

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN AMERICAN POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

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In the United States, women and men consistently differ in their vote choice, party identification, and policy preferences. These differences, often called gender gaps, have existed for quite some time – at least since 1980 for vote choice and earlier for many policy attitudes. Such gaps involve women leaning more liberal than men, with women being more likely to vote for Democratic candidates, identify with that party, and take the liberal side on many policy issues.

Although gender gaps vary depending on the election or the policy area, they often range from four to fourteen percentage points. For example, the gender gap in 2016 presidential vote choice was 13 percentage points, with 54% of women supporting Hillary Clinton compared to 41% of men. Because women make up half of the population and have been more likely to vote in recent presidential elections, even modest gender differences are politically consequential and interesting.

The Emergence and Roots of the Gender Gap

Many peg the origin of the term “gender gap” to the 1980 presidential election, when the news media began using that phrase to refer to women’s greater propensity to vote for Jimmy Carter. Democratic candidate Carter won support from 45% of women voters versus 36% of men – a nine point gender gap. This terminology has been criticized because “gender” is used rather than “sex.” But researchers did not develop the term and many argue in any event that the gap is grounded in gender expectations and women’s experiences and socialization, not biology.

As the news media took note of the gender gaps, researchers worked to better understand its origins and scope. To date, political scientists have investigated various possible causes of the gender gap in vote choice as well as party identification and public opinion. They have pointed to factors such as feminist identity and women’s economic vulnerability, along with larger contextual trends such as the political realignment in the South. Scholars have not found any single cause explaining gender gaps. Instead, different combinations of causes seem to come into play depending on the election year, issue area, and shifting contextual factors.

Explaining Gender Differences in Vote Choice and Party Identification

Again, most researchers point to the 1980 presidential election as the emergence of the gender gap in vote choice with women from that point becoming consistently more likely than men to vote for the Democratic presidential nominee. A gender gap in party identification first appeared in 1968, but was not present in 1970. It reemerged in 1972 and has persisted ever since.

Several researchers have found evidence that these gaps are more the result of men’s movement away from the Democratic Party than of women’s movement toward that party. Specifically, white men in the North and South have trended away from the Democratic Party, with white

southern men moving at a faster rate than those in the North. Recent research further suggests that women have stayed with or been drawn to the Democratic Party for symbolic reasons – such as the gender make-up of the parties’ Congressional delegations; women elected to Congress are mostly Democrats.

Gender Differences in Public Opinion

Differences between women and men on issues contribute to the gender gap in voting. In statistical simulations, when researchers assume that women have the same issue preferences as men, the expected gender gap in voting substantially decreases. In the real world, sizeable gender gaps exist on key issues:

- Attitudes about military force exhibit a gender gap of 8 to 12 percentage points on average, with women less supportive of military interventions such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- On domestic force issues, women are less supportive of the death penalty and more supportive of gun control.
- Women express consistently more support for government programs to help the less fortunate and provide for general welfare. Recently, this gender gap has hovered around ten percentage points. Women, for example, report higher levels of approval for the Affordable Care Act.

Other gender gaps are smaller. Women are less likely than men to favor the legalization of marijuana and more supportive of gay rights. Gender differences on the environment are modest, with women showing greater concern and support for environmental protections. On supposed “women’s issues” such as equal rights and abortion, men and women differ only slightly – and sometimes not at all.

Appealing to Women in the Electorate

During recent presidential elections, the news media and political campaigns have been preoccupied with the political leanings of certain subgroups of women, such as “soccer moms” or “security moms.” But social scientists have found only limited evidence of distinctive and politically consequential leanings for such subgroups of women.

More broadly, campaigns and political parties have developed gendered images. The 2012 “War on Women” is just one example, with Democrats pointing to policies they said indicated Republican bias against women’s rights and economic needs. Particular claims may or may not be true, but substantial evidence suggests that the political parties have become gendered in the minds of the U.S. electorate, with the Democratic Party viewed as more feminine and the Republican Party as more masculine.

Despite very real gender gaps of various sizes, today’s U.S. political parties and candidates must keep in mind that women, like men, are far from a monolithic voting bloc. Beyond gender, voter choices are influenced by other characteristics such as age, marital status, and especially race. In 2016, for instance, Democrat Hillary Clinton won support from 43% of white women compared to 31% of white men, while she got the votes of 94% of black women and 82% of black men. She was also much more likely to win support from younger, unmarried women of all racial backgrounds.