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NATIONAL | WINTER 2011

The Gender Gap Lives

WOMEN MADE A DIFFERENCE IN KEY RACES, BUT LOST GROUND IN CONGRESS

By Eleanor Smeal

The Gender Gap in Three Key Senate Races, according to exit polls

STATE	CANDIDATE	WOMEN'S VOTES (%)	MEN'S VOTES (%)	GENDER GAP (%)
Colorado	Michael Bennet	56	40	16
	Kenneth Buck	39	54	
Washington	Patty Murray	56	47	9
	Dino Rossi	44	53	
Nevada	Harry Reid	54	47	7
	Sharron Angle	41	48	

Source: Edison Research exit polls for major U.S. TV news networks and the Associated Press, as reported by CNN. Percentages vary from actual election percentages.

Don't believe anything you might have read to the contrary: The gender gap was alive and well in the 2010 midterm elections.

That gap—the measurable difference between the way women and men vote—showed clearly in 25 of 26 U.S. Senate races and 17 of 18 gubernatorial races for which exit polls were conducted. (There were no exit polls for House districts or state legislatures.) And the general pattern remains the same as it has since the 1980s: Women tend to favor Democratic candidates more than men do, while men favor Republicans.

"Typically, we see gender gaps in about two-thirds of all statewide races," says Susan J. Carroll, senior scholar at the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University in New Jersey, "but this year we saw gender gaps in all but a couple of contests."

In fact, the gap was so pronounced that without women's votes Democrats would not have retained a majority in the Senate. In three key races—Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D) versus Sharron Angle (R) in Nevada; Sen. Michael Bennet (D) versus Kenneth Buck (R) in Colorado; and Sen. Patty Murray (D) versus Dino Rossi (R) in Washington—the Democrats would have been defeated if men alone had cast votes (see chart, left).

The size of the gender gap varied widely in races, from as little as 4 percent to a startling 19 percent in the Hawaii governor's race, where former Democratic Rep. Neil Abercrombie was elected with 68 percent of women's votes and just 49 percent of men's. Even the Republican strategy of nominating more women candidates could not close the gap: Losing GOP candidates Christine O'Donnell (Delaware), Sharron Angle (Nevada), Linda McMahon (Connecticut) and Carly Fiorina (California) all had solid majorities of women voting against them. Of the non-incumbent Republican women senatorial candidates, only Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire had a majority of women voters on her side—and she won.

Despite the power of progressive women voters, women officeholders lost ground in Congress for the first time since 1979—albeit by just one seat—and a number of anti-choice women gained office. In a midterm that was difficult overall for Democrats, nine pro-choice Democratic women incumbents lost their House seats (four of whom were of color), and one, Blanche Lincoln of Nebraska, lost her Senate seat. At the same time, eight new Republican anti-abortionrights women (only one of color) won their House races along with the antichoice Ayotte in the Senate. (That said, one anti-choice Democratic woman lost her seat in the House, and a Republican woman with a mixed record on abortion won.)

Women lost clout, too: Nancy Pelosi is no longer speaker of the House. In contrast, House Republicans have no woman in a top leadership position, and all the men in charge are virulently anti-abortion and family planning—receiving scores of "0" from Planned Parenthood.

Overall, women still have a long way to go to reach parity within their parties and in the U.S. Congress, although Democratic women are further ahead. In 2011, women will hold only 10 percent of the Republican seats in the House, while Democratic women, despite their losses, will occupy 25 percent of the Democratic seats. In the Senate, only 17 women hold seats—12 Democrats and five Republicans. Overall, women will remain 17 percent of Congress, keeping the U.S. at a disgraceful 72nd in gender equity among 188 countries with national parliaments.

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