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The Changing Politics of American Men: Understanding the Sources of the Gender Gap

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We analyze male-female differences in partisanship and presidential voting between 1952 and 1996 to show that the gender gap is a product of the changing partisanship of men. We then focus on the 1992 and 1996 elections to explore two hypotheses about its sources. The Attitude Hypothesis proposes that the gender gap results from underlying gender differences in policy attitudes, and the Salience Hypothesis suggests that the gap results from the different weights men and women apply to their attitudes when making political decisions. This analysis uses logistic regression to estimate the relative contribution of attitude and salience differences to the overall gap in voting and party identification. It finds that both attitude differences and differential salience play a role, although the magnitude of their effects differ in 1996 from what is observed in 1992. In addition, the results suggest that differences in social welfare opinions may be the predominant contributor to the gender gap.

1. INTRODUCTION

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 1980.¹ Conventional wisdom treated gender as a distinction without political importance and scholarship confirmed the conventional wisdom.² By the middle 1980s, however, it had

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¹Throughout this paper, the gender gap is conceived as the difference between the proportion of women and men who identify with the Democratic Party and the difference in the proportion of men and women voting for the Democratic presidential candidate.

²For example, the 1973 and 1980 editions of a standard text in mass attitudes and behavior (Erikson and Luttbeg, 1973; Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, 1980) ended their discussion on the social basis of public opinion with a brief (twenty-seven lines in length) section on gender. The section began with the statement (well rooted in the evidence) that "(d)ifferences in the political attitudes of men and women are so slight as to deserve only brief mention" and included one table of data. The conclusion of the chapter noted that some of the group differences they reported might change and some group differences might increase, "perhaps even (the differences between) men and women." The gender section in the 1988 edition was equally brief and began with the same statement (Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, 1988). That sentence was gone by 1991 (Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, 1991), and the gender section was three times as long. It was 122 lines in length in the 1995 edition (Erikson and Tedin, 1995).

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become an important electoral fact among academics and pundits. The gender gap became even more noteworthy during the 1996 presidential election because of its exceptional magnitude and political influence throughout the election year. The fourteen-point difference in the Democratic vote of men and women was an all-time post-war high. Equally impressive, this difference was a 40 percent increase over the male-female difference in the 1992 vote and twice as large as any change since observers began to pay attention to it in 1981.³

Most research and virtually all public commentary on political differences between men and women have commonly viewed the gender gap as a function of changing *female* attitudes, their evolving objective circumstances, and their distinctive sensibilities. As such, American women have been the central feature of the gender gap story for the past twenty years, while men have most often been treated as the constant baseline against which the changing politics of women could be examined. This perspective, however, could not be further from the facts. *The continuous growth in the gender gap is largely a product of the changing politics of men.* Men have become increasingly Republican in their party identification and voting behavior since the mid-sixties while the partisanship and voting behavior of women has remained essentially constant. This fact is not unknown (see, for example: Wirls, 1986; Bendyna and Lake 1994; Miller and Shanks 1996; and Box-Steffensmeier, DeBoef, and Lin 1997; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997), but it is definitely underappreciated and requires a clear presentation.

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of the correlates and likely causes of the gender gap. This study is organized in three parts. Initially, we explore the history of gender differences in voting and party identification. Our findings demonstrate that the gender gap has resulted from changes in male partisanship and voting and that gender has become almost as important as other traditional and well-known demographic bases of party division. The second part of this study focuses on how the various political attitudes of men and women result in such large voting and party identification disparities. In particular, it tests two alternative (but not incompatible) hypotheses. The *Attitude Hypothesis* maintains that the gender gap in voting and party identification results from differences in the underlying political preferences of men and women. The *Saliency Hypothesis* suggests that, beyond differences in underlying political attitudes, men and

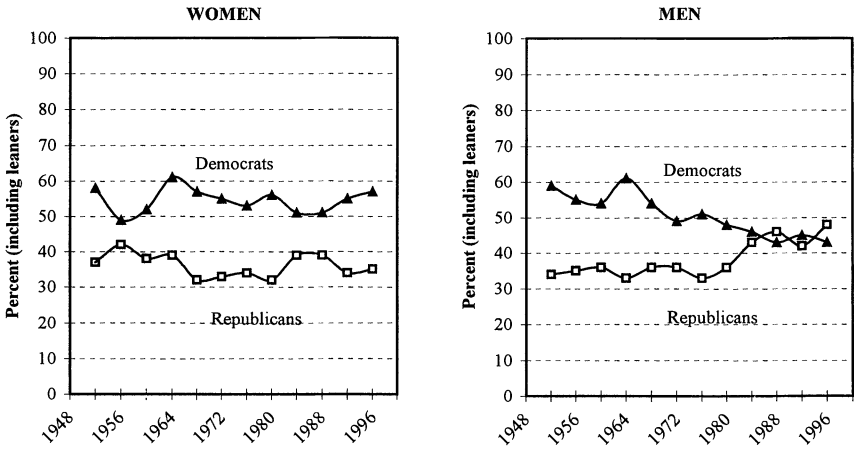
³According to the 1996 National Election Study, men preferred Dole to Clinton by 47–42 percent. Women preferred Clinton by 56–35 percent. The fourteen-point lead, then, refers to the difference between the 42 and 56 percent figures. The gender gap looks even larger if Perot's presence is factored in by looking at the Clinton lead/lag difference between men and women. Absolute values aside, any method of calculating the gender gap shows it to be larger in 1996 than in any previous presidential election since, and including, 1948.

women weigh issues differently when evaluating parties and candidates. Using survey data from the National Election Studies in 1992 and 1996 to explore these hypotheses, our findings show support for both, and yet note substantial differences in the role of issue salience between 1992 and 1996. To the best of our knowledge, these hypotheses have not been so systematically articulated or tested before. The final section focuses on the longitudinal changes in male party identification over the past three decades and proposes that the strong cross-sectional relationships between social welfare preferences and party identification observed in the earlier part of the paper may also be responsible for the conversion of men to the GOP.

