

Mobilization, Persuasion, and the Partisan Fallout of the Gender Gap in U.S. Voting

Barry C. Burden* Michael G. DeCrescenzo†

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*Professor of Political Science, University of Wisconsin–Madison (bcburden@wisc.edu)

†Graduate Student, University of Wisconsin–Madison (decrescenzo@wisc.edu)

Abstract

Since the gender gap in U.S. elections—in which women are more likely than men to vote for Democratic candidates—emerged in the early 1980s, observers have speculated that a larger gender gap works to the advantage of the Democratic Party. This widely shared folk wisdom has yet to be tested in a systematic way. Any mechanisms explaining the possible relationship between the gender gap and Democratic vote share have yet to be elaborated let alone examined systematically. We provide a theoretical framework in which such an electoral gap may be a function of two factors: mobilization or persuasion. Empirically we show that a larger gender gap advantages the Democrats slightly and then explore the mechanisms behind the relationship using a two-stage model. We find that the net partisan mobilization and persuasion among men generally has larger effects on the gender gap than do the same factors among women. However, mobilization increases the gender gap between 1952 and 2012 while persuasion's impact on the gap is dampened over time. In affecting the Democratic vote through the gender gap, the impacts of both mobilization and persuasion shrink over time as the vote becomes a closer reflection of underlying party identification.

The gender gap observed in voting in U.S. elections has garnered a tremendous amount of attention from journalists, the public, campaigns strategists, and academic researchers. Defined as the difference between the percentages of women and men who vote Democratic, the gap has risen to double digits in recent national elections and has generated much analysis and discussion. Although the voting patterns of men and women are not as divergent as some other subpopulations in the electorate such as blacks and whites, the gender gap is uniquely important because the two groups in question are nearly equal in size. Even small shifts in the vote choices of men, women, or both could have acute effects on election outcomes.

We ask two research questions about the gender gap in voting in U.S. elections, the first more easily answered than the second. First, does the gender gap advantage the Democratic Party? Despite being widely accepted as folk wisdom, we are not aware of any empirical testing to show whether a bigger gap in the vote choices of men and women actually helps Democratic candidates and hurts Republicans. Second, to the extent that the gap affects the vote, what are the mechanisms that make it happen? In particular, we explore how much of the gap's impact is due to party supporters being *mobilized* versus the degree to which voters are *persuaded* to support one party over the other.

In response to the first question, we find evidence of a modest relationship both cross-sectionally and longitudinally between the size of the gender gap (defined as the percent of women who vote Democratic minus the percent of men who vote Democratic) and the overall Democratic vote share. This connection translates to a gain of about one-third of a point more for Democrats for each percentage point increase in the gap between men and women, an effect that is more pronounced in closer, non-landslide elections. The gender gap is not determinative, but it could easily affect a close election.

In response to the second question, we uncover a more complicated set of relationships to understand why the gender gap provides the Democrats with a small advantage. We conceive of election outcomes as being the product of mobilization (i.e., turnout of loyal partisans) and persuasion (i.e., defection of partisans to vote for the opposite candidate), processes that may

work separately among men and women. Using American National Election Study data over 16 presidential elections, we apply a two-stage model to show how mobilization and persuasion first affect the gender gap and then affect the Democratic vote through the gender gap.

1 THE GENDER GAP AND THE DEMOCRATIC VOTE

Observers generally agree that interest in the gender gap took hold after the 1980 presidential election when it became clear from exit polls that men voted for Republican Ronald Reagan at a rate about eight points higher than that of women, a significant change from the previous election in which men and women voted almost identically (Norrande 1999; Wirls 1986). The persistence of this new cleavage between men and women spawned an array of academic studies seeking to understand the factors behind gender differences in party politics. From this work we have learned a great deal about how policy preferences, economic circumstances, social position, and other experience contribute to gender differences in political orientation (Box-Steffensmeier and Lin 2004; Chaney and Nagler 1998; Conover 1988; Edlund and Pande 2002; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Manza and Brooks 1998).

As rich as this literature has become, it tends to blur what might be an important distinction between party identification and voting behavior. Although gender gaps appear in both, research demonstrates that the two are not synonymous. Party ID is an attitude, which may be held weakly or intensely, whereas vote choice is a discrete decision that can either reflect party loyalty or run against it. The former also moves slowly over the long-term while the latter can fluctuate more rapidly in the short-term. Indeed, two general reasons why election results may not perfectly mimic the distribution of party identification in the electorate are that rates of turnout vary between the parties and because partisans cross party lines at different rates.¹ We pay close attention to this distinction as a means to understand the degree to which the

¹This insight is the basis of the Michigan school's classification of presidential elections as "maintaining," "deviating," or "realigning" (Campbell 1966) and the development of the concept of the "normal vote" based on party ID (Converse 1966).

gender gap in election returns is a simple function of underlying partisan preferences versus short-term campaign-specific factors that affect rates of turnout and defection differentially for men and women.

Journalists and pundits have widely assumed that Democratic candidates benefit when the vote choices of men and women diverge. Press coverage leading up to each election typically argues that Democrats are more successful at the ballot box when their advantage in the women's vote is greater. For example, prior to the 2012 presidential election, the *Washington Post* reported that "The Republicans are on the defensive partly because of the gender gap—in which Democrats have a sizable advantage among women—is growing."² Turning the discussion around, observers often link Republican electoral successes to decreases in the size of the gender gap. A discussion of the parties' demographic bases in *The New York Times*, for example, concluded that Republicans succeeded in the 2014 elections in part because they refuted the Democrats' accusation of a "war on women" that "generated a gender gap and has been crucial to past Democratic victories."³ Another report in *USA Today* on the eve of the Republicans' triumph in the 2010 midterm elections observed that "men generally tilt toward GOP candidates, so a significant narrowing of the gender gap among women is contributing to Democrats' struggles," with one commentator concluding that Democrats would only win "by mobilizing women voters."⁴ The discussion also frequently assumes that female voters are more volatile or persuadable, as suggested by popular images of "soccer moms" and "security moms" who are thought to be more susceptible to campaign effects than men. Only rarely does a media voice suggest that the political preferences of women and men do not differ enough for the gender gap to matter and that "You always know the Democrats are in big trouble when the media starts harping on the gender gap."⁵ Aside from these rare exceptions, the folk wisdom remains that Democrats benefit from a wider gender gap.

²Robert McCartney, "Romney's Woes Threaten McDonnell and Allen," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2012.

³Thomas B. Edsall, "Making the President Small," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2014.

⁴Mimi Hall, "Democrats Lose Share of Women to GOP," *USA Today*, October 20, 2010.

⁵Linda Hirschman, "Forget the Ladies; The Gender Gap Doesn't Matter—and It Never Has," *Newsweek*, November 5, 2012.

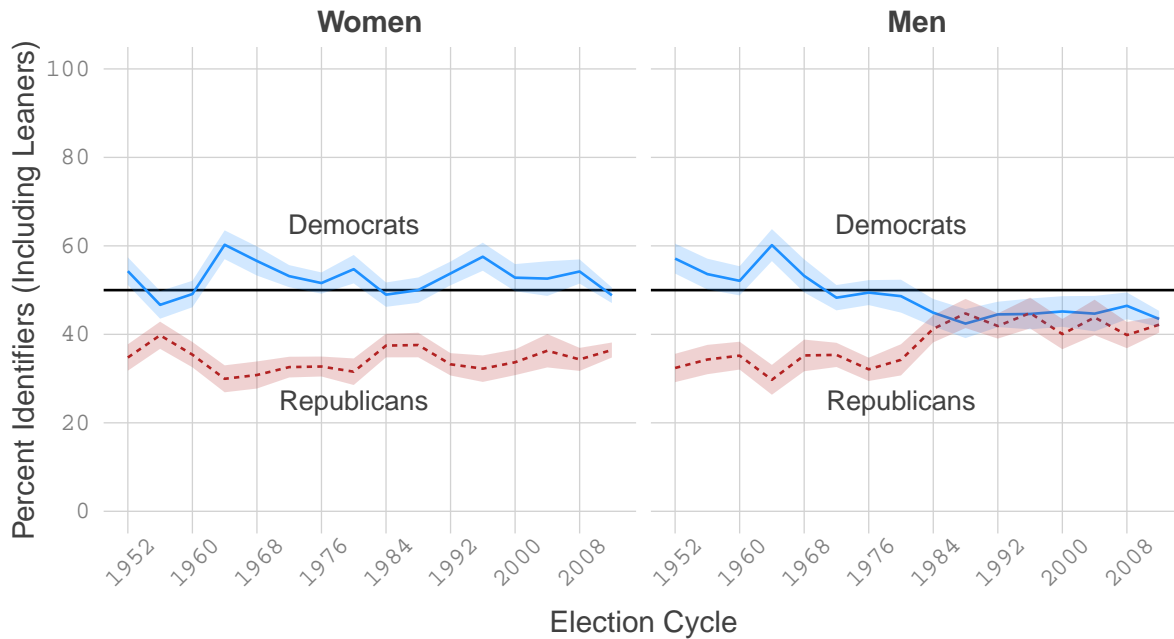
Despite the prevalence of the conventional wisdom, its proponents have not offered a clear explanation for the relationship or provided even basic empirical evidence that it exists. One exception is [Kaufmann and Petrocik \(1999\)](#) who argue that the gender gap in voting is caused not by a long-term strengthening of Democratic loyalty among women but by a long-term *weakening* of Democratic partisanship among men. However, it appears that the pattern changed in the 1980s when the movement of women toward the Democrats was more consequential [Kaufmann \(2006\)](#).

