The Gender Gap: 
Old Challenges, New Approaches

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The 1980 election signified a critical realignment in American gender politics. It revealed a seismic shift in voting choice and party identification, which has subsequently been consolidated over successive elections. This development has had important consequences for party competition, for the recruitment of women candidates for elected office, and for the salience of gendered issues on the American policy agenda.

References to the 'gender gap' have become commonplace in the popular press and the scholarly literature in the United States. Yet despite considerable research, the precise reasons for the realignment in American politics, and its implications, remain under debate. The key issues explored by this chapter are threefold: What are the trends in the gender realignment that need to be explained? What are the central theoretical issues about the causes and consequences of this phenomenon that continue to prove puzzling? And what are the research designs and methodological approaches that might help to tackle these questions? The review of the literature suggests that many American studies are limited to the analysis of voting behavior in specific Presidential or Congressional elections, rather than developing broader generalizations. The scattering of studies in other countries remains inconclusive. To learn more about this phenomena the chapter argues that we need systematic analysis that is sensitive to comparisons over time and place, as well as to differences between different groups of women. Most importantly, with a 'new institutionalism' perspective we need to understand the complex interaction between electoral behavior and party strategies, using multi-level and multi-method analysis, so that we start to
reintegrate our understanding of how women and men respond to the context in which they make their political decisions.

In developing this argument, this chapter does not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of the extensive literature on the relationship between gender, voting behavior, and public opinion. We cannot therefore discuss the issues raised by the growing body of research on gender consciousness, feminist attitudes, and support for the women's movement (for a review see Rinehart 1992; Wilcox 1991); as well as the general literature on public attitudes towards women in politics (cf. Bennett and Bennett 1992; Simon and Landis 1989); gender differences in political efficacy, interest, and participation (see Bennett and Bennett 1989; Inglehart 1981; Hayes and Bean 1993; Conway, Steuernagel and Ahern 1997); and studies of the gender gap among politicians at elite level (for example, Thomas and Welch 1991; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Dodson 1991; Thomas 1991, 1996; Berkman and O’Conner 1993; Mezey 1994; Rosenthal 1998). These issues are discussed elsewhere in this book, so that this chapter focuses on what we know, and do not know, about the nature of the gender gap in voting and partisanship, and what new research designs and methodological approaches would help us to expand this understanding.

**Gender Realignment in American Politics**

First, we need to clarify the key trends in the phenomenon under question, confirming some conventional perceptions but rejecting others. The first use of the term ‘gender-gap’ is credited to the then-President of the National Organization of Women, Eleanor Smeal, in 1981 (Bonk 1988). The phrase rapidly popularized as convenient shorthand for American journalists, scholars, and pollsters, referring to gender differences in support for the Democrat and Republican parties. The concept has subsequently been employed loosely to cover a diverse range of political phenomenon, such as gender differences in levels of electoral participation, political attitudes, issue priorities, and so on, at mass and elite levels, not to speak of the extension of the term even more broadly within the social sciences to describe other differences between women and men, such as in educational achievement and labor force participation.

Political analysis of the ‘gender gap’ in the United States and elsewhere has focused mainly, as we shall, on explaining differences between men and women in their party identification and voting choice. The American gender gap in votes is conventionally measured as the percentage difference between the two-party lead among women and men, as follows:

\[
\left( \% \text{ Women Dem vote} - \% \text{ Women GOP vote} \right) - \left( \% \text{ Men Dem vote} - \% \text{ Men GOP vote} \right) / 2
\]

E.g. 1996: \(\text{Women (60.0\% Clinton -34\% Bush = 26\%)} - \text{Men (46.5\% Clinton -44.6\% Bush = 1.9\%)}\) 

\[26\% - 1.9\% = 24.1 / 2 = 12.0\]

Key developments in the early 1980s fuelled interest in the gender gap in American elections: for the first time, proportionately more women than men voted, a significant gender cleavage emerged in
Democratic and Republican party support, and the women's movement seized on these developments to advance their agenda. During the 1980 and 1984 elections the gender gap could be dismissed as a short-term reaction to President Reagan's leadership and the mobilization of the New Right around issues like abortion rights and welfare cutbacks. But an enduring electoral cleavage since the early-1980, with American women consistently leaning more Democrat while men favored the Republicans, convinced even the most skeptical observer that this was not merely a temporary blip.

