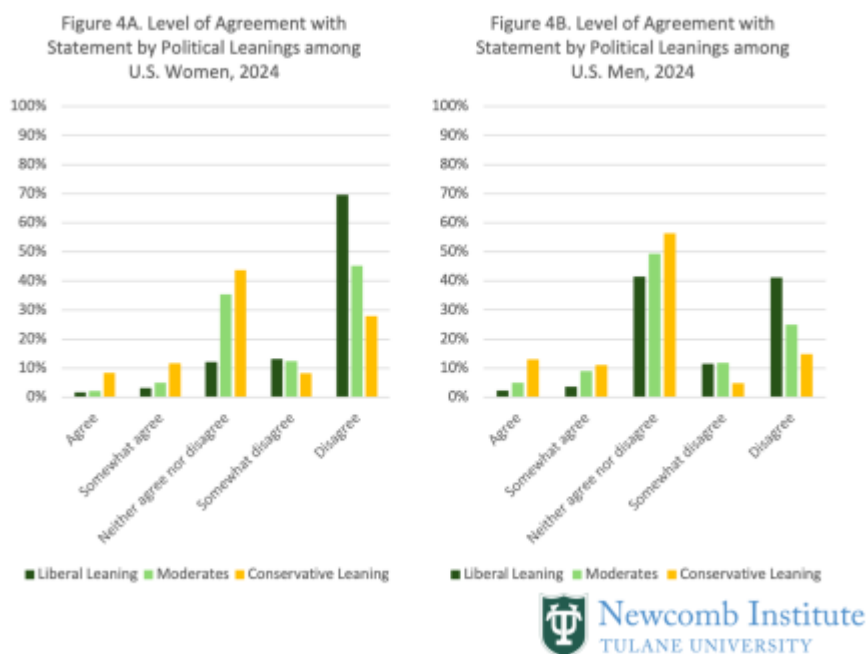
*Men are more likely to agree and women more likely to disagree with the statement* — 10% of women compared with 16% of men agree (definitely or somewhat) and 59% of women and 35% of men disagree (definitely or somewhat) with this statement. Half of men (49%) compared with 31% of women were neutral (neither agreed nor disagreed) with this statement. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 3. Political Leanings and Level of Agreement with Statement:  
*On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do*  
 U.S. Adults, 2024



*Conservatives are more likely to agree and liberals more likely to disagree with the statement* — 26% of very conservative leaning people compared to 5% of very liberal leaning people indicated agreement (definitely or somewhat), where 28% of very conservative leaning people compared with 76% of very liberal leaning people indicated disagreement (definitely or somewhat). (See Figure 3.)

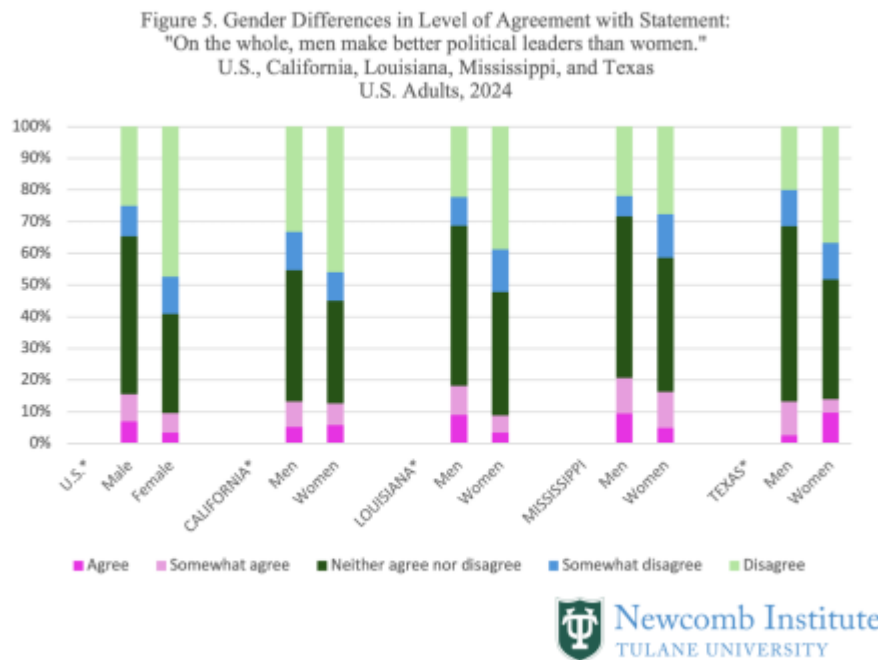
Based on the strong gender and political leanings effects, we also looked at the intersection of these in terms of their relationship to beliefs about women in political leadership. This analysis is all the more important because of the significant gender differences in political leanings, which we simplified as liberal, moderate, and conservative; chi-square analysis indicates that women as compared with men were more likely to be liberal (25% vs 20%) and less likely to be conservative (31% vs 23%) ( $p < 0.001$ ).



