

July 15, 2014

## The Gender Gap

### Gender Differences in Vote Choice and Political Orientations

Kelly Dittmar, Ph.D., Assistant Research Professor

Women and men are political actors with distinct political preferences. These differences – or gender gaps – emerged in the 1980s and have been persistent since then in vote choice, party identification, and presidential performance ratings. Recognition of these trends by political candidates and practitioners has resulted in efforts in both parties to appeal to men and women with targeted messages and strategic messengers. As we anticipate the sites, size, and significance of the gender gap in the 2014 elections, this brief provides definitions and summaries of the gender differences to date.

### Gender Gap in Voting

The gender gap in voting is the difference between the percentages of women and men who support a given candidate, generally the leading or winning candidate. It is the gap *between* the genders, not *within* a gender. There has been a gender gap of between four and eleven percentage points in every presidential election since 1980 (see CAWP's Fact Sheet on the [Gender Gap in Presidential Elections](#)). In the 2012 election, women were 10 percentage points more likely than men to vote for Barack Obama (55% of women vs. 45% of men). Gender gaps have also been evident in statewide and congressional contests, contributing to electoral outcomes in some of the most competitive contests in [2010](#) and 2012 ([U.S. Senate](#) and [gubernatorial](#) races).

### Gender Gap in Party Identification

The gender gap in party identification is the difference between the percentages of women and men who support a particular political party. A gender gap in party identification has been evident since the early 1980s; larger proportions of women than men self-identify as Democrats (see CAWP's Fact Sheet on the [Gender Gap in Partisan Identification](#)). In 2014, women are nine percentage points more likely than men to identify as Democrats (*ABC/Washington Post Poll*, April 2014).

### Gender Gap in Presidential Performance Ratings

The gender gap in presidential performance ratings reflects a similar Democratic preference among women. Women have been more likely than men to approve of the job performance of recent Democratic presidents, and less likely than men to approve of the job performance of recent Republican presidents (see CAWP's Fact Sheet on the [Gender Gap in Presidential Performance Ratings](#)). There is a gender gap in the latest presidential approval ratings, with women eight percentage points more likely than men to approve of the way President Obama is handling his job (*ABC News/Washington Post*, June 2014).

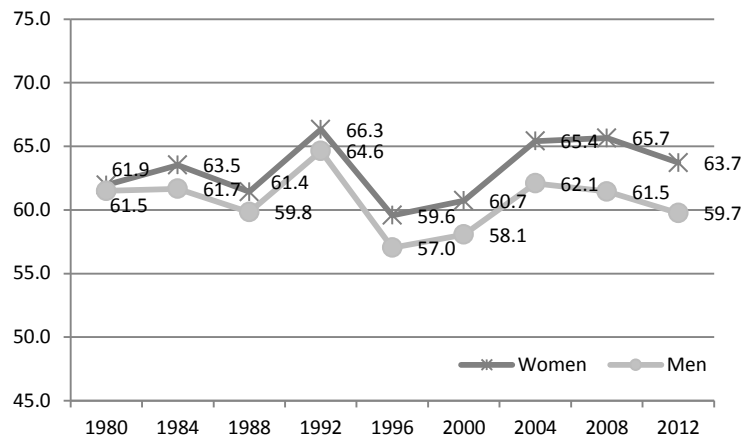
Year	Presidential Candidates	Women	Men	Gender Gap
2012	Barack Obama (D)	55%	45%	10 pts.
	Mitt Romney (R)	44%	52%	
2008	Barack Obama (D)	56%	49%	7 pts.
	John McCain (R)	43%	48%	
2004	George W. Bush (R)	48%	55%	7 pts.
	John Kerry (D)	51%	41%	
2000	George W. Bush (R)	43%	53%	10 pts.
	Al Gore (D)	54%	42%	
	Ralph Nader (Green)	2%	3%	
1996	Bill Clinton (D)	54%	43%	11 pts.
	Bob Dole (R)	38%	44%	
	Ross Perot (Reform)	7%	10%	
1992	Bill Clinton (D)	45%	41%	4 pts.
	George H.W. Bush (R)	37%	38%	
	Ross Perot (Reform)	17%	21%	
1988	George H.W. Bush (R)	50%	57%	7 pts.
	Michael Dukakis (D)	49%	41%	
1984	Ronald Reagan (R)	56%	62%	6 pts.
	Walter Mondale (D)	44%	37%	
1980	Ronald Reagan (R)	46%	54%	8 pts.
	Jimmy Carter (D)	45%	37%	
	John Anderson (I)	7%	7%	

