



Exploring the Trends That Have Shaped America's Growing Partisan Gender Gap

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After women proved less likely to vote for Ronald Reagan in the 1980 U.S. presidential election, the newsletter of the National Organization for Women highlighted what it called “the gender gap.” Ever since then, media reporters and scholars alike have paid increasing attention to gender gaps in political behavior. My research examines men and women’s partisanship to explain why the gender gap formed and has grown over time.

The Gender Gap in Partisanship

The gender gap in partisanship is the difference between the percent of women who identify with a political party minus the percent of men who identify with that party. In my research, I calculate the gender gap in terms of Democratic Party identifiers. Gender gaps also exist among people who identify as Republicans or as independents. Measurements can vary depending on whether analysts include independents when calculating the percent of men and women identifying with one of the two major U.S. parties. My research analyzes the gender gap separately for Democrats, Republicans, and independents.

It was hard to study gender differences in partisanship before the advent of modern survey research in the 1950s. My research draws on Gallup Surveys that have consistently asked respondents about their partisanship over time. Differences between men’s and women’s partisanship are small and inconsistent in the 1950s. Although it did not gain much notice until the 1980s, the gender gap in partisanship started to develop in the 1960s as men’s and women’s party identifications diverged. This divergence continued, with the gap averaging 3.4 percentage points in the 1970s, 5.2 in the 1980s, 6.8 in the 1990s, 8.5 in the 2000s – and widening to 11.7 points between 2010 and 2012.

To understand the origins and growth of the gender gap in partisanship, we need to track both men’s and women’s political identifications. This approach is important because the gender gap could form in different ways. Men’s and women’s partisanship could move in opposite directions. Alternatively, either men’s partisanship or women’s partisanship could change while the other gender’s identification remains stable. Or, lastly, both men’s and women’s partisanship could change in the same direction but at different rates.

What Has Caused Men’s and Women’s Partisanship to Change?

People identify with the political party that they think best represents their social identities. I argue that individuals look towards the parties and their officeholders for cues about which social identities the parties represent. When parties start to focus on different social identities and the composition of party delegations in office change, we typically see shifts in partisan attachments among voters. Over recent decades in the United States, two major shifts have mattered:

- **Women have become a larger and more visible component of Democratic delegation compared to Republican delegations in Congress.** In the 1950s, women elected to Congress were equally likely to be Democrats or Republicans and women were equally small slivers of the two parties' delegations. By now, however, there are three Democratic women serving in Congress for every one Republican woman; and by 2012, women made up 30% of the Democratic Party's congressional delegation compared to only 8% of the Republican delegation. Such divergences provide an ever-sharper signal to citizens about the party representation of their gendered social identities.
- **Meanwhile, Southern realignment also has reshaped the two major political parties and perceptions about them.** Southern realignment was a process that started in the 1950s and 1960s when the national Democratic Party began to change its racial policies. As Democrats challenged racial segregation and championed equal civil rights, many white Democrats, especially in the South, threw their support to the Republican Party instead. The process began with political elites, as the ranks of black officeholders grew and the ranks of whites waned in Democratic delegations. As the racial makeup of the parties' delegations visibly shifted, Americans changed their perceptions about which party best represents the interests of racial minorities.

My research finds that both of these transformations explain the growing gender gap in U.S. party politics. Women's growing presence and visibility in the Democratic Party caused female partisan identification with that party to increase as men's decreased. A growing gender gap was caused by the movement of men and women in opposite directions. But other gender changes also occurred over the same decades. Southern realignment caused both men and women to identify less with the Democratic Party, yet this parallel pulling back happened only up to a point. After the 1980s women pulled away from the Democratic Party more slowly than men. Racial realignment, in short, seems to have prompted more steadily prolonged abandonment of the Democratic Party by men – perhaps because women saw countervailing cues from the composition of Democratic elected officeholders and policy positions espoused by Democrats.

The Likely Importance of Efforts to Elect Women

Partisanship is extremely important in U.S. politics – not only as the best predictor of voting choices but also as a lens through which people interpret political and economic events. As a result, it is critical to decipher when, why, and how different groups identify with the parties. Early explanations attributed the gender gap to the gains of post-1960s women's movements, and my work shows that, indeed, the gender partisan gap may be, in part, a response to gains in the election of more female candidates. Although early efforts to elect women started out as bi-partisan or non-partisan, over the years they had more success electing Democratic women, which sent a clear signal to voters about the divergent stands of the two parties.

As for its practical implications, my work indicates that mass support for the political parties is significantly shaped by party elites. Parties should be aware of who they recruit to run for elected office, because citizens in general look at the social composition of the parties' congressional delegations for cues about who the party values and represents.

Read more in Heather Ondercin, "Who's Responsible for the Gender Gap: The Dynamics of Men's and Women's Macropartisanship, 1950-2012." Political Research Quarterly (forthcoming).