

The Importance of Women in the 2012 U.S. Elections

Written by Kristi Andersen

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KRISTI ANDERSEN, JAN 10 2013

Political analysts often refer to 1992 as the “Year of the Woman” in American politics – when four women were elected to the Senate, producing an all-time high of six female senators. But 2012 may now reasonably claim that title. Last November, American women’s votes were decisive in Barack Obama’s second-term victory, while some of the most publicized and divisive issues in the campaign involved women’s reproductive rights. And when the 113th Congress convened in early January of 2013, a record number of women were sworn into office.

For the first time since at least 1952, the presidential candidate favored by a majority of men lost the election, while the majority of women voted for the winner.[i] The so-called “gender gap”, which refers to the fact that American women tend to vote for (and identify as) Democrats, was first identified in 1980, when women were less likely to vote for Ronald Reagan; since then, it has varied from 4 points (1992) to 11 points (1996).[ii] The 2012 gender gap – the difference between women’s vote for Obama (55%) and men’s (45%) was second only to 1996; perhaps equally important for the presidential outcome, a similar gender gap appeared in 8 out of 9 of the battleground states.[iii]

Why do women skew Democratic? It is not due to “women’s issues” (though these were important, as I discuss below, in the 2012 election). Rather, women tend to have a more positive attitude toward government and government programs than do men. In part, this may reflect the fact that women live longer and are, on average, less wealthy than men; and that they bear more responsibility for the care of younger and older family members, who may depend on Social Security, Medicare, and other public programs. Women are also disproportionately employed in the public sector, particularly in health care and education. The significance of this continuing gender gap in attitudes, and ultimately in voting behavior, is magnified by the fact that women vote at a significantly higher rate than men. In 2008, for example, women’s turnout was 60.5%, while men’s was 55.7%. Over 10 million more women than men went to the polls that year – and this persisting pattern can safely be assumed to characterize voting in 2012.

In 2012, women’s right to contraception became, somewhat surprisingly, an important issue in the campaign. A provision in the 2010 Affordable Care Act required insurers to provide contraceptive coverage at no cost to employees, though an agreement allowed religiously-affiliated institutions to have their female employees deal directly with insurance companies, so that, for example, Catholic hospitals and universities would not be directly responsible for covering provision of contraception. But many Republicans rallied behind a proposed amendment that would have allowed any employer to exempt themselves from paying for any medical procedure they found religiously objectionable. In addition, Republicans attempted to eliminate funding for Title X, a Nixon-era program meant to increase access to family planning services, and to de-fund Planned Parenthood. Finally, a series of unfortunate comments by Republican candidates about rape and birth control (for example, that women who were raped would not get pregnant if the rape was “legitimate”) worked against Republican candidates. In response, Obama and the Democrats, particularly at their party convention, took a newly strong stance in favor of the right to abortion and access to contraception.

To what extent did issues of women’s health and women’s rights have an impact on electoral outcomes? In a few Senate races, such as those in Indiana and Missouri, such issues were almost certainly significant.[iv] In general, there are only modest gender differences in opinions about legal abortion. But women in 2012 were much more likely than men to favor the Democrats and Obama on this issue, and likely to say that the issue would play a greater role in their vote decision.[v] There are indications that women – particularly younger and unmarried women, who voted

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particularly strongly for Obama – may have been mobilized in part by opposition to the so-called “Republican War on Women”. EMILY’s List, a group working to recruit and elect Democratic women, raised a record-breaking \$51.2 million this election cycle and quintupled its membership to 2 million.[vi]

When the votes were counted, women candidates did extremely well in the 2012 election. An all-time high of twenty women now serve in the U.S. Senate (a fifth of the total), along with a record 78 women (18%) in the House of Representatives. This election produced a plethora of “firsts”, including the first openly gay person in the Senate (Tammy Baldwin, D-WI) and the first time that the U.S. has no state legislature without women (South Carolina is the last to leave that category). Mazie Hirono (D-HI) is the first Asian-American woman elected to the Senate, and her colleague Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) is the first Hindu in Congress. It should be noted that the women of the 113th Congress are even more disproportionately Democratic (16-4 in the Senate and 58-20 in the House) than the female members of previous Congresses.

