Gender Gaps in Presidential Elections

While I was delighted with the *PS* symposium on "Gender and Voting Behavior in the 1996 Presidential Election," I was less than thrilled with the naïve believe that a "gender gap" is a relatively recent phenomena. It is simply not true that differential voting between men and women was a "largely unremarked phenomenon" prior to 1980 (Sigel 1999, 5). On the contrary, a good deal of the political commentary on women in the twentieth century was devoted to real and speculative analyses about how women voted, or might vote.

The 8% gender gap in 1980 was larger than any previously measured, but it was not the first. Prior to 1980, there were two presidential candidates for whom women voted at notably greater rates than did men: Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower.

The election of 1928 could well be called the "year of the woman voter." Throughout the 1920s, the mass of women had been relatively apathetic about politics, enthused by only a few local candidates and none of the national ones. But Hoover was so popular that he became known as "the woman's candidate" (McCormick 1928, 22; Smith 1929, 126; Barnard 1928, 555). Some of his popularity derived from his role as Food Administrator during the Great War, and some from the importance of Prohibition in the election of 1928. Hoover was Dry, Smith was Wet, and it was commonly assumed that women wanted Prohibition to be enforced. Women registered to vote in record numbers, and the Republican Party's Women's Division was "besieged by unprecedented numbers of women who wanted to participate in the campaign" (Morrison 1978, 84). Hoover was endorsed by the National Woman's Party, the only major party pesidential candidate to be endorsed by a specifically feminist organization prior to 1984.

When the dust settled, both private and public commentators were impressed with women's greatly increased turnout to vote, and with their strong support for Hoover. While scientific polling did not yet exist, straw polls recorded a gender gap. Claude Robinson's review of these polls concluded that the Hearst poll was the most accurate; it had predicted that 60% of women and 56% of men would vote for Hoover (Robinson 1932, 92). Private reports to the Republican National Committee and to Franklin Roosevelt estimated larger differentials, some that women were 10% more likely than men to vote for Hoover. Indeed, these observations repeatedly emphasized the strong, conspicuous support of Hoover by women. Women were credited or blamed for the fact that Smith got a majority in only five Southern and one border state, and even lost New York, while the Democratic candidate for governor won. (Summaries of these reports are available in the FDR and Hoover presidential libraries; cf. Morrison 1978; Lichtman 1979, 163, 291-93; Harvey 1995, 253; *The New York Times*, November 8, 1928, 9).

Attention to women faded in the election of 1932, dominated as it was by the Depression, and fewer observations were recorded. However, when Gallup surveyed expected voters in 1936, he asked those who had voted in 1932 to declare their choice. Of those who said they had voted, 63% of the men were for FDR, but only 57% of the women. Only 35% of the men said they voted for Hoover, compared to 41% of the women (AIPO [Gallup] Poll #53).

This differential voting pattern faded to less than 2% in presidential elections until 1952. Polls of voters done before and after that election found women were 5% more likely to vote for Eisenhower than were men, though both gave him a majority. Republican women gleefully claimed that women had elected him president (Priest 1953), and this belief soon became "firmly enshrined among American political lore" (Shelton 1955, D1). Lou Harris' analysis of the Roper/NBC polls found a difference in male and female votes of 9% for those with high incomes, 6% for those with middle incomes, and 3% for those with low incomes, with women in all three groups more likely to vote for Ike. Harris attributed this to more women than men blaming the Democratic party for the Korean War, inflation, and corruption in Washington (Harris 1954, 112–13, 116, 222). By 1956, the press was once again paying attention to the woman voter. *The New York Times* sent reporters into several states to find out why women favored Eisenhower, and the findings were published in several issues during October 1956 (9, 22; 14, 49; 22, 1, 20; 23, 13; 26, 16; cf. Brown 1956 and French 1956). In the 1956 election, the gender gap increased to 6%, though more men as well as women voted for Eisenhower than in 1952.

The election of 1960 saw women once again fade from political sight.