The Reversal of the Participation Gap

The first significant factor fuelling interest in this phenomenon has been the mobilization of women voters, who have became the majority of the electorate. For successive decades since 1920, when the franchise was first granted, women had slightly lower levels of turnout than men (for a discussion of the reasons, see Andersen 1996: 49-75). According to U.S. census data, gender differences in voting participation gradually diminished in the 1980s in America (see Figure 1), as in many other countries (Christy 1987). The 1980 election was the first where there was parity in turnout. In successive elections since then, women have voted at slightly higher rates than men, although it should be noted that women still tend to engage in fewer campaign activities and other types of conventional activities than men (for a discussion, see Conway et al. 1997: 77-94; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995:228-266). The participation gap in voting turnout remains modest in size but it does mean that American women cast more votes at the ballot box; in the 1996 presidential election, for example, 101 million women voted compared with 92.6 million men, producing a participation gap of 8.4 million votes. Nor is this pattern simply a product of women’s greater longevity, since turnout was also higher for women in the younger (18-44 year old) age group (www.census.gov/population).

The Reversal of the Gender Gap in Voting Choice and Party Identification

The second significant development was the male and female reversal in voting choice and party identification. The central puzzle is why women, who were more rightwing than men in the 1950s, became more leftwing in the 1980s. Just as some naïve accounts suggest that sex was invented by the younger generation in 1964, so some popular accounts suggested the gender gap in voting started in 1980. Even recent scholarship reflects these assumptions: ‘The gender gap (typically understood as the partisan difference in voting behavior between men and women) was not a feature of political commentary prior to Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980.’ (Kaufman and Petrocik 1999). ‘In fact, not until the 1980 presidential election, when 8% fewer women than men voted for Ronald
Reagan, did anyone take much notice of the male/female split.' (Sigel 1999). Not so. This foreshortened understanding of the literature leads to a serious misunderstanding of trends, typically encouraging studies to focus on developments since 1980 (see, for example, Chaney, Alvarez and Nagler 1998). As always, any interpretation of trends depends critically upon the choice of starting and closing dates, and wherever possible the longest time-series is desirable for the most comprehensive picture.

In fact, the analysis of sex differences in voting behavior was established in the earliest pioneering works of empirical political sociology. The gender gap was studied in 1937 by Herbert Tingsten, in 1949 by Henry Durant, in 1955 by James Ross, and above all by Maurice Duverger's in his classic work, *The Political Role of Women*, published for UNESCO in 1955. Duverger established the conventional wisdom that prevailed in political behavior textbooks for many decades, namely early polls revealed that women voters were slightly more rightwing than men in many countries, including in Norway, France and Germany (see, for example, the literature review in Randall 1987). This pattern can be termed the traditional gender gap. Although the early studies were essentially descriptive, based on simple cross-tabulations of face-sheet variables, theories commonly explained women's conservatism by their greater longevity and religiosity (linked to their support for Christian Democrat parties), and lower female trade union membership, rather than by gender per se (Lipset 1960; Blondel 1970; Baxter and Lansing 1983; see, however, the critique of the literature by Goot and Reid 1984). Moreover, this phenomenon was not confined to Western Europe, since similar trends were established in the earliest surveys in the United States. *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) found that in presidential elections from 1952 to 1960 women were slightly more Republican than men, with a gender gap in the region of 3-5 percent. In the 1956 mid-term elections, for example, men voted decisively (58%) in favor of the Democrats while women gave the edge to the Republicans (52%). The pattern in NES data was confirmed by Gallup polls, which registered stronger female support for the Republican Presidential candidate in every election during the 1950s (for a discussion see Stoper 1989).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the traditional gap closed and became insignificant in successive American Presidential and Congressional election (see Figures 2 and 3). The modern gender gap in voting first became evident in the Reagan v. Carter contest in 1980, since then American women have consistently given stronger support to Democratic candidates in successive Presidential and Congressional elections. As a result, in the 1996 Presidential race women favored Clinton over Bush by a margin of 60 to 34 per cent, while men split by a far narrower margin of 46 to 45 per cent respectively, the remainder supporting Perot, producing the substantial gender gap already noted of 12 percentage points. As Carroll noted, for the first time in history, feminist activists could claim that
the votes of women determined the president of the United States (Carroll 1999; see also Mattei and Mattei 1998). The size of the gender gap has fluctuated substantially, however, which may provide important clues to the causes of this phenomenon, for example in the 1998 Congressional mid-term elections the gender gap shrank to only 4 percentage points. The gender gap is usually evident at many other levels of elected office, although in statewide races women have occasionally given stronger support to Republican candidates (for details, see CAWP 2000).

