

The Two Gender Gaps in Presidential Primaries

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April 2017

Abstract

Two types of gender gaps occur in presidential nominating contests. The first is gender differences in candidate preference. This occurs in both Democratic and Republican contests and preceded the candidacies of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The second gender gap is in participation rates. Women on average are 13.5 percentage points more likely than men to turnout in Democratic primaries, while men hold a 4.3 percentage point edge over women in Republican primaries.

Paper presented at the Western Political Science Association Convention, Vancouver, BC, April 13-15, 2016.

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In the spring of 2016 with Hillary Clinton as the frontrunner in the Democratic presidential nomination race and controversial statements by Donald Trump in the Republican contest, the opinions of women voters drew considerable media attention. Unfortunately, most media coverage made the critical error of reporting only figures for women without comparing them to the opinion of men. The media focused on the “women’s vote” by asking which candidate received the plurality of the vote from women. Thus, the media reported that Clinton lost the women’s vote in New Hampshire because Bernie Sanders won 55 percent of the women’s vote. Of course, Sanders won the majority of the votes from both women and men in the Granite State primary. Clinton, however, did receive greater support from women, at 44 percent, than from men, at 32 percent, for a 12 point gender gap. The second error by the media arose when it considers the potential impact of Trump’s statements depicted as misogynistic. Here the media also tended to report only the views of women and failed to consider whether men too were offended by Trump’s statements.

This paper focuses on two types of gender gaps that appear in presidential primaries. The first is whether a specific candidate receives more or fewer votes from women than from men. This type of gender gap is the correct measure of whether Clinton or Trump were advantaged or disadvantaged by the “women’s vote.” The second gender gap is in turnout. In 2016, women were 15.6 percentage points more likely than men to vote in Democratic presidential primaries, while men were slightly more likely to participate in Republican primary at an average rate of 3.3 percentage points. This second gender gap has generally been overlooked by the media and political science research, but such a gender gap can augment the support of a Democratic candidate that appeals to women.

Political Science Research on Gender in Presidential Primaries

A few studies examine the intraparty gender gap in presidential primaries (e.g., Fisher 2011; Huddy and Carey 2009; McMullen and Norrander 2002; Norrander 2003). Norrander (2003) reports on statistically significant gender gaps in candidate preference for Democratic and Republican presidential primaries between 1980 and 2000. Her work demonstrates that a gender gap in candidate preferences preceded the candidacy of Hillary Clinton. Over the earlier time period, 18 Democratic candidates had statistically significant gender gaps, either receiving more votes from women or more votes from men. These gender gaps varied in size from 3.2 to 9.6 percentage points. The largest and most consistent gender gap occurred in the 2000 primaries, where women favored Al Gore more than men by 9.6 percentage points, while men more than women favored Bill Bradley by 9.3 percentage points. Other notable patterns include 1980 where women were more supportive of Kennedy while men favored Carter. In 1992, both Bill Clinton and Paul Tsongas received more support from women while Jerry Brown was favored by men. In 1988, Gore had the opposite gender gap from 2000; in 1988 he was preferred by more men than women. Some candidates had inconsistent gender gaps within one year. In 1984, both Gary Hart and Walter Mondale drew more votes from women in some

primaries but more support from men in other primaries. Overall, a gender gap occurred in about one-quarter of the Democratic presidential primaries held during this time period.

In the 1980 to 2000 Republican presidential primaries, a gender gap occurred in one third of the primaries. Seventeen Republican candidates during this period were favored more by women than by men, or vice versa, in at least some of the presidential primaries in which they competed. In the 1988 presidential primaries, George H. W. Bush support among men was 11 percent higher than his support among women. Yet in 1992 when he was running as an incumbent being challenged by Pat Buchanan, women more than men supported Bush by the same 11 percentage point margin. Other candidates favored more by women included Pat Robertson in 1988, Robert Dole in 1996 and George W. Bush in 2000. Men provided greater support to John McCain in 2000.

Women and men may be looking for different qualities in a presidential nominee. McMullen and Norrander (2000) found that women prioritized traits such as leadership or experience. Men, more than women, valued the electability of the candidate. Men also looked for a candidate who was a maverick or would shake things up. Trent *et al.* (2010) report from their survey of citizens attending candidate rallies in New Hampshire that women more than men placed a focus on competency and caring about people's needs for the qualities desired in their ideal candidate.

