

WHEN DO WOMEN VOTE FOR WOMEN?

By Tom W. Smith & Lance A. Selfa

The July/August 1992 issue of Public Perspective raised the question, "Do Women Vote for Women?" To explore it, exit polls from 35 senate or gubernatorial contests involving a woman running against a man were examined to see if women were more likely to vote for the women candidates. A significant difference was defined as "a 10 percentage point or more difference in the support of women for women." The conclusion was drawn that "(W)ith few exceptions... women have not voted for women in significantly greater numbers than men have."

This conclusion overlooks the following patterns. First, appreciable gender differences have been fairly common. There are gender differences of 10 percentage points or more in 8 of the 35 races covered. Moreover, in another five races with gender differences of less than 10 percentage points, a plurality of women backed the female candidate while a plurality of men supported the male candidate.

Second, Democratic woman candidates almost always attract women's votes, while Republican woman candidates rarely do so. In the 16 races involving a Republican woman there are no cases with gender differences of 10 points or more, but in the 19 races with a Democratic woman 8 have gender differences of at least 10. The partisan split on gender differences is further shown by the fact that women were more likely to vote for the Republican woman in only 3 of 16 races, but women favored the Democratic woman in 16 to 19 races.

In addition, in the only two senatorial or gubernatorial races that pitted women against women, the Democrats held the edge among women voters. In the 1986

Maryland senate contest, Republican Linda Chavez ran against Democrat Barbara Mikulski. Chavez got 40% of the male vote, but only 30% of the female vote, for a gender difference of minus 10 percentage points. Similarly, in the 1986 Nebraska governor's race, Republican Kay Orr, running against Democrat Helen Boosalis, got 54% of the male vote, but only 47% of the female vote.¹

Moreover, for Democrats the gender difference appears to be growing over time. In 1980-1984 the Democratic gender edge averaged +3.9 points. In 1986-1990 it averaged +10.2 points. So for Democratic candidates even the average gender difference in 1986-1990 was significantly large. For Republicans the averages were -2.0 points for both 1980-1984 and 1986-1990. Thus, the answer to the question, "Do Women Vote for Women?", seems to be: "Yes, if she's a Democrat, and increasingly so."

The gender difference for Democratic woman candidates comes both from a general Democratic edge among women and from the special appeal that Democratic women candidates have among women. Since 1980 Democratic candidates regardless of their gender have done better among women than have Republican candidates.² At the presidential level there's the well-known "gender gap." In 1984, exit polls by CBS/New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, NBC, and ABC showed Reagan's support among women averaged 7 percentage points lower than his support among men. In 1988, these exit polls showed a Bush gap of 8 percentage points. Less well known is the gender gap in congressional races. In 1984, exit polls by CBS/New York Times and the Los Angeles Times found women more likely to vote for Democratic candidates for the House, by 4 percentage points. In

1988, CBS/New York Times, ABC, and NBC exit polls put the congressional gender gap at 6 percentage points.³

This gender gap seems to come from female reservations about the use of military force and greater concern about so-

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cial welfare in general and the needy in particular.⁴

Democratic female candidates apparently build on this general advantage. They tend to do even better among women than Democratic male candidates. If we take the average 5 percentage point Democratic edge among women in congressional races in 1984 and 1988 as the now-normal gender gap, we see that the Democrats' 10 point edge in statewide races involving a woman candidate in 1986-1990 doubles the expected difference.

This bonus comes in part because Democratic women have usually included women's issues in their campaigns, while Republican women have often either ignored women's issues or been hostile to a women's rights perspective. As journalist Ellen Goodman has remarked about the strategy of the Reagan campaigns, "women were wooed successfully on the

basis of their other identities: as family members, workers, taxpayers. Not as women. Not as 'sisters'." Furthermore, Ann Lewis, national director of the Americans for Democratic Action argues, "(t)here is a gender gap on the issues. The Democratic candidates spoke to the issues they [women] cared about." Sociologists John F. Zipp and Eric Plutzer found in an analysis of five statewide races in 1982 that women and men tend to vote for different candidates "in elections with women candidates who are closely identified with issues of importance to women."⁵

Finally, in the 29 races with voter turnout figures, the voting rates of women exceeded those of men by 1.3 percentage points in contests with Republican women running and by 2.2 percentage points in elections where Democratic women were candidates. Democratic women candidates may therefore not only capture a women's vote, but also may stimulate more women to vote. (Since we are comparing different races this is far from certain.) Combined with the fact that more eligible voters are women rather than men, the greater turnout of women means that over three million more women than men voted in 1988.

In 1992 women are running for at least 18 senate and 7 gubernatorial seats. In 20 of these 25 contests the woman candidate is a Democrat. Given the gender differences that have emerged in recent years, women should favor Demo-

crats in general and Democratic women in particular in these races.⁶

Endnotes

¹ Data supplied by the Roper Center. See David E. Procter, Roger C. Aden, and Phyllis

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Japp, "Gender/Issue Interaction in Political Identity Making: Nebraska's Woman vs. Woman Gubernatorial Campaign," *Central States Speech Journal*, 1988, 39:190-203.

² Except for a small tendency for women to vote Democratic in 1972, no Democratic edge among women occurs in either party preference or presidential vote from 1948 through 1976. See Henry C. Kenski, "The Gender Factor in a Changing Electorate," and Arthur Miller, "Gender and The Vote: 1984," in *The Politics of the Gender Gap: The Social Construction of Political Influence*, edited by Carol M. Mueller (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988). Most of the time no notable gender differences existed. Those that did

appear in the 1950s favored the Republicans rather than the Democrats.

³ Karlyn H. Keene, "The Gender Gap Revisited: George Bush's Support Among Women and Men," *The Public Perspective*, 1992, 3(May/June):15-18.

⁴ Carol Mueller, "The Gender Gap and Women's Political Influence," *Annals, American Association for Political and Social Science*, May 1991, 515:23-37; Ethel Klein, *Gender Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Cheryl Sullivan, "Women Established New Political Beachheads in '86 Election," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 1, 1986, p. 3; and Miller, *op. cit.*

⁵ Ellen Goodman, "From Sisterhood to Equality," *Washington Post*, November, 17, 1984, Section A, p. 23; Sullivan, *op. cit.*; and John F. Zipp and Eric Plutzer, "Gender Differences in Voting for Female Candidates: Evidence from the 1982 Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Spring 1985, 49:179-197.

⁶ It is unknown whether the difference comes from attracting extra women or losing more men. Zipp and Plutzer, *op. cit.*, found that in some races women were gained, in some men were lost, and in some no net shifts occurred. Kenski, *op. cit.*, shows that in terms of partisan preference the gender gap of the 1980s came from more men than women leaving the Democratic party.

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THE GENDER GAP IN AUGUST: A VIEW FROM THREE SETS OF POLLS

In percentage points. If Clinton is relatively stronger among women, here the "gap" is expressed as a positive number; if he is weaker among women than among men, as a negative number.