This study contributes to the existing understanding of the gender gap in several ways. First, this research explores the dramatic conversion of men to the Republican Party over the past three decades. While most prior analysis has looked to the characteristics of women to explain the gender gap, we appropriately analyze the agents of change—in this case, men. Second, the analysis explores a broad range of potential issue explanations for the gender gap. Previous studies have typically focused on one or two issue dimensions and even some of the more recent and methodologically sophisticated research (Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler 1998; Box-Steffensmeier, DeBoef, and Lin 1997) do not include as wide a range of issues as are considered in this analysis. Third, we explore the gender gap in both party identification and voting. Most prior research has focused on one or the other, and while differences in party identification account for a great deal of the voting gap (more on this below), it is also true that party preferences and voting decisions are not identical phenomena. Finally, the contemporary focus of this analysis updates an earlier body of research on the gender gap that was largely concerned with presidential voting in the 1980s.

2. THE GENDER GAP IN VOTING AND PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Figure 1, which reports male and female party identification from 1952 to 1996, demonstrates that changes in male partisanship have been the driving force behind increases in the gender gap. For example, in 1952, 59 percent of men and 58 percent of women identified with the Democratic Party. While there was fluctuation in the party preference of women during the next forty years, their overall identification *did not change* during the period and the fraction preferring the Democratic Party did not drop below 50 percent after 1956. Democratic identification among men, by contrast, consistently declined after 1964 and has not been above 50 percent since 1980. Forty years ago men were Democratic by a margin in excess of twenty-five points; today they are Republican by a margin of about seven points. If men had been as stable in their party preference as women, the Democratic Party today would command the same national lead in partisanship over the Re-

Figure 1. The Party Identification of Men and Women: 1952–1996

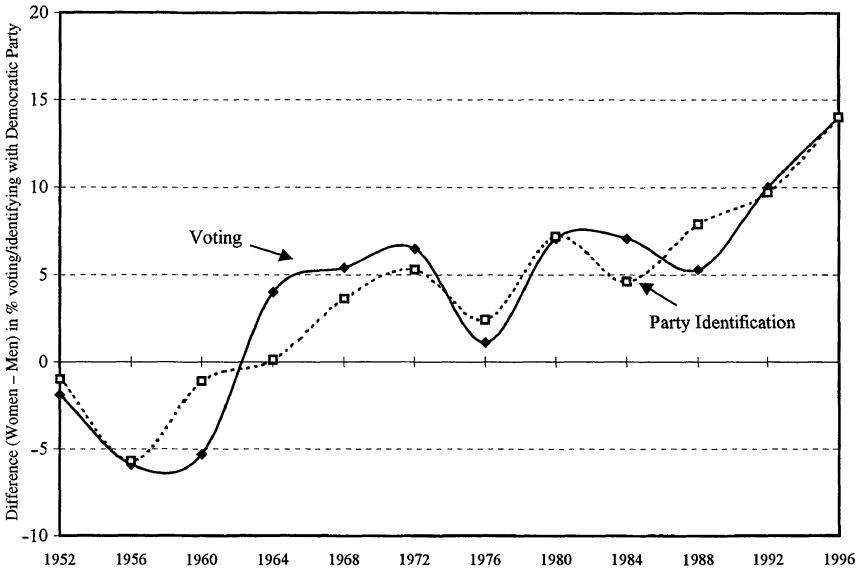
Source: NES Surveys of the Indicated Years

publicans—about twenty points—that they enjoyed during the period of mature Democratic dominance in the 1950s.

The partisan difference between men and women is paralleled by a difference in their presidential votes. Figure 2 plots the gender gap in party identification and voting behavior from 1952 to 1996 and demonstrates that the gender disparity in both is closely correlated.⁴ Changes in party identification somewhat lagged behind the gender gap in the vote in the 1960s and early 1970s. By 1980 they reached equivalent levels, and they continued to grow at roughly similar rates. The gender gap appears to have three distinct periods. It favored the GOP before 1964. After that, it surged in favor of the Democrats and, with the exception of 1976, held constant at a relatively modest five to seven percentage points from 1964 to 1988. In the 1990s, the size of the gender gap increased substantially in two successive presidential elections.

It is worth emphasizing that the gap did not, as conventional wisdom often assumes, begin in 1980; it preceded the Reagan era by at least sixteen years, and, if the smaller values before 1964 are to be credited, it extends back to the origins of the NES series. There was a relative Republican preference among women until 1960: they preferred Dewey, Eisenhower, and Nixon slightly more than did the men in each of these elections. In 1964, however, men were decidedly more positive than women toward the

⁴Partisans include strong, weak, and leaning identifiers.

Figure 2. Gender Gap in Voting and Party Identification: 1952–1996

Source: NES Surveys of the Indicated Years

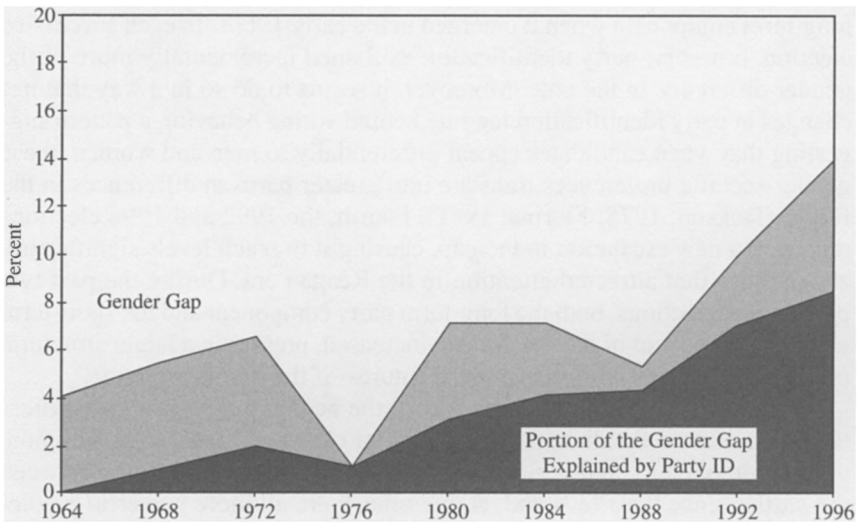
Goldwater candidacy, and the gender gap assumed its contemporary configuration of a Democratic tilt among women and a GOP tilt among men. The gap in voting behavior continued to grow in 1968 and 1972, virtually vanished in 1976 in the wake of Watergate and the Nixon pardon, only to reappear in 1980 at a slightly higher level than it was in 1972. It reached a full ten points by 1992 and a historic fourteen points by 1996.⁵