The partisanship of women and men voting in presidential primaries differs, as well. Even though primaries are divided between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, all formats of primaries tend to have voters who identify themselves as independents as well as partisans from the party holding the primary (Norrander and Wendland 2016). In four out of ten Democratic primaries and three out of ten Republican primaries held between 1980 and 2000, men who voted in primaries were more likely than women to call themselves an independent (Norrander 2003). This difference may be reflective of the overall "independence gap" that finds men more likely than women to call themselves political independents (Norrander 1997).

Ideological differences also exist among presidential primary voters (Norrander 2003). In one out of five Democratic primaries between 1980 and 2000, women were more likely than men to call themselves either a liberal or a moderate, while in 39 percent of the Democratic primaries, men more than women adopted the conservative label. On the Republican side, a more consistent ideological difference existed between the women and men participating. In two-thirds of Republican primaries women were more likely than men to call themselves a moderate, while in three out of four Republican primaries men were more likely than women to identify as conservatives.

Differences in issue positions or priorities also may underlie gender differences in candidate preferences. The economy is one issue that often impinges on presidential nomination races, and women primary voters, more than men, tend to be more pessimistic about the state of the economy. Rapoport, Stone and Abramowitz's (1990) in their 1984 surveys of caucus participants in Iowa, Michigan and Virginia found greater gender differences on issue positions among Republicans than for Democrats. Within each party, gender differences in issue positions emerged on women's issues, such ERA and abortion, and foreign policy topics such as a nuclear freeze or defense spending. These authors found fewer

intraparty gender differences on compassion issues, which the authors attributed to greater interparty differences on these issues.

With Hillary Clinton's candidacy in the 2008, and subsequently in 2016, more attention has focused on gender gaps in candidate support. Fisher (2011) notes a 7 percentage point gender gap between Obama and Clinton but also demonstrates that the gender gap was smaller than voting patterns based on race, age, religion or education. Likewise, Stockley (2008) describes gender differences in support between Clinton and Obama but also found a greater division along racial lines. Redlawsk, Bowen and Tolbert (2008) based on their early polling of potential Iowa caucus participants report greater support for Clinton among women. They also report on the Republican side noting greater support for McCain by women with Giuliani and Romney obtaining more support from men. Huddy and Carey (2009) extend the analysis of gender differences in support of Hillary Clinton across racial and ethnic groups. They find the largest gender gap among white primary voters (at 12 percentage points), a sizeable gender gap among Latino voters (10 percentage points), with a small difference among African American voters (3 percentage point gender gap). Thus, past research notes gender gaps in candidate preferences and suggests some possible explanations.

The potential for gender differences in turnout rates for the Democratic and Republican primaries and caucuses is less frequently examined. McKee and Hayes (2009: 407) report on the "feminization of the Democratic electorate" in the southern states, a trend that began before Hillary Clinton's candidacy in 2008. They also found men to be a larger proportion of the Republican primary electorate in the South during these same years. Redlawsk, Bowen and Tolbert's (2008) survey of potential Iowa caucus participants suggest that the Democratic caucuses would have greater participation by women over men with the opposite pattern for the Republican caucuses. Likewise, Rapoport, Stone and Abramowitz (1990) report women were a greater proportion of Democratic caucus participants in 1984 while men were the majority of Republican caucus attenders. Kamarck, Podkul and Zeppos (2017) found a gender gap in turnout for the 2016 congressional primaries, but this was largely confined to those congressional primaries held jointly with presidential primaries.

This paper will increase our understanding of primary elections and intraparty gender differences by examining gender gaps in Democratic and Republican presidential primaries from 2000 to 2016. The traditional gender gap in candidate preferences is updated to this period with an eye for new patterns. The paper also explores the turnout gender gap across a wider geographic time span.

Research Design

The study of primary elections has always been hampered by the lack of survey data. Academic polls focus on the general election. The diverse dates of primary elections complicate the polling of voters either before or after primaries are held. Thus, academics typically rely on commercial polls or media exit polls to analyze primary voters. The downside of these commercial polls is that they ask fewer questions and in formats that are dissimilar from those in academic polls. For this analysis, gender differences are explored using the media exit polls.¹

¹ The data are drawn from the exit polls as posted on CNN website.

