

The Gender Gap's Back

The gender gap, in hibernation earlier in the presidential campaign, is back and as big as ever. And its reappearance raises anew a key political question: Just what is it that causes more women than men to support Democratic candidates?

A statistical analysis of polling data by ABC News seeks to answer the question, and uncovers some misconceptions in the process. It finds that some common explanations don't satisfactorily explain the gender gap – and that broader political philosophy does.

First, what it's not: The gap is not directly caused by differing opinions between the sexes on specific issues, such as abortion or Social Security; in fact most men and women agree on these and most other issues. It's also not caused by demographic differences, such as income. And it's not caused by greater concern among women about compassion in politics, although this does exist.

Instead, this analysis finds that two other factors together explain almost all of the gender gap in presidential politics. First, greater support among women for a larger, more activist government; and concomitantly, a broad sense that the Democratic Party is better attuned in general to the concerns of women in this country.

The gender gap is a matter, then, of a differing political philosophy and a related political empathy. The Democrats' faith in a larger, more activist government, plus their image as a more women-oriented party, together draw more women to their ranks.

THE GAP – The gender gap is defined as the difference between how men and women vote, and it's been a staple of presidential elections since exit polls first picked it up in 1980. It merited particular notice in 1996, when Bill Clinton won women by 16 points, but lost men by one point.

The 2000 gender gap was minimal last fall, but it's grown considerably since then. In last week's ABC News/Washington Post poll, Al Gore led among women by 10 points, while George W. Bush led among men by the same amount – a 20-point gap. That's a bit bigger than usual: The gap was 17 points in 1996, and has averaged 14 points since 1980.

The Gender Gap in Presidential Elections												
	April 2000		1996		1992		1988		1984		1980	
	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep	Dem	Rep
All	47%	46	49	41	43	37	46	53	41	59	41	51
Men	42	52	43	44	41	38	41	57	38	62	35	54
Women	51	41	54	38	45	37	50	50	46	54	42	47
Gap	20 points		17 points		5 points		16 points		16 points		14 points	

PARTY ID – This gender gap in vote preferences exists because men and women differ in their political allegiances. Women are 10 points more apt to call themselves Democrats or to lean that way; men are 13 points more likely to identify themselves as Republicans. ABC News' statistical analysis finds that party identification almost entirely explains the gender gap in presidential preference.

	Leaned Party ID	
	Men	Women
Democrat	44%	54%
Republican	48	35
Independent	6	9

One of the reasons the gender gap has grown since last fall is that Democrats (and Democratic-leaning independents) have come home to Gore. In October, 69 percent of leaned Democrats backed Gore; now it's 83 percent. Support for Bush among leaned Republicans slipped, but just slightly – 93 percent then, 88 percent now.

ISSUES – Just what is it that attracts women more to the Democratic Party, and men to the Republicans? Specific issues don't explain it, because most men and women are on the same side of most issues; examples include abortion, strengthening Social Security, campaign finance reform, subsidizing private education, after-school prayer and raising the minimum wage.

On some issues there are differences between the sexes; examples include gun control, education funding and the death penalty. In some cases these differences seem to be a function of women's greater interest in an activist government.

But even when opinions on the issues differ, the divisions go only so far. Women are more likely than men to favor increased federal spending on education, but majorities of both sexes do support the idea. Men are more likely to support the death penalty, but again, majorities of both sexes support it. And majorities of both sexes say homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the military, though more women than men feel that way.

	% Support		
	Men	Women	Gap
Stricter gun control laws	51%	76	25
Death penalty	73	56	17
Gays in the military	59	75	16
Increase education spending	57	72	15
Raise minimum wage	78	88	10
Cut funding to underperforming schools	39	34	5
Strengthen Soc. Sec. before tax cut	65	69	4
Abortion	55	58	3
Subsidize some private school tuition	46	45	1
Stricter campaign finance laws	65	66	1
After-school prayer	67	67	0

PRIORITIES – There is a more persistent division between the sexes on the importance of various issues, rather than in the majority's positions on those issues; women are more likely than men to call any number of issues "very important" in their vote.

Out of 15 issues tested in the latest ABC News/Washington Post poll, women gave more than half of them a higher priority than men did. About eight in 10 women called patients' rights, Social Security, abortion and crime "very important" in their vote. Among men, anywhere from 16 to 22 points fewer gave those issues top importance.