Figure 1 shows the percentages of men women identifying with the Democratic and Republican parties in American National Election Study (ANES) in presidential election years from 1952 through 2012. Partisanship among women since the 1950s has been relatively stable, with between roughly 50 and 60 percent of women identifying with the Democratic party and roughly 30 to 40 percent of women identifying as Republicans. Among men, however, there has been a pronounced decline in Democratic Party identification—from 57 percent in 1952 to 43 percent in 2012—and a corresponding increase in Republican Party identification—from 32 percent in 1952 to 42 percent in 2012.

Although party identification provides important raw material to form the gender gap in voting, the two are not the same. [Kaufmann and Petrocik](#) show that party ID often accounts for less than half of the voting gap. Following their insight, we argue that the observed gap in voting behavior must be a function of party ID in the larger electorate, filtered in two ways. The two parts of this function are how many partisans of each sex turn out to vote for their preferred parties (the *mobilization* effect) and how many defect to vote for the opposing party (the *persuasion* effect).

Figure 2 displays the gender gap in voting from 1952 to 2012 from the ANES. Here we examine the share of men and women who reported voting for one of the two major party candidates. Residue of the underlying gaps in party identification is apparent. Men are slightly more likely to vote Democratic in the 1950s, after which the differential collapses and then reverses to become the familiar contemporary gap in which the women's vote is decidedly more Democratic.

Figure 1 Party Identification of Men and Women



Source: ANES Cumulative File

A visible gap emerges briefly in 1972 only to reestablish itself in 1980 and then reach double digits in the 1990s.

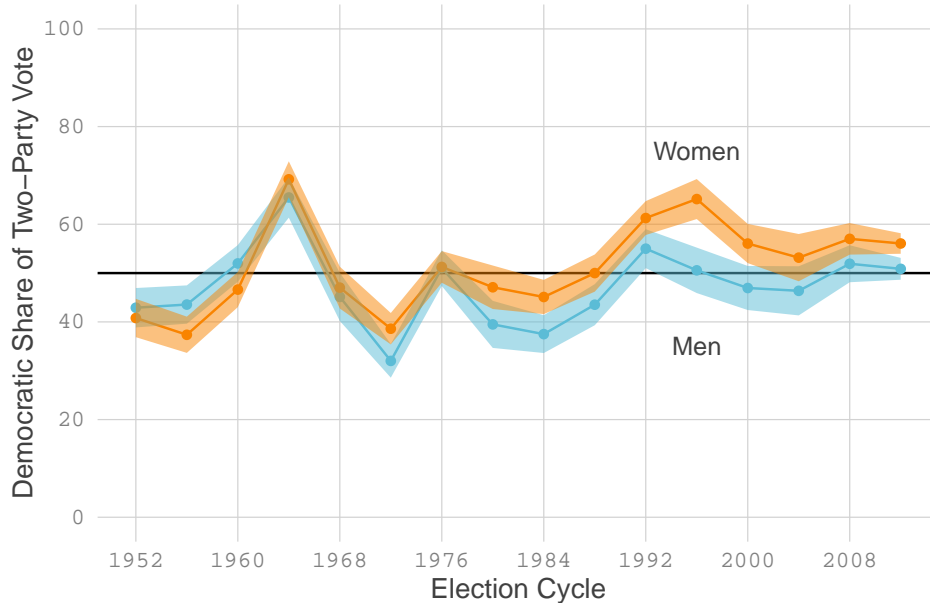
2 DOES THE GENDER GAP HELP THE DEMOCRATS?

Although views about the gender gap are not monolithic, it is generally assumed that a wider gap corresponds to a larger share of the vote going to Democrats. In this section we examine this hypothesis cross-sectionally and longitudinally. The test is simply whether there is a positive correlation between the size of the gender gap and Democratic vote.

For the cross-sectional test, we rely on exit polls from the 2004 and 2008 elections.⁶ Exit polls are conducted by a media consortium of five major television networks and the Associated Press. Unlike other surveys, they have the benefit of surveying people who are certain to have voted, as the poll is conducted as voters “exit” from the polling place. This eliminates any

⁶Adding data from 2012 could be useful, but exit polls were not conducted in 19 states that year.

Figure 2 Democratic Voting of Men and Women in Presidential Elections

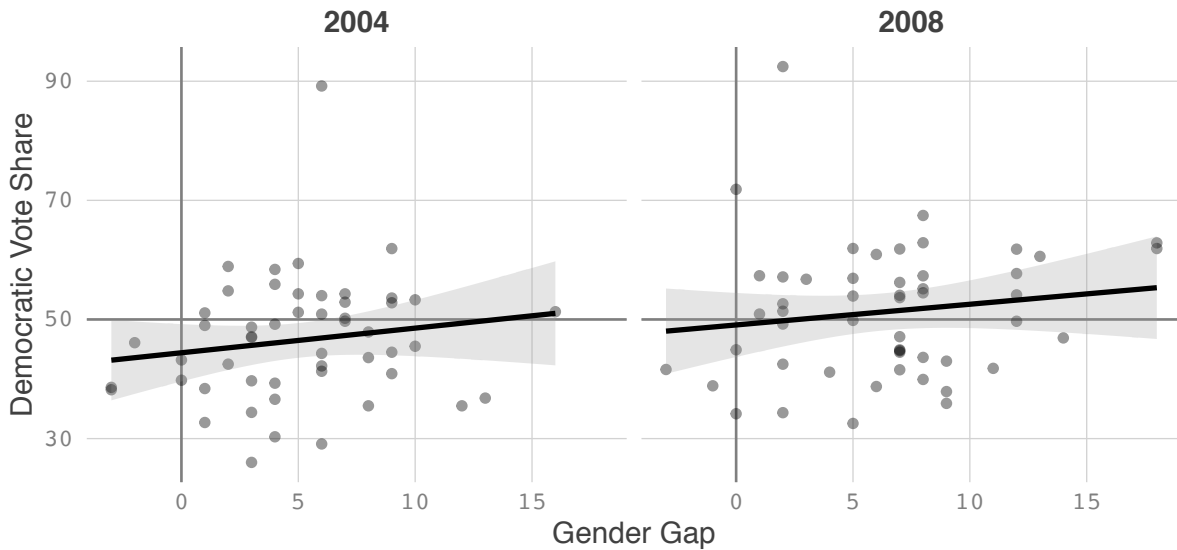


Source: ANES Cumulative File

misreporting of turnout on the part of respondents. The other benefit is that we have 51 observations for each election, so plenty of statistical power to detect a simple linear relationship. Finally, because the two elections we examine are so different—2004 being a modest Republican victory and 2008 being a substantial Democratic victory—any conclusions that apply to both would seem generalizable to other recent election years.

For each state we compute the gender gap as the percentage of women who voted for the Democratic presidential candidate minus the percentage of men who did so. In most cases this variable should be positive. The key outcome of interest is the official percentage of the vote won by the Democratic ticket. Figure 3 displays the scatterplots for the two election years. We have imposed the OLS regression line with 95% confidence intervals. The figure shows that there is a mild positive relationship, as evidenced by the positive but insignificant correlations of .16 in 2004 and .14 in 2008. The slopes of the regression lines are .41 and .35, suggesting that each percentage point increase the gap corresponds to about a little over one-third of a point increase the Democratic vote share.

