

The Role of Women Voters in the 2012 Presidential Elections

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Abstract

Today American women play important role in political life of the country. Women's active participation affects the outcomes of the elections at all levels. The 2012 presidential elections were a demonstration of the political power of women who proved that they can defend democratic values and successfully continue to struggle for the equal rights. As elected officials and as voters, women are more likely than men to hold liberal views and support the Democratic Party, while men favor Republicans for decades. 55 percent of women voted for Obama, while only 43 percent voted for Mitt Romney. Women made up about 54 percent of electorate, and in total, the gender gap on Tuesday reached 18 percent. It is becoming more and more evident that women leaders are able to bring different policy priorities in the legislative agenda, particularly in the area of women's issues. Social problems directly impacting women helped Democrats sway votes in many states. The effective steps taken by Obama Administration to ensure gender equality and equity at all levels encourage women to support incumbent president policy. One of the impressive achievements of the women movement is that now women participate in political processes and speak for themselves; so that different ideas which do not necessarily coincide with the mainstream opinion, have equal right for existence. This fact indicates that a true democratic attitude has been shaped, and the women are gaining power as they speak for themselves. Women support governmental spending on social issues and expect new administration to show more empathy and actual help to middle class. They positively responded to the Democrats' messages supporting welfare policy, abortion rights, jobs, healthcare, economy, and equal rights.

Keywords: 2012 elections, women voters, gender gap, women's political power, Barak Obama's supporters, Violence against Women Act (VAWA)

In the last one hundred years, America has witnessed a significant progress in women's rights. Women's political and social status has been changed alongside with socio-economic transformation that took place during this period. Exactly one hundred years ago women were fighting for the right to vote, whereas, today they play an important role in political life of the country. Women's active participation affects the outcomes of the elections at all levels. The present article tries to demonstrate American women's political struggle during presidential elections of the 2012 in support of a democratic candidate Barack Obama. How did American women demonstrate their will and show ability to combine a broad understanding of political issues with adequate actions in order to achieve success? What were the main reasons why they supported Obama administration?

Nowadays, women still face injustices in many spheres: labor discrimination and unequal payment, birth control and health care, family violence and sexual harassment, unequal access to financial resources and bank credits. On the whole, women in the United States are now more self-reliant, dynamic, prosperous, well-informed, knowledgeable, also, purposeful and organized than ever before. Today, though it has become obvious that gender equality is crucial for sustainable development of the democratic society, women's struggle for equal rights has not been supported by all political parties and non-governmental organizations in the same way. Conservative politicians and religious leaders' efforts to limit or reverse women's progress in many areas have been followed by negative reaction from the progressive society. The existed confrontation has made women's struggle more purposeful and meaningful. In order to respond adequately to the challenges of modern society, women make use of the advanced feminist the-

ories to have better understanding of political, psychological and socio-economic reasons of women's problems. By the second decade of the twenty first century, American women's unions have become more organized and have acquired a broader vision, a clear-cut strategy, prudent tactics which resulted in crucial political and social changes. One of the best examples of action-based strategy was 2012 presidential elections when 55 percent of women voted for Obama, while only 43 percent voted for Mitt Romney. Women made up about 54 percent of electorate. In total, the gender gap on Tuesday added up to 18 percent – a significantly wider margin than the 12-point gap in the 2008 elections. (McVeigh & Borger, 2012)

The gender gap is nothing new in American politics. Since 1972, when exit polling became widespread, men and women split their votes in three elections 1996, 2000, and 2004. In general, the 2012 election was the year of big gains for American women. Was it, in principal, women's reaction to the Republican's extremism regarding abortion and birth control? Or, did other factors also play a significant role when the majority of women voters supported Democrat candidates? Both, polling and research results showed that there have been a number of other reasons which caused women's active support for the Democratic candidate and determined the election outcomes. The present article tries to analyze women's motives and the goals they wanted to achieve by making their choice.