2.1 Party Identification as the Source of the Gender Gap in the Vote

As a result of the changing party identification of men and women, the male-female vote difference in any given presidential election is partly specific to the forces of that election and partly a reflection of a more long-term “structural” feature of the party coalitions. Consider Figure 3, which decomposes the vote difference into a long-term, structural component (party identification) and a second short-term component that reflects forces specific to

⁵It is important to note that gender gap figures do vary with different surveys and there is little consensus as to “actual” figures. Several studies, using exit polls as opposed to the National Election Study, have suggested that the gender gap in 1992 was smaller than the ten points we report (Bendyna and Lake, 1994; Cook and Wilcox, 1995).

Figure 3. The Gender Gap in Presidential Voting and the Proportion Explained by Gender Differences in Party Identification: 1964 to 1996



Source: NES Surveys of the Indicated Years

each election. The top line in the figure is the observed difference in the reported vote of men and women (labeled as the “Gender Gap” in the figure). The second line is the gender gap in the vote that would be expected from the party identification difference between men and women.⁶ The lower line represents the portion of the total (also in percentage points) that is accounted for by controlling for party identification

Four things stand out in Figure 3. First, as others have noted, the gender gap in voting largely reflects the gender gap in party preference (see, for example, Kenski 1988; Cook and Wilcox 1995; Miller and Shanks 1996). In recent years, the observed difference in male-female voting would have been between one-half to two-thirds *less* if men and women had a more similar party preference. Second, the long-term component of the gap (the party

⁶The estimate of the vote for men and women—which is needed to calculate the gender gap in the vote—was calculated via logistic regression. The results with this method are equivalent to what was obtained using revised normal vote estimates or the loyalty and defections rates characteristic of different classes of partisans for the election in question. In the interest of methodological consistency and given the dependence of logistic estimates later in the paper, we opted to use the logistic estimates.

identification component) has consistently grown over time; the only exceptions are years when the overall gender gap in the vote abruptly declined (in 1976 and 1988). Third, the voting gender gap had a proportionately small long-term component when it emerged in the early 1960s. In each successive election, however, party identification explained incrementally more of the gender difference in the vote. Moreover, it seems to do so in a way that has changes in party identification lagging behind voting behavior, a pattern suggesting that when candidates appeal differentially to men and women, these gender-specific preferences translate into greater partisan differences in the future (Jackson, 1975; Fiorina, 1981). Fourth, the 1992 and 1996 elections represent a new escalation in the gap, causing it to reach levels significantly above those that attracted attention in the Reagan era. During the past two presidential elections, both the long-term party component and the short-term election component of the gender gap increased, presaging a larger structural (party identification) difference in the future—if the past is prologue.

A fifth observation should be added: the gender gap in party identification has assumed the dimensions of a major cleavage. Race, class, religion, union membership, and region have defined the social fault lines between the parties since the 1930s and, at one time, were all more powerful predictors of party identification than gender. In the last twenty years the relative importance of these social cleavages has undergone large changes. Regional differences have virtually disappeared; social class (represented by income) has increasingly shaped party preference; religiosity has also come to mark differences in party preference. Race has become particularly prominent. Most of this has been the subject of wide commentary and analysis (see Huckfeldt and Kohfeld, 1989; Hout, Brooks, and Manza, 1995; Petrocik, 1998; Miller and Shanks, 1996; Jelen, 1991; Wilcox, 1992; Gilbert, 1993; Mattei and Mattei, 1998; and Legee and Kellstedt, 1993). The prominence of gender has been less widely noted. As of 1996, gender predicted party identification better than some of the historically important social cleavages (region, for example) and as well as religiosity (which has received increasing attention).⁷ Also, like religiosity, gender is a division that cuts across every demographic characteristic except for race. Women in virtually every segment of the white electorate—whether defined by region, religiosity, class, religion, age, or marital status—are more Democratic because men of almost every type moved toward the GOP.

⁷The data are taken from the National Election Study in 1996. The correlation ratios between the vote and the these party cleavages are as follows: race (.26), income (.22), gender (.14), religiosity (.13), union membership (.10), and region (.01). Furthermore, over-time analyses of these factors show the relative influence of race, income, gender, and religiosity to be increasing, while union affiliation and region are declining.

2.2 Focusing on Men

The previous data, which convincingly demonstrate the dramatic rise in the gender gap over the past two decades, has at least two interpretations. The one adopted here is that men have moved into GOP ranks as women have retained a traditional Democratic preference. But at least two studies interpret these changes in a different light and maintain that the growing political difference between men and women has resulted from the unwillingness of the latter to follow a secular trend toward greater conservatism and the Republicans. Wirls' account of the gender gap during the Reagan administration concluded with the observation that "both women and men are defecting from the Democratic Party and liberal values, and the gender gap has been the result of unequal rates of defection" (1986, 319). Box-Steffensmeier, DeBoef, and Lin echoed that conclusion when they hypothesized "that the rise of the gender gap is mainly a reaction of women to the national ideological swing to the right starting from the late seventies" (1997, 8).

The perception that women resisted a trend justifies an analytical focus on women's distinctive characteristics as an explanation for the increasing gender gap. But there is no obvious reason for looking at the gap from the perspective of the women. It clearly offers no empirical leverage since the observed data and most relationships will be identical whether one observes a shift in male behavior or a refusal of women to follow men.⁸ More important, a focus on women seems less faithful to the most obvious trend in Figure 1: the changed partisanship of men and the stable party identification of women. Beyond that, there is no evidence to support the notion of a secular trend or that women are in fact resisting such a trend. For example, while Wirls and Box-Steffensmeier, DeBoef, and Lin argue for a conservative shift in the underlying political predisposition of the electorate, no such shift in ideology is demonstrated. Even Box-Steffensmeier and her colleagues' own data show an essentially flat "macro-ideology" (their Figure 3; 1997, 25) from 1976 to 1994. Moreover, the slight movement by women to the Republican Party observed during the Reagan years (cited by Wirls as evidence that women were following men into the Republican Party), was short-lived. Women returned to the Democrats in 1988. In brief, the Republican conversion of men seems to be the fact in need of explanation, and it is the fact explored here.