Evidence for gender realignment in the United States, signifying a long-term shift in the loyalties of male and female voters, displays a slightly different pattern in terms of partisan identification. As demonstrated in Diagram 4, from 1952-1970 there were only modest differences in the party loyalties of women and men, and the pattern is one of trendless fluctuations over time. In contrast, male support for the Democrats started to erode after 1972, producing a gender gap that expanded in the 1980s. In 1998, according to NES data, men split 54% self-identified Republicans to 46% Democrats, whereas women were evenly divided between the parties. As Kaufmann and Petrocik emphasize (1999), the primary change in partisanship has been the growing Republicanism of men, not a substantial change in female party loyalties. Yet this observation in itself does not provide many novel insights since the gender gap is, after all, a relative phenomenon. The puzzle is why there is a difference between women and men, and why the gender-related electoral cleavage should have reversed over time, more than whether one or the other sex ‘caused’ this development.

**Gender Realignment and Party Competition**

The third related development was the way that the organized feminist movement and women political activists seized the emergence of the gender gap to advance their agenda, and the news media rapidly adopted this frame (see Bonk 1988; Smeal 1984; Abzug and Kelber 1983). As a result, press coverage of the gender gap expanded dramatically as a popular framing device or ‘peg’ for a wide variety of electoral stories in the mainstream media from the early 1980s onwards (see Figure 5). The story first broke with Judy Mann in an article entitled “Women are Emerging as Political Force,” in The Washington Post (October 16, 1981). The theme was picked up by Adam Clymer in a lengthy, front-page article in The New York Times in June 1982, which throughout focused on the change among women rather than men. Content analysis reveals that this frame is apparent in every election; it dominates coverage in 1988 and is the most common gender-related theme in 1982, and 1984, before surging in 1996. The ‘angry white male’ story in 1994 and the ‘soccer mom’ story in 1996 are perhaps most appropriately considered as variations of the gender gap frame employed by journalists to fit the peculiarities of each election—why the GOP surged in 1994 and why Clinton rebounded in 1996 (Carroll and Norris 1997; Carroll 1999).
Therefore in the United States the gender gap in most presidential and statewide elections has not been great - in the region of 4 to 10 percentage points - but it has been politically significant. The women's movement mobilized around this development, it affects millions of votes, these votes are dispersed across every electoral district, press coverage has been extensive, the gender gap cannot be explained (and therefore modified) by a single issue, and it is a relatively recent phenomenon. As a result, party strategists have sought to compete for women's and men's ballot box power, with only an incomplete understanding of what steps are necessary to obtain maximum advantage of this development.

Explaining the Causes of Gender Realignment

How do we explain the gender realignment in American elections? Studies have generally worked within alternative explanatory frameworks in electoral studies based on theories of issue voting, structural change, political mobilization, and generational value-change. 'Issue-based' explanations commonly point to gender differences in policy priorities and attitudes. Structural explanations are based on the classic 'Michigan' model of group voting, which suggests that objective socioeconomic differences in the lifestyle of women and men determine their voting behavior. Political mobilization theories suggest the gender gap emerged largely among self-identified feminists as a result of the second-wave women's movement. Lastly, generational accounts emphasize the glacial process of value-evolution, in the United States and elsewhere, associated with societal modernization. How persuasive are these alternative accounts?

Issue-Voting

One of the most common ways of explaining the gender gap is by theories of issue voting. In the classic account by Campbell et al. (1960), the necessary conditions of issue voting are threefold:

(i) The public needs to be divided on the issue;
(ii) The issue needs to be salient to voters;
(iii) Candidates or parties need to take a distinct stance on the issue.

