

# The Intraparty Gender Gap: Differences between Male and Female Voters in the 1980–2000 Presidential Primaries

An interparty gender gap developed over a 40-year period resulting in a pattern where men are slightly more likely to be Republicans while women are slightly more likely to be Democrats. A gender gap in the opposite direction existed in the 1950s when women were more likely to support the Republican party and men the Democratic party (Campbell et al. 1960). This older gender gap began to be replaced with the current pattern in the early 1960s as men, most dramatically white southern men, altered their partisan preferences (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Norrander 1999a; Wirls 1986). Some women, primarily southern white women, also moved into the Republican party but at a slower pace than men. The new interparty gender gap first

reached statistical significance in the early 1970s and stabilized around 5 percentage points in the 1980s. During the Clinton years, the gender gap grew

to 15 percentage points. This time women moved in greater numbers with growing allegiance to the Democratic party while men's preferences remained more stable. In the 2000 election, the gender gap fell back to 9 percentage points.

Gender differences occur in issue preferences and ideological identification, as well. The oldest and largest of these differences exist for use-of-force issues, with women less supportive of military intervention abroad and more supportive of gun control at home. Women are more likely to favor using the government to help individuals in need, on what are called the compassion issues. On the other hand, women may be more conservative on some issues involving moral questions. By the 1980s, women and men also were adopting more distinctive ideological identifications that reflected some of these issue differences (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Norrander 1999b). Thus, by the end of the 20th century it appeared that men and women had sorted through their issue and ideological differences and matched these to two more ideologically distinctive parties. Yet, the match between issues and parties has never been perfect among the American public. An imperfect sorting process may still leave differences between men and women within each party, creating an intraparty, as well as an interparty, gender

gap. This article briefly explores the intraparty gender gap by examining men's and women's preferences in the 1980–2000 presidential primaries.

An intraparty gender gap could take on a variety of magnitudes. In general, the intraparty gender gap might be expected to be smaller than the interparty gender gap, if many Americans have a more or less good fit between their issue preferences and partisan identities. A second possibility is that the intraparty gender gap is more varied than the interparty gap. Presidential primaries are characterized by a larger number of candidates, which often change even over the course of one election year. Finally, single candidates or combinations of candidates might evoke more gender differences in support than other combinations of presidential nominee seekers. However, several differences exist between men and women that may produce, at least at times, an intraparty gender gap.

## Intraparty Gender Gaps in Voters' Identities and Concerns

One difference between men and women is that women are slightly more partisan than men. The independence gap finds men about 5 percentage points more likely to view themselves as leaning independents while women are more likely to view themselves as weak partisans (Norrander 1997). Women's more partisan identities might lead them to be more supportive of incumbent presidents seeking renomination, vice presidents hoping to move up to the top post, and other party frontrunners. Likewise, candidates who have a greater appeal among independent rather than partisan primary voters also should experience a gender gap in support.

Table 1 examines partisan differences between men and women participating in the 1980–1996 Democratic and Republican presidential primaries.<sup>1</sup> First, in both parties' primaries on average three-quarters of the voters identify with the party. About one-quarter view themselves as independent voters, and only a scant 4% are crossover voters. The independence gap occurs more clearly among Democratic primary voters. In 43% of the primaries, the Democratic electorate has statistically a significantly larger proportion of male than female independents. On the other hand, in 51% of the Democratic primaries, women are a larger proportion of the partisan voters. Generally, the few crossover voters are not differentiated

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**Table 1**  
**Gender Gaps in Partisanship and Ideology Among Democratic and Republican Presidential Primary Voters, 1980–1996**

Democratic Primary Voters									
	Average Percent	Gender Gaps				Average Percent	Gender Gaps		
		More Women	No Gap	More Men			More Women	No Gap	More Men
Dem.	71%	51%	48%	1%	Liberal	30%	21%	76%	4%
Indep.	24%	1%	56%	43%	Moderate	48%	20%	76%	5%
Rep.	4%	0%	81%	19%	Conser.	22%	2%	59%	39%
N = 79 primaries					N = 82 primaries				
Republican Primary Voters									
Dem.	4%	14%	80%	6%	Liberal	10%	29%	69%	3%
Indep.	24%	10%	61%	29%	Moderate	35%	65%	35%	0%
Rep.	72%	18%	72%	10%	Conser.	55%	0%	26%	74%
N = 79 primaries					N = 80 primaries				