⁸However, framing the problem as a need to explain the failure of women to respond may offer theoretical leverage on questions which are intrinsic to the focus on the emergence of feminism. Formulated as a resistance to GOP appeals, the gender gap in partisanship and the vote fits easily into a broader analysis of the roles and viewpoints of women. A gender gap that is attributed to male behavior may be less easily incorporated into analyses that focus on the politics of women.

3. EXPLAINING THE GENDER GAP

Plausible issue preference explanations of the greater Republicanism of men are several in number. Early explanations of the gender gap often attributed it to male/female differences in foreign policy preferences generally (Francovic 1982) and, particularly, to a substantial difference about the use of military force (Smith 1984; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; and Wilcox, Ferrara, and Allsop 1993). Later work by Gilens (1988) used more sophisticated statistical techniques to confirm early conclusions about the importance of these military attitudes. He demonstrated that the gender gap in Reagan's presidential job approval was more strongly influenced by attitudes toward defense spending than by any other single policy issue and nearly equal to the effect of social spending, abortion, women's rights, and the environment combined (Gilens 1988, 34). More current research by Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler (1998) found less of a foreign/defense policy influence on the gender gap, perhaps because these attitudes are less salient than they were during the Reagan years.

The domestic social policy of the Reagan administration was also frequently cited as an explanation for the gender gap. Piven (1985) noted that changes in the objective circumstances of women had made them more dependent on the welfare state and increasingly at odds with much of the conservative, "anti-statist" rhetoric of the Reagan Republicans (see Erie and Rein, 1988 and May and Stephenson, 1994). Gender differences over the government's responsibility to provide services, ensure jobs and living standards, and health care (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Gilens 1988; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997; and Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler, 1998) seemed to corroborated this speculation. In a similar vein, analyses that explored the link between the gender gap and male-female perceptions of the economy concluded that men appeared more prone to self-interested "pocketbook" voting, while women seemed more beset by economic troubles and more inclined to see economic difficulties in the society at-large. Female pessimism about the economy was then suggested to result in an anti-incumbent bias among women (Welch and Hibbing, 1992; Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler, 1998).

A third line of research focused on feminist issues. Ronald Reagan's opposition to the ERA and abortion rights and his general hostility to the feminist movement were seen as an important contributors to his (and the GOP's) weaker appeal to women (Smeal 1984; Abzug and Kelber 1984; Conover 1988). Other research challenged these findings, noting that feminist ideals were strongly correlated with other political values for *both* men and women and that feminism per se was not responsible for the gap (Klein 1984; Mansbridge 1985; Cook and Wilcox 1991; Seltzer, Newman, and

Leighton 1997), but the general importance of feminist issues to the gender gap was not discounted.

All of these issue-based explanations for the gender gap make intuitive sense, and there is no a priori way to determine which of the preceding factors continue to be important. Indeed, there is no theoretical need to commit to any view about what issues might explain the increase in the gender gap, and thus the subsequent analyses include them all. The following section explains two ways in which the political attitudes of men and women translate into gender distinctive political behavior.

3.1 The Attitude and Salience Hypotheses

Much of the empirical analysis of voting and party differences between men and women as explanations has focused on attitude *differences*. Most of the literature previously cited is an example of this approach (see in particular, Piven 1985; Conover 1988; Cook and Wilcox 1991; May and Stephenson 1994). It expects gender differences in voting and party identification to result from underlying differences in political attitudes that are politicized in similar ways. It assumes that men and women have different attitudes, assign approximately equal importance to corresponding issues, and thus convert these attitude differences into a gender gap in voting and partisanship. Evidence in support of this perspective requires the gender gaps in partisanship and voting to become insignificantly small when issue and policy differences between men and women are held constant. This Attitude Hypothesis has considerable initial plausibility since there are consistent gender differences in attitudes across a wide range of issue dimensions.

The assumption that men and women equally weigh their dissimilar attitudes is, however, *not* an obvious a priori. Neither theoretical justifications nor empirical findings make it compelling. For example, self-interest and social identity considerations (on the latter see Tajfel and Turner, 1986) make it unlikely that female equality or abortion are as important to the political judgments of men as they are to women. Furthermore, if Piven (1984), Erie and Rein (1988), and May and Stephenson (1994) are correct, men and women are differentially sensitive to social welfare questions. Simply put, the presumption that men and women care equally about the same political issues as they make their political choices is an empirical question in need of further study.

The Salience Hypothesis explanation of the gender gap focuses on this prospective differential weighting of issues by men and women (see Klein 1984; Gilens 1988; Welch and Hibbing 1992; Bendyna and Lake 1994; and Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler 1998). It allows for attitude differences, but asserts that gender differences in voting and party identification are not solely

the result of variance in political orientations but are importantly influenced by the different salience of issues between men and women. Thus, a matter on which they have virtually identical opinions might have quite different effects on their candidate evaluations or their feelings about the parties. Men and women might, for example, agree about the condition of the economy, but the opinion might do much more to shape the candidate choices of (let us say) men because the issue is more salient to them. Conversely, the political importance of an issue on which men and women hold very different opinions may be enlarged if the issue is disproportionately salient to either group or may be diminished if neither give substantial weight to it when making a political choice. The following analyses focus on the extent to which the gender gap is a product of attitude or issue salience differences between men and women. Using National Election Survey Data from 1992 and 1996, we employ a series of logistic regression analyses to test these hypotheses. The following discusses the attitudinal measures utilized in this research.

