

# THE GENDER GAP REVISITED: GEORGE BUSH'S SUPPORT AMONG WOMEN AND MEN

*By Karlyn H. Keene*

The conventional wisdom about George Bush and women has it that he is less popular with them than he is with men. The newest wrinkle on that popular assessment is that the President is less popular among *Republican* women than among *Republican* men, and that many of the former could defect in the fall over an issue such as abortion, or in response to a compelling Democratic candidate. We're told that issues defined as "women's issues" or, in their more fashionable current idiom, "family issues," are a distinct negative for this President, raising additional questions about his electability in the fall. As we shall see, however, this conventional wisdom is open to question in several important respects.

George Bush has had a long career in public life. This enables us to look at a substantial collection of survey data about him stretching back at least to 1980. It also allows us to test some assumptions about the issues which divide the sexes and the intensity with which they are likely to be felt on Election Day.

Issues involving gender have commanded our attention over the last decade because women are participating more actively in electoral politics than they did in the past and because their voting preferences appear to be changing. In 1980, for the first time, the rate of voting by men and women was the same. Prior to that time, a lower percentage of women than men turned out to vote. Fifty-six percent of men reported to Census investigators that they had voted in the 1988 presidential elections, compared to 58% of women. Because there are more women in the population than men, and more of them turned out, approximately three million more women than men cast ballots in 1988. The new activism of women can be

seen when we look at voters by age. Among those over 45, women's participation trailed that of men slightly (67%-70%), but among younger voters the pattern was reversed, with 52% of women voting compared to 47% of men. Even so, it must be borne in mind that both younger women and men vote in far lower proportions than their older counterparts.

## Are Women More Democratic?

Women's voting patterns have been changing, too. Before 1980, women and men typically voted alike. As recently as 1976, the historic pattern was evident: Fifty-one percent of women and of men voted for Jimmy Carter. But, four years later, only 36% of men voted for Carter, compared to 45% of women. That year, Reagan won the plurality of both men and women, but he carried the women's vote narrowly, 47-45%. Among men, Reagan swamped Carter, 57 to 36%.

In 1988, the gender gap at the presidential level was visible again. CBS News/New York Times exit pollsters found that 58% of men voted for Bush compared to 51% of women. (The other three major exit polls showed the women's vote going to Dukakis, but the margin in each was razor thin; men in all four of the exit polls voted solidly for Bush). A gender gap now appears to be a distinctive feature of our political landscape. Women are more Democratic than men. Or, if you prefer, men are more Republican than women.

The pattern was different in last month's British election, when the right-of-center party drew more support from women than from men. In the 1987 British election, men and women had split their votes identically for the three main parties. But on April 9, women were the

more Conservative. According to noted British election analyst Anthony King, "If only men had voted, the Conservatives would have been the largest party in a hung Parliament. If only women had voted, Mr. Major's majority today might well be 100." On the question of who would make the best prime minister, John Major enjoyed a 29-point lead among women, compared to a 21-point lead among men. Unlike Mrs. Thatcher, who was less popular among women than men at the end of her service, Mr. Major has enjoyed good ratings among both groups, but with much stronger support from women. King concludes that "the Prime Minister's [Major's] special appeal to women seems in part to account for the scale of his victory last week."

## Caveat Interpretator

There are two important cautions to observe when looking at the gender gap. While the phrase is commonly used to describe the Republican party's problem with women, it is not always clear which party benefits or loses from it. The GOP's problem with women can also be seen, for example, as the Democrats' problem with men. And, as we will see, there can be gender gaps *within* each party.

We also need to keep in mind that the "gender gap" is only one of many "gaps" among groups in the electorate. CBS News analyst Martin Plissner identified a "marriage gap" in 1982 voting that was much larger than the gender gap that year. The preferences of single and married voters continue to differ. In looking at Bush approval in three recent Gallup polls, the gap between those 18-29 and those 65 and older was three times larger than the gap between men and women. The split between black and white voters is, we know, also far wider than the gender gap.

For the purposes of this article, the gender gap is defined as the difference between the support given by women and that by men. Thus a minus figure indicates that the candidate does less well among women.

### A Gender Gap Within the GOP?

As to the current wisdom about George Bush, the first proposition about his approval rating is true: Like Ronald Reagan before him, Bush is less popular with women than men. At the same time, his gender gap has been smaller than Reagan's. Looking at the first 40 months of both presidencies, and using Gallup data, Bush's gender gap has averaged -5.8 percentage points compared to Ronald Reagan's -8.4. There have been times during Bush's presidency when no gender gap existed, and even a few occasions where he was more popular with women than men. Neither of those circumstances ever occurred during Reagan's presidency in the Gallup data—he was consistently less popular with women.

The gender gap in Bush approval was largest during the Gulf War crisis, in December of 1990 and in January and February of 1991, when the gap was -14, and -14 and -10 points, respectively. When the possibility of war was being widely discussed in September, the gap was -11. In looking at survey data going back to the 1930s, the issue of when is it proper for a society to use force has consistently divided the sexes, with women less likely to approve its use. The Gulf War responses followed this pattern. Though both women and men consistently approved of the job Bush was doing during the war, the latter approved less strongly. During the conflict, the more sharply a question raised the issue of using force, the larger the male-female gap was. For instance, when CBS News/New York Times interviewers asked about bombing civilian targets, 57% of men approved, but only 34% of women did. Thus, the timing of George Bush's largest gender gap is not surprising.

