

The Gender Gap: Huge Myth; Important Reality

An Interview with Karlyn H. Bowman, Ted G. Jelen, Irene Natividad, and Jody Newman

PP: 1992 was heralded as the “Year of the Woman,” 1994 was alternately billed as the “Year of the Angry White Male” and the “Year of the Ambivalent Woman.” What do you think about this trend toward characterizing elections in terms of gender?

Jody Newman: It was valid to describe 1992 as the “Year of the Woman” because of women candidates making big gains in elective office. They went from 29 to 47 women in the House and from 2 to 6 in the Senate. And 1994 could be called the “Year of the Angry White Man” because male voters shifted dramatically more Republican, probably the primary reason that the Republicans took back the Congress. I do not agree that it was the “Year of the Ambivalent Woman” because that implies women didn’t go to the polls in 1994, which is not true. Women went to the polls as much as men did, but it was not a presidential year. Women’s and men’s turnout is always down in a non-presidential year.

Karlyn Bowman: By virtue of the way reporters do their jobs, they use a kind of shorthand to describe results that are complicated. It’s not surprising that they would want to tell their viewers and readers about two of the largest groups in the electorate. Yet I think that the simplification—and in the case of the angry white male, the exaggeration—is not very helpful in terms of understanding important trends in

That’s good. I want both parties to target women because women’s votes are not automatic, and there are many different types of women voters. At the same time, the hype creates a level of expectation that I think might be harmful. If women’s participation falls off in the next mid-term elections—which as Jody said, it normally does for all Americans—then it’s as if we failed again. I don’t know how to inject gender without the hyperbole.

Ted G. Jelen: I can accept the characterization of 1992 as the Year of the Woman as long as we are careful to talk about that as candidate recruitment. In 1992, there was an unusually high number of politically experienced women trying to move up. I am thinking especially of Carol Moseley-Braun. We had the Thomas-Hill part of that election, and it took something like that for someone to take on incumbent senator Alan Dixon in the 1992 Illinois Democratic Primary. He was regarded, by everyone including me, as invincible. So, in that sense, you had higher quality, more experienced women candidates running in 1992 than perhaps you had before or since. This does make 1992 kind of an appropriate benchmark.

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politics. It’s hard to find anger in surveys. I’m not sure it’s helpful to describe elections this way, but it is a fact of life that we’ll be subjected to such characterizations.

Irene Natividad: What I dislike about a lot of this—aside from using journalistic shorthand to represent a much more complex reality—is that from the vantage point of activists, like myself, when you call 1992 the Year of the Woman that means no other year is. It denies the continuance of a phenomenon, and it also paints women’s progress into a corner. If you call 1992 the Year of the Woman, then every other year, if it doesn’t produce the same results, will be considered much less significant.

PP: Is there another way to get at the gender factor?

IN: I have been trying to figure this out because I am ambivalent about characterizing elections in these terms. On the one hand, I am excited by the attention that politicians and the press are giving to women voters for the first time. We have been talking “gender gap” since 1980; but this time around, the attention is overwhelming.

On the other hand, the “Year of the Angry White Male” is absolutely not helpful at all. You really can’t measure anger very well with surveys, although it’s not hopeless. Certainly if we did have a group of mobilized angry white males, we should have seen a bigger turnout. If people are angry, one would expect them to act on the anger. The story of 1994 is low turnout, and we know that people don’t drop out of the electorate at the same rate. Republicans are a little bit more likely to vote than Democrats, and in the absence of a presidential year that helped the party a lot..

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PP: In this issue of the magazine we present data on a variety of social and political questions with the responses broken out for men and women. In many areas there seems to be no difference between women and men, but in other areas differences are significant. What do you see as the areas where the differences between women and men are politically relevant?

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Bowman: *I would define the politically relevant areas slightly differently. Women and men differ on the role government, particularly the federal government, should play in our society. In another area, women seem to be less confident about the economy. Those differences are relevant in some elections. They are central to the way that women are thinking about the two parties, the two candidates and the elections.*

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IN: There is an economic gender gap that is the basis for the political gender gap. Over 60% of minimum wage workers are women, and the majority of working women earn less than \$26,000 a year. The majority of working women work part-time which means no benefits and a very small salary. And, of course, the majority of the poor and the elderly are women. Then if you separated out women of color who face race as well as gender barriers, access to employment and to education is critical. Health care becomes important because it's an economic issue for women. So, it is not a question of men not being as concerned about economic security as women, but that women's worries are greater because women are on the lower rungs of the economic ladder.

