

Women Voters

Abigail Adams advised her husband John Adams to “Remember the Ladies” in 1776. Nevertheless, women were not enfranchised at the nation’s founding. Hundreds of campaigns waged across states and time would eventually culminate in the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1920. And the 1965 Voting Rights Act would be needed to ensure that all women—including African American women—could vote.

We no longer ponder whether women should vote. Instead, we are usually concerned with how women vote. What is the status of women voters? What role do women voters play in contemporary American politics?

The short answer is that women vote a lot: women are more likely to be registered to vote and more likely to turn out to vote than men. In the most recent presidential election, there were 10 million more women voters than men voters.¹ Women have been more likely to vote in presidential elections since 1980. Meanwhile, studies show that women and men vote differently, making women voters central to the study of American elections.

Some scholars have examined the relationship between women voters and women candidates, given that women voters are a natural base for women candidates. They have also analyzed political knowledge, which is a central building block of political participation.

THE GENDER GAP: PARTY, VOTING, AND POLICY DIFFERENCES

The term “gender gap” has been commonly used in American politics since 1980. It usually refers to the difference in how women and men vote, though it can also be used to describe gender differences in partisan loyalties or policy preferences.² A persistent pattern has emerged whereby women are more likely than men to support Democratic presidential candidates. Underly-

Gender gap = difference in how women and men vote: women are more likely than men to identify as Democrats; men are more likely than women to identify as Republicans

ing this difference is a gender gap in partisan identification, with women more likely than men to identify as Democrats; men are more likely than women to identify as Republicans.³

The existence of a gender gap gives women’s organizations an opportunity for leverage in American politics. It is arguably a generalized resource for women, making possible political claims that warrant attention from candidates and politicians.⁴ The gender gap is smaller than other gaps in voting behavior, such as the gap between white and nonwhite voters; nevertheless, the persistence of the gender gap across elections and the majority status of women voters makes the gender gap significant.⁵ The distinct preferences of men and women in elections mean that election outcomes might change if only women or only men had the right to vote.

Women were more likely by 10 points to support President Barack Obama, a Democrat, in 2012.⁶ In the 2014 midterm elections, exit polls showed that women preferred Democratic candidates for the U.S. House more than men by 10 points. In that year, gender gaps were evident in almost all statewide elections in which exit polls were conducted, with women more likely to prefer the Democratic candidate.⁷

Research has been conducted on some of the central reasons for the gender gap. Overall, it is believed that

Women Voters

average differences between women and men in their life experiences, jobs, economic and family situations, and, by extension, relationship to politics and public policy, give rise to gender differences in policy preferences and partisanship. The precise reasons and mechanisms for the gender gap have generated substantial debate.

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One of the most persuasive explanations for the gender gap concerns women's greater support than men for an active role for government, including stronger social provision.⁸ This orientation could arise from women's caregiving roles, greater employment in jobs close to government, economic self-interest, and/or personal experiences with sex discrimination. In a recent analysis, Laurel Elder and Steven Greene find that mothers, but not fathers, are more liberal on social welfare issues.⁹

Small and persistent gender gaps on policy issues, in turn, shape partisan loyalties and voting choices.¹⁰ Personality and socialization may also play a role in shaping men's and women's values, and ultimately their policy preferences and behavior.¹¹

There are other partial explanations. One consistent gender gap in policy preferences concerns war and peace issues.¹² Women tend to be somewhat more reluctant than men to support military intervention. The party reputations on defense and war issues, with Republicans typically perceived as more hawkish and stronger on defense than the Democrats, may help to connect these issues to the gap. Note, however, that

women have expressed greater interventionist tendencies for humanitarian causes.¹³

Whether feminists and feminist consciousness drives the gender gap has also been investigated, though this explanation does not find substantial support.¹⁴ The partisan loyalties of women who identify as feminists cannot fully explain the gap, given the widespread nature of gender gaps throughout the electorate. Yet the reason that the gender gap emerged when it did in 1980 is most likely related to the emergence of the modern women's movement and the rising divorce rate, which allowed women to pursue their distinctive policy preferences.¹⁵

Candidates, politicians, and political parties court women voters with various strategies. Over the course of U.S. history, candidates have made appeals to women in their role as mothers.¹⁶ In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan sought to improve his reputation on women's rights issues while also appealing to subgroups of women.¹⁷ Both parties have battled over women voters in recent elections on reproductive rights issues, with the Democratic party alleging that the Republican party is pursuing a "War on Women."¹⁸ Both parties use sophisticated techniques to target subgroups of women voters through radio and television advertising, as well as direct mail.¹⁹

Recent turnout efforts aimed at women voters reveal the diversity of subgroups of women as well as some of the key ways that young women are distinctive from older women.²⁰ For example, Susan MacManus shows that young women voters in 2012 were more ethnically diverse, more liberal, and more Democratic than older women voters, which affected how candidates and parties shaped their appeals.

While women voters overall trend Democratic, there are key differences among subgroups of women. For

Women Voters

example, unmarried women and women of color are more likely to vote Democratic than married women or non-Hispanic white women.²¹ And research examining public opinion by race/ethnic group has found that what the gender gap means and whether it exists on various policy issues is unclear.²² For example, attention to gender alone fails to capture the determinants of attitudes and voting behavior for one of the fastest growing groups of voters: Latinos. Instead, Christina E. Bejarano shows that the relationship of gender to attitudes and voting among Latinos is shaped by ethnicity, generation, and relationship to migration.²³ She also shows that although Latinos overall are supportive of the Democratic party, Latinas are more Democratic than are Latino men.