Unless all these conditions are met, issues are unlikely to affect voting choice. The public may disagree about whether American and allied troops should intervene in Bosnia, for example, but this will not influence electoral behavior if the issue is overshadowed by others such as health care reform or the state of the economy. Or the public may be sharply polarized on the question of abortion services, important as a 'hot-button' issue, but candidates may seek to minimize damage by taking a bipartisan stance on the policy. To influence gender realignment, issues need to divide women and men; to be salient; and to distinguish candidates or parties.
Studies within this theoretical framework usually restrict themselves to the first condition, commonly focusing on differences in the political attitudes of women and men on one or two issue dimensions. Most have compared the sexes in their attitudes towards issues of war and peace, such as defense spending or the deployment of troops (Francovic 1982; Smith 1984; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Gilens 1988). 'Compassion issues' have also been seen as important, notably attitudes towards social welfare and racial equality (Piven 1985; Erie and Rein 1988; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Seltzer, Newman and Leighton 1997). Lastly support for feminist issues of abortion and women's rights have commonly been studied, such as Reagan's opposition to ERA (Smeal 1984; Abzug and Kelber 1984), although research has challenged the idea that feminist issues per se was responsible for the gap (Klein 1984; Mansbridge 1985; Seltzer, Newman and Leighton 1997). The most plausible pattern to emerge from this body of work indicates that women and men differ most consistently on issues related to the use of force and violence. These attitudes may influence support for foreign and domestic policy issues, including levels of defense spending and weapons build-ups, military intervention, and nuclear weapons, as well as approval of gun control and capital punishment (Smith 1984; Poole and Zeigler 1985; Clark and Clark 1993). Moreover women have also been found to be more strongly in favor of environmental protection and recycling initiatives, and opposing nuclear power stations (Wirfs 1986). On 'compassion' issues, women are generally more supportive of welfare programs for the elderly, sick and poor, as well as government spending on education, health and urban development (Deitch 1988; Page and Shapiro 1992). In contrast, on attitudes towards specifically feminist issues like abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment, gender differences have usually been found to be small or non-existent (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986).

But if we accept this evidence, do attitudinal differences between women and men, - whether on foreign policy, the role of government, or social issues, - provide plausible explanations for gender realignment? For a convincing case, studies need to demonstrate not just that women and men have different attitudes today, but also that these attitudes relate systematically to voting choices. In particular, it is not enough to show that in any particular election these attitudes are associated with Democratic or Republican support, which is the common approach. The central challenge is to account for the partisan realignment that we have already established occurred in the early 1980s by demonstrating that either (i) the attitudes of women and men, or (ii) the policies of parties, reversed on these issues around this period.

Did attitudes change? Unfortunately the available evidence of long-term trends in public opinion towards these issues remains patchy, at best, due to the limitations of time-series survey data. An analysis of gender differences in public opinion polls from 1960s to the 1980s, by Shapiro and Mahajan (1986), established only modest changes in women and men's political attitudes on most issues at aggregate level. Nevertheless this pattern could disguise countervailing trends among...
different groups of women, and the study found some evidence of greater polarization over time between liberal and conservative women. Another study by Page and Shapiro (1992) compared trends over fifty years in aggregate differences between men’s and women’s policy preferences. They concluded that out of hundreds of comparisons, in all but a handful of cases the attitude gap remained largely constant over time. That is, on issues like gun control, support for capital punishment, or welfare spending, the study confirmed the existence of some consistent differences between women and men, but the attitude gap has not expanded in recent decades. As always, a dynamic process fails to be explained by a constant.

Therefore the core puzzle remaining for the issue-voting model is to explain why attitudinal differences between men and women on certain issue dimensions should have generated gender realignment in the American electorate in the 1980s. What does this suggest for the research agenda on issue voting? If the gender gap in attitudes has remained stable, answers within this framework must be sought by analyzing (i) possible changes in the salience of these issues on the public policy agenda, or alternatively, (ii) possible strategic changes in the position of parties and/or candidates. Although systematic evidence is lacking, there are plausible grounds to believe that both these factors may have altered in the early 1980s. Thorson and Stambough (1994) measured trends in the salient issues facing the electorate from 1960 to 1992 and the results suggest that women and men became increasingly polarized over the most important issue facing the country. During the 1960-1972 period women and men expressed similar concerns about issues like the economy, the environment, and economics. The main gender difference during the 1968 and 1972 elections revolved around foreign policy, with far more women than men prioritizing the bloody conflict in Vietnam. Most strikingly, however, from 1976 to 1992 a pattern of increased polarization developed, with women far more likely than men to stress welfare as an important problem, while conversely men gave greater priority to the economy. This reflects similar gender difference in issue priorities found in some other countries like Sweden (Wangnerud 1994). Kaufmann and Petrocik (1999) that the salience of issues, not just attitudinal differences, contributed towards the gender gap in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections.

