



Perspectives

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Lydia Quarles, J.D., Senior Policy Analyst
John C. Stennis Institute of Government

WOMEN'S VOTES CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The latest census data tells us that the number of women in the United States exceed the number of men – not only the total number, but in every age group. Thus, we can conclude that the number of voting-age women exceeds the number of voting-age men, probably by about 3 or 4 million. If women got their ducks in a row, they could rule the world!

The world is, alas, too complicated; and women are too complicated. Unlike the far left and right tangential wings of each party, women are not one-issue mavens. It is not all about the war, or abortion, or electing Hillary. There are many, many things that motivate women to vote. But despite the complexity of issues, there is a documented gender gap in American politics.

Exit polls in 2006 reflected that a majority of women in the states of Missouri, Montana and Virginia voted for the democratic candidate for senate. And in each of these races, the democrats maintained these senate seats. In Missouri, 51% of women and 45% of men voted for Democrat Claire McCaskill. In Montana, 52% of women and 48% of men voted for Democrat Jon Tester. In Virginia, 55% of women and 45% of men voted for Democrat Jim Webb. Susan Carroll, a senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University opined: “The exit polls [Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International] provide compelling evidence that Democrats would not be in control of Congress after the 2006 election without strong support from women voters.”

A gender gap in voting refers to a difference between the percentage of women and the percentage of men voting for a given candidate, generally the winning candidate. Even when men and women favor the same candidate, they may do so by different margins, resulting in a gender gap. The 2006 U.S. Congressional election is not the first election in which the gender gap was noticeable. It has been apparent in every federal election since 1980. In the 2004 presidential election, according to the same pollsters, the gap was evident in almost all segments of the electorate – across different demographic categories – accounting for over 7% of the votes cast. In other words, across all categories of voters, 7% fewer women voted for George W. Bush than men.

In the last two decades, the gender gap in presidential elections has stayed around the 7 to 8% mark. The average difference in percentage points between men and women voters during these years is 7.7%. In 2004 it was 7%; in 2000 it was 10%. In that election 43% of women and 53% of men voted for President Bush.

Researchers at Rutgers have noticed that, compared with men, women are more likely to:

- Favor an activist role for government;
- Oppose military intervention by their government in other countries;
- Favor programs that support health care and basic human needs;
- Favor restrictions on firearms;
- Favor affirmative action and efforts to achieve racial equality.

This list, itself, demonstrates the fact that women are not one-issue mavens. As you compare your own positions with those that more women are likely to share than men, you will find that you probably have one or more disagreements with positions that more women than men favor or oppose.

Many of us were frustrated with hanging chads – a physical impetus for us to re-consider the Electoral College. I admit that I am less than enchanted with the Electoral College, which, in many ways seems capable of thwarting the will of the governed by not relying on the popular vote. While watching the post-mortem of the 2000 election and considering the fact that the popular vote did not elect the president, did you stop to think: Does my vote really matter?

Each of our votes matter, in more or less dramatic ways. For example, In the 1829 election for the U. S. House of Representatives in Kentucky’s 2nd district, Jackson Democrat Nicholas Coleman defeated National Republican Adam Beatty by one vote. In the 1847 election for the U. S. House of Representatives in Indiana’s 6th district, Whig candidate George G. Dunn defeated Democratic candidate David M. Dobson by one vote. In that same year in the 3rd district of Virginia race, Whig Thomas S. Flournoy defeated Democrat Treadway by one vote. In the 1854 election to the U. S. House of Representatives in the 7th district of Illinois, Democratic candidate James C. Allen bested defeated Republican William B. Archer by one vote. In the 1882 election for U. S. House of Representatives in the 1st district of Virginia, Readjuster candidate Robert M. Mayo defeated Democrat George T. Garrison by one vote.

One vote margins occur in state elections, too. In 1977 Vermont State Representative Sydney Nixon was seated as an apparent one vote winner. A recount determined that he had, in fact, lost by one vote to Robert Edmond, who was then seated. In 1989, a Lansing, Michigan school bond issue produced a tie, denying the district the revenue sought in the bond issue. In 1994, Republican Randall Luthi and Independent Larry Call tied for a seat in the Wyoming House of Representative from the Jackson Hole area. A recount reproduced the tie. Mr. Luthi was declared the winner when, in a drawing before the Wyoming State Canvassing Board, a ping-pong ball bearing Luthi’s name was pulled from the cowboy hat of Wyoming’s Democratic Governor at the time, Mike Sullivan.

The fact is that each of us can make a difference individually, and as a gender, should women ever decide to assert ourselves as a group, we can make not only a difference, but an impact!

Think about that when you go to the polls. Think about that the next time you get a hankering to make an impact. Fact Sheets on the Gender Gap are available from the Center for American Women and Politics, www.cawp.rutgers.edu.