Figure 3 State-level Gender Gap and Democratic Vote



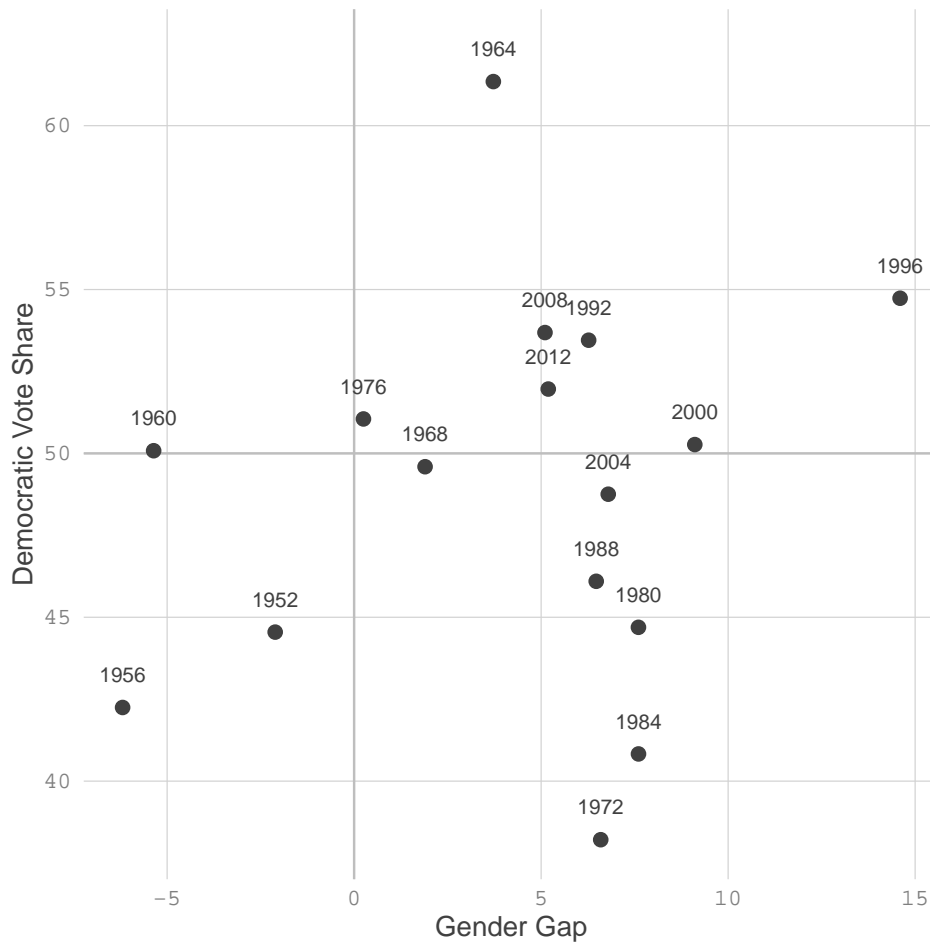
Both scatterplots have clear outliers that might be dampening what is otherwise a more robust relationship. To check this possibility, we recomputed the correlations after removing the point with the most extreme Democratic vote in 2004 (the District of Columbia) and two extremely high points in 2008 (DC and Hawaii).⁷ Omitting these irregular observations has boosts the correlations slightly to .17 in 2004 and substantially to .35 in 2008. This suggests that the gender gap in voting might in fact have more consequence when the election outcome is within the boundaries of “normal” political competition.

A second way to evaluate the relationship is over time. This approach has the benefit of covering a wider range of electoral contexts from landslide elections such as 1972 to close contests such as 2000. However, a limitation of the approach is that the ANES time series only covers 16 presidential elections, so our statistical power is limited. We again compute the Democratic share of the two-party vote as the outcome of interest and compute the gender gap as the difference between the percentages of women and men voting Democratic. Figure 4 displays the scatterplot for elections from 1952 to 2012. The data tell essentially the same story as the cross-sectional analysis. The correlation between the gender gap and the Democratic vote is a positive

⁷DC is a city not a state and might be excluded on grounds of noncomparability anyway.

but insignificant .17 and the regression coefficient is a mere .18. It is worth noting that removing the three landslide elections (1964, 1972, and 1984) causes the correlation to jump to .51 ($p = .04$, one-tailed). As with the cross-sectional state analysis, it appears that the gender gap is consequential when the race between the major parties does not veer beyond normal politics to extremely lopsided outcomes.

Figure 4 Gender Gap and the Democratic Presidential Vote



Based on these two sets of analyses testing the first research question, we conclude that an expansion of the gender gap does lead to at least a slight increase in the Democratic vote when all elections are examined. The effect is far from determinative and appears stronger in competitive elections than landslides, but the relationship generally runs in the direction that folk wisdom has suggested.

The more difficult question to answer is why this might be so. In the remainder of the paper we explore how voter mobilization and persuasion—both hallmarks of “regular” campaigns—contribute to the gender gap. Understanding these two factors allows us to identify mechanisms that transform an increase in the gender gap into an advantage for Democrats and a liability for Republicans. We argue that an understanding of how the gap increases the Democratic vote share must account for changes not only in the party affiliations of men and women over time, but also the level of voter turnout and cross-party voting among men and women. In the following section, we provide a framework for understanding the impact of these electoral forces—particularly *mobilization* and *persuasion*—in both the formation of a gender gap in voting and the gap’s implications for the final vote outcome.

3 A THEORY OF ELECTORAL GAPS

Our analytical task becomes much more difficult when we move beyond simple “gaps” that appear on the surface between men and women—or any other groups in the electorate—to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that produce them. The gender gap is conventionally defined as the Democratic vote share among women minus the Democratic vote share among men.⁸ This is how we measure the gap in the previous section of the paper. However, because vote shares are proportions, and because vote shares can be placed on the same scale regardless of *how many votes* they are worth, the gender gap by itself does not convey enough information to determine whether it is “good” or “bad” for Democrats. For example, if the Democratic vote share among women is 55 percent and the Democratic vote share among men is 45 percent, the resulting 10 percentage-point gap does not itself convey whether Democrats have any more *votes* than the Republicans do. We thus turn our focus to the mechanisms that cause voting gaps to form between groups in the electorate in the first place. Although our application is to the gender gap—a demographic cleavage that we believe is especially consequential because

⁸There are alternatives such as [Norris \(2003\)](#) measure, which computes the net partisanship of women minus the net partisanship of men.

the rough parity and sheer size of the two voting blocs—the theoretical framework we offer can in principle be applied to any electoral gaps.

We contend that three primary factors shape voting gaps between groups in the electorate. These factors are (1) the long-term *partisan inclinations* of group members, (2) the *mobilization* of those party supporters in the group to vote, and (3) the short-term *persuasion* of group members to vote against their long-term partisan inclinations.⁹ While past scholarship has examined the role of partisanship in the formation of the gender gap (Carroll 2013; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999), studies of the gender gap have not included mobilization and persuasion in a unified framework. Our approach is reminiscent of Axelrod (1972)’s analysis of coalition composition, which measures a group’s size × partisan loyalty × turnout (see also Stanley and Niemi 1986). We differ in considering vote choice not as “loyalty” but as a combination of long-term partisan inclinations and short-term partisan defections. Indeed, we believe that our approach mimics how campaign strategists think about building winning coalitions by turning out supporters who have long-term attachments to the party and persuading supporters of the opposing party to defect in the short term.

We present a series of illustrations to outline our approach, building upward from micro-foundations to aggregate results. As shown in Table 1, if we assume a two-party system, a citizen must make one of three potential choices in the election: voting Democratic (D), voting Republican (R), and not voting.¹⁰ This trichotomous choice exists for all groups in the electorate.

Table 1: Three Choices for Potential Voters

Do Not Vote	Vote D
	Vote R

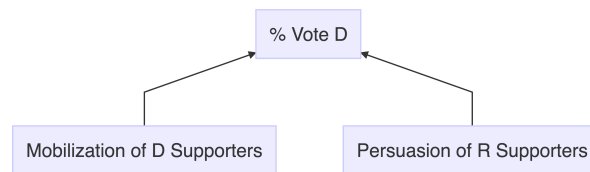
⁹Group *size* is a factor that determines how group differences in voting affect the final vote outcome. Smaller groups have less influence on the final vote, but group size does not itself influence the size of a voting gap across groups. If Democrats win 50 percent of votes from Group A and 30 percent from Group B, there is a 20-point gap regardless of which group is numerically larger. Because the numbers of adult men and women in the U.S. are essentially equal, we do not explicitly incorporate group size into our analysis. Studies of other unequally-sized groups in an electorate (such as racial or ethnic groups) would have to take into account the relative sizes of the groups when determining the impact of group differences in voting on the final vote.

¹⁰As the table suggests, not voting is typically the modal choice in actual elections. Voters and candidates who are not affiliated with the major parties are omitted.

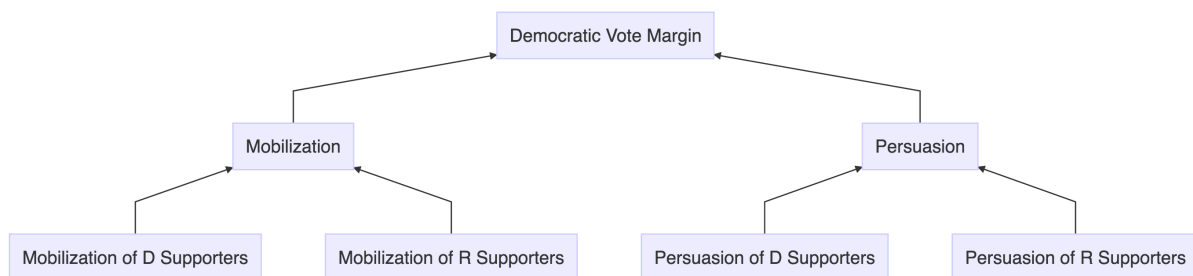
Now consider how these choices aggregate up to form the gender gap. We assume there are only two groups in the electorate. The partisan voting gap between Group W (Women) and Group M (Men) is expressed as the difference in the percentage of women and men voters who vote D provided that they do vote.¹¹

$$\text{Gender Gap} = \% \text{ Vote } D_W - \% \text{ Vote } D_M \quad (1)$$

The level of party identification within each group is a serviceable baseline for the way these groups will vote—most partisans, if they vote, cast votes for their own party.¹² But to obtain the final vote, we must account for the processes that intervene between partisanship and the vote: *mobilization* and *persuasion*. When we take these factors into account, each of the *Vote D* terms in Equation 1 is the result of both the mobilization of Democratic partisans and the persuasion of Republican partisans to crossover and vote Democratic.