Moreover many have observed how Congressional parties in Washington have become increasingly polarized over social and economic policy issues, starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Aldrich 1995). President Reagan’s alliance with the Christian Coalition and the New Right, coupled with the long-term decline of the southern Democratic ‘Boll Weevils’, led to greater divisions between Congressional parties. Support for reproductive rights, affirmative action and childcare, which had previously been bipartisan, became more strongly linked with the Democrats. Moreover President Reagan’s commitment to cutting back government services, the welfare state, and particularly AFDC, greatly increased the salience of these issues on the policy agenda. The 1994
Republican sweep of Congress, under Newt Gingrich's leadership, reinforced party divisions over welfare reform while the impeachment proceedings further polarized Washington politics. The challenge for the research agenda within this framework is to use systematic evidence such as content analysis of party manifestoes or analysis of roll call voting to document these trends, and then to demonstrate how these developments altered the issue agenda facing women and men voters since the 1980s. This research therefore needs to link survey analysis of electoral behavior with an awareness of the choices facing voters, reintegrating our understanding of voters and parties (for an illustration of this approach, see Evans and Norris 1999).

**Structural Explanations**

Structural theories are commonly used to explain the link between social groups and party identification. In the United States the 'Michigan' theory by Campbell et al. (1960) established the conventional wisdom throughout the 1960s. Democratic and Republican support was seen as rooted in long-standing and complex historical alignments based on successive waves of external and internal immigration, regional polarization over the Civil War, racial divisions over civil rights, the urban-rural split, and to a lesser extent the cleavage between unionized workers and employers. Once established, party loyalties maintained group support for decades.

The analysis of group voting support during the last forty years, shows the Democratic base today remains a faded print of the classic New Deal coalition - Jewish liberals, low income whites, African Americans, Hispanics, union households, older voters. The old Democratic coalition has lost some support among certain groups; whites (especially southern whites) who deserted in the mid-sixties, men, the young, union households, and Catholics who gradually lost their Democratic faith. Some of these groups have themselves been transformed; in the 1950s 'Catholics' usually meant Italian-Americans, Polish-Americans, and other ethnic groups from southern, central and Eastern Europe. Today this group has become more socially and politically diverse with the entrance of new Hispanic émigrés from central and southern America. In counterbalance the Democrats have made gains among African-Americans, and older voters, as well as women. There have been temporary shifts over time relating to the particular candidate, for example the rise in Catholic votes for John Kennedy in 1960, the overwhelming support among blacks for Johnson in 1964, and increased southern support for Carter in 1976, but overall the general pattern is one of trendless fluctuations, and broad continuity. The structural shrinkage in the size of the Democratic base has proved more significant than behavioral shifts among voting groups.

In the classic theory of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), social class, region and religion were regarded as the most important political cleavages in many European countries, because they reflect broadly based and long-standing social and economic divisions within society at the time when
Western democracies were emerging. Contemporary party systems resulted from complex historical processes, notably the national and industrial revolutions experienced by societies from the 17th century onwards. In Europe the division between Church and State produced religious support for Christian Democrat parties; the division between landowners and industrialists helped create agrarian parties; and the division between employers and workers generated leftwing parties.

Therefore groups in different countries - whether based on social class, religion, language, ethnicity, and region - became the primary building blocks for the political system. Parties mobilized coalitions of social groups and appealed to their interests. In contrast to these blocks, gender was usually regarded as secondary, since women's interests were seen as divided by crosscutting cleavages such as class, ethnicity, and generation. The varying pattern of social cleavages across Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century established the essential framework for contemporary party systems. After the systems were established, Lipset and Rokkan suggest they 'froze' as parties strengthened links with their supporters, and integrated new social cleavages. In most countries women won the franchise after the modern party system was established, and they were therefore absorbed into the existing framework.

The gender gap can be explained by this theory if, like race, ethnicity, class and religion, sex can be seen as a basic social cleavage reflecting distinctive political interests. Women's life-styles, based on their roles within families, the labor market, the welfare state, and the community, may be expected to lead to different patterns of political participation, partisan loyalties and political priorities on a wide range of issues: childcare, family support, public transport, environment and technology, reproductive rights, welfare, education, and defense.

