

## Gender and Voting Behavior

THE IMPACT OF gender on the voting behavior of the American electorate began to seep into consciousness after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. This act granted women the right to vote in 1920. While a majority of the research related to gender and the voting patterns of Americans has focused on the trends of female voters, the voting conduct of male voters has also evolved over the decades. The voting behavior of each sex continues to have significant impact on the outcomes of local, state, and national elections.

The early legal foundations of the United States separated the sexes into two spheres, public and private. This legal basis stemmed from English common law, the legal system based on tradition, customs, and precedent. Men represented the public sphere, and women the private

sphere. This separation, usually based on patriarchal notions, resulted in men being the sole delegate for issues outside of the household, including voting rights. The early founders of the United States saw politics as an exclusively male domain. Early supporters of women's voting rights were called suffragists. Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, were powerful advocates for women's political rights during the 1800s and early 1900s.

After a 72-year struggle, women garnered the right to vote. But even after women were able to cast a ballot in local and national elections, many women did not exercise their right. The initial lack of voter turnout by women has been attributed to a number of factors. Women may have needed some time to learn how to incorporate voting as a behavior into their lifestyle. Also, strong gender-role expectations encouraged women to



Three suffragists casting votes in New York City, c.1917. Early women's organizations, like the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the League of Women Voters, spearheaded women's direct involvement in voting issues.

view voting as something their husband or father was in charge of and did not see their vote as an important part of their role as a woman.

However, among the seeds of the woman's suffrage movement was the seed of broader social participation. For example, women began to organize around issues they cared about, particularly civil rights, prohibition, domestic violence, and the welfare of children. Early women's organizations, such as the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the League of Women Voters, spearheaded women's direct involvement in domestic and international public policy issues and organized women to vote across the country.

### VOTING AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Even as women participated in the political process by addressing and protesting against pressing social and political issues, women voters were not seen as a voting constituency much different from men. Similar to male voters, the factors of political affiliation, geographical location, education, and socioeconomic level, dominated the reasons women voted, rather than their sex. Women and men voted similarly due to their shared life contexts. It was not until 1968 that women began to vote at the same rate as men did. However, even with the increase in women participating in the electoral process, they did not vote in a manner that dictated an isolated voting constituency. With the emerging women's rights movement, a movement in the 1960s and 1970s that aimed to increase the political, legal, and economic rights of women, female voters continued making decisions based on their political ideology and social contexts, rather than voting as a separate block.

Until the 1980s, women voters were viewed as more conservative than male voters. This was mainly attributed to women's primary roles as wives and mothers. Prior to the 1970s, the long-held assumption that female voters tended to be more conservative than male voters panned out at the ballot box. Women slightly preferred both Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, the two more conservative presidential candidates of the time.

### THE GENDER GAP

The gender gap emerged at the beginning of the 1980s, when women began to vote differently from men. This new electoral variable first became apparent on a

national scale during the presidential race between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter in 1980. Analysis from this election indicated that women preferred Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan by more than seven percent. This was the first time that gender was strongly associated with a particular candidate. The way women voted was attributed to the nomination of Geraldine Ferraro becoming the first female vice presidential candidate nominated for the 1984 election with running mate Democrat Walter Mondale.

The introduction of the gender gap reflects an enormous shift in the ideological preference of women voters. Because close elections might be influenced by the gender of the voter, social science researchers and political strategists took note. It became clear that female voters, viewed as a single voting block, preferred Democratic candidates to Republican candidates for the first time in history. However, the Democratic Party made a critical mistake during the 1984 presidential election in assuming that women voters had a preference for female candidates over male candidates. This assumption led Democrats to believe the presence of a woman on the ticket would be enough to encourage women to vote for Mondale/Ferraro.

In contrast, the Reagan campaign downplayed the reality of the gender gap; public opinion polls indicated that Reagan had a major problem connecting with female voters. Soon, Republican political strategists and pollsters began to dissect the complexities of women voters and found they were most concerned about economic interests. With this information in hand, the Reagan campaign catered to these women voters by targeting single working women, married working women, and elderly women. The Republican strategies were effective; Reagan was re-elected in a landslide with a majority of male and female votes. Democrats had failed to understand of the gender gap; women voters did not rally around Ferraro simply because she was a woman.

During the 1990s, the gender gap continued to grow and shape elections, along with the help of a high-profile sexual harassment case that commanded the attention of the nation. In 1991, Clarence Thomas was nominated by President George H.W. Bush to become an associate justice of the Supreme Court. During Thomas's confirmation process, attorney Anita Hill claimed that Thomas had sexually harassed her when they worked together at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). A public hearing was set to discuss

these charges. An all male and all white Senate Judiciary Committee questioned Anita Hill. Many women were shocked by the insensitive questions asked by committee members and the fact that Congress was so male-dominated (at the time, 98 percent of U.S. Senators were men). This public hearing was a wake-up call to American women and inspired many to be politically active for the first time.

The election in 1992 became known as the Year of the Woman because a record number of women ran for public office and won. In the U.S. Senate, 11 women ran and five won seats. In the House of Representatives, 24 women won congressional races. Many political pundits saw this increase as a direct reaction to the Thomas nomination and election results indicated that women voters strongly supported women candidates in that election.