3.2 Attitude Measures

Social welfare spending, social issues, feminist issues, retrospective economic evaluations, defense attitudes, and congressional approval ratings are the issues we use to examine the gender gap in 1992 and 1996. These are all multi-item indices based on factor and reliability analyses, with the exception of a single question item that assesses the respondent's rating of the Congress and a single question item regarding the use of military force.⁹ The measures have several strengths to recommend them. First, they provide a broad sample of the issues that are a staple of traditional and contemporary party conflict and that were part of the campaign debate in 1992 and 1996. Also, they subsume specific issues used in previous gender gap research, as well as a number of items that have not previously been included. Furthermore, they are entirely comparable in the two surveys: individual scale items and summary measures comprise identical survey questions from 1992 and 1996.¹⁰

The Social Welfare Index includes questions regarding support for government social spending for the poor, the middle class, and African-Americans, as well as two more general questions regarding the desired level of government services and the proper role of government with regard to providing jobs and health care. The Social Issues Measure combines items relating to gay rights and prayer in school, while the Feminist Issues

⁹The specific indicators of the attitude orientations used throughout were a product of a principle components analysis. The reliability of each index was evaluated with Cronbach's alpha test.

¹⁰Each summary measure is scaled from 0 to 1, which makes it possible to interpret each mean as a percentage of the maximum possible score. This scaling algorithm also permits a direct and easier comparison of the MLE coefficients in various tables.

Index includes questions on abortion and the desirability of women working outside of the home. Defense Attitudes is a single-item measuring support for the use of military force. All of the measures are scaled so that higher scores indicate a liberal response. Liberal for the Social Welfare Index means support for more spending. Liberal for the Social Issues Index means support for protecting homosexuals from discrimination and opposition to school prayer. Support for abortion and support for working women are coded as liberal responses for the Feminist Issues Measure. Liberal for the Defense Index is coded as opposition to the use of military force. These measures should be positively correlated with Democratic voting and Democratic party identification. If women are consistently more liberal on these measures, then these attitude differences may account for the gap in partisanship and voting.

The Retrospective Economic Evaluation items include two sets of issues on the national economy and on personal finances. This index is scaled from better to worse, so that higher mean scores reflect more negative appraisals of the economy. In 1992, higher scores reflect greater disapproval of the Republican led economy under Bush. Conversely, higher scores in 1996 reflect a more negative assessment of the economy under Clinton. A gender gap in retrospective economic evaluations could account for party and voting differences in 1992 and 1996 if men are more positive on the economy in 1992, but more negative than women in 1996.¹¹

Finally, the Congressional Approval Measure is comprised of one item and is scaled from approval to disapproval; thus higher mean scores reflect greater disapproval of the Congress. Keeping in mind that the Democrats held the majority in Congress in 1992, whereas Republicans were the majority in 1996, evaluations of Congress can account for the gender gap only if women were more positive than men in 1992 and more negative in 1996.

3.3 The Gender Gap in Attitudes

Table 1, which displays mean scores by gender for the six issue dimensions and the individual component questions for both 1992 and 1996, demonstrates that men are uniformly more conservative than women. They are more conservative across all social spending issues by an average of six percentage points; significantly more conservative than women on issues related to homosexuality (by fourteen and twelve percentage points, respectively); but roughly equivalent to women in their views about prayer in school, abortion, and the desirability of women working. Men are more optimistic about the economy by about five percentage points and roughly

¹¹These predictions assume that men and women weight these issues equally in their judgments about the candidates and parties, that is, that the issues are equally salient.

**Table 1. Mean Differences in Political Attitudes
Between Men and Women: 1992 and 1996**

	1992		1996		Difference	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	1992	1996
Democratic Vote	38	48	43	57	+10	+14
Democratic Party ID	43	52	43	57	+9	+14
Approval of Congress	72	68	55	55	-4	0
<i>Social Welfare Spending Issues:</i>						
Spending on Poor	70	75	63	68	+5	+5
Spending on Middle Class	81	85	80	84	+4	+4
Desired Level of Govt. Services	48	54	41	48	+6	+7
Proper Role of Government	48	54	44	51	+6	+7
Programs that Help Blacks	29	34	26	30	+5	+4
Social Welfare Spending Index	57	61	53	59	+4	+6
<i>Social Issues:</i>						
Gay Rights	47	61	56	68	+14	+12
Prayer in School	38	35	41	40	-3	-1
Social Issues Index	43	50	49	54	+7	+5
<i>Feminist Issues:</i>						
Abortion	65	63	64	66	-2	+2
Working Women	78	79	51	49	+1	-2
Feminist Issues Index	71	70	58	58	-1	0
<i>Retrospective Economic Evals:</i>						
National Economy	73	79	42	46	+6	+4
Personal Finances	50	54	42	46	+4	+4
Retrospective Evaluations Index	61	66	42	46	+5	+4
<i>Defense/Foreign Policy:</i>						
Willingness to Use Force	48	50	46	49	+2	+3

Notes: Cell entries represent mean scores on a zero to one scale. Social Welfare Attitudes, Social Issues, Feminist Issues, and Defense Attitudes are scaled from conservative to liberal. Congressional approval is scaled from approve to disapprove. Retrospective Economic Evaluations are scaled from better to worse.

Difference scores are calculated (Women - Men).

Source: National Election Studies, 1992 and 1996

similar in their assessment of Congress (though men are slightly less approving in 1992).¹²

¹² Surprisingly, disapproval of Congress actually declined between 1992 and 1996. In 1992, 69 percent disapproved; disapproval declined to 51 percent in 1996. The numbers in Table 1 do not match these figures exactly because, with the exception of the vote and party identification, all the values in the table are indices which were transformed to range from zero to one. This scaling facilitates comparisons among logit coefficients but it complicates statements about the value of variables. Magnitudes among the variables and differences between the years and between men and women are proportional to what would be seen if simple percentages were used. However, the reader should keep in mind that the values in Table 1 are not percentages and cannot be described as such.

