

# The gender gap was expected to be historic. Instead, women voted much as they always have.

By [Samantha Schmidt](#)

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In the weeks leading up to Election Day, women were expected to overwhelmingly reject President Trump.

Polling suggested that 2020 would bring the largest gender gap of any presidential election since women were granted the right to vote. A national [Washington Post-ABC News poll](#) showed former vice president Joe Biden leading Trump by 23 points among female likely voters. Some expected his lead among women to be larger than Hillary Clinton's in 2016.

But according to preliminary exit polling data from 2020, that doesn't seem to have happened. Instead, Biden's lead among women appeared to fall in line with 2016, when Clinton won women by 13 points, and 2012, when President Barack Obama won women by 11 points.

Some early exit polling even suggests a slightly smaller gender gap than 2016, driven by men shifting toward Biden: The male vote split roughly equally between Biden and Trump, according to [preliminary results](#) from national and state exit polls conducted by Edison Research, down from an 11-point lead that Trump had among the group in 2016.

While the exact divide between men and women remains unclear, political scientists say the gender gap in support of the Democratic candidate stayed within the [same range as it has since 1980](#). And one pattern continues to be clear, year after year: Party is usually a stronger force in presidential politics than gender.

In 2016 and 2020, polls and pundits suggested that women would serve as key swing voters because "they're going to respond more powerfully to campaign dynamics than men," said Erin Cassese, an associate professor of political science at the University of Delaware whose research focuses on the behavior of women as voters.

"That's not a thing that happens," Cassese said. "It's really about partisan identity."

The gender gap began emerging as a major force in presidential elections in 1980, when Ronald Reagan won with support from 47 percent of women. A slim majority of women have backed the Democratic candidate in every election since 1996, and the size of the gender gap has hovered within a narrow range: On average, women have been eight percentage points more likely than men to support the Democratic candidate in elections since 1980, according to the [Pew Research Center](#).

Kathleen Dolan, a political science professor at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, was struck less by the voting patterns among women and more by the split vote among men.

"In political science, we understand that the gender gap usually ebbs and flows based on men's behavior, not women's," Dolan said. "Women are more static."

When it comes to voting, race and education tend to matter more than gender, Christina Wolbrecht, a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame, pointed out. “Women vote more similarly to the men in their own racial group than they do to women in other racial groups,” she wrote on Twitter.

Preliminary results from exit polls conducted by Edison Research suggest roughly 9 in 10 Black women said they voted for Biden, compared to 8 in 10 Black men. About 7 in 10 Latina women said they voted for Biden, compared to roughly 6 in 10 Latino men. Meanwhile, more than half of White women voted for Trump, preliminary exit polls suggest.

And the causes of the gender gap in the last several decades are almost never the issues that are most often associated with women voters, such as abortion rights and sexual harassment, Wolbrecht said. What divides men and women most clearly, she said, are their preferences on the social welfare state. Women are more likely than men to favor government involvement in health care and education, for example.

“Women are not primarily motivated by how misogynistic a candidate is,” Wolbrecht said. “If there are changes in how women vote in 2020, I would not assume that’s because of how Donald Trump talked.”

It’s more likely that women made decisions based on economic concerns or racial identity, Wolbrecht said.

Some political scientists were reluctant to draw clear findings from exit poll data, because of some inconsistency in different exit polls and concerns that corrections due to the coronavirus pandemic and the shift to mail-in ballots may have led to problematic numbers. For example, polls conducted by Edison Research show that college-educated White women and White men were split fairly evenly between Biden and Trump, while other polling services show this group of women leaning toward Biden.

But Wolbrecht said she was interested to see some preliminary exit polling suggest that while a majority of White women without college degrees continued to back Trump, a small percentage moved toward Biden. She hypothesized that this may have been a result of the economic recession amid the pandemic, which has fallen hardest on women and mothers overburdened by child-care roles and overrepresented in industries such as retail and hospitality.

The women’s labor force participation rate is its lowest level in 32 years, according to analysis from the National Women’s Law Center. Women account for 54.5 percent of the nearly 10.1 million jobs lost in the economy since February.

Similar economic factors may help explain gender gaps among people of color, said Celeste Montoya, an associate professor in the Department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. She argued that gender gaps in voting among Latinos are not because of cultural reasons, such as the narrative around Latino men and “machismo.” Instead, she would like to see more research about the impact of employment patterns on gender voting gaps in Latino communities.

For example, in states such as Texas, where some exit polling indicated particularly large gender gaps in voting, many Latino men are employed in the energy industry and, increasingly, in law enforcement, Montoya said. Meanwhile, Latina women are overrepresented in industries that have faced some of the highest risks of coronavirus exposure and some of the biggest job losses.

The gender gap in the 2020 election may also be better explained as a turnout gap, Montoya said. Latina and Black women are more likely to show up and vote than their male counterparts, she said.

Black women in particular likely played key roles in Biden’s lead in states such as Georgia.

“A lot of the attention on women voters was on White suburban women,” Cassese said. “But the story is really secondary to Black women’s activism, Black women’s organizing.”

Kathryn Pearson, an associate political science professor at the University of Minnesota, said some preliminary exit polling data indicated the gender gap in Michigan. Wisconsin and Minnesota was higher than the national average.

polling data indicated the gender gap in swing states like Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota was higher than the national average. Women, especially Black women, she argued, were critical to Biden's victories in these states.

"Their support made the difference," Pearson said.

*Emily Guskin and Scott Clement contributed to this report.*

By [Samantha Schmidt](#)

Samantha Schmidt is The Washington Post's Bogotá bureau chief, covering the Andes region of South America. [!\[\]\(cbe80b694ebd74fcfe136a095b608235\_img.jpg\) Twitter](#)

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