In that same election, Bill Clinton ran for president against President George H.W. Bush. Clinton beat Bush by winning 43 percent of the vote, due, in part, to significant support from women voters. During Clinton's 1996 re-election campaign, a public opinion poll produced one of the largest gender gaps ever reported. The poll showed that women voters preferred Bill Clinton to his Republican opponent Bob Dole by over 26 points. The same poll indicated that male voters preferred Clinton by only seven points. As women voters continued to move toward supporting Democratic candidates in the 1990s, male voters were quickly moving away from the Democratic Party. This phenomenon was seen most dramatically with southern white male voters who felt the Democratic Party was moving too much to the ideological left. Many of these male votes found their new home with the Republican Party, whose support grew in the south in the 1970s and remains strong today.

### **MEN'S ISSUES VS. WOMEN'S ISSUES**

With the creation of this new dynamic in the voting patterns of the U.S. electorate, the debate over which issues were female issues versus male issues moved into the political dialogue. Historically, women's issues were believed to revolve around domestic concerns such as healthcare, civil rights, and education, while stereotypical male issues related to national security, economic, and tax issues. These associations affected the way candidates catered to male and female voters and also affected the way voters perceived candidates'

abilities and strengths. There is some evidence to support this; for example, women legislators often take up more domestic and family-oriented legislative issues, such as healthcare coverage and quality education. Women legislators have also been pivotal in addressing issues that disproportionately affect women. In 1993, Congresswoman Pat Schroeder of Colorado was instrumental in passing the Family and Medical Leave Act. This legislation allowed employees to take leave from work for pregnancy or a serious medical condition without fear that they would be fired. Understanding that women candidates were addressing critical issues that affected women was a powerful motivating factor encouraging women voters to support women candidates. Women candidates began to cater to women voters, based on the notion that the struggles in their everyday life would be better addressed if they elected woman politicians.

While it is undeniable that women legislators and women voters have been more concerned with healthcare and education issues than male policymakers and male voters, women policymakers are now also taking up issues that have historically been reserved for male politicians. Issues, particularly focused on veterans affairs, retirement, and security have come to the forefront of women's issues. The lines between "women's issues" and "men's issues" have begun to blur in recent years.

### **PERCEPTION OF FEMALE CANDIDATES**

Until the beginning of the 1990s, many female candidates felt compelled to steer clear of "women's issues." Female candidates needed to be careful how much they emphasized their support for issues that might make them appear to be weaker candidates. The fear of many female candidates was that voters would perceive them as less credible on foreign affairs issues such as the economy and defense if they focused on issues that were stereotypically female or "soft" issues such as education. This fear is substantiated by evidence that, even today, voters perceive male and female candidates with a gendered lens. Although this is less often the case than in the past, studies show that voters still associate certain issues and abilities with each sex.

While these perceptions are changing for women candidates, there is still a "credibility factor" that female candidates must contend with when it comes to certain political issues. Voters see a candidate with high cred-

ibility as powerful, authoritative, and capable of making critical decisions. Women candidates have a particularly difficult time with this because some voters still perceive women as less politically powerful than men. One way that the media perpetuates this stereotype is in the way female candidates are depicted in the news. Studies have found that the media focuses on the personal lives and physical appearance of female candidates, more so than they do for male candidates.

A study which examined the newspaper reports of six campaigns concluded that the journalists in this study were much more likely to address the personal characteristics of women candidates in their stories. They reported the age and marital status of the female candidates more often than they did for the male candidates. In addition, the researchers stated that reporters were more likely to highlight substantive elements such as political platform and policy stance, if the candidate was male.

### RECENT TRENDS IN GENDERED VOTING BEHAVIOR

One of the most dramatic recent gender shifts affecting voting behavior was seen after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Before this event, men appeared to be more concerned about security and war issues than women. For example, a CNN/Gallup public opinion poll in 1991 indicated that men were much more favorable than women about sending ground troops into Iraq. There was a gender gap of 22 points, with men significantly favoring this action. But after 9/11, women became much more concerned with national security issues. Today, a significant majority of women, 43 percent, versus 11 percent of men, believe that a member of their family could be affected by a terrorist attack. This group of women voters that has emerged has been labeled the “security moms.”

This shift suggests a major change in voting behavior because women have moved away from issues such as abortion and towards security issues and protecting families. In the 2004 election, women indicated that their top issues were jobs and the economy, the war in Iraq, and Social Security issues, with the more typical women’s issues of healthcare and education receiving less than half as much support.

By and large, women tend to support the Democratic Party and men have stayed more aligned with the Republican Party in recent years. Although data from

the 2004 and 2006 elections indicate that more white males are moving back toward the Democratic Party, it is uncertain if this is a long-lasting trend, or a short-term phenomenon. Male voters still consistently vote based on political ideology and with their geographic region, while women tend to move more as a voting block. Women voters will remain a critical voting constituency for political candidates and parties to attract during each election cycle.

**SEE ALSO:** Abortion; Feminism; Gender Gap; Nineteenth Amendment; Suffrage; Voter Disenfranchisement.

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## Gender Gap

**GAINING FULL CITIZENSHIP** with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in August 1920, 26 million women voted in that year’s presidential election. Although women had gained the right to vote, the majority of these new women voters simply followed the views and votes of the men in their lives. Over the next six decades, women voted at lower rates than men did in presidential elections, and gender differences in candidate support were rare. Only two presidential candidates, Republicans Herbert Hoover, in 1928, and Dwight