The final Democratic vote margin is therefore the result of mobilization and persuasion mechanisms among Democrats, net of those same mechanisms among Republicans.



Two points are worth noting. First, persuasion has twice the impact on the vote margin that mobilization does. This is because mobilizing one additional Democratic-aligned voter nets the

¹¹This is a percentage of the “two-party vote.”

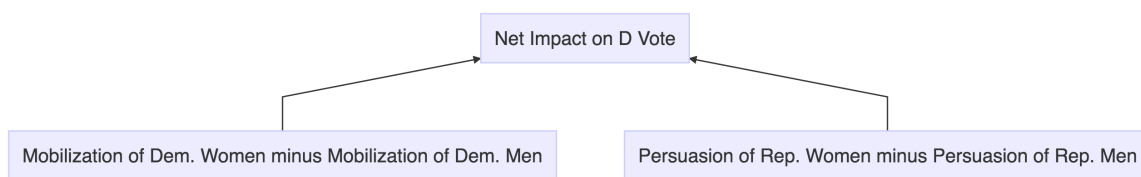
¹²Other measures of party support or affiliation are possible.

Democratic Party *one* vote, whereas persuading a Republican-aligned voter to vote Democratic nets the Democratic Party *two* votes—Democrats gain a vote and Republicans lose one. Although persuasion might be more difficult for campaigns than is GOTV, it has twice the payoff. Second, analysts must be cautious not to measure mobilization and persuasion as *rates*—such as turnout rates or rates of cross-party voting. If they do not account for differing denominators, simple rates do not convey the real numerical impact of mobilization and persuasion on the final vote. Democratic-aligned citizens and Republican-aligned citizens may have identical turnout rates, for example, but if a greater number of citizens is aligned with the Democrats than with the Republicans, Democrats receive a greater number of votes, all else equal. Because the impact of the mobilization of supporters depends on both the number of supporters and their rate of turnout, it is helpful to conceive of the *mobilization* component as distinguishing turnout among partisans from underlying partisanship in the electorate. The number of mobilized partisans is the total number of partisan supporters minus the nonvoting partisans.¹³ Equation 2 shows this logic.

$$\text{Mobilization of D supporters} = (\text{Total D supporters}) - (\text{Nonvoting D supporters}) \quad (2)$$

By conceiving of mobilization and persuasion as raw totals rather than as rates, we can account for mobilization and persuasion among men and women separately to measure more directly how gender differences in voting behavior affect the partisan outcome of elections. The impact of women’s voting behavior on the vote, net of men’s voting behavior, can be understood as the following:

¹³The *mobilization* concept (e.g. *Mobilization of D supporters*) will overestimate the number of votes for a party, since not all party supporters will vote loyally. However, this over-estimation is offset by a corresponding persuasion term (e.g. *Persuasion of D supporters to vote R*) in a full equation.



This formulation makes clear that relationship between the gender gap and the Democratic vote could be the result of differential turnout among party supporters, differential persuasion of those supporters, or both.

4 ACCOUNTING FOR MOBILIZATION

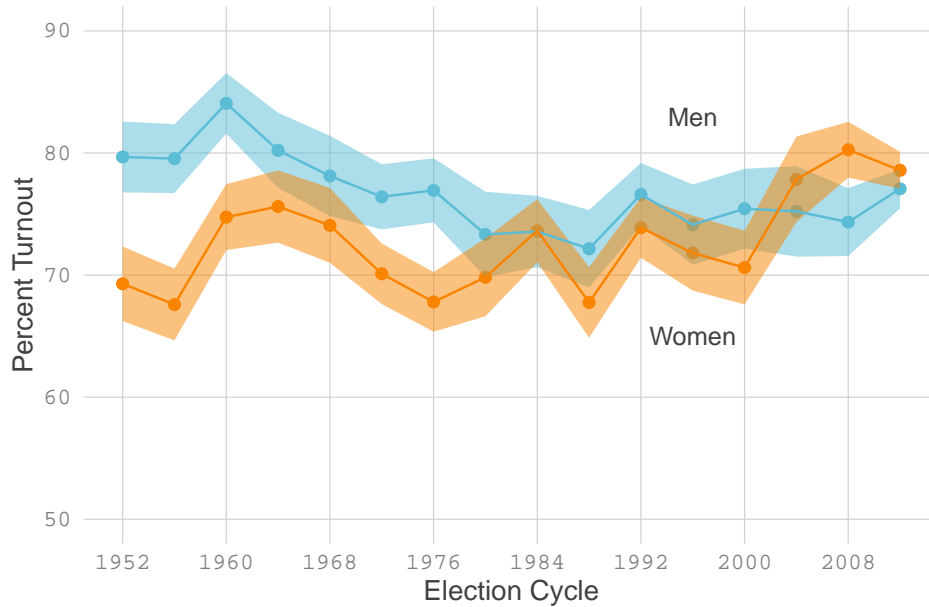
It is not obvious that the size of the gap ought to be related to the Democratic vote in a predictable way. Although the journalistic and popular views that we highlighted earlier strongly suggest a particular relationship, it need not be so. Our framework shows that is theoretically possible that the gender gap to have no relationship with the overall vote or even that a larger gender gap helps Republicans. After all, a bigger gap means that more men are voting Republican relative to women. In this section of the paper we explore the mechanism of mobilization.

Differential mobilization seems a likely candidate to explain the connection between the gender gap and the Democratic vote. After all, the rise of the gender gap in both partisanship and voting coincides with trends in voter turnout. Figure 5 shows self-reported voter turnout among men and women in the ANES. Though turnout among women lagged behind men by roughly 10 points in the 1950s and early 1960s, the gap in turnout has shrunk and even reversed itself in recent years, with women's turnout anywhere from two to six percentage points higher than men's turnout since 2004.¹⁴ As a result, rising turnout among women relative to men may produce more Democratic *votes* on net, even when holding the vote choices of men and women constant. Indeed, even though party identification among men stabilized around

¹⁴Self-reported voter turnout data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) also show that women's turnout has surpassed men's, though the CPS observes this reversal as early as the 1980s.

the 1988 presidential election, Zingher (2014) finds that women have nonetheless grown as a share of the Democratic Party’s electoral coalition since 1988.

Figure 5 Self-Reported Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections



Source: ANES Cumulative File

An election with a larger gender gap might reflect a context favoring the Democratic candidate in which women—who are more likely than men to identify as Democrats—are more enthusiastic than men and end up voting at higher rates. This seems to be the logic behind Democratic campaign efforts to “get out the women’s vote.” The cross-pressures felt by men—who are more Republican—could lead to lower levels of voter turnout for them. In contrast, in a setting where the Republican candidate is succeeding, (Democratic-leaning) women might vote at lower rates because of their ambivalence while (Republican-leaning) men would participate more enthusiastically. This simple response, based on mobilizing effects of partisan attachments, could produce a positive correlation between the gender gap and the Democratic vote share. Whereas equal turnout from the sexes would merely reflect the underlying gap in party identification, a turnout differential would either heighten or diminish it. In this simple model, it would be wise for Democratic campaigns to focus on increasing turnout among

women and for Republican campaigns to focus on increasing turnout among men.

The graph provides hints that turnout affects the gender gap, but in a surprising way. As documented earlier, the gender gap has increased over this time period, rising from a negative gap in the 1950s to a more stable difference of five to 10 points by the 1990s. During this same time voter turnout among women increased not much at all ($r = .06$, driven mostly by the last two elections in the series). In contrast, men's turnout fell precipitously over time ($r = -.65$).

The turnout rates for women are positively correlated with the gender gap in voting (the difference between the two lines in Figure 2) at .17, albeit not significantly so. For men the correlation is a much stronger and negative: $-.78$ ($p < .01$). These patterns hold even controlling for a linear time trend in the form of a counter for election years. This suggests that differential mobilization might be related to the gender gap, but that such an effect is asymmetric in that it driven more by men than women. If so, this turns the popular wisdom about the “women's vote” on its head.¹⁵

As a further test of this idea, we estimated a simple linear regression model of the gender gap in the 16 elections covered by the ANES. As predictor variables we include the turnout rates of men and women. To ensure that we are not merely capturing the partisan tendencies of men and women, we also control for the underlying party identification—measured as percent Democratic—among all men and women in the electorate.