The number of exit polls in each year varies, since the media cease to conduct exit polls once the nomination race is, for all practical purposes, over. Thus, in 2008 there are more exit polls for the Democrats than for the Republicans. In 2016, the media ceased conducting exit polls after the West Virginia primary on May 10. Only two caucus states have exit polls: Iowa and Nevada.

Data for this project consist of aggregate-level patterns in gender gaps. Support for a candidate from male voters is subtracted from support for that candidate among female voters. Due to this directionality, positive results indicate that more women than men voted for a candidate. Negative gender gaps indicate a candidate was favored by more men than women. The same process is used to calculate the turnout gender gap.

Gender Gaps in Candidate Preferences

Table 1 lists the sizes of the average gender gap for candidates from 2000 to 2016. These figures are the average gender gap across all primaries in which a candidate competed and an exit poll was taken. On the Democratic side, the 2000 Gore versus Bradley race produced a moderate gender gap across all the primaries.² No gender differences arose in support of Democratic candidates in 2004. Hillary Clinton's gender gap appears to be slightly larger in 2016 than in 2008.

Figure 1 compares Clinton's gender gap across the two years by individual states. States on the left side of the graph found Clinton with a larger gender gap in 2008 while those on the right side resulted in a larger gender gap for Clinton in 2016. Few patterns seem to exist. The Pearson's r value between the two years is .22 (sign. = .26, $n = 27$). This hints that Clinton's gender gap may be structured more by the particulars of a nomination contest than the characteristics of a state's voters.

Variations in the sizes of Clinton's gender gap alone do not tell us the reasons for these gender differences. Nor does the size of the gender gap indicate whether a gap occurs because a candidate gains support from one sex or whether the candidate is losing support from the opposite sex. However, Clinton's 2016 gender gap is not related to either her support from men ($r = -.16$, sign. = .42) nor from women ($r = .07$, sign. = .71). Nor is it related to the overall vote for Clinton ($r = -.04$, sign. = .85), the margin of victory or defeat ($r = -.06$, sign. = .77), or whether Clinton won the primary ($r = .20$, sign. = .33). The sizes of groups that supported (or did not support) Clinton could have some connection to the overall size of the gender gap. Yet again, the patterns are few. The gender gap for Clinton was smaller in states with more moderate voters ($r = -.37$, sign. = .06), but the pattern for black voters is weak ($r = -.19$, sign. = .33). Sanders generally did better with younger voters and those who called themselves independents. Yet, neither of these two factors is related to the size of Clinton's gender gap: young ($r = .06$, sign. = .76) and independents ($r = -.02$, sign. = .91). Finally, Clinton's gender gap did not grow or shrink over the course of the primaries ($r = -.11$, sign. = .59). Aggregate analyses do not provide many clues as to why Clinton's gender gap varied across the states.

² Differences between the gender gaps for Gore and Bradley in Table 1 and those reported by Norrander (2003) arise because the latter study considered only gender gaps that were statistically significant. Values in Table average the gender gaps across all primaries, whether they were statistically significant, or not.

Returning to Table 1, Republican Party gender gaps from 2000 to 2016 are generally smaller than those found for Democratic candidates. Republican women gave greater support to frontrunners, such as Bush and Romney, as well as candidates that appealed to religious voters, such as Huckabee and Santorum. Donald Trump has the largest gender gap of any Republican candidate, receiving 6.9 percentage points more support from men than from women. Figure 2 shows variations in Trump's gender gap across the states. Since the gender gap is measured by the support for the candidate among men subtracted from his support among women, Trump's gender gap is signed as negative and a larger negative number indicates a larger gender gap. Excluding the West Virginia primary, after Cruz and Kasich left the race, Trump's gender gap is larger when he receives more support from male voters ($r = -.38$, $\text{sign.} = .06$, $n = 26$) but the gap is unrelated to his support among women ($r = -.00$, $\text{sign.} = .99$). Trump's gender gap was not related to his overall vote percentage ($r = -.19$, $\text{sign.} = .35$) nor to the date of the primary ($r = -.16$, $\text{sign.} = .45$). Variation in Trump's support from men appears to be the only factor influencing the size of his gender gap.