Sources: 1980 CBS News/*New York Times* Election Surveys; 1984 CBS News Primary Election Exit Polls; 1984 CBS News/*New York Times* Primary Election Day Exit Polls; 1988 CBS News/*New York Times* Primary Election Exit Polls; 1988 CBS News/*New York Times* Super Tuesday Primary Election Exit Polls; 1992 Voter Research and Surveys Presidential Primary Exit Polls; 1996 Voter News Service Presidential Primary Exit Polls.

along gender lines, but in about one in five primaries more men than women are crossover voters. The patterns are not as distinct among voters in the Republican primaries. In two-thirds to three-quarters of the Republican primaries, no differences exist along gender lines for partisan, independent, or crossover voters. Still, a weak independence gap does occur. Somewhat less than a third of the time, men are more likely to outnumber women among independent voters.

Issue or ideological differences also could separate men from women in each party's primary electorate. Table 1 illustrates that a gender difference on ideology is quite prevalent in the Republican primary electorate.<sup>2</sup> Generally, about half of the

Republican primary electorate view themselves as conservatives, one-third as moderates, and 10% as liberals. Men outnumber women among the conservative voters in three-quarters of the primaries, while women outnumber men among moderate voters in two-thirds of the Republican primaries. The Democratic primary electorate is more broadly divided among the three ideological identifications but the differences between men and women are more muted. About half of the Democratic primary electorate view themselves as moderates, and in about 20% of the primaries women outnumber men in this category. Nearly one-third of Democratic voters describe themselves as liberals, and once again, about 20% of the time

women outnumber men in this category as well. Finally, in the quarter of the Democratic electorate who view themselves as conservatives, men outnumber women about one-third of the time. Similar intra-party ideological gender gaps occur among caucus participants and delegates to the presidential nomination conventions (McMullen and Norrander 2000; Rapoport, Stone, and Abramowitz 1990).

If primary voters are retrospective voters (Monardi 1994; Wattier 1990), women's more pessimistic view of the economy might lead them to be less supportive of incumbents (Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler 1998) even during the nomination stage. Among voters in the 1992 Republican primaries, women were more pessimistic than men about the economy in 45% of the states while men were more pessimistic than women in 9%. Thus, while women's stronger partisanship could lead them to give greater support to incumbent presidents, women's more pessimistic evaluations of the economy could push their support away from incumbents.

Men and women appear to be looking for different qualities in candidates. Women



**A Split Decision.** According to Norrander, men and women simply appear to be looking for different qualities in a candidate, with differences in partisanship, ideology, and more leading both groups to support different candidates in presidential primaries. Photo: istockphoto.com/Andrea Gingerich.

**Table 2**  
**Gender Gap in Democratic Presidential Primaries, 1980–2000**

	Number of Surveys in Which Candidate Received 5% of Vote	Surveys with Significant Gender Gap		Mean Gender Gap	
		Number	(Percent)	When Significant	All Primaries
<b>1980 Primaries</b>					
Brown	2	0	(0%)		2.1
Carter	10	3	(30%)	–8.5	–3.3
Kennedy	10	3	(30%)	8.5	2.9
<b>1984 Primaries</b>					
Glenn	4	2	(50%)	–6.9	–4.0
Hart	19	2	(22%)	–6.1	–1.2
		2		6.6	
Jackson	18	6	(39%)	7.1	2.6
		1		–3.2	
McGovern	2	1	(50%)	–4.2	–2.0
Mondale	19	3	(27%)	5.2	–.1
		2		–4.9	
<b>1988 Primaries</b>					
Dukakis	23	3	(13%)	5.9	1.9
Gephardt	15	0	(0%)		–.5
Gore	16	6	(38%)	–9.2	–4.6
Hart	1	0	(0%)		–2.5
Jackson	23	4	(22%)	7.4	1.9
		1		–5.6	
Simon	3	0	(0%)		–1.7
<b>1992 Primaries</b>					
Brown	28	6	(21%)	–6.0	–1.7
Clinton	28	4	(14%)	6.3	.8
Harkin	3	0	(0%)		–1.1
Kerrey	5	0	(0%)		1.7
Tsongas	26	3	(12%)	7.8	.8
<b>2000 Primaries</b>					
Bradley	20	10	(50%)	–9.3	–5.3
Gore	20	11	(55%)	9.6	5.9