On its face, the consistent attitude differences between men and women make the Attitude Hypothesis appear plausible. Nonetheless, while every difference greater than three percentage points is statistically significant, the overall policy differences between men and women are not particularly large. More important, the attitude differences between men and women are relatively stable between 1992 and 1996 (as they usually are over such a short term; see Page and Shapiro 1992), while the gender gap in the vote and partisanship grew substantially over the same period—a fact which suggests that changes in attitude salience may be largely responsible for the short-term growth in the gender gap.

3.4 The Effect of Salience Differences on the Gender Gap

The Salience Hypothesis, as formulated here, maintains that two factors influence voting behavior and party preference: (1) the underlying issue preferences of voters and (2) the weight that voters apply to these preferences when making a political choice. Given this, the difference between any two voters (or groups of voters) can be explained by differences in underlying attitudes, differences in the salience of these attitudes, or some of both. If two Americans have identical issue preferences, then any systematic differences in voting and partisanship between them would reflect the different weights they apply to these attitudes when choosing a candidate or party. Similarly, if they use an identical calculus when voting, then the systematic difference between them *must* arise because their attitudes are not the same.

Logistic regression is used to recover the weights that men and women apply to different issues when making political decisions. The coefficients, calculated for men and women separately in each of the years, represent the differential importance of these issues in shaping their respective votes and party preferences. This method infers relative issue importance through empirical observation. And while direct reports of issue importance might be valuable in this exercise, they are not available, and it is not clear that they would be superior. The “revealed preference” approach to estimating salience employed here allows for a direct inspection of salience differences and avoids the limited variance that often characterizes self-reporting of issue importance.¹³

¹³These estimates of salience cannot be compared with, much less corroborated by, respondent reports. A measure of salience based on a self-report (the only other way we can imagine doing it) is not available. Moreover, we are not convinced that self-report measures are superior. We believe that the logistic coefficients have several strengths as a salience measure. Salience-measuring questions such as “how important is . . .” are likely to prime a much larger set of considerations than would otherwise be there. More importantly, in our experience, these questions almost never yield useful variance. In our experience, importance questions produce responses which indicate that almost everything is important to almost everyone. They do not discriminate, and they rarely produce results because of these measurement error problems. The present method of inferring issue salience is an unobtrusive and nonreactive measure much like the economists’ notion of a

4. THE RESULTS

The top half of Table 2 displays the logistic regression results with party identification as the dependent variable; the bottom half of the table reports the equation for the presidential vote. There are significant similarities in the weights that men and women place on these issues. In both years, and for both sexes, social welfare issues, social issues, retrospective economic evaluations, and (with a bit less warrant) opinion of the job performance of the Congress are significantly linked to party identification. Social welfare attitudes are the strongest predictors of the party identification of both sexes. Retrospective economic evaluations are also consistently important (though less so than social welfare attitudes). Social welfare preferences and retrospective evaluations of the economy also directly influence the vote of men and women.

But salience differences are also apparent in the varying magnitude of these coefficients. The relationship between social welfare preferences and, respectively, party identification and the vote tends to be stronger for men than women. The importance of retrospective evaluations for party preference seems greater among women, but it seems to play a larger role in shaping the vote of men. All of the issue salience differences associated with party identification are consistently ordered in both years. That is, in both years social welfare issues seem to count more for men; retrospective evaluations and judgments about the Congress counted more for women.

The coefficients for the vote equation are less consistent. The net effect of social spending on the vote is greater for men in 1992, but social spending attitudes influenced the vote of women more heavily in 1996; social issues and feminist issues counted more for women in 1992, but were more strongly correlated with the vote of men in 1996. Still other issues matter for men and women in one year but fade away in another (e.g., military policy issues). Contrary to the findings for party identification, retrospective economic evaluations played more of a role in the vote of men than it did in the vote of women in both years.

Also striking was the vastly greater importance that evaluations of Congress played in the vote choice of women in 1996 relative to the insignificant attention paid to this issue by men. The weight placed by women on their assessment of the performance of the Congress is noteworthy since most

“revealed preference” manifested in observed behavior rather than an verbal expression. It is, as an example, similar to how Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry measured the popularity of their exhibits: they did not ask people what they liked; they measured how frequently they had to replace the floor tiles around the exhibits. The weights generated through the logistic regression analysis serve a similar function. By comparing the logistic regression results for men and women, we are able to observe the different weights employed by men and women and thus identify varying levels of issue salience.

Table 2. Predicting Party Identification and Vote Choice for Men and Women in 1992 and 1996

	Party Identification			
	1992		1996	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Social Welfare Spending	5.96** (.61)	5.34** (.57)	7.13** (.69)	6.12** (.67)
Social Issues	.91** (.30)	1.00** (.28)	1.20** (.41)	1.45** (.42)
Feminist Issues	.14 (.29)	.33 (.26)	.58 (.40)	.23 (.35)
Retrospective Economic Evals	1.04** (.38)	2.05** (.36)	-1.80** (.52)	-2.61** (.46)
Approval of Congress	-.41 (.23)	-.56** (.22)	.59** (.28)	.79** (.29)
Defense Related Attitudes	.43 (.36)	.67 (.35)	.02 (.47)	.21 (.46)
Constant	-4.67** (.46)	-5.07** (.47)	-4.58** (.56)	-3.41** (.53)
N =	973	1047	754	799
	Presidential Vote			
	1992		1996	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Party ID	2.54** (.22)	2.49** (.20)	2.62** (.29)	2.79** (.28)
Social Welfare Spending	4.67** (.90)	2.98** (.78)	5.68** (1.02)	6.00** (1.10)
Social Issues	.74 (.43)	1.19** (.38)	1.42** (.61)	.30 (.65)
Feminist Issues	-.05 (.44)	.74** (.37)	1.39** (.58)	.81 (.55)
Retrospective Economic Evals	2.25** (.58)	1.24** (.51)	-4.17** (.82)	-2.36** (.75)
Approval of Congress	-.64 (.35)	-.52 (.31)	.08 (.42)	1.36** (.45)
Defense Related Attitudes	1.05** (.56)	1.02** (.51)	.03 (.74)	-.98 (.75)
Constant	-6.11** (.73)	-5.40** (.64)	-4.36** (.81)	-4.21** (.86)
N =	743	797	512	525

Note: Cell entries represent unstandardized logistic regression coefficients.

Standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < .05$

Source: National Election Studies: 1992 and 1996

research contradicts the notion that voters split their ticket in order to balance out the programmatic proclivities of the parties (Alvarez and Schousen, 1993; Born, 1994; Petrocik and Doherty, 1996). Whatever the merit of this general finding that voters do not “balance” their voting, it is possible that some segments of the electorate do cast a “balancing vote” on occasion, and women seem to have been such a group in 1996.

4.1 Comparing Salience and Attitude Effects

The data in Table 2 convincingly demonstrate that men and women do not always politicize issues to an identical degree. The analysis presented in Table 3 attempts to sort out the relative influence of attitudes and salience with regard to the gender gap. The Table includes: (1) the observed gender gap in party identification and voting for 1992 and 1996, (2) the projected gender gap controlling for salience differences, and (3) the projected gender gap controlling for attitude differences.

The projected values controlling for salience differences are calculated by applying the logistic coefficients from the women (in Table 2) to the means observed for men (reported in Table 1). These substitutions produce a predicted party identification and vote for men that allows men to have their expressed attitudes, but requires that they weight these attitudes as the women did in deciding their partisanship and vote. If the substitution predicted equivalence in the vote and party identification of men and women, then salience differences between the sexes would explain the entire gender gap. When they are unequal, the effect of issue salience is equal to the arithmetic difference between the original gap and the projected one.

The projected gender gap controlling for attitude differences (lines 3 and 6) is generated in a similar way. In this case, men retain the recovered weights from Table 2, but the mean attitudes of women are substituted for the men. This simulation predicts the gender gap that would result if men and women were to politicize the issues differently but have essentially similar underlying attitudes. If the predicted vote and party identification of men and women are identical in this case, then attitude differences between men and women are (arguably) responsible for the entire gender gap. To the extent that they deviate, the effect of attitude differences on the gender gap can be calculated as the difference between the original and projected gaps.

The results show large differences between the two elections. Attitude differences between men and women largely explain the gender gaps in party identification and the vote in 1992.¹⁴ The gender gap in party identification is reduced by only two points (7 percent remains) when controlling

¹⁴The finding that attitude differences were primarily responsible for the gender gaps in 1992 confirms earlier analyses reported in Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler (1998).

Table 3. Salience and Attitude Effects on the Gender Gap in Partisanship and the Vote

	1992					
	Party Identification			Vote		
	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
Observed Gender Gap	43	52	9	38	48	10
Projected Gap with Salience Controlled	45	52	7	32	48	16
Projected Gap with Attitudes Controlled	54	52	-0.2	52	48	-0.4

	1996					
	Party Identification			Vote		
	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
Observed Gender Gap	43	57	14	43	57	14
Projected Gap with Salience Controlled	53	57	4	53	57	4
Projected Gap with Attitudes Controlled	53	57	4	55	57	2

Note: The Observed Gender Gap is the difference between the proportion of women and the proportion of men identified with or voting for the Democratic Party. The Projected Gap with Salience Controlled is equal to the gender gap when the regression coefficients for women (from Table 2) are substituted in the equation for men. The Projected Gap with Attitudes Controlled is equal to the gender gap when the mean attitudes for women (from Table 1) are substituted for the men's attitudes.

for salience differences in 1992, while the gender gap in the vote would have been even larger (at sixteen percentage points) if men had weighed the issues as women did. Controlling for differences in attitudes, by contrast, reduced the Republican advantage among men to zero. If men had been as liberal as women were in 1992, the weight they assigned to the issues would have produced a party identification and a vote that was *more* Democratic than that of women. In brief, a gender gap in policy attitudes appears to have shaped the gender gap in voting and party identification in 1992.

Issue salience was a substantially larger component of the gender gap in 1996. The gender gap in party identification is reduced some 70 percent—from over fourteen points to four points—when differences in the salience of issues is controlled. Controlling for the salience differences produced a virtually identical reduction in the gender gap in the vote in 1996. But attitude differences continued to be important. Gender gaps in the vote and partisanship are reduced every bit as much with attitudes controlled as when issue

saliency was controlled. The overlapping estimates thus indicate that the greater conservatism of men and the different weights they assigned to these attitudes made almost equal contributions to the gender gap in 1996.

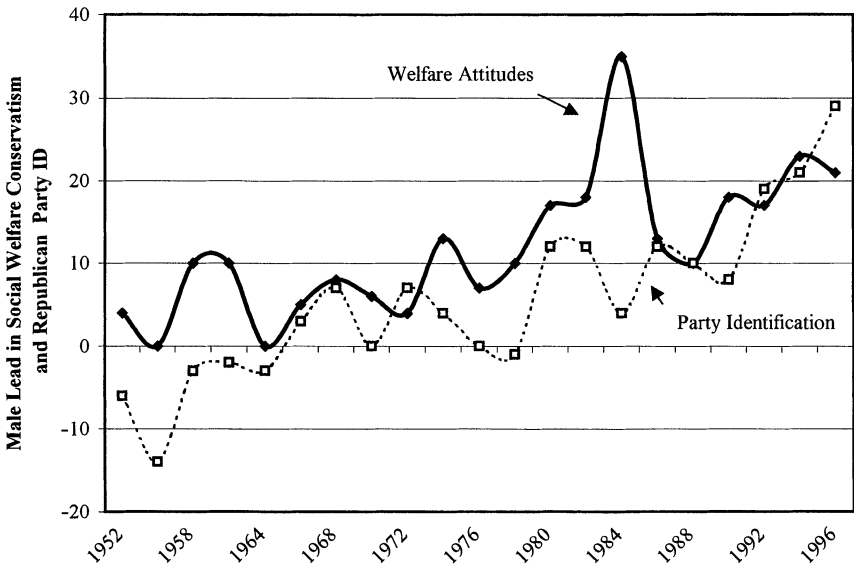
4.2 Social Welfare Attitudes and the Republican Conversion of Men