Sources: Edison Research (2012); Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International (2008 and 2004); Voter News Service (2000, 1996, 1992); CBS News/New York Times (1988, 1984, 1980)

## Gender Differences in Voter Turnout

Gender differences in voter turnout make the differences between women and men's preferences even more important politically. Women have voted at higher rates than men since 1980 and in higher numbers than men since 1964. In 2012, 71.4 million women reported voting, compared to 61.6 million men. Moreover, 63.7% of eligible female adults went to the polls in 2012, compared to 59.8% of eligible male adults. Women are also registered to vote at higher rates than men; in 2012, 81.7 million women were registered, compared to 71.4 million men. See CAWP's Fact Sheet on [Gender Differences in Voter Turnout](#) for more information over time and by race and age.

Percentage of Eligible Voters who Reported Voting, by gender



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey

## Gender and the 2014 Vote

These data illuminate persistent differences between women and men in political preferences and vote choice, differences that are likely to continue in the 2014 elections. Beyond calculating the gender gap in polling and vote choice in the most competitive races of this cycle, CAWP will be asking the following questions about women voters in 2014:

- 1. Will women turn out?** The turnout rate for women and men is always lower in nonpresidential than in presidential elections. Although the drop-off rate between presidential and nonpresidential elections has been greater for women than men, women have outvoted men in all recent nonpresidential elections. For example, in the last non-presidential election year (2010), 46.2% of eligible female adults and 44.8% of eligible male adults reported voting. In a [June 2014 poll](#) from *ABC News/Washington Post* 77% of women, compared to 70% of men, said they were absolutely certain they would vote in November 2014. While it is hard to gauge voter enthusiasm and engagement based on this single measure, the percentage of women reporting a certainty to vote is higher now than it was in July 2012 for the fall 2012 election. Campaigns will work hard over the next four months to keep enthusiasm up and get women to the polls for their candidates. Will women turn out at a higher rate in 2014 than in 2010, and will they continue to outvote men as they have in recent nonpresidential elections?
- 2. Which women will turn out?** Women are not a monolithic voting bloc, with scholarship and data demonstrating differences in preferences and behaviors for women of different ideologies, races and ethnicities, ages, and marital status. Still, gender gaps between women and men persist within these subgroups. Black women, for example, have been the most reliable Democratic voters in recent years, voting at the highest rates of any race and gender subgroup in 2008 and 2012 (see chart above). Recent polls provide insights into which subgroups of women are less likely to turn out to vote in 2014. [Democracy Corps](#) found that only 68% of African Americans, Latinos, young people, and unmarried women who voted in 2012 are "likely" to vote in 2014, and an [April poll](#) from the Harvard Institute of Politics found that just 19% of Millennial women said they were "definitely" going to vote this fall (compared to 28% of Millennial men). Voter outreach and targeting efforts will be important for campaigns seeking either to close or expand gender gaps in vote choice.
- 3. What issues will move women voters?** As campaigns work to reach women voters, what messages will be most effective in 2014? Democrats continue to [emphasize the Republican "War on Women"](#) while Republicans have directly challenged this rhetoric by [employing female messengers](#), [schooling male members on how to speak about women](#), and arguing that [the real "War on Women" is being waged by Democratic leaders](#). Despite these gender-specific strategies and messages, polling continues to show that women – like men – are most concerned about the economic well-being of themselves and their families. Candidates who can demonstrate a capacity to break through the legislative gridlock to help provide economic security and opportunity may fare best among the majority of women voters.
- 4. Where will women's votes matter most?** Women have played [decisive roles](#) in recent elections, often providing the votes needed to sway some of the most competitive elections. We will be tracking polling in the closest contests of this cycle to see where women make the greatest difference in electoral outcomes. To watch with us, be sure to follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).