KB: I would define the politically relevant areas slightly differently. Women and men differ on the role government, particularly the federal government, should play in our society. In another area, women seem to be less confident about the economy, and it could be because of their experiences, as Irene suggests, though they seem to be equally confident about their personal futures. Concerns about the economy are politically relevant. People looking at gender differences over time have noted that women are less inclined to back the use of force than men in areas such as gun control, the death penalty, sending troops abroad. Those differences are relevant in some elections. The major differences are on the question of the proper role the government should play in the society. They are central to the way that women are thinking about the two parties, the two candidates, and the elections.

I don't see differences in men's/women's approaches to the so-called "women's issues". There are hardly any differences at all on issues like abortion and women in the military.

TJ: It is important to note is that it's mostly men who

provide the dynamic element of widening gender differences. Take the table of NES data for party identification (see p. 8). Over the entire series, among Democrats, women have moved four points and men have moved sixteen. There has been a massive shift toward the Republican party on the part of southern white men. Some explanation of this has got to take into account that—at least at the level of partisanship—women's partisanship is somewhat more inertial; it isn't changing as fast. Among whites, there is a general shift toward the Republican party which is very slow among women, especially northern women, and very abrupt among men.

KB: Ted, you also saw men moving sharply in a conservative direction on the ideology question. That is fascinating (see p. 10).

IN: I'd like to clarify something. When "women's issues" came up, Ted said abortion automatically. What I have seen through focus groups is that women's issues encompass all issues. The two top issues that have been identified as primary concerns to women are economic equity and crime. Education was identified as a third issue because a lot of women perceive that as the key to advancement, not only for themselves, but for their families. So it is imperative to define women's issues as including a range of concerns. In the ranking of their concerns, abortion comes somewhere in the neighborhood of number 5 or 6. It's not number one.

KB: This carries over from the birth of feminism, where for a long time active feminists talked about abortion as the primary women's issue.

JN: What is interesting is that everyone here agrees that the political differences between men and women are not on what used to be called women's issues. But look at Bob Dole's attempts to appeal to women voters. He is going to talk about violence against women and send women out to campaign. It seems the press and the candidates still think that the way to appeal to women is to talk about spousal abuse and abortion and things that relate to women's bodies. In a way, it is demeaning to think that women decide whom to vote for based solely on issues that relate to their bodies. Women really are extremely concerned with a much broader range of economic issues and the role of government.

PP: What if I hypothesized that by taking two factors into account, we would be closer to understanding what is behind these gender differences on the role of government questions? (See pp. 10-11). First, as we have noted, the circumstances and needs of women are different from men's. Second, women are often thought to be more compassionate than men. Whether it's a culturally constructed or naturally endowed trait, issues that appear to involve a humanitarian appeal may resonate more strongly with women. Taken together, do these two

factors account for a good portion of what propels the gender gap?

KB: It's a big question, I am not as familiar as I probably should be with the writing of the so-called "Difference Feminists"—Deborah Tannen and Carol Gilligan. They argue that women use a different kind of language than men. Other feminists argue that it hurts the feminist movement to say men and women are significantly different and bring different ideas to politics. But if the Difference Feminists are right, that would support the point about compassion. Irene said earlier that women's experiences and their circumstances are different. Women's re-entry into the workforce in the early 1970s coincided with a time when we began to see evi-

of the question here, but I would put it a little bit differently. You have among American men a fairly radical reaffirmation of a very strong form of individualism. There is an increasing denial of social and political connectedness to obligation.

KB: So they are never going to be able to ask for directions.

TJ: Bulls-eye!

PP: As women are moving into the workplace, you might expect more men to embrace obligations—co-parenting, for example—out of necessity.

TJ: One of the things I have worked on is the role of religion in people's

spouse or partner, they don't necessarily love these changes. Their earning power has decreased, many of them are being down-sized out, they face a workplace where other folks who weren't there before are all of a sudden next to them, or they are reporting to women and minorities. The world they knew is shifting quickly. It was a workplace emphatically not created for those who came later—the women and minorities. Anxiety may surface in much more conservative positions on a number of issues. Also, on the basis of polls I have seen, while most women will say that, they think the men are helping, women do bare the brunt of domestic labor.