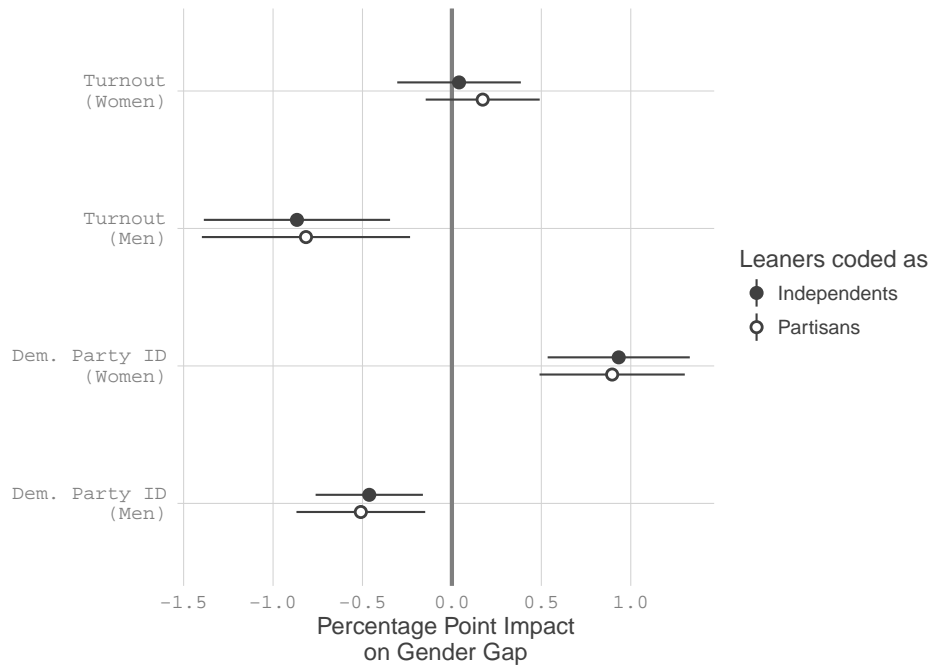
The model is estimated two different ways to reflect alternative operationalizations of party ID: one based only on “strong” and “weak” partisans and another that also codes independent “leaners” as partisans. The scholarly literature is divided as to whether “leaners” ought to be considered independent or are better viewed as partisans because of their voting behavior (Keith et al. 1992; Petrocik 2009). We present the results for both codings, and fortunately our results do not depend on which measure is used.

Figure 6 plots the coefficient estimates for both forms of the model. The figure confirms that the gender gap is largely unaffected by turnout among women but the gap shrinks as turnout

¹⁵CPS data show different trends in turnout rates than does the ANES. We plan to explore these discrepancies between the datasets.

increases among men. A one point increase in turnout among men shrinks the gender gap by about three-quarters of a point. In addition, the gender gap driven most strongly by women's partisanship not men's, as much of the literature has suggested.

Figure 6 Partisanship, Turnout, and the Gender Gap



5 MEASURING NET MOBILIZATION AND PERSUASION

It seems unlikely that either election outcomes or gender gap is driven by turnout rates alone. An important factor to consider is *persuasion*: the conversion or defection of people attached to one party to vote for the candidate from the opposing party. A range of studies have shown that campaign activities such as television advertising and strategic use of issue messages are effective in convincing people who generally favor one party to cross over and vote for the candidate from the opposing party in a given election (Hillygus 2014; Huber and Arceneaux 2007).

The resurgent influence of party identification on vote choice may have implications for the gender gap as well. While differences in the vote choices of men and women may have reflected

a greater degree of partisan “defection” in voting in the past, the heightened degree of partisan voting in recent elections may produce gender gaps that are more reflective of long-term gender differences in partisanship than short-term crossover voting (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Bartels 2000).

Our task is to see how the underlying distribution of partisanship is perturbed as it is translated from preferences into votes. We have already shown that the turnout rate among men is one factor affecting the gender gap. But this mobilization effect was uncovered without accounting for persuasion. We envision the “translation” process to work through two filters as it goes from mass partisanship to actual votes. First, due to turnout effects, voters might not be representative of the larger electorate. Second, among voters, there might be persuasion such that the partisan loyalties of those who do vote are (temporarily) supplanted.

To tease out the influence of these underlying mechanisms, we create four measures to capture the partisan impact of mobilization and persuasion separately for men and women. Each of these measures is designed to capture the *net partisan impact* of each mechanism for each gender. In other words, these variables measure *which party* is the net beneficiary of mobilization among women, mobilization among men, persuasion among women, and persuasion among men—and by how much.

To capture the net partisan impact of mobilization, we create measures of the *net Democratic advantage in turnout* among men and women. Capturing the partisan advantage in turnout is not as simple as taking the difference in turnout rates between the parties, however. Because the two parties have differently sized constituencies, turnout rates *within* the parties will not accurately describe the impact of differential party turnout on the eventual *number* of votes cast for each party. To rectify this, we measure mobilization for a party as the number of partisans who reported voting in an election divided by total number of eligible voters in that year. We measure this quantity separate for men and women. For example, we measure the

mobilization of Democratic men as:

$$\text{Mobilization of Dem. Men} = \frac{\text{\# of Male Democratic Voters}}{(\text{Total \# of Voters and Nonvoters})}$$

The result is a measure that represents the *share of the total electorate* that is composed of Democratic men who turn out to vote. This measurement strategy better captures the numerical impact of the mobilization of men on the final vote, and we can compare this impact across election years by dividing by the total number of voting-eligible adults in the ANES for that election cycle.

We repeat this procedure for each gender-by-party combination for every presidential election year.¹⁶ We then calculate the *net Democratic advantage in turnout* for each gender by taking the mobilization measures for Democrats minus the mobilization measures for Republicans. For example, the net Democratic turnout advantage among men is:

$$\text{Male Democratic Mobilization} - \text{Male Republican Mobilization}$$

The measure captures the *net Democratic advantage* because the quantity is 0 when an equal number of Democratic and Republican men turn out to vote, and it is positive when Democrats have the numerical advantage. We construct a similar measure for women's mobilization.¹⁷

We repeat a similar routine to operationalize the *net Democratic advantage in persuasion*. Because the *percentage* of defecting partisans will have a greater or lesser impact on the final vote depending on the size of the partisan base, we implement similar correction as we do above by dividing the *number* of party defectors by the total number of partisan voters in an election

¹⁶This formulation excludes independents by necessity, as we can make no uniform judgment as to whether turnout among independents should advantage either party *a priori*.

¹⁷By taking differences to calculate the *net Democratic advantage* in mobilization among men and women, we are able to cut the number of variables in half (from four to two) and save degrees of freedom in subsequent regressions while losing no information about the numerical advantage either party has over the other in turnout in a given election year. And because each of these component measures is standardized by dividing by the total number of the eligible respondents in each survey year, these net mobilizations are comparable across gender and across election years.

year. Persuasion among Democratic men, for example, is thus measured as:

$$\text{Persuasion of Dem. Men} = \frac{\# \text{ of Dem. Men Voting Rep.}}{\text{Total \# of Voters}}.$$

We again compute the *net* Democratic advantage in persuasion by taking a difference across parties. The *net Democratic advantage in persuasion* among women, for example, is therefore:

$$\text{Persuasion of Rep. Women} - \text{Persuasion of Dem. Women}.$$

As with the net mobilization measures, the net persuasion measures are positive when Democrats are the numerical beneficiaries of persuasion.

Tables 2 and 3 summarize these measures of mobilization and persuasion over time, with leaners coded as independents in Table 2 and coded as partisans in Table 3. The first four columns show mobilization measures among Democratic and Republican men and women, while the next four columns show persuasion. The final four columns in the table show the *net partisan impact* of each mechanism among men and women, with positive values indicating a net Democratic advantage. Both tables remind us that in the earliest years of the ANES soon after the New Deal era, larger shares of the eligible electorate were composed of Democratic-affiliated men and women than Republican-affiliated men and women. These advantages were offset to some degree by Republican advantages in *persuasion* among men and women. Although the numbers in the net persuasion columns are often smaller than the numbers in the net mobilization columns, it is important to keep in mind from the theoretical discussion above that persuasion is worth double the votes of mobilization. This means that in many of these early survey years, although a net advantage in mobilization for Democrats appears to be substantial, this mobilization is outweighed by a persuasion advantage for Republicans, hence Republican victories in these elections despite the overwhelming advantage in partisanship for Democrats.