Attention to the gender gap doesn't always yield policy benefits for women as a group. Campaign appeals targeted to swing voters may focus on narrow or symbolic issues without addressing the most pressing issues facing women. Also, the interests of women of color, who are the most loyal Democratic voters, are not always acknowledged when "women" are targeted as a group.²⁴

In addition, Wendy Smooth argues that the gender gap in turnout among African Americans is not necessarily something to celebrate; after all, one of the reasons that turnout is higher for African American women stems from the lesser voting power of African American men as a result of felony disenfranchisement laws.²⁵ Smooth emphasizes the importance of attention to both race and gender in analyzing voting patterns.

WOMEN VOTERS AND WOMEN CANDIDATES

Women voters are often thought to be the natural constituency for women candidates. But are women more likely to vote for women candidates? Because voters usually vote for candidates on the basis of party rather than gender, "gender affinity" effects do not seem to

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be especially important in elections. However, Susan J. Carroll finds some evidence that gender gaps are narrower in contests featuring a Republican female candidate compared with races featuring a male Republican candidate; Democratic female candidates, meanwhile, sometimes see larger gender gaps than those seen in contests with Democratic male candidates.²⁶

It is important to recognize that women voters are more interested in increasing the presence of women in office than men; problems facing women as a group, including the problem of women's underrepresentation in politics, are more salient to women than to men.²⁷ Democratic women, in particular, are eager to see a woman elected president.²⁸

WOMEN VOTERS AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Many have lamented a persistent gender gap in which women tend to be less knowledgeable about politics than men.²⁹ This gap can put women voters at a disadvantage as they pursue their interests in elections. If women know less about the players and processes of American government, they may be less effective citizens. But other scholars are more optimistic. They point out that women are not always less knowledgeable about politics than men. Instead, women seem to know more about issues that are especially relevant to them. If political knowledge is gendered, then our assessments about how much women and men know depend greatly on what measures are used and whether the measures are tapping into knowledge that

Women Voters

women are likely to possess. Depending on the measure, women may even have an edge over men. For example, Dolan found that women were more likely to know the percentage of women serving in Congress and more likely to know that their state had a female U.S. Senator.³⁰

Interestingly, Markus Prior shows in a new study that the gender gap in political knowledge declines when survey questions include visual elements, such as photographs, rather than questions that are purely verbal.³¹

Future Research Directions

Scholars continue to investigate the nature of the gender gap in elections and the ways that gender intersects with other important categories of voters, such as race/ethnicity and marital status. And although party identification is a better predictor of vote choice than voter gender, research has yet to fully explore how the gender imbalance of voters, candidates, and elected officials may affect party loyalties. If voters, candidates and elected officials are disproportionately male in the

He contends that some voters can store political information visually and that women seem to have a more visual cognitive style. His research adds to the view that past research may have exaggerated women's deficit in political knowledge.

Finally, Heather L. Ondercin and her coauthors find that the gender gap in knowledge decreases as a campaign progresses, suggesting that campaigns are especially valuable to the political engagement of women voters.³²

Republican party compared with the Democratic party, perhaps this knowledge provides cues to the public about which party can best represent them.

Future research should also examine the behavior of women voters in primary elections across offices. Voting behavior studies usually concern the general election stage. But the dynamics of primary elections featuring women candidates are also important aspects of women's election to office.

Further Reading

Carroll, Susan. J. 2014. "Voting Choices: How and Why the Gender Gap Matters." In S. J. Carroll & Richard L. Fox (Eds.), *Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics*, 3rd edition (pp. 119-145). New York: Cambridge University Press.

In this chapter, Carroll provides a background on gender gap research. She investigates the gender gap strategies of recent presidential and congressional candidates. Carroll presents data on the size of the gender gap in recent presidential elections and examines the relationship between women candidates and the gender

gap in statewide elections. Explanations for the gender gap in party identification and voting are examined.

Bejarano, Christina E. 2014. *The Latino Gender Gap in U.S. Politics*. New York: Routledge.

While most gender gap research examines the American electorate as a whole, Bejarano offers a new perspective on the gender gap with this thorough comparison of gender differences among Latinos. Using data from a series of national surveys of Latinos, the book investigates the gender gap with respect to public opinion, partisanship, and voting behavior. Bejarano

Women Voters

shows that gender interacts with ethnicity, immigration, and generation to make the Latina gender gap distinctive in comparison with other groups. She also shows that the overarching Latino community needs to be disaggregated by gender.

Dolan, Kathleen. 2011. "Do Women and Men Know Different Things? Measuring Gender Differences in Political Knowledge." *Journal of Politics* 73: 97-107.

Dolan uses an original, national survey conducted in 2007 to investigate the gender gap in political knowl-

edge in this article. She finds that the traditional gender difference (with women less knowledgeable than men) is only evident for what she calls "traditional political knowledge"; in contrast, there is no gender difference when political knowledge is measured with "gender-relevant" items. This means that we cannot assume that women are less knowledgeable than men. Instead, Dolan calls attention to the ways that gender interacts with American politics, which has consequences for whether women or men are engaged in the political process.

Women Voters

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