Gender gaps in candidate preferences in presidential primaries suggest no firm patterns. Rather, the nature of the candidate field may matter. This may even lead candidates in one year to be favored by men and another year to gain larger support among women. This was true for Al Gore, who received more support from men in 1988 when he ran as the southern candidate but gained more support from women in 2000 as he was the establishment candidate. In a similar vein, the size of Clinton's gender gap in specific states is not correlated over the two years in which she is a candidate. Finally, in 2016 it appears that the preferences of male voters are driving the size of the gender gap for Trump: when more men support Trump, his gender gap grows. The only aggregate-level factor related to Clinton's gender gap in 2016 was the percentage of moderates in the electorate: her gender gap was smaller in states with more moderate voters.

Gender Gaps in Turnout

The second type of gender gap in the presidential primaries is in turnout. Table 2 reveals the average gender gap in turnout for Democratic and Republican primaries from 2000 to 2016. Women are more likely than men to participate in Democratic primaries. On average, this gender difference measures 13.5 percentage points. The gender gap in turnout in Democratic primaries preceded the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, discounting a gender mobilization explanation as the sole explanation. However, the Democratic gender gap is larger in the two years in which she was a candidate. To a lesser extent, men are more likely than women to participate in Republican primaries with an average 4.3 percentage point gender gap across four election cycles.

Table 3 examines the correlations across years for each state for Democratic and Republican primaries. If the gender gap in primary turnout is relatively constant within a state, then the correlations across years should be relatively high. This appears to be true, but only since 2004 for Democratic primaries. This suggests some permanence in size of each state's turnout gender gap in the last three Democratic nomination contests. The pattern on the Republican side is a bit more erratic. The size of the turnout gap in the 2012 Republican primaries seems to be the closest in size to primaries occurring in 2000, 2008 and 2016.

However, some of these other years do not correlate highly with one another, such as 2000 and 2008.

Table 4 addresses the question of whether the size of the turnout gender gap in a state for the Democratic primaries is related to the size of the turnout gender gap in the Republican primaries. The answer is basically no. Correlations are near zero in two of the years in which both parties held primaries, and in 2000, the correlation was $-.28$ ($\text{sign.} = .23$). This suggests that the turnout gender gap is not created by more women in a state selecting the Democratic primary while more men choose the Republican primary.

What may be the cause of the turnout gap in presidential primaries and caucuses is the overall gender gap in party identification in a state. To measure the gender gap in party identification in each state, the 2004 and 2008 general election exit polls are used. The Democratic partisan gender gap is measured as the percent of women self-identifying as Democrats minus the percent of men viewing themselves as Democrats. A Republican partisan gender gap is computed in the same manner. Table 5 shows the correlation between the turnout gap in the primaries by the partisan gender gap in each state by election year. For Democratic primaries, by 2008, a statistically significant pattern emerges. When the gender gap in party identification is larger, the turnout gap in the Democratic primaries is larger. A statistically significant pattern for Republican primaries emerges in 2008, as well. However, the pattern disappears in the 2012 primaries only to reemerge in 2016.

Beyond party identification, another reason for the size of the turnout gap in Democratic primaries may be the role of minority voters in southern primaries. For example in 2016, some of the largest gender gaps in turnout occurred in Alabama (20 percent), Georgia (24 percent), Mississippi (28 percent) and South Carolina (22 percent). This fits with McKee and Hayes's (2009) depiction of the feminization of Democratic primaries in the South. Another reason for the turnout gaps in the South is participation rates by African American voters. African American women participate at higher rates than African American men in the southern primaries. In the 2016 southern primaries, black women outpaced black men in participation by 13 points in South Carolina, 14 points in Georgia, 20 points in Alabama and 24 points in Mississippi. In other states, the gender gap in turnout among African Americans was between 3 and 9 percentage points.

Summary

Gender gaps in presidential nomination contests come in two forms. The most commonly noted is differences between women and men in their support for specific candidates. Such gender differences preceded the candidacy of Hillary Clinton and occur in Republican primaries as well as Democratic contests. A second, generally overlooked, gender gap is in participation rates by women and men in the primaries.