The second piece of conventional wisdom holds that this President has a problem with Republican women. But

here, available data say otherwise. For example, combining the Los Angeles Times polls from the third quarter of 1990 through the first quarter of 1992, we find no significant difference in Bush approval between GOP women and men, or between younger and older GOP women. Similarly, analysis of a broad collection of surveys taken by a number of different organizations over the last two months shows overall no support for the argument that Bush is weaker among the women of his party than among the men. The data are collected at the end of this article.

### The Cut of Issues

Another way to assess Bush's potential weakness among women is to look at those issues some consider particularly important to women, to see whether they have affected his standing. To get some sense of how abortion rulings impacted on Bush's standing, for example, I tracked his approval in Gallup polls before and after the *Webster* decision of July 1989. In this sequence, Bush's gender gap didn't change significantly. Neither did it before and after his veto of parental leave legislation on June 29, 1990. Of course, given the presence of so many other factors, it would be impossible to establish causation. But there's little indication in the polls on Bush's backing among women being much affected by his actions on so-called women's issues.

Voter Research and Surveys (VRS), the consortium of polling organizations that is conducting exit polls this year, has asked voters whether a list of labels describe them. One of those has, in some polls, been "pro-choice." In the Illinois Republican primary, to take an example, 89% of pro-choice women said they would vote for Bush over Clinton in the fall, compared to 91% of all women who voted in the GOP primary. In Michigan, 88% of pro-choice GOP women said they expected to vote for Bush in the fall, compared to a very slightly larger 92% of all Republican women. Among both states' primary voters, Republican women were just as heavily supportive of the President as were Republican men.

### November 1992

Will there be a gender gap this fall if the contest is between George Bush and Bill Clinton? And, what is likely to happen if the election is a three-way contest among Bush, Clinton and Ross Perot? Given recent electoral experience, we might expect Bush to do less well overall among women than men. At this point, the data are ambiguous. In the March/April national two-way poll matchups that I reviewed, some show Bush with a relative deficit among women, some with a comparative advantage. There's no clear pattern. It isn't surprising that the polls would bounce around at this early stage, when many Americans are just beginning to focus on the candidates. In the next issue of *Public Perspective*, we will take another look to see what patterns are emerging.

The three-way matchups are even more difficult to read at this point. In a few of these poll contests, Bush's gender gap disappears. In others he has a small gender gap, but he still wins a plurality of women. Perot has been stronger among men than women in nearly every poll I have reviewed.

Some have speculated that Clinton may have a greater problem with female than male voters because of what they see as greater sensitivity on the part of women to issues involving character and ethics. But the national data do not provide evidence of this so far.

A button circulated during the 1980 campaign read: "The gender gap is going to get you." The button was worn by many Democratic women activists to draw attention to their strength among women voters. Right now, it's not clear who, if anyone, the gender gap will "get" in this fall's presidential contest.

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# IS IT TRUE THAT BUSH HAS A POLITICAL PROBLEM WITH REPUBLICAN WOMEN?

## The Polls Say No

### PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL

		Approve	Disapprove	DK
Gallup/CNN/USA Today 3/11-12/92	GOP Women	61%	25%	14%
	GOP Men	74	23	3
Gallup/Newsweek 3/19-20/92	GOP Women	70	26	4
	GOP Men	67	27	6
Gallup/CNN/USA Today 3/20-22/92	GOP Women	68	25	7
	GOP Men	73	20	8
Gallup News Service Survey 3/26-29/92	GOP Women	71	24	5
	GOP Men	65	29	6
Los Angeles Times Poll 3/27-29/92	GOP Women	68	29	4
	GOP Men	69	29	2
ABC News Poll 4/8-9/92	GOP Women	58	38	4
	GOP Men	68	28	3
Gallup News Service 4/9-12/92	GOP Women	71	25	4
	GOP Men	76	21	3

### HOW ILLINOIS REPUBLICAN PRIMARY VOTERS ASSESS THE PRESIDENT'S PERFORMANCE

	Approve	Disapprove
All GOP Women	78%	22%
All GOP Men	74	26
Pro-Choice GOP Women	81	19
Pro-Choice GOP Men	67	33

Source: 1992 VRS Exit Poll.

**IS IT TRUE THAT BUSH HAS A POLITICAL PROBLEM  
WITH REPUBLICAN WOMEN? [Continued]**

		<b>BUSH VS CLINTON</b>		
		<b>Bush</b>	<b>Clinton</b>	
Gallup/CNN/USA Today 3/11-12/92	GOP Women	88%	12%	
	GOP Men	86	14	
Gallup/Newsweek 3/19-20/92	GOP Women	85	6	
	GOP Men	81	14	
Gallup/CNN/USA Today 3/20-22/92	GOP Women	80	14	
	GOP Men	86	8	
Gallup News Service 3/26-29/92	GOP Women	82	6	
	GOP Men	81	8	
Los Angeles Times Poll 3/27-29/92	GOP Women	78	12	
	GOP Men	84	11	
ABC News Poll 4/8-9/92	GOP Women	74	15	
	GOP Men	80	10	
Gallup News Service 4/9-12/92	GOP Women	83	8	
	GOP Men	86	7	
		<b>BUSH VS CLINTON VS PEROT</b>		
		<b>Bush</b>	<b>Clinton</b>	<b>Perot</b>
Los Angeles Times Poll 3/27-29/92	GOP Women	69%	6%	17%
	GOP Men	61	9	27
Gallup/CNN/USA Today 3/31-4/1/92	GOP Women	74	4	14
	GOP Men	73	3	21
ABC News Poll 4/8-9/92	GOP Women	67	12	19
	GOP Men	61	9	26
Gallup/Newsweek 4/15-16/92	GOP Women	67	3	13
	GOP Men	68	4	18