	"Very Important"		
	Men	Women	Gap
Patients' rights	58%	80%	+22
Women's issues	32	53	+21
Gun control	51	72	+21
Social Security	65	82	+17
Crime	63	79	+16
Abortion	42	58	+16
Education	70	82	+12
Economy	63	74	+11
Environment	51	59	+ 8
Federal budget	63	69	+ 6
Moral standards	64	67	+ 3
Taxes	68	66	- 2
Death penalty	38	36	- 2
Campaign finance	35	33	- 2
Foreign affairs	51	43	- 8

These differences, however, also don't explain the gender gap, after taking into account the tendency for women to place a higher priority on "women's issues" in general. Neither is the gap fueled by interest in "compassion" in a political party, even though 51 percent of women say it's more important for a political party to show "compassion toward those in need" than to "encourage personal responsibility," while just 39 percent of men agree.

Ideological differences don't have great impact, either. Women are no more apt than men to call themselves liberals. They're six points more likely to be moderates rather than conservatives, but this accounts for relatively little of the gender gap.

THEN WHAT? – The first difference that *does* count in explaining the gender gap involves views of the role of government. Forty-six percent of women prefer "larger government with many services"; this falls to 29 percent of men.

Second is that broad notion of "women's issues" – not a defined list of specific issues, but a more general sense of being attuned to women's concerns. Nearly six in 10 men and women alike say the Democrats care more about "women's issues." The difference is that 53 percent of women call such issues very important to their vote; just 32 percent of men do likewise.

Prefer: All Men Women

Smaller government	56%	67	46
Larger government	38	29	46
Women's issues:			
Very important	43	32	53
Not very important	56	65	47

People who prefer larger government and who place a higher priority on women's issues are much more likely to identify with the Democratic Party. And this rubs off on the presidential candidates: Fifty-four percent think Gore would do a better job on "women's issues," compared to only 31 percent for Bush.

The role of these views in the gender gap is best parsed through a statistical procedure called a regression analysis – a means of measuring the effect of one factor by controlling for the influence of other factors. It's a regression, for instance, that shows that the gender gap in presidential choice is almost entirely a function of political party allegiance, rather than, for instance, a response to the individual candidates.

As noted, the regression analysis finds that demographic differences – income, education, age and race – only explain a small portion of the gender gap in party ID. Taking into account views about compassion in politics also accounts for very little of the gap. But feelings about the size of government and the importance of "women's issues" have much more of an impact; when taken together, they explain the gender gap almost entirely.

Effect of Regression on Gender Gap in Party ID:

Controlling for income, education, age and race	84% of the gender gap remains
Controlling for demographics and interest in political compassion	77% of the gap remains
Controlling for demographics and liberal/conservative ideology	69% of the gap remains
Controlling for demographics and views on government activism	52% of the gap remains
Controlling for demographics and importance of "women's issues"	35% of the gap remains
Controlling for demographics, views on government activism AND importance of "women's issues"	only 9% of the gap remains

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone March 30-April 2, 2000, among a random national sample of 1,083 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Field work by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Daniel Merkle

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:

<http://www.abcnews.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

Here are the full results:

3. If the election for president in November 2000 were being held today, and the candidates were (Al Gore, the Democrat), and (George W. Bush, the Republican), for whom would you vote?

Net Leaned Vote, Registered Voters:

	Gore	Bush	Neither (vol.)	Other (vol.)	Wouldn't vote (vol.)	No opin.
4/2/00 All	47	46	2	*	2	2
Men	42	52	2	1	2	2
Women	51	41	3	*	2	2

4. How important will (READ ITEM) be to you in deciding how to vote in the 2000 presidential election in November - very important, somewhat important, not too important or not important at all?

4/2/00

	---Important---		----Not important---		No
	Very	Somewhat	Not too	Not at all	op.
A. Handling the issue of gun control					
All	62	21	8	9	*
Men	51	25	10	14	0
Women	72	17	6	4	1
B. Reforming election campaign finance laws					
All	34	36	16	11	3
Men	35	31	15	18	1
Women	33	41	18	5	4
C. Protecting patients' rights in the health care system					
All	70	21	5	3	1
Men	58	26	8	6	1
Women	80	16	3	1	*
D. Holding taxes down					
All	67	25	5	4	*
Men	68	24	4	4	0
Women	66	25	5	3	1
E. Protecting the Social Security system					
All	74	20	3	2	*
Men	65	26	5	4	*
Women	82	15	2	1	*
F. Handling the national economy					
All	69	27	2	2	*
Men	63	32	3	2	0
Women	74	22	2	2	1
G. Handling crime					
All	72	19	5	3	1
Men	63	23	8	4	2
Women	79	17	2	2	*