Letters to the Editor:

We like to hear from *PS* readers. Readers may respond to articles in previous issues of *PS*, or may comment on topics of general interest. Letters, including email, must include full name, address, and daytime telephone for verification purposes. We believe the exhange of comments should be open and civil. In all but a limited number of cases, authors' identities will not be withheld from the published version of their letters or comments. Letters may be edited and condensed for publication. We prefer short letters, 300 words or less. Send letters to: *PS* Forum, 1527 New Hampshire Avenue, NW 20036, or fax to 202-583-2657. Our email address is ps@apsanet.org.

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Some of this was due to the ongoing campaign of the DNC to downplay the idea that there was a woman's vote, and some was due to the rise of new issues. The gender gap dropped to between 2 and 3% in 1960—too small to be statistically significant, but implying that women still voted more frequently for the Republican candidate. The GOP women's division proudly declared that in the last three presidential elections a majority of women voted for the Republican Party, and a majority of Republican votes came from women (Women's Division, Republican National Committee 1962). In 1964, as in 1960, the gender gap of 2 to 3% was too small to be significant, but it was notable because, for the first time, women were more likely than men to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate. In 1968, 43% of both men and women said they voted for Nixon, but men were 4% more likely to vote for George Wallace (16% to 12%) and women were more likely to vote for Humphrey (45% to 41%) (Lynn 1979, 409). In the same polls, the traditional relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and party preference disappeared. High SES white women were 3% more likely to vote Democratic than low SES women (Ladd and Hadley 1978, 240). In 1976, the gender gap was back to 5 %, but now women favored the Democratic candidate (Lynn 1979, 409).

What's notable about this history is not merely that there was a gender gap prior to 1980, but that the pattern shifted. Previously, the Republican Party had been the beneficiary of woman suffrage; subsequently, the Democratic Party was. Furthermore, this change correlates with different attitudes by the national parties toward women and women's rights. While partisan differences were not large prior to 1980, they were present. Historically, it was the Republican Party that was the party of women's rights, and the Democratic Party that was the home of anti-feminism. After the new feminist movement rose in the 1960s–70s, the parties switched sides (Freeman 1987).

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P.S.: The above is from my forthcoming book, *A Room at a Time: Women's Entry into Party Politics from the Mid-19th Century to the Mid-1960s* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

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A Comment on Somit and Peterson's "Rational Choice and Biopolitics"

The article by Somit and Peterson in the March 1999 issue of *PS* undoubtedly will cause displeasure to those who take biopolitics seriously and consider it an important endeavor in the study of political behavior, processes, and institutions. Ultimately, dismay may come to those who ignore or even reject biopolitics as a proper approach to political science.

On the basis of incisive observations and convincing arguments the authors of the article reach two main conclusions: (1) Biopolitics has been successful in creating new knowledge and has made it available as a source for teaching and research in the form of a comprehensive literature; (2) The substantive impact of biopolitics on political science, as it now is established as a discipline, has been minimal.

No discipline, in established form, has a prerogative to maintain a "mainstream" status. Such a status is subject to the continuing test of whether or not the established discipline offers better explanations of the phenomena it studies than any other existing or aspiring discipline. Specifically, if biopolitics will be able to provide more enlightening knowledge than political science as it now is organizationally recognized, biopolitics will become the "mainstream" discipline for the study of political phenomena, regardless of the name of the discipline or the expertise of its practitioners.

It is noteworthy in this connection that—as the authors of the article point out—the membership of the Association for Politics and the Life

Sciences (APLS) has changed. Although the founders of the Association were primarily long-standing members of the APSA, most of its current members have other primary professional affiliations. This change deserves attention in view of the presidential address of John Wahlke at the APSA Annual Meeting in 1978. Wahlke described the status of political science that had been described as "behavioral" as actually having been "pre-behavioral." Behavioralism had adopted powerful methods of analysis, to a large extent, but not exclusively, from mathematics and statistics. However, the independent variables that were employed in the various forms of analysis did not have the needed explanatory content. With increasing participation by members of the life sciences in the pertinent research, the needed explanatory content may be provided. The "mainstream" of the study of political phenomena then may shift, with shifting regrets of a loss of disciplinary status.

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