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What is the Gender Gap? And what does it mean in 2012?

Much attention has been paid to the women's vote in recent weeks, with specific concern and debate over which candidate women will favor on Election Day. The recognition of women's influence on this and previous presidential elections is both welcome and warranted, as scholars and advocates alike have continuously identified the crucial role of women voters in shaping electoral outcomes. However, while terms like the "gender gap" and the "women's vote" are buzzwords that attract readers, they are often confused and used to describe very different measures of voter perceptions or support.

The gender gap is a well-established measure of gender differences in voters' presidential votes, partisan preferences, and positions on policy issues. The gender gap in voting is the difference in the percentage of women and the percentage of men voting for a given candidate, generally the leading or winning candidate. Using this measure, we have seen a gender gap in every presidential election since 1980, averaging 7.5 points. In 2008, there was a 7-point gender gap, with women voters favoring Barack Obama more than did men, even though Obama won the majority of both male and female votes. The gender gap has consistently shown women more likely than men to favor the Democratic candidate.

The gender gap—a measure across genders—is different from, although frequently conflated with, the women's vote. The women's vote is the percentage-point advantage that one candidate has over the other among women voters – that is, the difference in support for the major party candidates within one gender only. This measure is useful in describing the behavior of women as a voting bloc, but provides an incomplete picture of voting trends without a comparison to men.

At the [Center for American Women and Politics](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu) (CAWP), we have long tracked the [gender gap](#) as a window into the important role that women voters play in modern elections. The gender gap not only reveals the unique positions and preferences of women versus men, but also demonstrates women's ability to shape electoral outcomes. Women voters have [outnumbered](#) men in every election since 1964, and they have [outvoted](#) men in every election since 1980. In 2008, nearly 10 million more women than men voted in a presidential election decided by less than 9 million votes. If recent polls are a guide, the 2012 election will be a closer contest where every vote will count, especially those of women.

Recent polls show that the gender gap, accurately-defined, is likely to persist this year. A [recent analysis](#) by pollster Margie Omero revealed that the trendline for the gender gap in 2012 national polls is consistent with previous presidential contests. The most recent national poll from *ABC News/Washington Post* shows President Obama leading Governor Romney by one percentage point overall, with a gender gap in voter preference for President Obama whereby women are 14 percentage points more likely than men to support him. In late October 2008, an *ABC News/Washington Post* poll showed a 7-point gender gap, with Obama leading McCain overall and being favored more strongly by women than men.

Significant gender gaps emerge as well in the most recent polls taken in at least seven of the nine battleground states being tracked by CAWP, with gaps in states like Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin larger than they were in 2008 exit polls. In each of these states, women are more likely than men to support President Obama and less likely than men to favor Governor Romney.

Despite these numbers, many pundits have cited a recent narrowing of the gender gap by referring instead to the difference in the women's vote. The volatility, variability in methods, and sheer number of recent polls makes it hard to confirm any strong trend in this measure, and identifying trends – as Omero did with the gender gap – is likely most illustrative. Compared to 2008, the difference in women voters' support for the major party candidates is slightly smaller in national and battleground polls taken in the weeks leading up to Election Day. At the same time, the margin of difference among male voters is larger in 2012 than it was in 2008, reflecting what seems to be an overall shift in the electorate to the right, to the potential advantage of this year's Republican candidate. As is evident here, comparing within-gender differences alone can easily ignore overall trends in the electorate. The gender gap provides a between-gender comparison in voter preference for each of the major party candidates and, in 2012, reveals that women remain a stronger base than men for the Democratic ticket.

In any election season, it is easy to get lost in the barrage of numbers being reported, especially in a media-saturated world. That is why journalists, pundits, and scholars alike should be careful to compare apples with apples and oranges with oranges in analyzing the rising tide of presidential polls. As we continue to debate and discuss the women's vote in 2012, reporters and analysts need to be clear in defining concepts like the gender gap and the women's vote so that our analyses are understandable to readers and comparable across time.

For more information:

The [Center for American Women and Politics](#) is tracking national and battleground state polls as part of our [Women's Vote Watch 2012](#), reporting both the gender gap and women's vote measures for each publicly-available poll and providing comparisons to previous election data.