

# Do Women Vote For Women?

By Jody Newman

Do women vote for women? Is it true that women candidates have an advantage among women, that putting a woman on the ticket will help win women voters? Or is the opposite true—that women “just won’t vote for women?”

When Walter Mondale chose Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate in 1984, it was widely assumed that he would gain among women voters. Speculation about New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman as a vice-presidential candidate often assumes that she would help Republicans win more women’s votes. A television discussion of Mary Landrieu’s 1995 campaign for governor of Louisiana included the remark that she “can’t count on the women’s vote because there’s another woman in the race,” implying that she *could* have counted on “the women’s vote” had she been the only woman.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, a Democratic woman who lost her state senate race in a heavily Republican district against an entrenched Republican incumbent wrote a whole book examining why “women won’t support women running for office.”<sup>2</sup> A 1989 study done by EMILY’s List, based on discussions with women candidates and campaign managers, concluded that “many women voters re-

mained hesitant about supporting women candidates...women voters did not provide a secure, early base for women candidates...there is no ‘leg up,’ no advantage, with women voters.”<sup>3</sup> And ironically, the same Christine Todd Whitman cited as a potential boon among women for the Republican presidential ticket said of her own race for governor in 1993: women need to “get the confidence to say...it’s okay to come down on the side of the woman. I haven’t been able to break down that barrier yet.”<sup>4</sup>

The distinction between women voters and women candidates has often been blurred or confused. For example, recent articles marking the 75th anniversary of women’s suffrage frequently began by discussing women as voters and then continued with women as candidates, as though one necessarily meant the other. This study was designed to clarify and explore the relationship between women voters and women candidates.

## Understanding the Gender Gap

At the most basic level, the answer to the question of whether women vote for women is obviously yes. Women make up the majority of voters, and if women never voted for women, no woman could ever win an election. Equally obvious, *all* women don’t vote for women candidates; if they did, no man could ever win against a woman.

The real question is whether women voters give an extra edge to a woman candidate *because* she is a woman, and if so, how large is this edge. To answer these questions, we began by comparing the percentage of women who voted for a woman candidate to the percentage of men who voted for that candidate—in other words, we looked at the “gender gap” for women candidates.

The term gender gap was coined to refer to the difference between the way

men and women vote, but it is often misused and poorly understood. “Winning among women” is different from having a gender gap. A candidate might have done better among women than among men (a gender gap) and yet not have won a majority of women’s votes. For example, a candidate who received 40% of women’s votes and 30% of men’s votes would have a 10-point gender gap, but would not have won among women.

And a candidate might have a large gender gap, have won among women, and still have lost the election. For example, a candidate who received 53% of women’s votes and 33% of men’s votes would have a 20-point gender gap and would have won a majority of women’s votes, but not received enough total votes to win the election.