Sources: 1980 CBS News/*New York Times* Election Surveys; 1984 CBS News Primary Election Exit Polls; 1984 CBS News/*New York Times* Primary Election Day Exit Polls; 1988 CBS News/*New York Times* Primary Election Exit Polls; 1988 CBS News/*New York Times* Super Tuesday Primary Election Exit Polls; 1992 Voter Research and Surveys Presidential Primary Exit Polls; 1996 Voter News Service Presidential Primary Exit Polls. 2000 results estimated from VNS exit poll results as published on CNN web pages.

often are more reluctant to vote for “maverick” candidates. In general election voting, men have been greater supporters of third-party candidates (Alvarez and Nagler 1995; Lacy and Burden 1999; Lacy and Monson 2002). Likewise, in response to the 1992 primary exit polls, men were more likely than women to pick a candidate who would “shake things up.” Women focused more on qualities such as caring, courage, ability to handle a crisis, or experience. Men, on the other hand, also were more likely to be looking for a candidate who could win the fall election (McMullen and Norrander 2000). Thus, a number of differences in partisanship, ideology, evaluations of the economy, and preferred candidate qualities could lead men and women within the same party to support different candidates for their party’s presidential nomination.

### **Intraparty Gender Gaps in Candidate Preferences**

To measure the intraparty gender gap in candidate support during the 1980–2000 presidential primaries, the proportion of male supporters is subtracted from the proportion of female

supporters and a difference in proportions statistical significance test is applied. A positive gender gap number indicates more support from women and a negative gender gap figure denotes more support from men. When only two candidates contest an election, a gender gap in preferences for one candidate is reflected in the opposite direction for the other candidate. However, in a multicandidate setting a number of combinations could occur. Pairs of candidates could have inverted gender gaps, one favored by women and the other by men. One candidate could garner stronger support from one of the sexes, but voters of the other sex might distribute their preferences across a number of candidates such that none of the candidates has disproportionate support from these voters. It is even possible that a single candidate might be preferred by men in some electoral settings and supported more by women in other primaries.

Table 2 lists the intraparty gender gaps for Democratic candidates. The 1980 contest between President Jimmy Carter and Senator Ted Kennedy produced a significant gender gap only one-third of the time. Contrary to the incumbency support argument due to women’s stronger partisan identification but

in support of the economic vote hypothesis, women were slightly more likely to support Kennedy (an 8.5 percentage point gap in the statistically significant instances) while more men supported Carter.

The 1984 Democratic contest had some candidates, such as Jesse Jackson, producing a more frequent gender gap, and some odd combinations where the same candidate (Gary Hart, Jackson, Walter Mondale) at times had greater support from women and in other primaries greater support from men. Much of the explanation for these gender gaps in the 1984 Democratic contest has to do with racial voting patterns in that election. In 1984, the support for Jesse Jackson came almost entirely from black voters. In primaries with exit poll data, Jackson on average received the support of only 5.5% of white voters while attaining the votes from 77%

of African American voters. Black women are more likely to turn out to vote in elections than are black men (McClain and Stewart 1998, 83). This was true in many of the 1984 primaries, where women comprised 59.3% of the black electorate in comparison to 51.8% of the white electorate (a difference statistically significant in eight of the 13 primaries). Thus, the greater presence of black female voters led to an overall gender gap of women supporting Jesse Jackson.