Gender gaps in candidate preferences seem to be guided more by the candidate field than structural elements, such as the composition of the electorate in specific states. This is demonstrated by the fact that some candidates have mixed gender gaps within one election year, favored by women in one state and by men in another. For example in the 2016 contests, both Cruz and Kasich received more support from women than men after Rubio left the race. Cruz's gender gap in the earlier contest averaged $.3$ and rose to 1.7 after Rubio's exit. The

patterns for Kasich are stronger averaging a gender gap of .6 with Rubio in the race and 2.4 after Rubio left the race. Other candidates have mixed gender gaps across election years: Gore received more support from men in 1988 and greater support from women in 2000. The nature of the candidate field may matter in the way it characterizes the qualities of the candidates. As women, more than men, appear to favor candidates with experience or who come from the mainstream of the party, the lineup of candidates on these qualities may depend as much on the competition as the inherent qualities of any candidate. Changes in candidate fields also may reshape basic preferences for the candidates. One of Hillary Clinton's key support groups in 2016 was African American women in the South, while in 2008 these women generally favored Barack Obama. However, a few consistent patterns may occur. On the Republican side, women have a slight tendency to favor candidates who stress religious qualities.

The turnout gender gap is stronger on the Democratic side. This gap has existed since at least 2000, though it appears to be somewhat higher in the two contests with Hillary Clinton as a candidate. Still the gender gap in turnout in Democratic primaries most likely is attributable to the interparty gender gap where more women than men favor the Democratic Party. The turnout gender gap on the Republican side is smaller and less consistent. This turnout gender gap has been less well studied, leaving room for further discovery of explanatory factors.

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Table 1: Gender gaps in candidate preferences in Democratic and Republican presidential primaries between 2000 and 2016.

	Favored by Women		Neither		Favored by Men	
Democratic Candidates						
2000	Gore	5.7			Bradley	-5.0
2004			Clark	-0.2		
			Dean	-0.4		
			Edwards	0.9		
			Kerry	0.9		
			Kucinich	-0.0		
			Lieberman	-1.1		
			Sharpton	-1.1		
2008	Clinton	8.6			Obama	-6.9
					Edwards	-3.4
2016	Clinton	10.6			Sanders	-10.4
Republican Candidates						
2000	Bush	3.8	Keyes	-1.8	McCain	-2.4
2008	Huckabee	3.0	McCain	-0.4	Paul	-2.7
			Romney	0.5		
2012	Romney	2.6			Paul	-4.4
	Santorum	3.6			Gingrich	-2.4
2016	Rubio	4.3	Cruz	0.5	Trump	-6.9
			Kasich	1.1		

Note: Entries are average gender gaps across all primaries in which exit poll data are available for each candidate.

Source: Presidential primary and caucus exit polls.

Table 2: Average gender gaps in turnout for Democratic and Republican primaries and caucuses from 2000 – 2016.

Year	Democratic Contests	Republican Contests
2000	13.5	-3.8
2004	9.5	
2008	15.1	-6.6
2012		-3.7
2016	15.6	-3.3
Average	13.5	-4.3

Note: Positive values indicate more women than men voted in the primaries. Negative numbers indicate more men than women voted in the primary.

Source: Presidential primary and caucus exit polls.

Table 3: Average gender gaps in turnout for Democratic and Republican primaries and caucuses correlated across years, 2000 – 2016

Years	Democratic correlation	Number of Cases	Republican correlation	Number of Cases
2016-2012			.63 (.01)	17
2016-2008	.62 (.00)	27	.16 (.47)	22
2016-2004	.69 (.00)	17		
2016-2000	-.04 (.88)	15	.40 (.11)	18
2012-2008			.58 (.01)	18
2012-2004				
2012-2000			.61 (.01)	15
2008-2004	.60 (.00)	22		
2008-2000	.07 (.77)	19	.15 (.52)	20
2004-2000	-.17 (.49)	19		

Note: Values inside parentheses are significance levels

Source: Presidential primary and caucus exit polls.

Table 4: Correlations of turnout gender gaps by state between Republican and Democratic primaries or caucuses.

Year	Cross-party correlation	Significance level	Number of Cases
2000	-.28	.23	20
2008	.00	.98	27
2016	-.03	.88	27
Average	.04	.83	35

Source: Presidential primary and caucus exit polls.

