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Tom Jacobs

With the election approaching, is the gender gap widening?

As analysts combed through the results of the 2024 election, something striking caught their attention. They were expecting a significant gender gap, with more women voting Democratic and more men voting Republican. That's been true since at least the late 1970s.

But looking specifically at voters under age 30, they found that gap had ballooned. Instead of the typical seven-point cap between men and women, there was a 17-point chasm, as 63% of young women voted for Kamala Harris while only 46% of men did the same.

Eric R.A.N. Smith, professor emeritus of political science at UC Santa Barbara, expects this will continue — and possibly expand — in the coming midterm elections on November 3.

"The things that (President Donald) Trump is doing tend to push women away from voting Republican," he said. "If the polls are right, there will be a larger gender gap in this election, driven largely by people who are under 35."

Is this shift real and lasting? If so, it will represent a big change from the status quo of recent decades. In a recently published paper, Smith and his colleagues traced the gender gap in public opinion over the past 20 years and found it is remarkably consistent.

Obviously, public opinion on some issues swings back and forth. As a result, Democrats get more votes than Republicans in some elections, and vice-versa. But no matter which party was dominant in any given year, the divergence between how men and women voted remained roughly the same.

The paper, published in the journal Social Science Quarterly, was co-authored by April Clark and Juliet Carlisle — both former graduate students at UCSB — along with Smith, and Izabelle Chick in the political science department at the University of Utah. Analyzing data from the annual Gallup Poll Social Survey Series from 2000 to 2024, the researchers concluded: “Although men and women differ in their opinions, their attitudes generally move in parallel.”

Smith and his colleagues found that major news events that capture people’s attention often move the needle on public opinion. For instance, after the Sandy Hook school-shooting tragedy in 2012, public satisfaction with gun laws declined significantly.

However, it declined by similar levels among men and women. And when the issue faded over the following years, men and women gradually returned to their previous level of concern in tandem.

Smith points out there is one major exception to this rule, and it’s not one you would expect: Abortion rights.

“If you go back to the 1960s, it used to be the case that men were more pro-choice, and women were more pro-life,” he said. “Over time, they became equal, and then women became more pro-reproductive rights.”

After the Supreme Court allowed states to outlaw abortion in its 2022 Dobbs decision, opinion shifted again. Men’s opinions on the subject have stayed roughly the same, but women have become significantly more pro-choice.

Smith suspects that may account for part of the widening gender gap among younger Americans, who after all are the most likely to be personally affected by such a law.

Another likely reason for the increasing divide, he argues, is the current administration’s attitude and policies. In research going back to the 1960s, women have expressed more concern about issues such as hunger and homelessness, and

been more opposed to the use of violence. The Trump administration has aggressively cut social welfare programs, and the president's own rhetoric often contains violent imagery.

"Trump is cutting Medicare and Medicaid," Smith noted. "Rural hospitals are shutting down. There is less funding for education. On all these issues, men and women have longstanding differences."

And then there's the economy.

"Everybody feels the pain of higher prices, but women are more economically vulnerable," he said. "They're making less money than men (on average), and there is a huge wealth gap."

So women are impacted more severely by inflation, and they disproportionately disapprove of the president's social policies. With those factors in play, it's easy to envision a female-powered blue tsunami.

Smith also cleared up a few additional myths about why people vote the way they do. He argues that "generational claims" — the notion that a specific generation grows up with certain formative influences that influence their political views — are highly exaggerated. Over the long run, such widely shared experiences "matter a little for some issues, but not at all for others," he said.

And then there's the idea that people gradually grow more conservative as they age,famously quipped by Winston Churchill). Not true, Smith said —Once your political identity is set, you tend to stick with it throughout your life.

The only major exception to this, he added, is the issue of taxes. "Middle-age people tend to pay most of the taxes while the young and the old tend to be collecting benefits exceeding the taxes they pay." Therefore, it's hardly surprising that anti-tax sentiment tends to peak in middle age.

So will the larger gender gap persist once the current president leaves the scene? Smith declines to make predictions, although he suspects that the female-led backlash to the Trump agenda will last for at least the next five years.

Beyond that, he argues it will depend on what happens to the Republican Party. If religious conservatives like Speaker of the House Mike Johnson take control, he believes the party could continue to turn off a majority of American women — much

to its political peril.

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