H. Handling foreign affairs					
All	47	40	7	4	2
Men	51	36	7	4	2
Women	43	44	8	3	2
I. Improving education and the schools					
All	76	18	2	3	*
Men	70	21	3	5	*
Women	82	15	1	1	0
J. Encouraging high moral standards & values					
All	66	21	8	5	1
Men	64	20	9	5	1
Women	67	22	6	4	0
K. Managing the federal budget					
All	66	26	4	3	1
Men	63	26	5	4	2
Women	69	26	4	2	0
L. Protecting the environment					
All	55	34	8	3	0
Men	51	35	10	4	0
Women	59	33	6	2	0
M. Handling the abortion issue					
All	50	27	14	9	1
Men	42	27	18	12	*
Women	58	26	10	5	1
N. Handling the death penalty issue					
All	37	35	17	9	1
Men	38	30	20	11	1
Women	36	40	15	7	2
O. Addressing women's issues					
All	43	38	11	7	1
Men	32	40	15	10	3
Women	53	37	7	3	0

5. Which presidential candidate, (Gore) or (Bush), do you trust to do a better job on each of those issues? First is (INSERT ITEM)

	Gore	Bush	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opin.
O. Addressing women's issues					
All	54	31	3	3	8
Men	55	32	3	2	7
Women	53	31	4	4	9

9. Comparing the two political parties, which would you say (read item) - the (Democrats) or the (Republicans)?

	Dems.	Reps.	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opin.
--	-------	-------	----------------	-------------------	-------------

A. Does more to encourage personal responsibility					
All	39	49	2	5	5
Men	33	55	3	6	4
Women	44	44	2	4	6
B. Is more compassionate toward those in need					
All	61	28	2	5	4
Men	61	29	2	5	3
Women	62	27	3	4	4

10. Which of those would you personally say is more important in a political party - (doing more to encourage personal responsibility) or (having more compassion toward those in need).

	Personal responsibility	More compassion	No opinion
4/2/00 All	48	45	7
Men	53	39	8
Women	44	51	5

11. Which political party would you say cares more about issues that are especially important to women - the (Democrats) or the (Republicans)?

	Democrats	Republicans	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opinion
4/2/00 All	58	24	5	4	9
Men	58	25	6	3	8
Women	58	24	4	5	9

12. On another subject, do you think federal spending on education should be increased, decreased or kept about the same?

	NET	-----Increased----- Great deal	Somewhat	Decreased	About the same	No opin.
4/2/00 All	65	42	23	8	26	2
Men	57	39	18	12	30	1
Women	72	45	27	4	22	2

13. Would you support or oppose a plan to reduce federal education funding to school districts whose students don't improve on standardized tests?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
4/2/00 All	36	61	3
Men	39	58	3
Women	34	63	4

14. In areas where the local public schools are not improving, would you support or oppose the federal government giving parents money to send their children to private or religious schools instead?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
4/2/00 All	46	51	3
Men	46	50	4
Women	45	53	1

15. On another subject, do you favor or oppose stricter gun control laws in this country? Is that strongly or somewhat favor/oppose?

-----Favor----- -----Oppose----- No

		NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	opin.
4/2/00	All	64	49	14	34	21	13	2
	Men	51	34	16	47	32	15	2
	Women	76	63	13	22	11	11	2

17. What do you think is the best way to reduce gun violence in this country - (by passing stricter gun control laws), or (by stricter enforcement of existing laws)?

		Passing new laws	Enforcing old laws	Both (vol.)	Neither (vol.)	No opin.
4/2/00	All	33	53	7	5	2
	Men	27	60	5	5	2
	Women	38	47	9	4	2

20. On another subject, do you support or oppose stricter laws controlling the way political campaigns can raise and spend money?

		Support	Oppose	No opin.
4/2/00	All	66	28	7
	Men	65	29	6
	Women	66	26	7

22. What do you think is the best way to reduce improper campaign fundraising, passing stricter campaign finance laws, or the enforcement of existing laws?

		Stricter laws	Enforcement	Both	Neither	No opin
4/2/00	All	49	40	4	2	5
	Men	49	41	4	2	4
	Women	50	39	3	2	6

23. Would you say you favor smaller government with fewer services, or larger government with many services?

		Smaller govt. fewer services	Larger govt. many services	No opinion
4/2/00	All	56	38	7
	Men	67	29	4
	Women	46	46	8

24. How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Would you say just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

		Just about always	Most	Only some	None (vol.)	No opin.
4/2/00	All	4	26	64	5	*
	Men	4	26	62	7	*
	Women	4	26	66	3	*

END