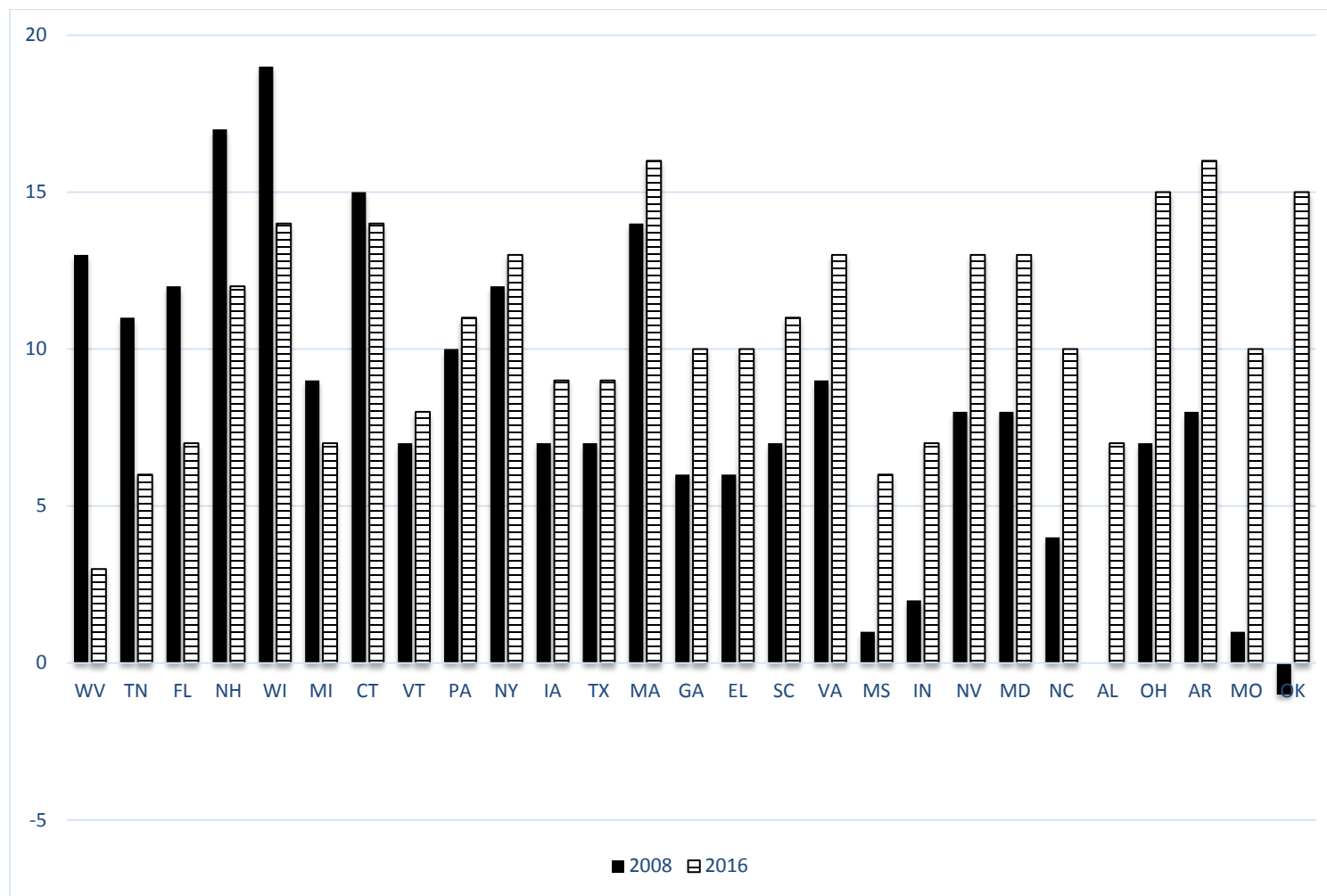
Table 5: Correlations between turnout gender gap in presidential primaries and caucuses and the gender gap in party identification from the 2004-2008 general election

Year	Democratic primaries		Republican primaries	
	Correlation	Number	Correlation	Number
2000	.13 (.58)	21	.22 (.31)	24
2004	.21 (.35)	22		
2008	.39 (.01)	39	.43 (.02)	27
2012			.02 (.93)	19
2016	.45 (.02)	27	.41 (.03)	27
average	.34 (.03)	41	.40 (.02)	35