The consistent importance of social welfare attitudes for the gender gap in the vote and party identification (Table 2), the more conservative opinions of men (Table 1), and the prominence of social welfare issues in creating and maintaining the New Deal party coalitions (see Ladd, 1970) intuitively place social welfare opinions at the center of any explanation of the gender gap. Specifically, they suggest that their relative conservatism on social welfare questions played a role in creating the gender gap as we know it from the preceding data. Other issues as well almost certainly played a role, but the magnitude of the coefficients for these latter variables (in Table 2) suggest that their influence is probably smaller than social welfare issues. On the other hand, the substantial effect of social welfare attitudes in 1992 and 1996 and the strong correlation between male-female differences in welfare attitudes and party identification represent plausible a priori evidence that gender differences on the “social safety net” may be a major cause of the gender gap. Figure 4, which presents longitudinal data on the gender gap in social welfare attitudes and party preference, confirms this expectation.¹⁵

Notice that men were more conservative than women on social welfare questions during the entire 1952–1996 period. But their party preference began to conform to their social welfare attitudes between 1966 and 1978, when party disputes about “big government” and welfare spending became

¹⁵Because wording of various NES questions have changed over the past fifty years, the social welfare attitude measure reported in Figure 4 is not identical over time. The measure for the period from 1952 through 1976 are fully described in Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1979). The attitude for the years after 1976 is measured with an additive index based on the standard NES questions about the government’s responsibility for (1) jobs and a good standard of living, (2) health care, and (3) the tradeoff between lower taxes and more services. The full text of these questions can be found in the 1996 NES as, respectively, variables 483, 479, and 450. The warrant for this index are factor and reliability analyses that established their suitability for scaling. The resulting index is scored from liberal to conservative, parallel to the scoring of party identification from Democrat to Republican. The comparison of the two produces number line values from negative to positive. Since we are correlating difference scores (gender gaps for the measures) through time we do not believe that changes in the component questions affects the analysis. While the absolute values of the measures fluctuate (though not excessively or randomly), the between-gender differences are orderly and increase over time in concert with the increasing difference in party identification. The focus on explaining the gap in the partisanship of men and women is also behind our decision to use attitude gap scores. It yields a more simple presentation, and the operationalization is more equivalent to the gender gap in party identification. The simple correlation between the two series (after smoothing to account for the inexplicable spike in 1984) is .796.

Figure 4. Changes in Social Welfare Attitudes and Party Preference: 1952 to 1996



Note: "Male Lead" equals the percent of men who are social welfare conservatives or Republicans minus the percent of women in these categories.

more salient with the arrival of militant Republicanism in the form of Goldwater and, later, Ronald Reagan. After 1964, the two trends change together. Overall, the pattern is consistent with the notion that the greater salience of social welfare spending for men may have been the source of their changes in party identification. Certainly the cross-sectional relationships between social welfare issues and the gender gap are not equivalent to demonstrated causal relationships, and, as noted above, the emergence of the gender gap in partisanship has not been compared with the emergence of any gender gaps in other attitudes. Nonetheless, the relationship graphed in Figure 4 is consistent with the individual data presented above and is certainly suggestive that social welfare issues may be a principal force behind the gender gap.

5. CONCLUSION

While popular wisdom regards the gender gap as a "female-centric" phenomenon, the historical data on this point are clearly contrary. The gender gap resulted from the changed partisanship of men, as the party bias of

women has changed very little, if at all. Further, the gap has become sufficiently large to be accorded the status of a party coalition-defining social cleavage. Race and social class differences are more prominent, but after these two factors only religion and religiosity rival the ability of gender to predict party preference and voting. All other social differences—such as region, union membership, age, size of place of residence—are measurably less significant predictors of party preference and voting.

The importance of attitude differences in 1992 and the greater importance of salience in 1996 precludes any clear conclusion about whether issue salience or opinion differences are the primary source of growth in the gender gap. Policy attitude differences between men and women appear to be a fundamental component of the gender gap. Controlling for them largely erases the vote and party preference gaps in 1992, and the increase in salience effects in 1996 does not diminish the absolute importance of attitudes to the gender gap. Issue salience effects are, we suspect, less constant and more context driven. Abrupt changes in the gap, such as occurred in 1996, appear to reflect a surge in the salience of some issues. Other dynamics are possible, but the relative stability of the opinion differences between the sexes, coupled with the large increase in the gender gap and stronger salience effect in 1996, makes this hypothesis plausible. It is also consistent with a growing line of research that traces the variability of election outcomes to the salience of issues rather than to shifts in popular opinion (see, for example, Iyengar and Kinder, 1987 and Petrocik, 1996).

Our conclusions regarding which attitudes cause the gender gap are more tentative, but social welfare issues were a principal correlate of the gender gap in the last two presidential elections and may be its primary cause. The measured effects of military and defense policy questions, feminist issues, and social issues were weaker and more erratic. The correlated changes between the gender gaps in partisanship and social welfare issues offer further evidence of the importance of social welfare questions. We have not exhaustively examined this relationship, nor has it been contrasted with similar time series for other issues (largely because comparable data cannot be marshaled). But the parallel changes in Figure 4, coupled with (1) the cross-sectional correlations for 1992 and 1996, (2) the centrality of social welfare issues for the programmatic orientation of the parties, (3) the polarization of the parties on this issue, and (4) the clear divergence between the sexes in their dependence on the social spending of the national government, makes us believe that social welfare issues are the central cause of the gender gap.

Finally, and also tentatively, there is no reason to think that gender differences will subside to any great degree in the near term. The contemporary debate over the suitable role of government and the indispensability of the

social safety net is at the heart of current interparty policy battles. To a great degree, the future of American party coalitions and the future of the gender gap will depend on the evolution of these policy debates. While gender continues to be less influential than race and income, these data strongly suggest that gender may become an ever more politically influential social cleavage simply because differences tend to be self-reinforcing. Parties design agendas that respond to their constituencies, and as the Democrats and Republicans exploit social welfare issues to mobilize their familiar support they will be priming an issue that underpins the gender gap. Salience effects around the social welfare attitudes that distinguish men and women may ensure that the fourteen-point gender gap of 1996 will not be its high-water mark for the contemporary period.

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