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Women's Voices and Women's Votes: Gender and the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election

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KELLY DITTMAR, NOV 20 2012

Upon accepting his re-election as President of the United States, President Barack Obama told a crowd of supporters: "Democracy in a nation of 300 million can be noisy and messy and complicated. We have our own opinions. Each of us has deeply held beliefs. And when we go through tough times, when we make big decisions as a country, it necessarily stirs passions, stirs up controversy. That won't change after tonight, and it shouldn't. These arguments we have are a mark of our liberty." In 2012, women candidates, women voters, and women's issues played an essential role in the nation's democratic process. More directly, women's votes were critical in determining who would call the White House home in January 2013.

Four years ago, the gender dynamics of the U.S. presidential election were shaped in large part by the prominent female candidates vying to make history as the nation's first woman President (Hillary Clinton) or Vice-President (Sarah Palin). Despite their many differences, both women confronted the disjuncture between stereotypes of their gender and of executive political office as they sought to break through the "highest, hardest glass ceiling" in American politics [1]. In 2012, women were largely absent from the presidential stage; only one woman – Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann (R-MN) – made a bid for the Republican nomination and neither major party candidate selected a woman as their running mate [2]. Bachmann's candidacy was short-lived, as she suspended her campaign in January 2012 after receiving only 5 percent of the vote in the Iowa caucuses – the first of fifty state contests to select the Republican presidential nominee.

However, women's voices were far from silent in the U.S. presidential contest. This year, the electoral climate assured that neither campaign could ignore women voters or women's issues and still expect victory. In fact, when women were largely absent in the first of three presidential debates this fall, women's organizations mobilized to be sure that candidates and commentators would speak directly to women and their concerns in the remaining debates [3].

Women's Issues

Women in the United States faced unique economic challenges going into the 2012 elections. While men had suffered greater job losses in the recession of 2008, women have lagged significantly in the recovery. According to the National Women's Law Center, from June 2009 – the start of the recovery – to October 2012, women gained a net 850,000 jobs while men gained just under a net 2.4 million jobs. Women continue to face a gender wage gap of 33 cents, and over 14 percent of women were in poverty (versus 10.9 percent of men) in 2011. Both President Obama and Governor Romney sought to exploit these numbers to their benefit with women voters, but Romney's unwillingness to endorse pay equity legislation and his much-maligned statement about ignoring the most government-dependent 47 percent of Americans (among which women are likely a majority) presented multiple obstacles to him securing women's support [4].

While economic issues dominated the 2012 election for all voters – men and women, Democratic candidates emphasized the Republicans' "War Against Women" on issues of reproductive health and violence against women to draw sharp partisan contrasts and energize female voters in this cycle. From the over 40 laws enacted by Republican

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legislatures this year with the potential to restrict women's access to reproductive health care to Republican candidates' inflammatory comments on rape, the Republican record on issues particularly important to women presented a challenge to the Party's candidates at all levels [5]. This challenge was not lost on prominent Republican women, whose post-election comments reflected a frustration over the Party's insensitivity to women's concerns; Karen Hughes, former adviser to President George W. Bush, penned a post-election op-ed claiming Republicans need to "set a tone that is more respectful, positive and inclusive," and added, "if another Republican man says anything about rape other than it is a horrific, violent crime, I want to personally cut out his tongue."

Democratic leaders and campaigns did not miss this opportunity for capitalization on the Republican record, as wide-scale targeting of women voters throughout the summer and fall focused in part on what they outlined as the Republican assault on women's most basic rights. In a post-election interview, David Axelrod, President Obama's senior strategist, told Politico, "From May on, we were running a track that was specifically targeting women on women's health issues, Planned Parenthood, contraception. It broadened out somewhat to economic issues, but primarily focused on those issues, and we maintained our support among women."

Women's Votes

While certainly amplified in this gendered political environment, targeting women voters was not unique to the 2012 presidential contest. According to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, women voters in the United States have both outnumbered and out-voted men since 1980. Their ability to shift electoral outcomes has caused parties, candidates, and strategists alike to recognize the value of women's votes. In 2012, women made up 53% of voters on Election Day, casting over 64 million votes in the presidential race. As they have since 1980, women also voted differently than men, resulting in a gender gap in vote choice. This year, women were 10 percentage points more likely to vote for Barack Obama than were men. In fact, if women did not vote in this election, Mitt Romney would have won by 8 percentage points. The 10-point gender gap of this cycle ranks as the second largest gap we have seen since its emergence in 1980.