Note: Values inside parentheses are significance levels

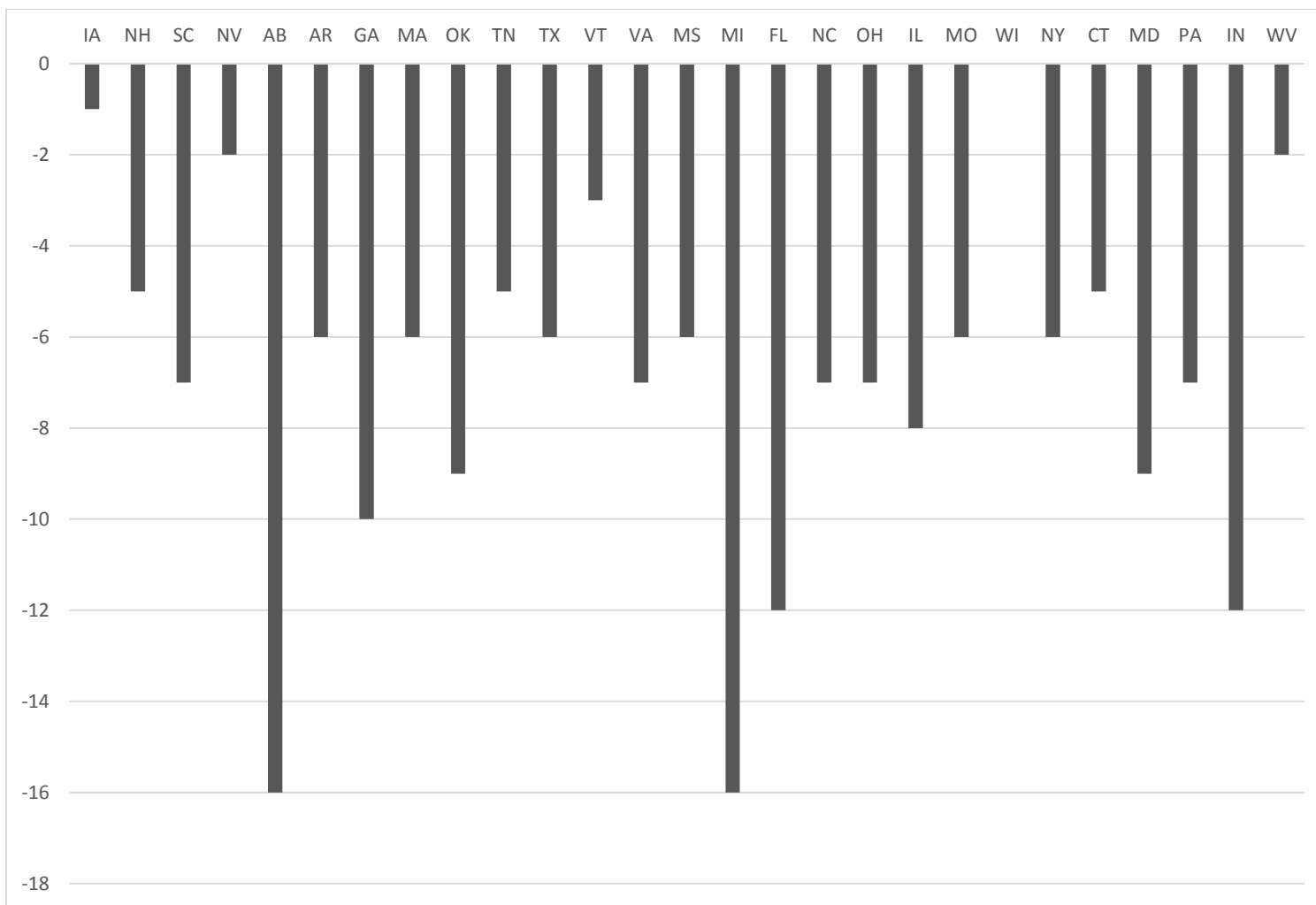
Source: Presidential primary, caucus and general election exit polls.

Figure 1: Gender gaps for Clinton in 2008 and 2016, organized by difference in size and direction of gender gap.



Values are calculated as percent women voting for Clinton – percent men voting for Clinton. Positive values indicate more support from women.

Figure 2: Gender gaps in support of Trump, 2016 (organized by date of primary or caucus).



Values are calculated as percent women voting for Trump – percent men voting for Trump. Negative values indicate more support from men. The value of the gender gap in Wisconsin was zero.