To understand the intersection of gender and political leanings, we looked at responses to the item based on political leanings separately for women and men. (See Figures 4A and 4B.) We then examined visually where we could see differences by gender and political leanings. Among conservative leaning people, men and women's reports of agreement (definitely or somewhat) were comparable (20% of women and 24% of men), but women were more likely than men to disagree (definitely or somewhat) with the statement (36% of women vs. 20% of men) where men were more likely to report neutrality (56% of men vs. 44% of women). This same pattern was seen for liberal leaning people, in terms of comparability by gender on agreement (6% of men and 5% of women) but higher disagreement for women compared with men (83% of women vs. 53% of men) and much higher neutrality for men compared with women (41% of men vs. 12% of women). Among moderates, men were more likely than women to report agreement with the statement (14% of men vs. 7% of women) or neutrality (49% of men vs 35% of women), where women were more likely than men to report disagreement (57% women vs. 37% of men).

### **Gender and beliefs on women's political leadership in four unique states: California, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas**

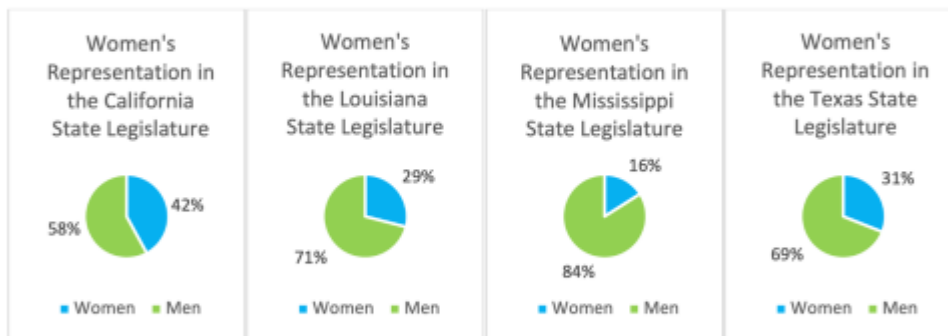
As part of this study, we oversampled four states to understand gender issues for California and the Gulf South of the United States, two distinct political regions of the country; these states also allow for analysis of two larger states with a stronger tax base (California and Texas) and two smaller states with higher levels of poverty relative to that seen in the U.S. as a whole (Louisiana and Mississippi). These Gulf South states also have [poor ratings](#) with regard to women’s representation in political life, where California, which has a positive rating in this sphere.



Analysis of beliefs regarding women’s political leadership yields findings that correspond to women’s representation in the state legislature, with those in California most likely to disagree (55% of women and 45% of men) with the statement and those in Mississippi, particularly men, least likely to disagree to agree (42% of women and 27% of men). (See Figure 5.) [Note: Again, for text purposes, we collapse definitely agree and somewhat agree responses as agreement and definitely disagree and somewhat disagree responses as disagreement, to simplify reporting of findings in text.] We also see that Californians are least likely to agree (13% of women and men, respectively) and Mississippians most likely to agree (16% of women and 20% of men). Louisiana and Texas hold more similar patterns to each other, with stronger gender differences observed in these states. Louisiana shows the strongest difference by gender in agreement with the statement, with men twice as likely as women to agree with the statement (18% of men vs 9% of women).