As elected officials and as voters, women are more likely than men to hold liberal views and support the Democratic Party, while men favor Republicans for decades. More women than men support gun control, a national health-care system, government funding for social programs, tougher sentences for perpetrators of sexual assault, work place and domestic violence, also women's right to abortion and LGBT rights. The

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gender gap in 2012 election can be significant in two ways: getting more liberal candidates – women and men – elected, and giving greater focus to liberal issues once such candidates are in office.

According to CNN's exit polls, 55% of women and 45% of men voted for Obama, and 44% of women and 52% of men voted for Romney. In 2012 election female African- Americans and Latinos together make up Obama's new winning coalition. That level of female support for the president made an especially big impact in swing states like Ohio where the gender breakdown mirrored the national figures. (Abdullah, 2012)

As said by Christopher C. Hull, who runs the online advocacy platform Blast Roots, gender gap has more to do with the nature of the parties than the candidates. (Election 2012: 6 Women Explain Why They're Voting for Barack Obama, 2012) Hull's conviction that traditionally women are more inclined to support Democratic Party's political platform than the Republican Party platform has been shared by many politicians, but besides general principles, there have been other racial, social and economic reasons specific to this election why women supported Democratic candidates, including the personality of the incumbent president. Implementation of gender equality, Obama healthcare program, higher education grants for poor students, signing of Violence Against Women Act, wide support and promotion of non-white political candidates, are just a few examples of the Democrats' policy in the head of Obama.

In general, 2012 can be marked as a historic year for the women. They demonstrated they could "crack the glass ceiling" in politics by winning the highest number of seats in the Congress. Democrats' victory brought the liberal shift also in Congress and twenty women now hold the U.S. Senate seats. Five newly elected members in the Senate are: Wisconsin Democrat Tammy Baldwin, Democrat Mazie Hirono from Obama's home state of Hawaii, Democrat Elizabeth Warren from Massachusetts, Democrat Heidi Heitkamp from North Dakota, and Deb Fischer – a Republican from Nebraska. Also, the New Hampshire congressional delegation in the Congress is all female (CNN's Joe Von Kanel contribution). As Hanna Rosin, the author of "the End of Men" and the Rise of Women" declares in her interview with CNN, "... After this election, I feel like I am on much more solid ground." (Lowen, 2013) Beyond doubt, women were one of the principal players in the 2012 elections that made the victory of democratic forces come true once again. But will this success bring more women in power? In case women get more seats in Congress and occupy key positions in public offices, are they proficient and competent enough to bring different policy priorities to the legislative agenda, particularly in the area of women's issues? (Abdullah, 2012) Women's political advancement at all levels has become one of the reasons why women supported Obama; current policy proved to be faithful to the gender equality policy. Significant changes introduced during Obama first term in women promotion were another stimulus for thousands of women to support Obama's administration.

Gender gap appeared not only due to Obama's prudent gender policy, but also because the Republican candidates advanced issues which were unacceptable for the majority of women, particularly for young females from lower social class. Kathleen Dolan, a political science professor at the University of Wisconsin argues in her interview with CNN (Washington, CNN), that a Republican presidential candidate who can declare superficial answers to serious questions about economic

equity and autonomy reveals a lack of serious thoughts about the issues of substantive importance of women, and also demonstrates a lack of commitment to the change necessary to allow women and men to lead fully integrated professional and personal lives. (Abdullah, 2012) Democrats used Republicans' aggressive declarations, such as, women's body preventing pregnancy after "legitimate rape", (Rep. Todd Akin) to suggest that, Republicans would threaten the right to contraception, to equal pay, health and abortion rights. Romney avoided equal pay legislation discussions, did not support Planned Parenthood and pledged to overturn Roe v. Wade that also alienated many female voters. Unmarried women backed the president by an incredible 38 percentage-point margin over Romney, because Romney promised he would abolish Planned Parenthood, a key women's healthcare provider. Terry O'Neill, president of the National Organization for Woman, argues that women's position was dictated mostly by economic motives, which were no less important than women's rights."When you look at unmarried women, they are very often the head of their families or taking care of elders. What they saw in Mitt Romney was someone who had disdain for them – as part of the 47%. He wanted to cut after-school programs, Head Start, food stamps and job training programs." (Abdullah, 2012) Apart from those mentioned above, there have been a number of other reasons why the majority of women voters opposed the Republicans' policy. Women saw in Republican's stand another attempt to turn the clock back in the historical struggle for women's rights.