When the 1984 election choices are controlled for race, the gender gap for Jackson among white voters occurred in only two states, and in these two states (California and Illinois) men gave Jackson higher support. Among white voters, John Glenn had greater support from male rather than female voters in only one state, Hart garnered more support from women rather than men in only one state, while Mondale drew greater support from women in two states and men in one state. Overall, the number of significant gender gaps among white voters shrunk from 16 states to seven states. (The discrepancy in total number of gender gap states with those listed in Table 1 occurs because exit polls in several states did not include a race question.) Among black voters, Jackson had only one significant gender gap, drawing the support of more female voters in New York. Black male voters in New York were slightly more likely to support Mondale. Finally, black male voters were more likely than black female voters to support Hart in three states (New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee).

In 1988, Jackson's gender gap is once again primarily explained by differential turnout rates among black voters. In three of the four states where Jackson had greater support from female voters, black women participated at higher rates than white women. In the one state where Jackson drew greater support from male voters, black men participated at a higher rate than white men.<sup>3</sup> Al Gore had the most frequent gender gap in 1988. In six mostly southern states, Gore received more support from men than women, perhaps tapping into the greater number of conservative male voters. In four states, women gave greater support to Michael Dukakis, while the votes for Richard Gephardt, Hart, and Paul Simon never produced a gender gap. In 1992, a gender gap occurred only about one-fourth of the time. Men gave greater support to Jerry Brown, hoping to shake things up. Women gave greater support to Clinton because he cared or could handle a crisis and to Paul Tsongas because he was courageous (McMullen

and Norrander 2000). In the 2000 Democratic contest, Gore experienced a more consistent gender gap than he received in 1988, but in 2000 female voters gave him greater support than male voters in 11 of the 20 states. This may be the case of women's greater partisan leanings producing added support for a vice president seeking to move up to the top post. In general, a gender gap occurred about one-fourth of the time for candidates in the 1980–2000 Democratic primaries.

Table 3 presents evidence on the gender gaps for Republican candidates. These differences between male and female voters appear to be slightly more pronounced in the Republican primary electorate. Overall, about one-third of the time a Republican presidential nominee seeker experienced a gender gap in support. The 1980 primaries are a notable exception, with only one instance of a gender gap.

The most frequent gender gap in the 1988 Republican primaries occurred in support of Pat Robertson, who drew greater support from women than from men. Women are more religious than men, which appears to explain women's greater support for Robertson. Robertson also had more women among his financial supporters than did the other Republican candidates (Wilcox 1992).

While George H. W. Bush drew greater support from men than women in a small number of the 1980 and 1988 primaries, in 1992 President Bush was consistently and strongly favored by female voters. The 1992 Republican contest pitted an incumbent president against a maverick-style opponent. Men supported Pat Buchanan to shake up politics and because of their concern for the deficit, trade issues, and affirmative action. Women's stronger partisanship and search for candidates with experience led them to support President Bush's renomination, despite their more negative evaluation of the economy. Women who supported Buchanan did so due to concerns about family values while men who supported Bush cited him as a winner (McMullen and Norrander 2000). The reasons and patterns of support for Buchanan and Robertson hint that the gender gap might partially overlap with divisions between economic and social conservatives within the Republican party.

The 1996 Republican primaries saw a repeat of Buchanan's wider support from male voters, although in fewer primaries than in 1992. When the vote for Dole reflected a gender gap, he was favored more by women than men—a pattern that also occurred in the 1988 primaries. For the two main candidates in the 2000 Republican primaries, George W. Bush drew broader support from women while John McCain attracted greater support from men. Bush's compassionate conservatism versus McCain's maverick style and support from independent voters may underlie the gender gap in the 2000 Republican primaries.

A number of instances of gender gaps exist within as well as across the two major American parties. About one-fourth of the time, candidates seeking the Democratic nomination experience a statistically significant difference in support levels from male versus female voters. A gender gap is more likely to occur for Republican candidates, about one-third of the time. Within the Democratic primary electorate, women are more likely to view themselves as Democrats while men are more likely to describe themselves as independents. This pattern is less strong in the Republican primary electorate. Yet, the

**Women focused more on qualities such as caring, courage, ability to handle a crisis, or experience. Men, on the other hand, also were more likely to be looking for a candidate who could win the fall election (McMullen and Norrander 2000).**