The levels of agreement or disagreement by state correspond with representation of women in elected office for these states — highest for California and lowest for Mississippi. (See Figure 6.)

*Figure 6. Women's Representation in the State Legislature in 2024, California, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas*



*Data from the Center for American Women and Politics.*

<https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/state-legislature/women-state-legislatures-2024#table>. Rutgers University. Accessed August 8, 2024

### **What do these findings tell us?**

In sum, these data highlight that the belief that “men are better political leaders than women” is not normative (i.e., held by the majority) in the U.S., which is an important place from which to increase representation of U.S. women in elected office. However, gender and political divides, as well as state level differences may be impeding our progress on this issue. Further, the majority of people in the U.S. do not disagree with the statement, which is a concern in itself. It is unclear why neutrality is so commonly reported on the statement, particularly among men. These beliefs need to be unpacked and addressed if we want to achieve gender parity in politics.

Questions remain from this work, as we cannot know from these data what aspects of men and women would create differences in their capacity to lead. Gender



stereotypes about women as collaborative and compassionate can work against stereotypes connected to executive offices, such as decisiveness and combativeness. A [2023 Pew Research study](#) affirmed these perceptions about candidate gender. For example, 39% say a woman president would be better at working out compromises, and a similar share (37%) say a woman would be better at maintaining a respectful tone in politics. Yet those gendered qualities that may be perceived as beneficial for elected officials working at more local levels may not be extended to higher offices, and to date, we have yet to see a woman in the Oval Office. It is clear that this remains an open question in the nation. The nomination of Kamala Harris to the top of the Democratic ticket has yielded several media articles asking whether U.S. voters are [“ready”](#) for a woman president.

Equal representation of women in political office is not simply a demonstration of women’s equity in society; it is also a way to help ensure that the needs and issues important for women are effectively considered by policy makers. We know that women elected officials are more likely to bring legislation forward that [supports health, reproductive rights, childcare and child needs, and prevention programming](#). Furthermore, evidence shows that women legislators, and legislators with higher representation of women, have led to [greater legislative achievements](#). If we want to build these efforts in legislation, we must combat persistent and potentially growing attitudes that this job is better suited to men than women.

It is time that we move past simply encouraging women to exercise their voting rights and build awareness of the value and contributions women can bring to elected office. We have met and exceeded gender parity in our voting. It is time to achieve gender parity in our political representation, starting with the Gulf South.

### **Authors and Affiliations:**

**Anita Raj:** Executive Director of the Newcomb Institute; Nancy Reeves Dreux Endowed Chair; Professor of Public Health, Tulane University

**Priyanka Patel:** Data Analyst, Newcomb Institute, Tulane University

**Clare Daniel:** Senior Professor of Practice & Director of Research, Newcomb Institute, Tulane University

**Aidan Smith:** Senior Professor of Practice & Director of Newcomb Scholars Program, Newcomb Institute, Tulane University

**Namratha Rao:** Senior Research Manager, Newcomb Institute, Tulane University

**Jakana Thomas:** Associate Professor, School of Global Policy and Strategy,  
University of California San Diego

**Citation:** *Raj A, Patel P, Daniel C, Smith A, Rao N, Thomas J. Biased Beliefs May Be Impeding U.S. Women's Progress in Political Leadership. Newcomb Institute. Tulane University.*

[https://newcomb.tulane.edu/content/National\\_survey\\_reveals\\_gender\\_and\\_political\\_divides](https://newcomb.tulane.edu/content/National_survey_reveals_gender_and_political_divides).  
August 22, 2024.