Unmarried women undoubtedly drove much of this gap in 2012, as 67 percent of them voted for Obama and only 31 percent voted for Romney. Married women, on the other hand, were more likely to vote for Romney (53 percent) than Obama (46 percent). Both men and women of color voted overwhelmingly for Obama, but gender gaps remained whereby women were between 9 and 11 percentage points more likely than men to vote for the Democratic candidate. Similarly, while majorities of both white men and women voted for Romney, white women were 6 percentage points less likely to vote for the Republican candidate than white men.

The persistence of the gender gap in presidential vote choice demonstrates the significance of women voters' preferences in today's election results.

Down-Ballot Races

Women's votes were also critical to deciding the balance of power in the Congress with whom President Obama will work for the next two years. While Republicans easily retained the majority in the United States House of Representatives, women's votes made the difference in the outcomes of several high-profile races that helped Democrats retain control of the United States Senate. Gender gaps in voting, ranging from 5 to 13 points, were evident in all but one of the 23 U.S. Senate races in 2012 where exit polls were conducted, and women were more likely than men to support the Democratic candidates in each case.

Some of the largest gaps were in races where Democratic women won U.S. Senate seats. Unlike the dearth of women on the presidential ballot, a record number of women (18) ran for the U.S. Senate in 2012 and a record number of women will serve (20) in 2013. Similarly, a record number of women were on the ballot for the U.S. House of Representatives (166) this year and a record number of women (78) will take the oath of office in January 2013.

Looking to 2016

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Women's success at the congressional level may bode well for the possibility of a female presidential contender in 2016, as names of some new and sitting members have been floated as potential candidates in four years. However, no woman is viewed as any more well-situated and well-supported to run for president in 2016 than Hillary Clinton. Public Policy Polling released a survey the day after the 2012 election that showed Hillary Clinton as the strong favorite in the 2016 Iowa Caucuses, with a 40 percentage point gap between her and the next Democratic candidate. Her popularity among voters is at an all-time high and Americans have largely applauded her work as Secretary of State. Despite evidence of being well-positioned today, Secretary Clinton has indicated that she does not plan to run in 2016. In a recent interview with the *New York Times*, she told columnist Gail Collins, "I've ruled it out. But you know me. Everybody keeps asking me. So I keep ruling it out and being asked."

Regardless of who will run in 2016, the 2012 presidential election reaffirms the importance of women's votes in U.S. elections. Moving forward, both parties would do well to pay particular attention to women's voices inside and outside of government, as they play a critical role in this "noisy, messy, complicated democracy" in which women have claimed their space.

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References

[1] Carroll, Susan J., and Kelly Dittmar. 2010. "The 2008 Candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin: Cracking the 'Highest, Hardest Glass Ceiling.'" In *Gender and Elections: Shaping the Future of American Politics* (2nd Edition), eds. Susan J. Carroll and Richard L. Fox. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Seven candidates campaigned for the Republican Party presidential nomination. Michelle Bachmann was the only female candidate and received the fewest overall votes due to her early departure from the campaign. President Barack Obama easily received his party's nomination to run for re-election, leaving no opportunity for a female Democratic contender. Among third party candidates on the presidential ballot, Jill Stein was this year's Green Party nominee. She selected another woman, Cheri Honkala, as her running mate. The pair received 0.3 percent of the national popular vote and no electoral votes.

[3] See more about the efforts made by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) at <http://blog-aauw.org/2012/10/18/presidential-candidates-talk-to-women-at-second-debate/>.

[4] At a closed-door campaign event, Governor Mitt Romney told supporters: "There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you-name-it — that that's an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what. ... These are people who pay no income tax. ... [M]y job is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives."

[5] In an August 2012 television interview, Missouri Republican Senate candidate Todd Akin told his interviewer, "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down." At a debate only weeks before the election, Indiana Republican Senate candidate Richard Mourdock explained his position on banning abortion even in the case of rape by saying, "I've struggled with it myself for a long time, but I came to realize that life is that gift from God...and even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that it is something that God intended to happen." Both comments yielded national responses and denunciation from both Democratic and Republican candidates and officeholders.

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