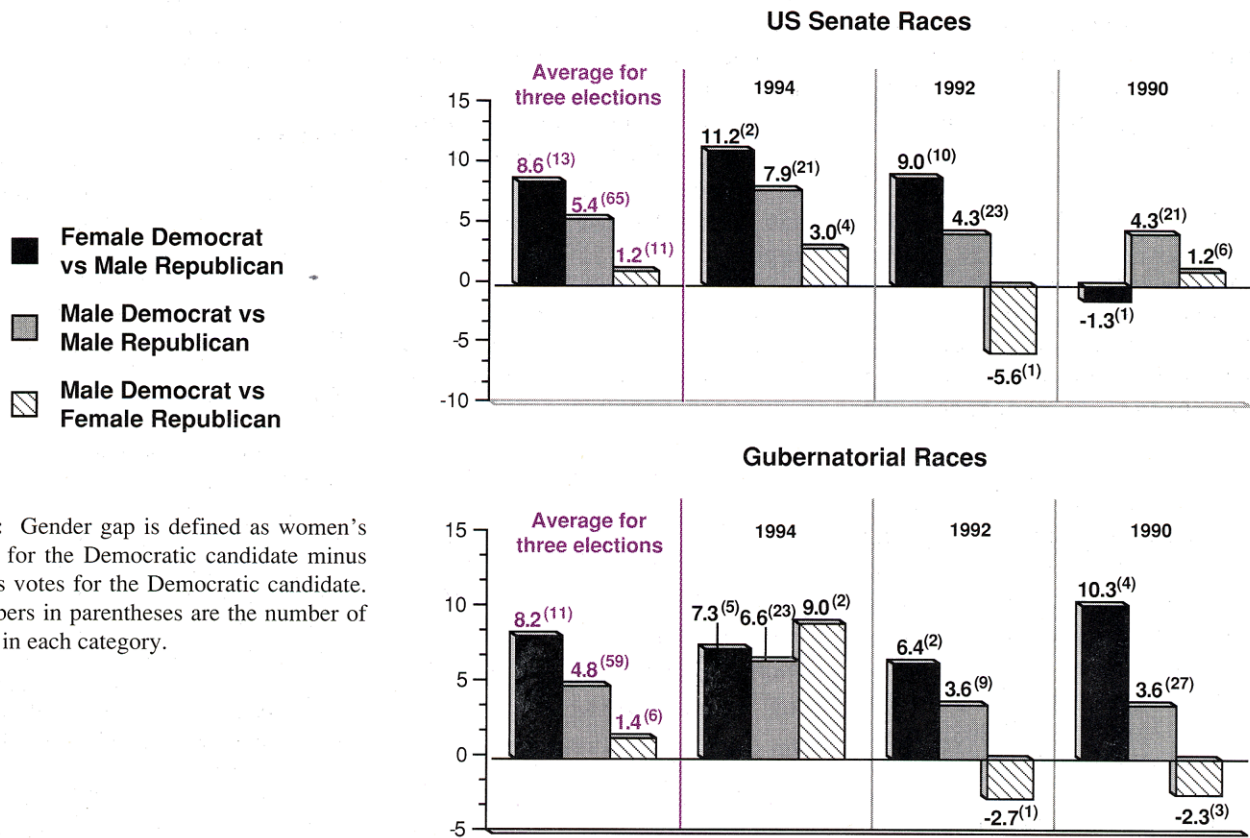
The term gender gap describes the *difference* between the way men and women vote, but it says nothing about what caused the difference. By itself, a gender gap is neutral, meaning it is not necessarily good or bad for a candidate to have one. The gap could occur because women moved toward one candidate or because men moved toward the other, or some combination of the two.

Gender gaps occur in almost all races, including those where no woman is running. Although sex is only one way to divide the electorate, and other divisions (such as race, income, religion, and marital status) are much greater, the gender gap has become a prevalent feature of political analysis.<sup>5</sup> One prominent pollster was quoted as saying “you’ll get [a gender gap] in a race for dog-catcher in Montana, if it’s a Republican against a Democrat.”<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s and 60s, women voted more Republican than men; since 1980, women have voted more Democratic than men.

The existence of a gender gap in a race with a woman candidate, therefore, does not necessarily say anything about women voting for women, because gender gaps also occur in most races without women candidates. To examine the impact of the candidate’s sex as opposed

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**Table 1**  
Average Gender Gap in US Senate and Gubernatorial Races



**Note:** Gender gap is defined as women's votes for the Democratic candidate minus men's votes for the Democratic candidate. Numbers in parentheses are the number of races in each category.

to the candidate's party, we compared the gender gap for women candidates by party to the gender gap for men candidates.

We calculated the gender gap in each race by subtracting the percentage of men who voted for the Democratic candidate from the percentage of women who voted for that candidate. This is usually the same as subtracting the percentage of women who voted for the Republican candidate from the percentage of men who voted for that candidate, because whenever one candidate does better among women than among men, the other candidate has the same advantage among men.<sup>7</sup>

We used Voter Research & Surveys (VRS) and Voter News Service (VNS) exit polls of US Senate and gubernatorial races from 1990, 1992, and 1994 to allow us to compare the votes of men and women. These polls gave us a total

of 165 statewide races to look at: 89 US Senate races and 76 races for governor. Of these, 41 were races between a man and a woman and the rest were between two men (there were no races between two women). Only Democratic and Republican candidates were included in the study.

In most races between two men, the Democratic candidate does better among women than among men. The question is—does this gender gap widen when the Democratic candidate is a woman? Normally, in races between two men, the Republican candidate does worse among women than among men. Does this gender gap shrink when the Republican candidate is a woman?