Social issues directly impacting women helped Democrats sway votes in some states. Traditionally, women support governmental spending on social issues and expect new administration to show more empathy and actual help to middle class. So, they positively responded to the Democrats' messages supporting welfare policy, abortion rights, jobs, healthcare, economy, and equal rights. On the other hand, dissatisfaction with Obama runs deeper among men when it comes to issues of economy and deficit, as the burden of being unemployed reflect more heavily on men than a woman. The latest jobs report in March declared unemployment rate for men at 7.6 percent, for women at 7, 4 percent. Also, men listed the deficit and national debt as their top issue, while the women it was healthcare problems.

It is also important to consider that, the women who voted for Obama did not constitute a unified vote. What changed in 2012 election was that women were more organized and took a deep insight into the intricate nature of the elections. Raising women's awareness in political and social issues does not necessarily mean that they all hold the same viewpoint. One of the impressive achievements of the movement is that now women participate in political processes and speak for themselves, so that different ideas which do not necessarily coincide with the mainstream opinion have equal right for existence. This fact indicates that a true democrat attitude has been shaped, and the women are gaining power as they speak for themselves. In fact, among female voters, more than 50% tend to favor abortion rights, and Minnesota republican Michele Bachmann, who is strongly pro-life, keeps her seat in the Congress. Therefore, Democrat women are not the only beneficiaries of women's liberation process and the women's movement is not confined to the Democratic Party alone. A Gallup Survey conducted in mid October found that women in the swing states differed greatly from men when asked to name the most important issues facing their gender in the 2012 election. "A plurality of female registered voters offered abortion (39%) as the most

important issue for women, followed by jobs, healthcare, the economy, and equal rights. The Gallup Survey indicates that, “in contrast, men see jobs (38%) and the economy (37%) as the two most important issues facing the men.” Though, in recent elections, women also declared the economy as one of the priority issues (Abdullah, 2012). Two important conclusions could be drawn from abovementioned: the women are more self-reliant, more educated and can promote their individual political attitude than during previous elections; the second, women’s concern was economic issues and they were focused on positive solution of definite programs which dealt with economic problems.

Eliana Sanchez, on November 13, 2012, declared that the United States is no longer a country ruled by old white men. The percentage of white voters came in at all-time low of 72 percent out of which 59 went to the republican candidate. The age of those (56%) voters was 65 and older. And 88% of Romney’s voters were white. “The GOP is coming to terms with the fact that the United States is no longer a country ruled by old white men. Barack Obama won the Latino vote three to one – a 44-point loss for Mitt Romney – the Asian-American vote with more than 70 percent, and the African-American vote by more than 90 percent. Not to mention he won the 18-29-year-old group by 29 points.” (Sanchez, 2012) The 2012 election results sent the most important message to American people and to the democratic world that white men absolute dominance in politics has come to the end. Women now play a decisive role in elections and their participation is now more meaningful because they are far more educated voters who acknowledge the significance of change in politics they struggle for. It is also worthwhile to mention that, a big majority of women who voted for Obama were young. This tendency seems very encouraging if consider that the youth active involvement in elections is becoming one of the fastest growing problems in America.

What changes did women expect from Obama administration? Will the expectations of the majority of women voters be met? Women want more than abortions and the GOP lost female votes not just for its position on abortion, but for a number of other reasons as well. Romney did not answer one of the top questions regarding equal pay legislation and threatened to stop funding Planned Parenthood, which many women rely on as a primary health care provider.