When shifting to more recent survey years, we note two important trends in net mobiliza-

Table 2: Mobilization and Persuasion Measures (Leaners as Independents)

Year	Mobilization				Persuasion				Net Mobilization		Net Persuasion	
	D Men	R Men	D Women	R Women	D Men	R Men	D Women	R Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1952	19.6	12.7	21.5	15.2	4.8	0.5	6.4	0.6	6.9	6.3	-4.4	-5.7
1956	22.0	13.5	22.0	18.5	5.0	0.5	6.0	0.6	8.5	3.5	-4.5	-5.4
1960	21.0	13.9	24.2	18.6	3.6	0.8	5.0	1.4	7.0	5.6	-2.9	-3.6
1964	21.6	11.3	27.9	14.8	2.4	2.4	2.9	4.7	10.3	13.1	0	1.9
1968	19.3	11.6	24.9	14.8	3.1	1.0	4.4	0.7	7.7	10.1	-2.1	-3.7
1972	16.2	11.6	22.9	15.8	6.6	0.5	9.2	1.2	4.7	7.2	-6.1	-8.0
1976	15.6	9.7	21.9	16.2	2.7	1.0	3.8	2.5	5.9	5.6	-1.7	-1.4
1980	16.6	11.5	23.7	14.8	3.5	0.5	5.0	0.7	5.1	8.9	-3.0	-4.3
1984	15.0	14.1	23.8	16.9	3.4	0.5	4.5	0.8	0.9	6.9	-2.9	-3.6
1988	13.0	14.7	22.3	17.4	1.9	0.9	3.5	1.8	-1.7	4.9	-1.0	-1.7
1992	16.9	16.1	24.7	15.2	0.9	1.2	2.3	1.5	0.8	9.5	0.2	-0.8
1996	15.8	16.4	24.1	14.9	0.8	1.4	1.1	2.3	-0.6	9.2	0.6	1.1
2000	15.6	15.4	23.2	14.8	1.3	1.2	1.6	1.1	0.2	8.4	-0.1	-0.5
2004	13.1	18.9	21.9	20.2	1.1	1.0	1.7	1.3	-5.8	1.7	-0.05	-0.4
2008	16.3	16.7	27.3	19.5	1.5	1.3	2.1	1.3	-0.3	7.8	-0.2	-0.7
2012	18.5	17.0	25.2	18.0	1.1	0.8	1.8	1.4	1.6	7.1	-0.2	-0.4

Table 3: Mobilization and Persuasion Measures (Leaners as Partisans)

Year	Mobilization				Persuasion				Net Mobilization		Net Persuasion	
	D Men	R Men	D Women	R Women	D Men	R Men	D Women	R Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
1952	20.4	13.3	20.5	15.0	5.6	0.4	6.4	0.8	7.1	5.5	-5.2	-5.5
1956	21.7	14.9	20.2	18.7	5.3	0.7	5.6	0.7	6.8	1.5	-4.6	-4.9
1960	21.5	15.5	22.0	18.7	3.5	1.1	4.3	1.6	6.0	3.3	-2.4	-2.7
1964	22.0	11.9	25.9	14.7	2.3	2.5	2.7	4.6	10.0	11.2	0.2	1.9
1968	18.6	13.2	23.2	15.1	3.3	1.0	4.8	0.7	5.4	8.1	-2.3	-4.0
1972	15.6	13.1	21.2	15.4	6.4	0.8	8.1	1.5	2.5	5.8	-5.6	-6.6
1976	15.9	11.6	20.4	15.2	2.8	1.4	4.0	2.2	4.3	5.2	-1.4	-1.7
1980	15.9	13.0	22.2	14.8	4.0	0.8	4.7	1.0	2.9	7.4	-3.2	-3.7
1984	14.5	15.4	20.7	17.3	3.2	0.6	3.9	1.0	-0.9	3.4	-2.6	-2.9
1988	13.3	15.0	19.3	16.2	1.7	1.1	3.1	2.1	-1.7	3.1	-0.6	-1.0
1992	16.7	16.3	23.2	14.8	0.7	1.1	2.2	1.8	0.4	8.4	0.3	-0.4
1996	15.0	16.0	22.1	14.0	1.0	1.7	1.0	2.6	-1.0	8.1	0.7	1.6
2000	14.6	14.8	21.2	15.1	1.4	1.1	2.5	1.7	-0.3	6.0	-0.3	-0.8
2004	15.3	18.1	20.2	16.5	1.5	1.5	1.7	1.2	-2.8	3.7	-0.01	-0.4
2008	15.8	16.0	24.9	17.6	1.4	1.5	2.1	1.9	-0.2	7.3	0.1	-0.2
2012	18.3	18.3	22.8	17.2	1.2	1.2	1.7	1.3	0.1	5.6	-0.0	-0.4

tion and net persuasion that implicate both the gender gap and the Democratic vote. First, the Democratic Party's advantage in the number of mobilized men shrinks over time and even reverses occasionally in recent contests, while the Democratic advantage in mobilization among women remains positive and sizable throughout the time period under consideration. This reflects the long-term partisan drift among men toward the Republican Party and the relatively stable Democratic majority in party identification among women, as originally highlighted by [Kaufmann and Petrocik \(1999\)](#). And second, although early survey years provided Republicans with a sizable benefit from persuading Democrats to cast Republican votes, this persuasion advantage begins to shrink substantially beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By 2008 and 2012, neither party receives a sizable advantage in persuasion. This is reminiscent of other findings in the study of voting behavior in the era of contemporary partisan polarization, with higher levels of party-loyal voting and relatively little swing voting in recent election cycles ([Bafumi and Shapiro 2009](#); [Bartels 2000](#)).

5.1 How Mobilization and Persuasion Affect the Vote

Based on Tables 2 and 3, we can see that our net mobilization and persuasion measures are useful enough to recover some basic trends from the literatures on the gender gap and voting behavior. In addition to this descriptive exercise, we also estimate straightforward least-squares regressions predicting the gender gap and the Democratic vote with these net mobilization and persuasion measures for men and women as predictors.

Table 4 outlines our expectations for the performance of these regressions. Because the gender gap measures the percentage difference in the Democratic vote between men and women, all else equal, it should *increase* when the Democratic vote among women increases relative to the Democratic vote among men, just as it should increase when the Republican vote among men grows relative to the Republican vote among women. Conversely, the gap should *decrease* when the Democratic vote among men grows and when the Republican vote among women grows, all else held equal. Thus, we would expect a net Democratic advantage in mobilization

and in persuasion among women to have a positive impact on the gender gap, while we expect a Democratic advantage in these mechanisms among men to exert a negative impact. And as explained above, the persuasion measures should net the advantaged party two votes rather than one; we thus expect the magnitude of persuasion coefficients to be double the magnitude of mobilization coefficients. All of these predictors should be positively related to the final Democratic vote, however, because positive values of every mechanism imply a net advantage for the Democratic Party, though persuasion should still be twice the value of mobilization.

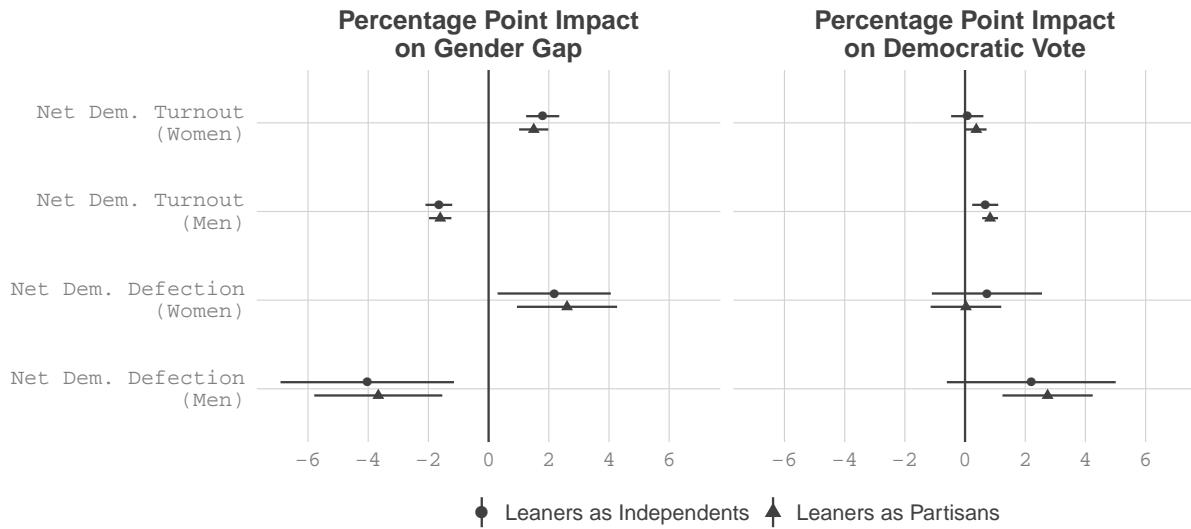
Table 4: Hypothesized effects of net mobilization and persuasion

Mechanism	Effect on Gender Gap		Effect on Democratic Vote	
	Direction	Magnitude	Direction	Magnitude
Net Dem. Mobilization – Women	+	1	+	1
Net Dem. Mobilization – Men	–	1	+	1
Net Dem. Persuasion – Women	+	2	+	2
Net Dem. Persuasion – Men	–	2	+	2

Results from these regressions are summarized in Figure 7 and are generally consistent with our expectations of the direction and magnitude of effects. The net mobilization (turnout) and persuasion (defection) measures for women are positively related to the gender gap, while those same measures for men are negatively related to the gender gap. Although the magnitudes of the persuasion variables are not precisely twice that of the mobilization variables, the estimated impact of persuasion is larger than the impact of mobilization on average, and all effects are significant. Predicting the Democratic vote with these four net mechanism measures is slightly less clear-cut. Coefficients are generally positive (consistent with expectations), but several predictors fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance, and though the magnitudes for the persuasion effects are generally larger than the magnitudes of the mobilization effects, the prediction that they should be twice the magnitude of mobilization is not as strongly supported in the Democratic vote regressions as in the gender gap regressions. Because we only have 16 elections in these regressions, coefficient estimation is imprecise (and is exacerbated because the persuasion variables are highly correlated—around .96). Nonetheless, because the sum of

the variables on the right-hand side of this equation are a relatively comprehensive decomposition of the gender gap and the Democratic vote, the model specifications provide extremely accurate predictions of the gender gap and the officially reported Democratic vote share (R^2 values between .89 and .96 in each of the four regressions).