**Table 3**  
**Gender Gap in Republican Presidential Primaries, 1980–2000**

	Number of Surveys in Which Candidate Received 5% of Vote	Surveys with Significant Gender Gap		Mean Gender Gap	
		Number	(Percent)	When Significant	All Primaries
<b>1980 Primaries</b>					
Anderson	6	0	(0%)		1.5
Baker	2	0	(0%)		-.8
Bush, G. H. W.	9	1	(11%)	-5.6	-.1
Reagan	9	0	(0%)		-.7
<b>1988 Primaries</b>					
Bush, G. H. W.	16	4	(25%)	-11.2	-4.4
Dole	16	1	(6%)	11.8	.4
DuPont	1	1	(100%)	-3.6	-3.6
Kemp	8	1	(13%)	-8.2	-1.0
Robertson	16	8	(50%)	7.6	4.7
<b>1992 Primaries</b>					
Buchanan	27	24	(89%)	-11.1	-10.4
Bush, G. H. W.	27	25	(93%)	11.2	10.7
Duke	3	2	(67%)	-5.6	-3.1
<b>1996 Primaries</b>					
Alexander	16	3	(31%)	4.5	1.3
		2		-2.2	
Buchanan	27	10	(37%)	-6.2	-3.6
Dole	28	9	(32%)	8.0	3.9
Forbes	24	2	(8%)	-4.8	-1.2
Keyes	4	1	(25%)	-4.1	-1.3
Lugar	2	0	(0%)		.4
<b>2000 Primaries</b>					
Bush, G. W.	23	10	(43%)	7	3.9
Forbes	2	0	(0%)		-.5
Keyes	18	0	(0%)		-1.7
McCain	23	5	(26%)	-6.2	-2.4
		1		5.0	

Sources: 1980 CBS News/*New York Times* Election Surveys; 1984 CBS News Primary Election Exit Polls; 1984 CBS News/*New York Times* Primary Election Day Exit Polls; 1988 CBS News/*New York Times* Primary Election Exit Polls; 1988 CBS News/*New York Times* Super Tuesday Primary Election Exit Polls; 1992 Voter Research and Surveys Presidential Primary Exit Polls; 1996 Voter News Service Presidential Primary Exit Polls. 2000 results estimated from VNS exit poll results as published on CNN web pages.

Republican primary electorate is more divided along gender lines when it comes to ideology. Men in three-quarters of the Republican primaries are more likely to describe themselves as conservatives while women see themselves more often as moderates in two-thirds of the primaries. Men and women also appear to be searching for different qualities in a presidential nominee. The gender gap for two candidates (George H. W. Bush and Al Gore) reversed itself when these candidates

changed from being challengers, when they were favored more by men, to incumbents, when women gave them more support. While the gender gaps within each party are often small and somewhat varied in their appearance, victory in the primaries is often attained by small vote margins. A greater awareness of gender differences within each party should serve to better our understanding of the dynamics of support during the nomination phase of the presidential selection process.

## Notes

1. In most of the primary exit polls, respondents are only asked to place themselves as Democrats, independents, or Republicans. The question in 1980, 1984, and 1988 asked “Do you usually think of yourself as a: Republican, Democrat, independent.” In 1992 and 1996 the question was expanded to “No matter how you voted today, do you usually think of yourself as a: . . .” In 1992, the number of response categories was enlarged to strong Democrat, not so strong Democrat, strong Republican, not so strong Republican, independent, something else. The 1996 exit polls used the 1992 question wording but reduced the number of responses back to Democrat, Republican, independent, something else. None of the exit polls solicited a response that would separate leaning from pure independents. For the analysis, responses were coded into the

three categories and difference in proportion tests were employed to identify primaries with gender gaps. A .05 level is reported as significant.

2. The ideology question in all surveys was, “On most political matters do you consider yourself:”. In 1980 to 1988, three options were given: liberal, moderate, conservative. In 1992 and 1996, five options were listed: very liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, somewhat conservative, very conservative.

3. When controlling for race in these five states, no gender gap occurs for Jackson among white voters. Only twice does a gender gap occur for Jackson among black voters, but the direction is split with greater male support in Texas and greater female support in Mississippi.

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