PP: Jody, would you like to weigh in on this?

JN: I usually like to talk from data. Most of the data that I have been able to collect traces the differences between the way men and women vote, and then traces the reasons behind their votes, and gets down to the level where you can say it's basically the role of government that divides men and women. But the question at hand asks why do men and women differ on the role of government, and it extends beyond the scope of the data.

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dence of a gender gap. Women were the last hired and at the bottom of the economic ladder, often heading single families, more vulnerable by virtue of that, and perhaps looking to government in the place of husbands who might have been there.

TJ: Gilligan argues that since most people are raised by women—who have primary responsibility for child care—the task of childhood is different for men. There are no worse aspersions to cast on a boy than to call him a mama's boy. You are supposed to establish your independence. Whereas for little girls, mothers are role models, people who can be usefully emulated. The reason I bring this point up is I want to emphasize once again that it's the men who are doing most of the changing politically. I am in general agreement with the premise

political thinking. One of the most important effects religiosity, and in particular conservative Protestantism, has on the roles of women is that religious women tend not to alter their expectations of themselves in their domestic roles in response to the workplace. They are much more likely to be double-bound psychologically. Overall, I am not sure men's lives have changed that much. If you have a two-income family, that probably means for the most part that the wife is pretty much holding down two jobs—that of homemaker and the full- or part-time job in the paid labor force.

IN: It doesn't surprise me that men became so conservative so quickly, as Karlyn mentioned earlier, and at a far faster rate than women. Their world is threatened. While they may acknowledge the economic contributions of the

Differences on role of government questions probably have more to do with women's role in society than with an inborn compassion. In the 50s and 60s women were more Republican than men, and unless they've evolved from then 'til now, the change probably has more to do with their role in society. Even when you account for income level or education level, there are still differences in the way men and women vote. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that women's lives are more tied to seeing the results of what government produces. In other words, both men and women say that they want to balance the budget and would like lower taxes and they don't want big government interfering in their lives. But women probably are *nearer* to seeing the effects of spending on education, for example. They are the ones who are more likely to be involved with their children's schools, more likely

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to take them to school and pick them up and go to teachers meetings. They are more likely to be taking care of their parents and see the effects of cuts in Medicare. So government isn't just paying taxes, it is also seeing the results of those services. (Or I could just be more partisan and say women are more Democratic because they are smarter.)

KB: Jody, as you said, we didn't see some of these differences in the 50s, but women could always have had separate speech and organizational styles, a separate value system. Do you think that these traits have simply become more permanent as women have become major actors in the workforce?

JN: There was a sea change in the role of women in our society between the 50s and 60s and now. One part of it is so huge that I don't think that people give it enough credence — the surge in the percentage of women who are in the workforce. It was a third back in the 50s and 60s and now it is two-thirds. That's a drastic change in a very short time, and I believe that is probably why fewer women are conservative. Women were at home and were more conservative in those days.

PP: How about extending the reach of party differences? Is the gender gap on party identification tied up with other things like candidate style or the party's relative successes in recruiting women as candidates?

JN: I would say no. Party identification is tied to women's beliefs about government, and it doesn't really make much difference if you have a woman giving a ten-minute keynote speech at the convention or out campaigning. It is not going to change women's fundamental impulses on how they vote.

It is also important not to exaggerate the size of the gender gap. We have talked about it so much that lay people or people who aren't familiar with the data think that when husbands and wives go to the polls, the men vote Republican and the women vote Democratic. We are talking about a relatively small gap

— 6 to 8 points — and it isn't all women voting one way and all men voting the other way.

TJ: I agree. We did a study a couple of years ago comparing two Illinois Senate races in 1990. In one, Paul Simon ran against Lynn Martin. In the other, in 1992, Carol Moseley-Braun ran against Richard Williamson. Party and gender of the candidate reinforced each other in 1992 and, in a sense, contradicted each other in 1990. Basically what we found is that, to the extent that there is a gender gap, it is driven by party and not by the gender of the candidate. Lynn Martin didn't receive an advantage among female voters in any party by virtue of the fact that she is a woman.