**The Impact of the Candidate's Gender**

We found that for almost every year and type of race, the average gender gap grew by several points when the Demo-

cratic candidate was a woman, and shrank by several points when the woman was the Republican candidate (see Table 1).<sup>8</sup> Compared to races between two men, the tendency for women to vote more Democratic than men was greater when the Democratic candidate was a woman, and smaller when the woman was the Republican candidate. This is the same as saying the tendency for men to vote more Republican than women was greater when the Democratic candidate was a woman, and smaller when the Republican candidate was a woman. In several of the "Democratic man vs. Republican woman" categories, women voted more Republican than men did (a negative or "reverse" gender gap).

In the 89 US Senate races (all three years taken together), the gender gap averaged 8.6 points in races between a Democratic woman and a Republican man, 5.4 points in races between two men, and 1.2 points in races between a



## The Gender Gap

Republican woman and a Democratic man. In the 76 gubernatorial races (all three years taken together), the gender gap averaged 8.2 points in races between a Democratic woman and a Republican man, 4.8 points in races between two men, and 1.4 points in races between a Republican woman and a Democratic man.

While these findings should be viewed with caution, given the number of races analyzed, the results demonstrated a consistent pattern: On average, women were slightly more likely than men to vote for women candidates.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the sex of the candidate did affect the gender gap.

Even though the sex of the candidate did make a difference in the gender gap, there is no reliable way to determine if the difference arose because women voted more for a woman than they would have for a similar man, or because men voted less for a woman than they would have for a similar man, or some combination of the two.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, all women did not support women candidates. Women candidates did not necessarily win among women, nor did they always do better among women than among men. On average, however, women were slightly more likely than men to vote for women candidates.

### When Gender Made the Difference

Sometimes, when a candidate wins an election by winning among women although losing among men, it is said that “women made the difference.” If it is said that women made the difference in such elections, then it should be said that “men made the difference” when a candidate won by winning among men although losing among women. These differences occur because in close races,

the gender gap can put women and men voters on opposite sides of the fence.

Using this terminology, we found that “women made the difference” in 13 of the 37 races in which one candidate won among women and the other among men; in 24, “men made the difference.” In the other 128 races, the winner was successful among both women and men, and the winner would have been the same even if only one sex had gone to the polls.

In 12 of the 41 races in which a woman ran, one candidate won among women and the other among men. In

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five of these 12 races “women made the difference” for the woman candidate who won; in five others, “men made the difference” for the man who won; and in two, “women made the difference” for the man who won.

### Women Do Not Vote as a Bloc

The answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this study, then, are that on average women *do* vote for women slightly more than men do, but that women do not automatically vote for women and do not necessarily form a solid base for women candidates. The extent of support a woman candidate receives from women voters will depend on the candidate, her campaign, her opponent, the composition and mood

of the electorate, and the political climate. Women are slightly more likely to vote for women candidates but they do not vote as a bloc; like men voters, they make their decisions based on a wide variety of factors.

### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> “Inside Politics,” CNN, October 20, 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> Sherrye Henry, *The Deep Divide* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1994).
- <sup>3</sup> “Campaigning In A Different Voice,” EMILY’s List, Spring 1989.
- <sup>4</sup> *US News & World Report*, August 14, 1995, p.27.
- <sup>5</sup> “Women Voters and the Gender Gap,” National Women’s Political Caucus, August 1995.
- <sup>6</sup> Celinda Lake, quoted in *The Washington Post*, August 15, 1995, p.1.
- <sup>7</sup> In most popular discussions, the gender gap has been used to refer to the percentage of women who vote Democratic minus the percentage of men who vote Democratic. Except in races with three candidates, or in polling taken prior to an election when the numbers do not add up to 100% because of “undecideds” or “no opinions,” the percentage of women who voted Democratic minus the percentage of men who voted Democratic will exactly equal the percentage of men who voted Republican minus the percentage of women who voted Republican.
- <sup>8</sup> There were 2 exceptions: 1990 US Senate “Female Democrat vs. Male Republican,” but there was only one race in this category; and 1994 Governor “Male Democrat vs. Female Republican,” but there were only two races in this category.
- <sup>9</sup> For purposes of comparison, and because other gaps such as the marriage gap, income gap, and race gap are larger than the gender gap, the study also calculated the average marriage and race gaps for races with and without women running, but found no discernible pattern. In other words, while the sex of the candidate did affect the gender gap, it did not affect the marriage or race gap.
- <sup>10</sup> The question can be tested in theory by asking people how they would vote for hypothetical candidates, and various studies have attempted to do so, but the results are not necessarily reflective of how people actually vote.



Jody Newman served as executive director,  
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