Figure 7 Regressions predicting the Gender Gap (left) and the Democratic Vote (right)



6 CONNECTING THE MECHANISMS IN A TWO-STAGE MODEL

The regression results summarize the impact of mobilization and persuasion on the gender gap and the Democratic vote, but they do not convey exactly how mobilization and persuasion affect the Democratic vote *through* the gender gap. We have not yet addressed whether the gender gap positively or negatively impacts the Democratic vote via these mechanisms.

To do this, we employ a two-stage regression approach. Our technique is a bit complex but it mimics familiar methods such as two-stage least squares (TSLS) in which predicted values from a first stage model are plugged in an explanatory variable in a second stage outcome model. Doing TSLS in our application would mean predicting the gender gap in stage one using net mobilization and persuasion among men and women as predictors, and then using

the estimated gender gap values to predict the Democratic vote in the second stage. Because the second stage equation generally would include the estimated gender gap as a single variable, however, information about how each individual mechanism affects the Democratic vote *through* the predicted gender gap would be lost. To avoid losing information about the unique impact of each predictor, we instead decompose the predicted gender gap from stage one to reflect the contributions of the four variables. In effect, rather than using each predictor in its raw form to predict the Democratic vote (as the regressions in right-side panel of Figure 7 do), we include each predictor *multiplied by its coefficient from the stage one regression* as predictors in stage two. This allows us to estimate how each mechanism influences the Democratic vote share *by way of* the gender gap, by using each mechanism's *partial impact on the gender gap* in each election year as second-stage predictors.¹⁸

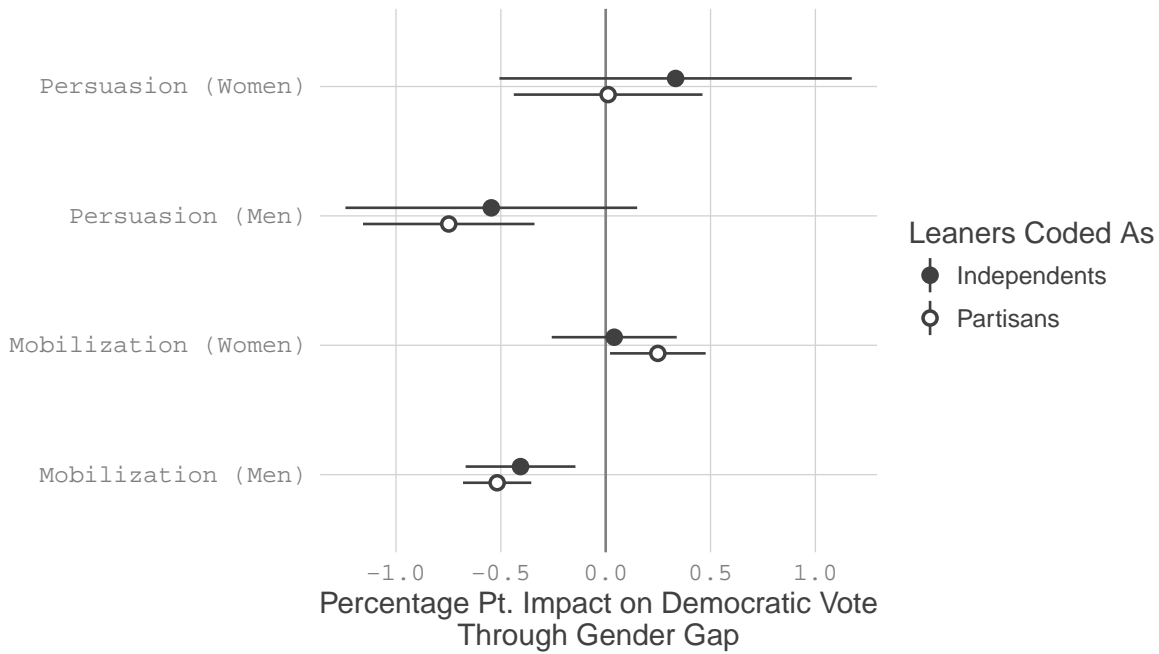
We display the results of the estimated second-stage equation in Figure 8.¹⁹ When independent leaners are coded as independents, we find that only mobilization among men is a significant predictor of the Democratic vote *via* the gender gap. When leaners are coded as partisans, however, mobilization among both men and women are significant, as is persuasion among men. The interpretation of these regressions results is not straightforward, so we present two final graphics to conclude the analysis. A key benefit of visualizing the effects is that, unlike the regressions, we can show how the impacts of the variables differ from one election to the next.

Before we visualize each mechanism's impact on the Democratic vote (stage two) once it is funneled through the gender gap, we should explain how each mechanism impacts the gender gap (stage one). Figure 9 shows how each mechanism impacts the gender gap. Lines for men and women are computed by multiplying each mechanism in each year by its estimated coefficient. Consistent with the expectations laid out in Table 4, the net Democratic advantage in mobilization has opposite impacts on the gender gap for women as it does for men (shown the upper and lower left panels). According to our theoretical framework and the stage-one regres-

¹⁸The constant from the first stage should be absorbed into the second stage constant, so we lose no information.

¹⁹Because each predictor is its observed value multiplied by its stage one coefficient, the second stage predictors are random variables. Standard errors currently do not reflect this reality.

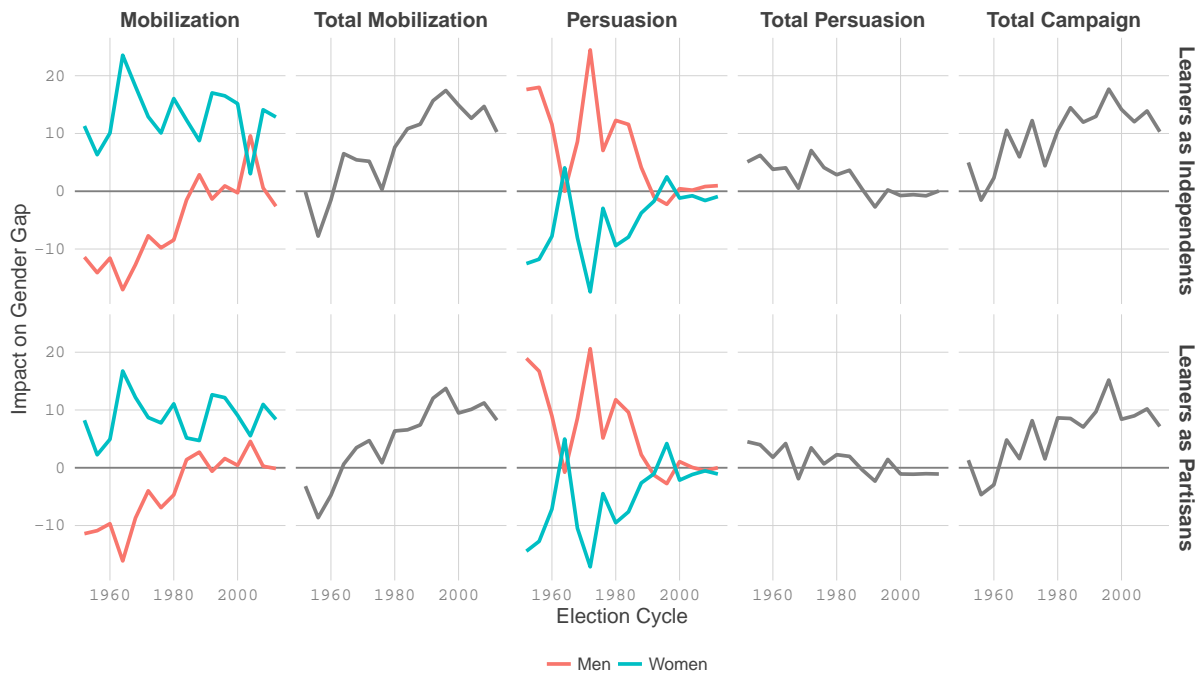
Figure 8 Results of Second-Stage Regression, Predicting Democratic Vote



sion, the net number of Democratic voters mobilized from women increases, the gender gap increases *ceteris paribus*; likewise, the gender gap decreases when the number of Democratic voters mobilized from men increases. As the number of Republican votes from men grows over time, however, the negative impact exerted by mobilization among men grows weaker. Summing the impact of mobilization among men and women together (in the second column of the figure), we see a gender gap that is consistent with the findings from the observed data in Figure 2—beginning as negative, emerging and then disappearing in the 1970s, and then reappearing permanently in the 1980s and beyond.

