

THE QUEST FOR WOMEN'S VOTES IN ELECTION 2012

by Kira Sanbonmatsu, Rutgers University

As November 2012 approaches and the contest for president looks like a cliffhanger, controversies about women – and debates about how they will vote – are all over the news. Accusations fly about a “GOP war on women” and Democrats’ supposed disrespect for stay-at-home moms. Mitt Romney and Barack Obama often seem to be parsing their words on issues thought to matter especially to women. Why? What are the myths and realities about gender at the voting booth? And what role will women likely play in this pivotal election?

Of course, American women are not politically monolithic. Some are Democrats, some Republicans, and some self-styled “Independents.” There are leading female liberals like Hillary Rodham Clinton, and equally prominent conservatives, such as Sarah Palin and her “mama grizzlies.” Like all Americans, women differ by race, religion, economic station, and region of residence. They will not deliver 100% – or even a vast preponderance – of their votes to either presidential contender or party. So why are women voters attracting so much attention?

Women's Voting and the Gender Gap

The reason lies with women's sheer voting strength. Women are the majority of U.S. adults, and since 1980 they have turned out to vote at a higher rate than men. This is the one aspect of political participation in which women have an edge, and therefore their best shot at exerting collective influence. As officeholders, women lag dramatically behind men. But women's voting power gives them a strong hand to play.

Here is where the often-touted “gender gap” comes in. If women and men voted the same way, or close to it, the gender gap would not be newsworthy. But, overall, female voters tend to support Democratic candidates more than male voters. To be sure, the gender difference in voting preferences is not huge – not anywhere near as large in percentage terms as the partisan preference gap between white voters, on the one hand, and African American and Latinos voters on the other. But women are a much bigger part of the entire population of voters, so even a relatively small gap in the support they throw to one party or another can play a big role in an election's outcome.

The gender gap is not new; it has been around for a while in U.S. elections. The gap first attracted notice when Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980 with more support from men than from women, by a difference of eight percentage points. An analysis of many years of election exit polls conducted by the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University shows that the gender gap has persisted since 1980. The gender gap in support for the winning presidential candidate was 6 points in 1984, 7 points in 1988, 4 points in 1992, 11 points in 1996, 10 points in 2000, and 7 points in 2004. In all cases, women were more likely than men to support the Democratic candidate (even if, in certain elections, a majority of both genders went with the winner).

The 2008 presidential election continued the well-worn pattern. Women gave Barack Obama a big boost toward the White House, as 70.4 million women cast ballots compared with 60.7 million men, and women voted for Obama over McCain by a large margin, 56% to 43%. Men, meanwhile, split their votes, with 49% opting for Obama and 48% for McCain. The overall gender gap, calculated the usual way, was 7 points.

Why Do Women Lean toward the Democratic Party?

Gaps in the presidential vote are largely grounded in party identification, with women more likely than men to describe themselves as Democrats. Much of the discussion focuses on women, but men are actually the ones shifting, by gradually becoming more Republican. In recent decades, the two major parties have developed distinct images. The Democratic Party is associated with activist government and stronger support for social programs and civil rights, while the GOP is associated with less government, racial conservatism, and a strong emphasis on national defense. These differences intersect with gendered attitudes and stations in life.

- According to opinion polls, women tend to be more egalitarian and concerned about social welfare than men; and women are also less supportive than men of using military force abroad.
- Women and men are differently situated in families and the economy, leading women to want more from government. Women need social programs because they tend to live longer, earn less than men, and are more often caregivers for children and aging relatives. Women are also disproportionately employed in public-sector jobs related to health and education.

Hot-button reproductive issues like abortion do not drive the gender gap in voting, because most men and women hold parallel attitudes on these issues.

Women Voters in 2012

With women sure to go to the polls in high numbers, politicians parry explosive gender issues. GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney tip-toed around Rush Limbaugh's insults hurled at Georgetown law student Sandra Fluke after her testimony about contraception, and Democrat Barack Obama repudiated a Democratic media pundit's disparaging comments about Ann Romney as a stay-at-home mother. Mostly, though, Democrats are actively appealing to women, with Obama touting his support for the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and Senate Democrats forcing votes on regulation of women's pay and protections against violence that Republicans oppose. Realizing that key GOP stands are unpopular with many women, Romney chooses photo ops and talk about how families and women workers have suffered in a down economy. For Republicans, the flip side of a deficit among female voters is an advantage with men. But because women vote in higher proportions, Republicans face the bigger gender challenge. Reducing the Democratic advantage with women voters, even slightly, could make all the difference in close November contests. So Republicans are trying to shrink the gender gap by taking the focus off issues that matter especially to women.

Read more in Susan J. Carroll, "The Politics of the Gender Gap" in *Gender and Elections*, edited by Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Leonie Huddy, Erin Cassese, and Mary-Kate Lizotte, "Gender, Public Opinion, and Political Reasoning" in *Political Women and American Democracy* edited by Christina Wolbrecht, Karen Beckwith, and Lisa Baldez (Cambridge University Press, 2008), and gender gap fact sheets from the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.