Why should the American gender gap have emerged in the last two decades? A number of interpretations within this theoretical framework are possible. For dealignment theorists, this development can be seen as part of a broader loosening of the traditional ties between social groups and parties, particularly the weakening of class alignments (Franklin et al. 1992; Dalton et al. 1984). In recent decades party fragmentation has grown in many established democracies, symbolized by the sudden rise of new regional, racist or Green parties in countries like Italy, Canada, France, and Germany. For Inglehart new cleavages in society, produced by the 'post-material' revolution, have changed priorities on the policy agenda, with a decline in the old left-right politics of redistribution, and a rise in concern about issues of the environment, women's rights, and the quality of life (Inglehart 1977, 1990, 1998; Inglehart and Norris 2000). If the old cleavages of class and religion have declined in importance, this opens the way for the politics of gender, region and ethnicity to become increasingly salient.

In a related explanation, it can be argued that in America structural change has produced a divergence in the socioeconomic position of women and men. If this has affected the gender gap in
voting behavior, we would expect considerable differences in the size of the gap depending on levels of education, income, age, occupational status and marital status. The results of previous studies are divided. Miller (1988: 264) concluded that the socioeconomic experiences of women and men are not sufficient to explain gender differences in the vote. The gender gap persisted even after controlling for demographic and social characteristics. On the other hand, Susan Carroll (1988) noted that the gender gap was strongest between two groups of women in the early 1980s: on the one hand, professional, college-educated and fairly affluent women and on the other hand the less well-off and unmarried groups. The common factor linking these two groups, Carroll suggests, is economic and psychological independence from men. A continuing pattern of gender differences by high and low-income group has been confirmed by more recent studies (Clark and Clark 1993). Plissner (1983) suggested the gender gap is essentially a 'marital' gap, with polarization around marital status. Research among European voters suggests that rather than a simple gender gap, we can identify a 'gender-generation gap'. Younger women in many European countries prove more left-wing than younger men, while the pattern reverses among the middle-aged and older generations, where women remain more right-wing than men in their voting choice and ideological self-placement (Norris 1993, 1996, 1999; Inglehart and Norris 2000).

One way to analyze this is to merge the NES surveys then to break down the analysis into two periods: the era of the traditional gender gap where American women leaned towards the Republicans (1952 to 1960) and the era of the modern gender gap (1980 to 1998) where women leaned Democrat. The social basis of the gender gap can then be examined to see where sex differences are greatest and also what has changed over time. The results in Table 1 and Figure 6 show that the size of the gender gap varies substantially by major social sector. In the traditional era, women lent towards the right in most of the categories, especially the oldest age cohort and the unmarried. The exceptions where women proved more Democratic than men were among the youngest group, college graduates, and women in working-class jobs. In contrast, by the modern era women were more left-leaning across almost all the categories, with the gap strongest among middle-aged women, middle to high income, college graduates, those in professional and managerial occupations, whites, and Protestants. The pattern suggests that the gender gap is a crosscutting cleavage, strongest among many of the groups of women who would traditionally have been expected to vote Republican. Further studies of gender realignment among different categories of women are needed using multivariate analysis before we can claim to understand the reasons for these variations. One problem with analyzing this phenomenon is that the gender gap is often relatively small, with few cases within each sub-group in standard social surveys. If existing surveys are consolidated this can help overcome the common problems of sample size, as well as allowing generalizations about longer-term patterns evident over successive elections. Moreover, where robust
and significant gender gaps among sub-groups of the population are identified, like those of marital status or socio-economic class, then we need much further theoretical development to provide plausible explanations of these differences.

[Table 1 and Figure 6 about here]

**Feminist Mobilization**

The development of the women’s movement, and the growth of feminist consciousness, another school of thought emphasizes theories of political mobilization. Early studies by Friedan and Dector (1982) first suggested a link between the gender gap and the strength of the women’s movement. This explanation has been developed most fully by Pamela Conover (1988), who suggested that American women as a whole do not differ much from men in their political values, on issues such as egalitarianism, individualism and liberal self-identification. Nevertheless, the study found that a feminist identity was significantly related to a range of domestic and foreign policy preferences, and political values. Conover concludes that becoming a feminist may act as a catalyst that helps women recognize their underlying ‘female’ values. This interpretation is interesting but it has attracted criticism. Cook and Wilcox (1991) argued that the relationship between feminism and policy preferences is reciprocal; developing a feminist consciousness may lead to more egalitarian values, but at the same time more liberal and egalitarian people become feminists. Without time-series panel data, it is difficult to disentangle the direction of causality in these claims, which have to remain theoretical.