In persuasion, the roles are flipped. Because persuasion has generally benefited Republican candidates since the 1950s, we find that persuasion among men widens the gender gap while persuasion among women decreases it. When we sum persuasion among men and women, we find that persuasion had a slightly positive net impact on the gender gap owing to the fact that Republicans netted more votes from Democratic men than from Democratic women in most elections. Persuasion's impact on the gender gap declines toward zero in recent elections,

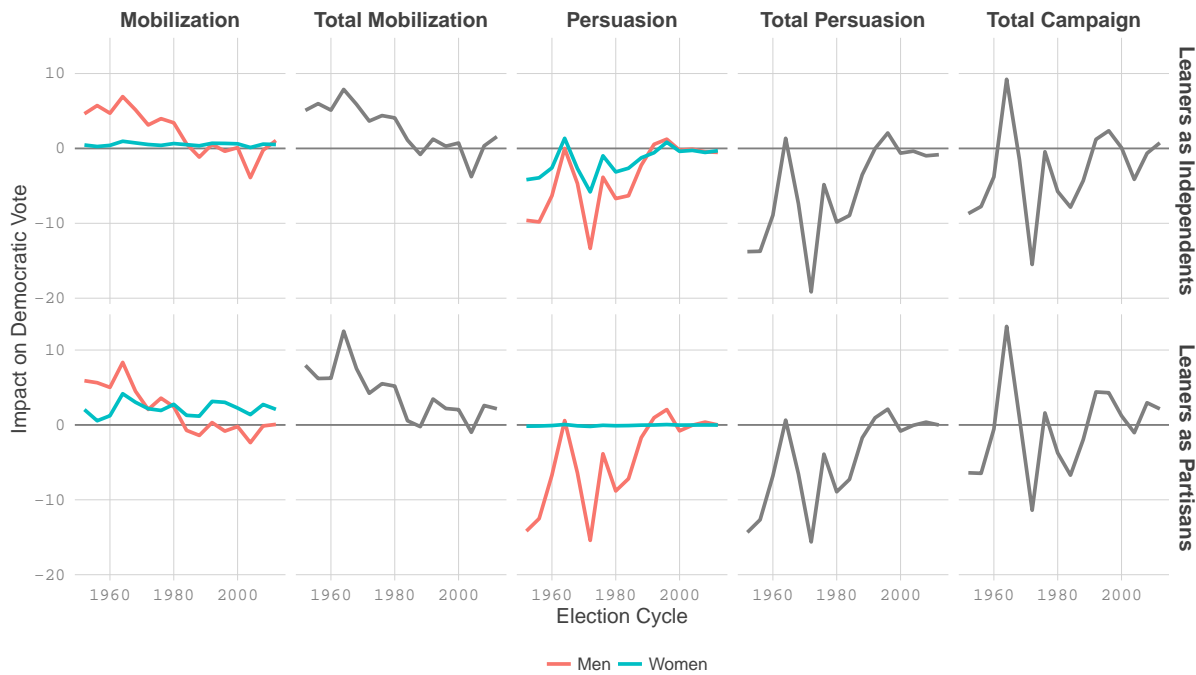
Figure 9 Impact of Mobilization and Persuasion on the Gender Gap (Stage one)



however, as the prevalence of swing voting has drastically declined in the era of polarization (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009).

Now that we have described how each mechanism influences the gender gap over time, we can better interpret the coefficients from the second-stage regressions summarized in Figure 8. Because mobilization among men benefited Democrats before the emergence of the contemporary gender gap (i.e., the variable was positive), its impact on the gender gap was generally negative even though Democrats enjoyed more votes from Democratic men overall. The two-stage regression turns up a negative coefficient for mobilization among men because, even though more Democratic male voters should boost the Democratic vote, the impact on the Democratic vote *through the gender gap* is negative, because more Democratic men shrinks the gender gap. When we plot the impact of the net Democratic mobilization among men using the coefficient from the second-stage regression, we find a more intuitive result: mobilization among men increases the Democratic vote, even though its impact *through the gender gap* is negative.

Figure 10 Impact of Mobilization and Persuasion on the Democratic Vote (Stage two)



Mobilization among women has little effect when leaners are coded as independents (due to a near-zero estimated coefficient in stage two), whereas when leaners are coded as partisans, net Democratic mobilization among women provides a boost to the Democratic vote share of 2 to 4 percentage points once funneled through the gender gap. The results of the second stage for men and women combined suggest that mobilization once provided an advantage to the Democrats, but as the number of Republican male voters increased from the late 1960s through the 1980s, the gender gap's influence on the vote (owing to mobilization alone) shrank toward zero. Following [Kaufmann and Petrocik \(1999\)](#), as a greater number of Republican men emerge, the gender gap widens while the number of Democratic partisans in the electorate decreases over time.

Persuasion widens the gender gap because the Republican Party collects more votes from male Democrats than the Democratic Party collects from female Republicans. So although net Democratic persuasion among men and women have divergent impacts on the gender gap (see [Figure 9](#)), the *level* of persuasion among both men and women historically has benefited the

Republicans. As persuasion's impact on the gender gap has declined, so too has its impact on the Democratic vote. This is due to the simple fact that persuasion is far less common than it used to be, and as a result, the gender gap reflects party identification more now than it ever has since it emerged in 1980.

7 DISCUSSION

In testing our first research question, we found correlational evidence for the folk wisdom that the Democratic Party enjoys a slight bump in vote share when the gender gap is larger. However, our subsequent examination of the underlying mechanisms suggests that this relationship is highly conditional. A careful reexamination of Figure 4 suggests that the positive relationship was quite strong until the 1980s but has weakened or even reversed since then. As the mobilization-based component of the gender gap has stabilized in recent years after a period of growth in the number of Republican men in the electorate, the prevalence of these new Republican male voters has eaten into the Democrats' long-term advantage in partisan mobilization and has decreased the Democratic vote.

While the persuasion component of the gender gap *used to* contribute to the gender gap in a manner that also hurt Democrats (by boosting Republican votes overall), the disappearance of persuasion in the overall electorate amid partisan polarization has helped Democrats by stemming the level of defection within their ranks of partisan voters. Because persuasion is worth twice as many votes as mobilization, the confluence of these forces may result in the appearance of an increased Democratic vote. As partisan change drove the gender gap to emerge in the first place, decreases in swing-voting, particularly among Democrats, has shored up the Democrats' base of support. As a result, Democrats retain more loyal voters on election day even as the number of men within the party has shrunk over time. By 2008 and 2012, the only mechanism that continues to exert a non-negligible impact on both the gender gap and the Democratic vote (by way of the gender gap) is the mobilization of women. The fact that this

result appears in Figure 10 only when leaners are coded as independents additionally suggests that it is leaning independent women who provide Democrats with the cushion that insulates them from losses in the vote due to partisan change among men.²⁰

8 CONCLUSION

Our investigation of the gender gap in postwar U.S. presidential elections has confirmed some popular assumptions while turning up some unexpected relationships. At a high level we discovered that growth in the gender gap does in fact lead to a slightly higher vote share for the Democratic candidate, particularly in competitive elections. To understand the mechanisms connecting the gender gap to election results, we developed a theoretical framework that accounts for both mobilization and persuasion effects of subpopulations within the electorate. Applying this framework to the gender gap, we find, contrary to popular wisdom, that while turnout among women has no effect on the gender gap, higher turnout among men decreases the gap. The net effect of mobilization for men and women is to reduce the size of the gap observed in party ID slightly. Persuasion has a similar net effect and that effect has been declining over time, indicating that there is more party-line voting happening along gender lines in more recent election cycles.

This paper is an exploration of what we believe are two important and related themes in contemporary electoral politics. First is understanding how “electoral gaps” between groups in the electorate—in our case, men and women—may lead to an advantage for one party over the other. Second is the more nettlesome task of decomposing these connections into the constituent parts of mobilization and persuasion. These two pieces are the major goals of campaigns and serve as the mechanisms for translating long-term support for the parties into short-term realizations on election day.

²⁰How to interpret this depends on your outlook on leaners as partisans or independents. If leaners are independents, these leaners are being *persuaded* to side with the Democratic Party year after year. If leaners are partisans, these women provide an edge in Democratic mobilization that has outlasted the growth of Republican party ID among men.

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