JN: Karlyn did a lot of that research,

this sense, candidate style may drive some of these numbers, but I certainly agree that party is a more important factor.

PP: As Jody noted, trended NES survey data show that in the 1950s and into the 1960s women were more Republican than men were (see p. 8). Why?

IN: The parties have changed in character. The Republican party in the 1950s and 1960s was much more moderate. Now the increased presence of conservatives in the party has certainly had a great impact on the issues it emphasizes and on the way it is perceived. It doesn't surprise me that men tended to be more Democratic in earlier years because of the make up of the economy: There were a lot of men employed in manufac-

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and so did I, and we found the same thing that you did in those two races. After looking at lots and lots of races, we found that it is not the gender of the candidate that makes a difference in the gender gap.

KB: Candidate styles can drive the gender gap numbers. For example, consider the Ann Richards / George Bush race and the Kay Bailey Hutchison / Bob Krueger race. In one — the Richards race — you saw a huge gap. But there was no gap at all in the Hutchison race. There may be something about a combative style of some Republicans that turns women off. Newt Gingrich's ratings are pretty negative generally. I would think that his negatives would be much higher among women than they are among men because for women that combative style tends to be a turnoff. In

turing at that time. Democrats working with unions were very much standing for the common worker. Then the shift from manufacturing to service industries, which tend to employ women, also put a lot of men in the traditional blue collar areas out of work. This accounts for some of the later shifts by women to the Democratic side. The service industries don't pay well in general, they hire a lot of women at minimum wages, they don't come with benefits. These large economic changes profoundly alter the issues that women and men tend to focus on and how each party becomes more or less appealing on the basis of their approaches to these economic changes.

TJ: To go beyond economic issues to extend that point a little further—one of the things that is associated with partici-

(Interview continued, please see p. 30)

pation in the paid labor force is a decline in religiosity. So some of the culturally conservative issues that resonated in the 50s, particularly things like anti-communism and rock and roll, probably don't have the same "effect" that they used to have with women because women are no longer so much the guardians of the culture.

IN: But the term gender gap surged when Ronald Reagan was running. Dick Wirthlin, his pollster, was the first to divide the women's vote into 50 some categories. Then they made appeal ads—program proposals—to women who were leaning Republican. It was the first time that such an effort was made to try to reach women voters, so it didn't surprise me that, given that kind of attempt and examination of the women's vote, a lot more women responded.

JN: Ronald Reagan did get a majority of women's votes, but he got a much bigger majority of men's votes, and he had the same gender gap—the 8 or 9 points, different amounts on different surveys—that Bill Clinton does today. That gap has become pretty traditional. There was a similar gender gap back in the 50s and 60s in the other direction. The gender gap did begin to be discussed in 1980 when women started voting noticeably more Democratic. Women's groups coined the phrase and started

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talking about it and promoting it to the press as a way of promoting Democratic candidates. The data that we've found implies that there may have been a gender gap back in 1920 when women started voting. Of course, you can't really measure it unless you have exit polls, and people didn't start doing exit polls until much later. But the data we have from back then show that men and women voted differently.

If you take any kind of difference—any kind of demographic group—and divide the electorate accordingly, you will get a gap—by race, income, education, etc. It is interesting that many of those other gaps are much bigger than the gender gap, yet we and the press focus so much on the gender gap. The attention seems somehow tied to that fascination with gender differences and “the men are from Mars and women from Venus” fixation. Other gaps are really bigger.

KB: I'd like to comment on something Irene said that I agree with. You talked about the Republican party being pulled to its extremes. In the early 70s the Democratic party clearly was pulled to its extremes, too, and that might explain some of the shifts that we began to see among men.

PP: What about interest and involvement in politics? Women, by many accounts, are less interested in politics than men are. A press release for the January survey of 1,000 women conducted by Lake Research for Ladies Home Journal reported an

interesting finding. When asked to describe their feelings about politics, women's top three adjectives (selected from a list) were “frustrated” (17%), “disgusted” (16%), and “disillusioned” (14%). Are women uniquely cynical about politics?

KB: My guess is that most men would have answered the same way on that Ladies Home Journal question.

TJ: Look at the NES questions about trying to influence someone's votes (see p. 13). There is a 8 to 10 percent difference, with men being more likely to try that level of activism — to try to convince someone to vote in a particular way.

