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Six in 10 Americans Think U.S. Ready for a Female President

Vast majority think country would not accept atheist or gay president

by Jeffrey M. Jones

GALLUP NEWS SERVICE

PRINCETON, NJ -- With Hillary Rodham Clinton the clear front runner for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, it is natural to ask whether Americans are ready to elect their first female president. A recent Gallup Panel poll put that question to the public, and 6 in 10 believe the country is ready to have a female commander-in-chief. People also say the country is ready to elect a black or Jewish president, but they are less willing to elect a person from other minority groups. The vast majority of the public believes Americans are not ready for an atheist or gay or lesbian president.

The roster of the 42 U.S. presidents is anything but a diverse list according to gender, race, and creed. As is well known, all presidents from George Washington through George W. Bush have been white males. Additionally, John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, is the only president who was not affiliated with a Protestant religious denomination. While several women and many members of minority racial and religious groups have sought the presidency, few have seriously contended for their party's presidential nomination, let alone won it. But as the country has grown more diverse over the course of its history and as women and minorities have risen to ever higher positions of prominence in recent decades, the time for a non-white male president may be near.

The Sep. 21-24 Gallup Panel survey sought to test whether that time is now. Americans were asked whether they thought the country was ready to elect presidents with any of eight different background characteristics spanning gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. Several people with one or more of these characteristics are considering a run for president in 2008.

Generally speaking, do you think Americans are ready to elect a/an [RANDOM ORDER] as president, or not?

2006 Sep 21-24 (sorted by "yes, ready") Yes, ready No, not ready No opinion

	%	%	%
Woman	61	38	1
African American or black	58	40	2

Jew	55	42	3
Hispanic	41	58	1
Asian	33	64	2
Latter-Day Saint or Mormon	29	66	5
Atheist	14	84	2
Gay or lesbian	7	91	2

The poll finds Americans most likely to believe that the country is ready for a female president. Sixty-one percent say Americans are ready to elect a woman, while 38% disagree. A majority also believes the country is ready to elect an African American or black (58%) or a Jewish (55%) president.

On the other hand, fewer than half of Americans think the country would be willing to elect presidents with other background characteristics, including a Hispanic (41%), Asian (33%), Latter-Day Saint or Mormon (29%), Atheist (14%), or gay or lesbian (7%).

In addition to Hillary Clinton's long-rumored candidacy, other possible 2008 non-traditional candidates include Bill Richardson, the Hispanic Gov. of New Mexico, Mitt Romney, the Mormon Gov. of Massachusetts, Wisconsin Sen. Russ Feingold, who is Jewish, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice -- a black woman.

It is important to note that Americans are much more likely to say they, personally, would be willing to vote for a president from a minority group than believe the country is ready for such a president. In a Gallup survey from 2003, roughly 9 in 10 Americans said they would vote for a female, black, or Jewish candidate for president. Four years earlier, a different Gallup poll found 79% saying they would vote for a Mormon, 59% for a homosexual, and 49% for an atheist presidential candidate.

Thus, the disparity between the two different sets of results may reflect a sense that the broader public is not highly tolerant. It could also be that the projective measure (asking how the country feels) detects some hesitancy toward supporting non-traditional candidates that the respondents would not want to attribute to themselves. Social science researchers sometimes ask survey participants to assess how "their neighbors" feel about certain minority groups in an attempt to measure racist sentiments because respondents are believed to be uncomfortable or unwilling to say they themselves have negative feelings about minorities -- even if they do.

Subgroup Differences

There are moderate differences by partisan affiliation in the perceived willingness of Americans to elect a minority candidate. Democrats (64%) are somewhat more likely than Republicans (54%) to think the United States is ready to elect a female president. This could be related to Hillary Clinton's front-runner status, with Republicans and Democrats viewing the question to some degree as a referendum on her candidacy. But aside from a female or a gay or lesbian presidential candidate, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to think the country is ready to elect a person with each of the other characteristics. The largest differences are seen for a black candidate (67% to 49%) and a Mormon (37% to 21%).

Perceptions That Americans Are Ready to Elect a President With Following Characteristic, by Party Affiliation

Democrat

Independent

Republican

	%	%	%
Woman	64	65	54
Black	49	59	67
Jew	48	59	58
Hispanic	34	42	46
Asian	26	39	35
Mormon	21	29	37
Atheist	8	21	14
Gay	7	10	4

Non-whites are generally more pessimistic that a member of a traditional minority group would be able to be elected president in the United States at this time. For example, while 64% of whites think the country is ready to elect a black president, only 43% of non-whites agree. The one exception to this relates to a female candidate, where non-whites are slightly more likely than whites to believe that a woman could get elected president at this time.

Perceptions That Americans Are Ready to Elect a President With Following Characteristic, by Race

	White	Non-white
	%	%
Woman	59	65
Black	64	43
Jew	60	43
Hispanic	42	37
Asian	37	23

Mormon	32	24
Atheist	16	9
Gay	6	10

Survey Methods

Results for this Gallup Panel study are based on telephone interviews with 1,010 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted Sep. 21-24, 2006. Respondents were randomly drawn from Gallup's household panel. Gallup panel members are recruited through random selection methods. The panel was weighted prior to sampling so that it was demographically representative of the U.S. adult population. For results based on these samples, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 3 percentage points.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

[^ Back to Top](#)

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