

# Ms Gerber, do women and men vote differently in general?

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The referendums in 2024 are attracting a lot of attention. As part of our series, we are therefore interviewing researchers who have studied the Swiss referendums intensively. Marlène Gerber takes the lead and explains whether there is a general difference between male and female voters.



**Is the female voter fundamentally different from the male voter?**

*Marlène Gerber:* Female and male voters are naturally not completely different. In any case, values and basic political convictions are more important than gender when it comes to voting. However, women and men still often live in different realities and have different experiences, which can have an impact on their voting decisions.

**What other experiences do you mean?**

For example, women are more likely to work in socio-cultural professions than

men; they are more likely to be teachers, child carers, nurses or social workers. This gives them a different view of the world than men, who are more likely to work in technical professions and are also generally more likely to be found in leadership positions. Men also gain experience during their military or civilian service that women do not. In addition, women are still more involved in childcare and household duties. All of this means that the genders may consider other policy areas to be more important.

### **Has it always been like this or have changes occurred over time?**

The role of women in society has been changing for several decades. Their participation in the labour market has increased, women are on average much better educated than before, they are more present in politics, there are also more and more women in management positions, etc. This, in turn, also highlights problems that were not known to the same extent in the past, for example when it comes to work-life balance or occupational pensions.

### **Has the entire electorate changed over time?**

If we look at voter turnout, we can see that it has remained relatively constant on average over time. However, the turnout is higher or lower depending directly on the particular referendum. What we also know is that voters participate very selectively in votes. It is not always the same half that goes to the ballot box when the turnout is 50 per cent! Different sections of the population are mobilised depending on the voting topic – and the times we live in certainly have an influence on which topics mobilise which sections of the population more or less strongly.

We can't say in detail whether the entire electorate is made up very differently today than in the past. The relevant research has only been conducted in Switzerland since the 1980s. What we can clearly say, however, is that the electorate of the parties has changed considerably over time. Today, for example, socio-cultural specialists are in the majority among social democratic voters, whereas the social democratic party (SP) used to be considered the party of the working class. On the other hand, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) has evolved from a protestant, small farmers' and industry party into a major party with a broad party programme that appeals to a wide section of the population.

It is interesting to note that the first generations of women who had political rights in Switzerland in the 1970s were considered rather conservative at the time. Since the end of the 1980s, however, women have always moved slightly to the left of men. There is also a suspicion that this gap is widening even further.

### **How else do female voters differ from male voters?**

Political self-confidence is perhaps generally lower among women than among men. As part of a study, we analysed the speeches at the 'Landsgemeinde' in Glarus. The results show that women raise their voices below average. Even among women, who are just as interested and informed as men, the inhibition to speak out at a meeting such as the 'Landsgemeinde' is much more pronounced than among men. This also means that the dominance of men is high, which in

turn is a barrier for women to speak out.

### **Does the mobilisation process for female voters differ from that of male voters?**

As far as I know, women do not use different information channels than men, so the mobilisation itself is certainly not fundamentally different. As the mobilisation is generally very much about the issues, it is certainly important to demonstrate that certain groups are affected. This is often more successful when those affected mobilise themselves. Recent women's strikes or the 'Helvetia ruft' campaign, for example, have shown that women can mobilise other women for their interests. As politics continues to be strongly male-dominated, such highly visible, public campaigns or events are certainly particularly important for mobilising female voters.

### **Have female voters in Switzerland ever actually decided the outcome of a referendum?**

The VOX post-vote surveys show that the majority of female voters have decided differently from the majority of male voters on just over 20 occasions since 1977 (see the articles by Claude Longchamp [here](#) and [here](#)). That's not all that often in around 420 federal votes since 1977. Men and women have 'won' at the ballot box almost equally often – in some cases, the men also thanks to the majority of the cantons. According to follow-up surveys, the first time a majority of women and men voted differently was in 1985: the new marriage and inheritance law, which brought many improvements for women, would probably have failed by a narrow margin without women. The last example was the 2021 AHV reform, which was clearly rejected by women in September 2022 but clearly supported by men.

Two aspects are striking:

Firstly, there were two waves that led to the majority of women voting differently to men. Firstly, in the 1990s and secondly, following the strengthening of the women's movement from 2019 onwards. This once again shows the importance of publicising women's interests: Women were also strongly mobilised in the 1990s, particularly by the women's strike in 1991 and the non-election of Christiane Brunner to the Federal Council.

Secondly, we can see that men's attitudes clearly differ from those of women, especially when it comes to issues relating to the military, defence and weapons. A gender gap is also recognisable when it comes to the environment, health and the welfare state as well as gender equality policy, even if this is not always reflected in different voting majorities (see the [article](#) by Funk and Gathmann). Different lifeworlds appear to entail different attitudes and reinforce the tendency for women to move slightly more to the left on average than men.

Bern and Helsinki and completed her doctorate at the IPW in Bern. She has been working at Année Politique Suisse since 2010, where she is currently Deputy Director. Her research focuses on deliberation, direct democracy, gender equality and election campaigns.

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