What accounts for this success? First, more women ran: 2012 was a record-setting year in terms of the number of women filing for election, winning primaries, and winning election to both Senate and House.[vii] Some of these women may have been motivated by the perceived threats to women’s rights: researchers at the Center for American Women and Politics found that threats to women’s health programs and access to contraception (as well as high unemployment rates) helped to motivate some candidates to file papers to run for office.[viii]

Second, female candidates’ success may also reflect the decline of gender bias in the electoral system. Though political scientists have found that overall it is now the case that – controlling for factors such as party and incumbency – a woman candidate has about the same probability of winning a Congressional seat as a male candidate, voters do in fact use gender stereotypes in evaluating male and female candidates, and such stereotypes can sometimes be damaging to women candidates.[ix] And even as voters were becoming somewhat more comfortable with women running for and holding political positions, the mass media continued to pay less attention to women candidates and to focus on their appearance and personality.[x] Recent research by Hayes and Lawless on voters and media in the 2010 Congressional elections found that “news coverage of women was just as common as coverage of men. And the content of campaign stories was nearly indistinguishable across candidate sex.” Moreover, they found that party, ideology, and incumbency were far more important than gender in forming voters’ impressions of Congressional candidates.[xi]

As media attention focused on the women re-elected and newly elected to Congress at the beginning of 2013, they stressed their willingness to work across party lines, their tendency to favor collaboration, their focus on problem-solving. Skeptics noted that there were clear partisan differences among the women, but research does suggest that elected women tend to value and emphasize egalitarian relationships, collaboration, compromise, and openness.[xii] In this era of political dysfunction in Washington, perhaps we can be forgiven for finding a small bit of optimism here.

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[i] Connie Cass, “When it comes to gender gap, men play crucial role”, *The Guardian*, November 25, 2012: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/10544453>.

[ii] A good overview of the gender gap in 2012: Kira Sambonmatsu, “The Quest for Women’s Votes in Election 2012,” Scholars Strategy Network, August 2012: http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/ssn_basic_facts_sanbonmatsu_on_the_gender_gap.pdf

For more background, see Susan J. Carroll, “The Politics of the Gender Gap” in *Gender and*

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Elections, ed. Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[iii] Center for American Women & Politics (CAWP), "Women's Votes Decisive in 2012 Presidential Race," November 7th, 2012: http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/press_room/news/documents/PressRelease_11-07-12-gendergap.pdf.

[iv] Jennifer Steinhauer, "Senate Races Expose Extent of Republicans' Gender Gap," *New York Times*, November 7, 2012: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/08/us/politics/womens-issues-were-a-problem-for-gop.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. See also CAWP, "Women's Votes Critical to Democrats Retaining Control of the U.S. Senate," November 9, 2012: http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/press_room/news/documents/PressRelease_11-09-12-ggap-senate.pdf.

[v] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "The Complicated Politics of Abortion," August 22, 2012: <http://www.people-press.org/2012/08/22/the-complicated-politics-of-abortion/>.

[vi] Laura Bassett, "Women in Politics Break Records in 2012 Election," Huffington Post, November 7, 2012: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/07/women-in-politics-break-records-2012-election_n_2088954.html.

[vii] CAWP, "Women Candidates 2012": http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/elections/documents/CanSum12.pdf.

[viii] Kathy Kleeman and Debbie Walsh, "Will the 'war on women' get women into office?" *The Washington Post*, April 27, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/will-the-war-on-women-get-women-into-office/2012/04/27/gIQARFidIT_story.html

[ix] Deborah Alexander and Kristi Andersen, "Gender as a Factor in the Attribution of Leadership Traits," *Political Research Quarterly*, September 1993 vol. 46 (3): <http://prq.sagepub.com/content/46/3/527.short>. Kathleen Dolan, "Women as Candidates in American Politics," in *Political Women & American Democracy*, ed. Christina Wolbrecht, Karen Beckwith, and Lisa Baldez (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[x] Kim Fridkin Kahn, *The Political Consequences of Being a Woman* (Columbia University Press, 1996).

[xi] Danny Hayes, "Why did women do so well in 2012? Because gender bias is declining", *Washington Post*, November 25, 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2012/11/25/why-did-women-do-so-well-in-2012-because-gender-bias-is-declining/>.

[xii] For example, Cindy Simon Rosenthal, *When Women Lead: Inrtewgrative Leadership in State Legislatures* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

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