Valerie Jarrett, senior advisor to President and Chair of the White House Council on Women and Girls in her address, issued on March 07, 2013, states that “According to official data, from 2009 to 2012, forty percent of mass shootings in America are a consequence of domestic abuse. One in five women is a victim of rape in their lifetime..... Stop the violence against women – is one of the major issues that women expect from the Democratic government to be effectively addressed. A few steps regarding the regulation of the problem have been taken by Obama administration.” (Jarret, 2012)

On March 7, 2013 president Obama signed a Bill that both strengthened and reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Vice president Biden, Senators Patrick Leahy, Mike Crapo, and Patty Murray and Representatives Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer and Gwen Moore actively supported and guided this legislation to passage. For the past eighteen years, since Vice President Biden initially wrote the Act in 1994, VAWA has helped to decrease the rates of domestic violence across the country. Three years ago, federal interagency group on violence against women began meeting to consider gaps in the

Country’s response to the violence and make recommendations to Congress to fill those gaps. Many of those recommendations were included in the final bill. Now the government is better equipped to recognize violence in its early stage, and help to reduce the number of domestic violence homicides. People of all ages united in the fight against all forms of violence, so that teens and young adults will have better access to prevention and intervention programs to help break the cycle of violence around the country. In addition, the bill removes barriers faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender victims, whose needs are often overlooked by law enforcement, prosecutors, courts and victim service providers. Congress also maintained protections for immigrants and took the important step reauthorizing the trafficking Victims protection Act in this same legislation. Very importantly, VAWA will bring justice for Native American victims. The Bill will help to improve effectiveness and efficiency of the tribal justice system and bring more offenders to justice. (Violence Against Women Act, 2013)

Signing of the Bill is just one good example which demonstrates that democratic government initiates significant changes to fight against all forms of oppression, violence and injustice. Though, according to many critics, the democratic policy is still not effective and bold enough at affecting significant social changes. Lessons of history show that crucial changes in mentality and psychology of people do not take place overnight. The laws and even effective implementation policies of regulations are not enough to bring the change at once. Instead, when government and society together works out a just and prudent policy and chooses step-by-step approach to the problems, they together finally achieve positive results. Those changes would not take place unless women made their voices heard. Also, a team of women in power had worked effectively on the issue, including Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer, Congresswoman Moor, and others. It is becoming more and more evident that women leaders are able to bring different policy priorities in the legislative agenda, particularly in the area of women’s issues.

Why did women vote for the Democrats? For a number of reasons, among them are women issues, economic, social, healthcare, education. Hundreds of women spelt out the reasons of their support through media and internet. They say they believed the Obama promoted Pre-Existing Condition Insurance Plan (PCIP) that had been created by the Affordable Care Act; That the President supported the candidates of more Latinos, among them women, than ever in the key positions, and also nominated the first Hispanic judge to serve on the Supreme Court, just to name a few. (Election 2012: 6 Women Explain Why They’re Voting for Barack Obama, 2012)

Conclusion

True reasons why the President Barack Obama won the majority of female votes are still the subject of through study. In the result of our study we have come to the conclusion that women supported Obama administration because: the Democrats implemented prudent gender policy during the first term, and have brought some important socio-economic changes. They believe Democrats can turn economy around, create more jobs, cut taxes on wealthy people, offer education grants to young people who want to continue their higher education; Women believe Obama will allow women and men to lead fully integrated professional and personal lives. So long as the ideological gap between the parties grows, gender gap may grow

as well. The Republican's controversial comments about rape and abortion urged women consolidate and declare that it was a turning back the clock on women's issues. This victory is a result of women's struggle for liberation. Violation of women's rights has turned voters into an organized group able to resist the existed reality and fight for the improvement of their life. It is also evident that American political system is becoming more open and responsive to demands from organized groups than it was in previous years. Politics involves the use of power, and women's personal power has increased to such a significant level that they can exercise it through governmental and non-governmental organizations. A modern women leader is now a charismatic person who has a vision, a power to persuade and lead to change. Women's political participation includes active membership in a wide range of local, state, and national organizations. They work in support of candidates for political office, organizing fund-raising events, circulating petitions and actively participating in voting. Women's involvement in different spheres of political, social and economic life provide for them wider opportunities to embrace a wider range of problems American people face including economics, business, security, foreign policy, migration, and other important issues.

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