**Modernization Theory and Value Change**

Lastly, the process of societal modernization provides an alternative explanatory framework. The process of gender realignment in the United States raises the question whether similar developments are emerging elsewhere. There are two perspectives on this issue. If the gender gap in American politics is caused by common structural and/or cultural trends affecting modern societies, such as increased female participation in the paid workforce, the break-up of traditional family units, or the transformation of sex roles, then we would expect to find similar gender gaps in other nations. But if the American gender gap is caused by factors that are distinctive to American politics, such as the traditional lack of a strong class cleavage in the electorate, the centrist pattern of two party competition, or the salience of issues like abortion and affirmative action, then the modern gender gap in the United States may be sui generis, or at least contingent upon particular conditions found in particular countries, such as the predominant issue agenda, patterns of party competition, or cultural values. Exploring this issue is important both to compare, understand and map the pattern worldwide and to provide further theoretical insights into the reasons for the emergence of the modern gender gap in the United States.
Unfortunately the previous comparative literature has been unable to resolve this issue, with different studies producing somewhat contradictory and ambiguous findings in different countries (see DeVaus and McAllister 1989; Everitt 1998a, 1998b; Haavio-Mannila 1985; Hayes and MacAllister 1997; Hayes 1997; Jelen, Thomas and Wilcox 1994; Listhaug, Miller and Valen 1985; Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Mayer and Smith 1995; Norris 1985, 1988, 1996; Oskarson 1995; Renfrow 1994).

Evidence from the World Values Surveys from 1981 to the mid-1990s indicates that gender differences in voting behavior have been realigning in post-industrial societies. Inglehart and Norris (2000) found that by the 1990s, women voters in most postindustrial societies had become significantly more leftwing than men, even after introducing a range of social controls. The modern gender gap in not confined only to the United States, as particularistic accounts suggest, but is also evident by the 1990s in some West European states. Nevertheless this pattern was not yet established in post-communist societies or developing societies, where the traditional gender gap persists into the mid-1990s with women voters continuing to be more rightwing than men. The main reason for the emergence of the modern gender gap in post-industrial societies, Inglehart and Norris argue, is that structural and cultural trends have transformed the values of women, particularly among the younger generation. We need further comparative studies examining the reasons for this pattern, and exploring other cross-national differences in political attitudes and behavior.

Conclusions: A New Research Agenda

Despite the extensive body of research, many aspects of gender realignment remain an unresolved puzzle. Certain issues emerge from this discussion, which help define the principles guiding any new research agenda. New approaches have to consider methodological innovations and the theoretical importance of contextual factors. Studies of the gender gap have usually followed the traditional methodology of public opinion research. Work has been based on individual-level analysis using existing cross-sectional survey data, usually items from the American National Election Studies or NORC. This has provided only limited answers to the key questions.

To expand the research agenda we need to move towards multi-method approaches. The reanalysis of aggregate trend data from opinion polls provides a rich source of data to consider the dynamics of changes in gender politics, and the decisive realignment in the early 1980s. The use of qualitative interviews and focus groups allows us to explore whether women and men structure their thoughts and beliefs about political issues, candidates and government in a similar or different fashion. It may be that women and men come to the same voting choices, but for different reasons. Or that women and men take account of different considerations when evaluating candidates or prioritizing issues. Given what we know about sex differences in speech patterns, it seems wholly
plausible that women and men talk about politics in distinctive way. More qualitative approaches could explore these avenues of research. Moreover, for those skeptical of qualitative approaches, experimental designs allow us to analyze how women and men respond to campaign messages and news within a controlled setting, and their response to different types of issues, candidates and formats (see Iyengar et al. 1996). Multi-method research designs, however, are insufficient by themselves without theoretical developments. In particular, it can be argued that we need to take account of contextual factors, including temporal, social, and national contexts.

First, the gender gap varies over time, in size and direction. A comprehensive theory needs to account for these variations. Many of the early studies were limited to static, cross-sectional survey data, focusing on one, or perhaps two successive, elections. Explanations of gender realignment need comparisons over time to explain why this voting shift occurred in the early 1980s, rather than before or after. Research replicating Page and Shapiro's (1992) analysis of fifty years of trends in public opinion, focusing on aggregate changes among women and men, could help illuminate these issues. Moreover the analysis of cross-sectional data needs to be sensitive to the context of the particular campaign - with its particular mix of issues, candidates and events - rather than assuming that the gender gap is constant and invariable. Studies need to consider how the gender gap in Presidential support may vary according to the configuration of women's races at House, Senate and Gubernatorial levels.

