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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Ted Kennedy and the Gap

By GAIL COLLINS

Great job, voters. Huge turnout, good vibes and everything's still up in the air. We could be working on these presidential nominations for months. Maybe all the way to the conventions! At last, an opportunity to have really serious discussions about the makeup of the credentials committee.

Really, it's been a surprise a minute. In Massachusetts, every Democratic alpha male in the state, including the governor and two U.S. senators, endorsed Barack Obama. Democratic women then stampeded to the polls in a great show of enthusiasm for ignoring their advice.

Ted Kennedy was the particular sore point. Some people looked at Kennedy's passing of the J.F.K. torch and felt their spines tingle. A lot of women saw him dumping his old ally, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, for the newer, shinier, male model of a presidential candidate and felt their spines stiffen.

"I don't think I understand it myself, other than I'm angry with them," said Barbara Wilson, a retired teacher from Quincy, Mass. "Piling on? Yes, I definitely think it was. The old boys' club."

Senator Kennedy has been a champion of many issues that women care about. But when he ran unsuccessfully for president in 1980, he was victim of a major-league gender gap. This was an early example of the rule that women will not vote for men who yell.

"He'd go out and scream on the podium and I'd think, imagine you're a retired woman, having your dinner in front of the TV in your nice quiet house, and you see this out-of-control, red-faced guy yelling. Maybe the gap had as much to do with that as Chappaquiddick," one of his former campaign people told me some years back.

We've had a gender gap in American politics since Ronald Reagan pushed the Republican Party to the right. (Featuring, in a supporting role, John McCain as the foot soldier.) Women peeled off toward the Democrats while men went the other way.

If you look at issues, you can also see a larger pattern. Women — especially older women — are often politically risk-averse. They worry about the social safety net. "They see themselves as economically vulnerable even when they're not," said Debbie Walsh, the director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

As a group, women haven't been all that enthusiastic about big, bold, new political ventures. Their first concern tends to be having somebody sensible mind the store. All other things being equal (and all voices being modulated), when given the choice between a senator with a long history of working on useful but unglamorous children's programs and a senator who's a relative newcomer with a dramatic but not totally defined vision for change, they'll go for the day care.

Hillary would be winning the women's vote this year even if she'd been a man. Although that's a concept I'd rather not dwell on.

Meanwhile, the Republican far right has fallen into a remarkable snit over John McCain's march to the nomination. Rush Limbaugh is virtually gnawing his own ankle in rage. By co-authoring legislation with Democrats, Limbaugh ranted, McCain was working with "threats to the American way of life as we've always known it." James Dobson says he won't vote if McCain is the nominee because of infractions ranging from failure to back a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage to "foul and obscene language." Ann Coulter claims she'd support Clinton "because she's more conservative than he is."

Once again, the reason for everything terrible about American politics for the last 20 years becomes clear. These people are nuts.

McCain, for his part, is in the sort of good mood that people acquire when they're winning. He even had nice words Tuesday night for Mitt Romney, who didn't return the favor.

Instead, Mitt treated his supporters to a mini-transformation. The candidate whose slogan was "Washington is Broken" is now the man who can stop "America's Long-Term Slide." One way or another, things are really falling apart in Romneyland.

The Republicans are fighting about the issues, in a strange, paranoid sort of way. The Democrats, on the other hand, are splitting into subsets. On Tuesday, Clinton got the white women and Hispanics, and Obama got the African-Americans. He got the youth and she got the oldth.

This has led to a lot of worrying about identity politics. We're finding it hard to adjust to the idea that we might actually be having a nontoxic election involving a black man against a white woman.

If either Obama or Clinton were a bad candidate, it would be irresponsible to vote for him out of black pride or for her out of sisterly solidarity. However, they're qualified, and most Democrats like them both. Since there's no real policy difference between them, it's not surprising that a lot of voters went for demography.

No harm will be done. As long as the candidates behave.

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