

Power of the Pocketbook: Women Gaining Influence As Campaign Donors

Lauren Leatherby



Campaign contributions from women have been on a slow but steady rise.

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In 1872, Victoria Claflin Woodhull became the first woman to run for president — before women even had the right to vote.

Campaigning as a member of the Equal Rights Party on a platform of women's suffrage and labor reforms, the election came and went without Woodhull receiving any electoral votes, but Woodhull became the first of a small club of women who have run for the United States' highest office.

This campaign cycle marks another milestone for women — for the first time, women are vying for the White House in each of the major parties' primaries. Women's voices are also becoming more prominent in campaign finance, particularly for Democrats. That's something that will get new attention over the next several months and with the first campaign finance disclosures set to be released Wednesday.

The [Washington Post](#) reported last month that 60 percent of Hillary Clinton's donors are women — a nearly 30 percent increase over Barack Obama's 2012 record, when almost half of Obama's [individual](#) donors were women, according to an analysis by the Center for Responsive Politics.

"Women candidates are front and center in a way they never have been before, which is really exciting for women voters and donors and activists," said Jess McIntosh, vice president of communications for EMILY's List, which aims to elect Democratic women to office. "We see in research that if a woman is running in a race, women are more likely to be engaged in that race."

Even before the 2016 presidential cycle, contributions from women to political campaigns had been on a slow but steady rise. The reason is threefold, says Missy Shorey, executive director of Maggie's List, an organization that supports conservative female candidates to run for U.S. Congress: increased efforts to engage women, more women in the workforce and more women are voting.

"When we represent 53 percent of the electorate — the majority — we are clearly going to be more politically active, and one of the forms of being politically active is, of course, donating," Shorey said.

Women's attitudes toward politics are also shifting.

"What we've seen over time is that women have been philanthropic givers, giving to charity in a range of amounts, but they haven't seen politics as a place to invest their dollars," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "There hasn't been a sense that politics is the place where you can make change."

But that sense is changing, Walsh says. Women are beginning to see politics as a way to cause change on the issues they care about. And traditional women's issues like reproductive health, equal pay, child care and family leave aren't the only topics bringing women to the table.

"We're even seeing political issues that don't usually get talked about as women's issues — like raising the minimum wage — get talked about as women's issues, because they disproportionately affect women," McIntosh argued. "I think seeing great female candidates, talking about women's issues in a way that really clearly defines the contrast between the two candidates running, just means that more women than ever are engaged in the process."

Share of presidential campaign donations from women

[Center for Responsive Politics](#)

That gain in share, however, has not been seen equally from both parties. While the share of money going to Republican presidential candidates from women has remained largely flat, the share of donations to presidential Democratic candidates from women has grown by more than 20 percent since 1992.

Some conservative groups are working to change that.

"When we reach out to women," Shorey said, "we speak about our core issues and talk about why this candidate is going to make a difference. Women like to invest their money knowing it's going to end up doing something, why this woman we're suggesting and have endorsed can win."

Maggie's List uses established political data and on-the-ground insights to talk about candidates when reaching out to women, Shorey said.

"We reach out to women that support our ideals, which are fiscal conservatism, less government, more personal responsibility, and stronger national security," she said. "Those are our core issues."

Though women are making gains as a proportion of individual donors for candidates, they still remain underrepresented among political donors as a whole. Women made up only 36 percent of all funds donated during the 2012 presidential election, meaning that men still donate at nearly double the rate of women.

This difference is even more pronounced at the top level. Of the 100 most generous campaign contributors during the 2012 election cycle, only 11 were women, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

But that's likely to change.

"As you see more women more successful in terms of income and business and as they have more independent wealth and disposable income they can invest," Walsh said, "you'll see more women as donors to campaigns."

Campaign donations from women