Second, studies need to be sensitive to social context and therefore significant diversity among groups of women, - by race, generation, and class, as well as between self-identified feminists and others, - rather than treating women as a single, homogeneous group. Research needs to build on the foundation of previous studies by Susan Carroll (1988) analyzing women's autonomy, and Pamela Conover (1988) focusing on feminist women, which have provided some of the richest theoretical work in this field. Initial comparison of the social profile of the gender gap since the 1980s, in Table 1, suggests some interesting patterns that deserve far closer examination and multivariate analysis. Cohort analysis shows that the gender-generation gap, found elsewhere, is also evident in the United States. Education, income and education are all important factors in distinguishing between groups of women, with a large gender gap among college graduates, as well as among those with professional or managerial occupations. Far more work using multivariate analysis needs to be done to explore differences within and between groups of women, as well as between women and men.

Lastly, convincing theories of trends in American public opinion need to be evaluated within a cross-national context. This is particularly true of accounts that suggest 'essentialist' explanations based on the changing role of women as child-rearers and homemakers. The tendency for women to favor right-wing parties during the 1950s was regarded as a cross-cultural pattern. In contrast, during the 1980s the gender realignment in American politics has seen parallel developments in some post-
industrial democracies, but not everywhere (Inglehart and Norris 2000; Rusciano 1992; Haavio-Mannila 1985; Listhaug et al. 1985). More comparative research is needed to map out and explain the reasons for this pattern more fully. In particular, cross-cultural differences point to the need to be aware of a broader range of systemic factors influencing the relationship between social cleavages and party loyalties, including the role of party systems and party competition, electoral systems, political culture, and the agenda and strength of the organized women's movement. A cross-cultural perspective also highlights the need to be aware of 'top-down' explanations of gender realignment, based on changes in party/candidate strategies, policies and images, as well as 'bottom-up' explanations based on changes in men and women's attitudes, values and policy priorities.

Therefore gender realignment has now become an established part of American elections, taken for granted by commentators, journalists and politicians. It provides a useful frame or 'peg' to hang different stories about the election. Nevertheless we should not be seduced by the conventional wisdom as many assumptions surrounding this phenomenon remain under-explained, and the challenge is to provide fresh ways of understanding the complex relationship between gender, voting behavior and public opinion.
Table 1: Profile of the Gender Gap, U.S. 1952–98

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1952-60 Gender Gap</th>
<th>1980-98 Gender Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALL</strong></td>
<td>-4.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-34</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>-5.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>-4.1</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>-10.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Birth Cohort</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959-1974 Gen X</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943-1958 Boomers</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927-1942 New Dealers</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-1926 Inter-War</td>
<td>-4.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895-1910 Pre-War</td>
<td>-5.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-1895 Victorians</td>
<td>-7.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-3.4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Married</td>
<td>-9.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade school or less</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
<td>-2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>-6.8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>-4.6</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or Advanced</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-4.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R’s Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional or Manager</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and Sales</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HH Income</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>-7.8</td>
<td>-2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
<td>-1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>-11.0</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>-5.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>-1.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The gender gap if defined as the difference between the Democrat–Republican voting lead among women and men. A positive figure means stronger female than male support for Democrats. A negative figure means stronger female than male support for Republicans.

**Source:** 1952–98 American National Election Studies
Figure 1: Voting Turnout, US 1964–98

Source: US Bureau of the Census

Source: www.census.gov
Figure 2: Presidential Vote 1948–96

Source: NES 1948–98

Gender Gap in Presidential Vote, 1948–96

Source: NES
Figure 3: Congressional Vote by Gender, 1952–98

Figure 4: US Partisan Identification 1952–98

Source: NES 1952–98
Figure 5: Press Coverage of the Gender Gap

Note: Nexis-Lexis keyword search of “Major Papers” database using term “gender gap and election” from September 1 through November 30 per election year. Table entries reflect number of stories using these terms.

Source: Carroll and Norris 1997.
Figure 6: The Gender Gap in Vote, US 1980–98

Gender Gap in Vote 1980-98 by Social Group

Source: NES 1980–98
See Table 1 for the definition and measures of the gender gap.


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