JN: Yes, but that is very different from feeling frustrated or disgusted. We did study why women don't run for office, and the reason that there aren't more women elected is because we don't have enough women running. Trying to figure out why we don't have more women running, we found men's and women's answers were remarkably similar in a lot of ways. Both men and women didn't want their personal lives exposed. They thought politics was dirty and didn't want to have to raise all the money. They didn't want to take time away from their families. The major differences that we found were that a higher percentage of the women said that they wanted to feel invited, qualified, and trained. Except for that, the answers were quiet similar.

IN: Also, women don't see themselves in government. I think that was the impact of Anita Hill in 1991. We are not part of the leadership of this country, whether it is business, religion, education, or politics. So when women saw this all male Senate, they realized what it means not to be in a government body. There are no role models, the numbers are too small and women don't feel that they are the ones who are governing. The connect is simply not there. Another point is that women are too busy, too pressed for time, just getting things done from day to day.

KB: Irene, we have seen such extraordinary strides for women in so many areas — law schools, medical schools, professional positions. Do you expect politics is always going to lag behind?

IN: Women are focused on economic

and are quite used to it. Women are making that same progress— what we always call slow steady progress— in politics that women are making in other fields. We have 435 members of the House and 100 Senators which totals 535 top political jobs in this country. Compare those numbers with the 500

they seem to dominate. There may be something in the opportunities structure itself that is choking off politics a little bit more.

PP: Have we missed anything in our discussion?

JN: I think that the one piece that we have forgotten to talk about is the sheer numbers of women in the electorate. Women are an extremely powerful force in elections today because they are more than half of the voters. They make up the majority of the electorate and they have slightly higher turnout rates than men do. Even if men vote Republican as much as women do Democratic, women will carry the day just because of their numbers.

TJ: For me the most important thing that we haven't really talked about is the extent to which recognition of political differences between men and women have altered the agenda. We talk about different things now. Bob Dole is talking about things like domestic violence. When he started in politics, it would not have been considered something that would make a fit topic for a national election campaign. We seem to be addressing some of the kitchen table issues, if you like, in a much more direct fashion as a result of the fact that people have recognized that there are a great many votes to be gotten from women.

KB: We need always to remember that the women's vote is not monolithic. A number of us have said that in many ways: The differences *between men and women* pale before those *among women*.



This interview was conducted by Catherine Flavin, a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut, and a graduate assistant of the Roper Center.

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Natividad: *The parties have changed in character. The Republican party in the 1950s and 1960s was much more moderate. Now the increased presence of conservatives in the party has certainly had a great impact on the issues it emphasizes and on the way it is perceived. It doesn't surprise me that men tended to be more Democratic in earlier years because of the make-up of the economy: There were a lot of men employed in manufacturing at that time. Democrats working with unions were very much standing for the common worker.*”

security and advancement, and politics usually comes later. The ethnic group I represent is Asian-Americans. The majority of Asian-Americans don't vote, for instance. They aren't engaged in politics in a major way, say the way African-Americans are. There are lots of reasons for this, but part of it has to do with their wanting to get economic and educational credentials first. Then we see them moving into politics. I'm seeing more of that, although by small increments, in my community. I think that the same kind of movement applies to women.

KB: Jody, you have written about how well women do when they run. Do you think that women are going to become much more active in politics as they already are becoming in a lot of other professions?

JN: Absolutely, and it is not true that women are lagging. Back when I was a kid my mother and all her friends, every one of them, was at home, not in the workforce at all. In one generation women are now attorneys and doctors

CEOs of the Fortune 500. Among the Fortune 500 CEO's, there are very few women—one or two, I believe. We now have nine women out of 100 in the Senate and 48 in the House.

IN: I am not denying that there has been progress. Is it enough or is it fast enough?

JN: I don't think it's fast enough, but I do think it is as fast or faster in politics than it is in a lot of other fields.

TJ: If we broaden the notion of what it means to “participate in politics,” if we move away from things that are directly related to campaigns and running for office to more communal kinds of things, we find women taking on a much more active role. It doesn't seem to me that differences in resources, time, energy, training, etc., are as important in associational life. If we consider participation in public affairs to include things like the Red Cross, Muscular Dystrophy, United Way, women are quite active in those areas. In some, in fact,