



Women in Election 2012 - Issues and Voters

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More American women than men will likely go to the polls on November 6, 2012.

SSN scholars explore the gender gap and explain the high stakes for many groups of women in key election debates about health care, education, birth control, and workplace regulation.

WHY WOMEN ARE COVETED VOTERS

Mitt Romney and Barack Obama are constantly maneuvering to appear appreciative of women – for good reason, as [Kira Sanbonmatsu](#) of Rutgers University explains in her informative brief on [the quest for women's votes in election 2012](#). Not only are women the majority of the adult population, they are more likely than men to actually appear at the polls and cast their ballots. American women have a long ways to go to hold as many public offices as men, but when it comes to voting, they have the advantage. Since 1980, they have voted at a higher rate than men.

Of course American women vary and their outlooks are far from monolithic. Some are rich, some poor, others middle class. Some work for wages full time; others care for children and other family members in the home, or combine such care-giving with part-time work. Women, like men, differ by age, religion, race, and region of residence. So why do pundits and politicians so often speak of "women's issues" or "the women's vote"? Are there predictable ways in which women, or many of them, share political interests and perspectives?

THE GENDER GAP

The gender gap attracts attention, Sanbonmatsu explains, because women voters overall are more likely than males to identify with the Democratic Party and support Democrats on Election Day. That has been true since 1980, when Republican Ronald Reagan got significantly more support from men. Gender differences pale in comparison to age differences and the gap between white and minority voters. But because women voters are so numerous, even a slight tilt in their voting patterns can have a big impact. In 2008, women gave Barack Obama a big boost – and he is trying to win women's support by a large margin again this time.

Are hot-button social issues like abortion what the gender gap is all about? Actually, no, because women and men think and vote in parallel ways on such issues. Male and female voters are more likely to disagree on social-welfare issues and questions about the use of military force, with women giving more support to politicians who promote peaceful resolutions of international conflicts and favor expanding or preserving social programs.

To probe more deeply and see the specific issues at stake, we need to look at the needs and values of women in various life circumstances.

PIVOTAL MARRIED MOMS

Obama and Romney are both going out of their way to court the votes of married mothers, because these voters swing back and forth between the two parties. When Esmé Deprez prepared her thought-provoking article in *Bloomberg News*, "[Man Winning Most Married Moms Poised for the White House](#)," she consulted with SSN scholar [Christine Percheski](#) of Northwestern University to create a profile of married mothers and the

experiences that make them open to appeals from both Republicans and Democrats. Like other women, married moms often tilt toward Democrats on issues like health care, education, and tolerance on social issues. But the higher incomes and greater financial security enjoyed by many married women make them receptive to Republican messages as well.

WOMEN'S SPECIAL STAKE IN THE RYAN BUDGET WARS

In election 2012, Democrats and Republicans are taking unusually polarized positions on taxes and social spending. Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney has expressed enthusiasm for a radical budget overhaul overwhelmingly supported by GOP legislators in the House of Representatives, and he made the overhaul's chief architect, Congressman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, his vice presidential running mate. In a recent Spotlight accessible [here](#), SSN scholars have dissected the Ryan budget in detail – and [Ann Orloff](#) and [Christine Percheski](#) of Northwestern University spell out the severe implications for women. As they explain in their brief on [what women will lose if the Ryan budget becomes law](#), arguments over this plan are likely to expand the gender gap, because so many social programs vital to younger and older women are at issue.

- Women live longer, so they will be strongly affected by Republican plans to raise the age of eligibility for Medicare to 67 and change the program into vouchers that may not cover as much of the costs of health care as Medicare now does. Women will also be hit hard by GOP plans to make very large cuts in Medicaid, which pays for nursing home care as well as extra aid to disabled older people.
- Life will also become more stressful for middle-aged women if they have to worry about their own parents' health care and cannot look forward to secure health care during their own retirement years.
- The Ryan budget calls for major cuts to programs for the poor that give special help to poor mothers and babies, and also portends cut-backs in Head Start for poor children and aid to public schools.
- Many planned GOP cutbacks in aid to low-income working parents are likely to hit women especially hard, because their wages are lower than men's and they often have to juggle paid work with caregiving responsibilities in the family.

EMPLOYED WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Democrats and Republicans also usually take different positions on policies of special concern to women who work full or part time for wages.

Access to affordable birth control is one of those issues, as [Carole Joffe](#) of the University of California at San Francisco explains in her brief on [birth control as an economic issue](#) for women and their families. President Obama's new health care law includes a rule that insurance plans have to offer free "preventive health care services," and his Health and Human Services Secretary has ruled that birth control is included in that coverage. This has sparked arguments about religious exemptions, but the more fundamental concern for most working-aged women may be economic. Reliable birth control costs money, yet without it many women could not hold down jobs vital to the economic wellbeing of their families as well as themselves.

A variety of protections for employees will go one way or another depending on which party is in charge after 2012. Along with repealing pending expansions of health insurance for millions of women and men making low or modest wages, Republicans plan big cuts to child-care subsidies and wage subsidies for low-income families. And they have promised to eliminate or reduce enforcement of rules about hours, wages, and workplace safety. Women workers will be among the hardest hit.

It is not just a question of existing rules and benefits. Some promising starts in new directions could be cut off. For example, millions of home care workers, most of them women, take care of feeble elderly people or disabled people in their homes, but they work without the same protections other U.S. workers have long enjoyed. As [Sandra Butler](#) of the University of Maine explains in her brief on [providing labor protections for](#)

[home care workers](#), these workers were originally left out of New Deal rules about wages and overtime pay. Just recently, the Obama administration has issued new rules that would protect these workers just like all others. But the changes will likely be reversed if Obama is not reelected – just as earlier attempts to include home care workers in labor-law protections were reversed when Bill Clinton left office and the next president was a Republican.

In the states as well as the national level, the U.S. faces many challenges in adapting longstanding social programs and workplace rules to the new realities faced by most families – where either a single parent or two parents both try to juggle family responsibilities with the demand of paid work. Government has to be involved in fashioning and paying for new supports if life is to become more manageable for today's working mothers and fathers. [Randy Albelda](#) of the University of Massachusetts at Boston explores [what government could do to fight persistent poverty among single mothers](#). And as [Ann Orloff](#) of Northwestern University details in her brief on [what government can do for all employed mothers](#), the U.S. federal government has made a few halting steps to help working parents, and some U.S. states have made a start with family and medical leave benefits. (See the SSN brief by [Eileen Appelbaum](#) and [Ruth Milkman](#) on how [paid leave policies have helped low-income families in California and New Jersey](#).) But there is much more to do, and today's battles over social programs and taxes will determine whether progress can be made in the near future.