

The Gender Gap in Russian Politics and Elections

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*Valerie Sperling
Clark University
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Introduction

After the Soviet Communist Party's regime was replaced by a multiparty system in the 1990s, voting in Russia became a subject of intense interest to political scientists. Voters in Russia, as elsewhere, now make choices based on many issues, such as perceptions about the economy. Demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity and income, highly predictive in the United States, and age, particularly salient in Russia, also play a role in voter choice. In recent years, scholars of U.S. politics have paid increasing attention to the role of gender as a demographic characteristic contributing to voter preference and have labeled this phenomenon the electoral "gender gap." The availability of reliable polling data in Russia has now made it possible to explore the gendered dynamics of Russian politics as well.

What Is the Gender Gap?

The gender gap is a term used largely to describe several phenomena, including the under-representation of women in political positions and the fact that women and men often differ in the political parties they support on Election Day. Several aspects of the gender gap are evident in U.S. politics. For instance, American female and male voters differ in turnout rates, party identification, issue positions, and vote choices. The proportion of men elected and appointed as politicians to women elected and appointed as politicians in the United States is highly skewed as well, with men dominating the political field across the board.

The gender gap in voter choice in the United States has made a large impression in recent years. According to Kaufmann and Petrocik, starting in the mid-1960s, men have voted more heavily for Republican candidates than women have. In the 2000 U.S. presidential election, the gender gap was higher than ever before. 54 percent of women supported Gore, while only 42 percent of men supported him. Conversely, 53 percent of men supported Bush, while only 43 percent of women supported him. If only men had voted on Election Day, Bush would have won by a landslide. By the same token, according to the Feminist Majority Foundation, Gore won 16 of the 21 states where he was victorious solely because of the gender gap. The gender gap is present outside of presidential elections as well. Data from the Center for American Women and Politics suggests that senatorial and gubernatorial elections since 1982 have repeatedly resulted in gender gaps significant enough to provide the margin of victory.

Ethnicity is important in any analysis of the gender gap in the United States. African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans all vote more heavily Democratic than do white voters. In the 2000 election, whites went 43 percent for Gore, blacks 90 percent for

Gore, Latinos 61 percent for Gore, and Asians 62 percent for Gore. But ethnicity does not entirely erase the gender gap; women of all ethnicities voted more heavily Democratic than did men of the same ethnic groups. For example, 94 percent of African-American women voted for Gore, but only 85 percent of African-American men did so. In short, the gender gap is a determining factor in elections in the United States.

The Russian Gender Gap in Voter Choice

Although the Russian political system is too newly pluralistic to provide meaningful data for comparison over time, a gender gap in voter choice is nevertheless evident in the last several elections.

In 1993, the political bloc, the Women of Russia (WOR), appeared on the scene and garnered just over 8 percent of the vote. According to Timothy Colton, these votes came predominantly from women, who simultaneously shunned Zhirinovskii's fascist-inflected Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). Russia's women continue to reject the LDPR. According to Colton's data, in 1995, all other social characteristics being equal, the probability that a woman would vote for the LDPR was nine percentage points less than it was for a man.

A gender gap is also visible in the constituency of the Russian Communist Party. Colton's data shows that in 1995, the probability that a woman would vote for the KPRF was four percentage points higher than it was for a man. In the first round of the 1996 presidential elections, the probability that a woman would vote for the KPRF was three percentage points higher than it was for a man, suggesting that women have a slightly greater preference for the KPRF than men.

In the 1999 parliamentary elections, there were gender gaps for all the major Russian parties except for Unity, which supported Putin and emerged as the victor. Unity's voters were almost evenly split between men and women. Data presented by Yitzhak Brudny shows that in the 1999 elections, gender gaps in support for the other parties ranged from 4 percent (female) for the KPRF to 24 percent (male) for the LDPR, continuing the gender gap trend.

The relatively even male-female split in Unity's voting constituency in 1999 is somewhat surprising in retrospect, because a significant gender gap emerged favoring Putin in the 2000 presidential elections. Those elections exhibited a marked gender gap in candidate choice: 61 percent of Putin's voters were women, and 39 percent were men—a gender gap of 22 percent. According to a dataset gathered and analyzed by Timothy Colton and Michael McFaul, men were six percentage points less likely to vote for Putin than were women. There was no such significant gender gap in the votes for Ziuganov (49 percent male, 51 percent female) and Yavlinskii (49 percent female, 51 percent male). And, according to Brudny, nonvoters were split equally between men and women.

Does such a gender gap carry political significance, or is it of purely academic interest? One way to explore this question is to ask whether Putin's margin of victory in 2000 was such that the gender gap had a determining effect. In other words, if only men had voted in the presidential elections on that day, would Putin still have won? As it turned out, Putin won the election with roughly 53 percent of the vote, and Ziuganov came in second with roughly 30 percent. Based on the fact that Russia's population is 53

percent female and 47 percent male, and assuming that the percentage of voter turnout is roughly equal among men and women, Putin won 60 percent of the women's vote and 44 percent of the men's vote. Thus, if Russia's women had stayed home on Election Day, Putin would still have won the election, but he would not have won in the first round.

The Russian Gender Gap in Elected and Appointed Politics

A significant gender gap is reflected in the Russian political arena as well, which is heavily biased toward male occupants of both elected and appointed offices. Indeed, according to Nadezhda Shvedova, Russia's political elite has been described as a “male club.” From 1996–1999, women made up only 7.2 percent of Russia's Federal Assembly, with only one woman present in the upper chamber, the Federation Council. The WOR's success in the Duma elections in 1993 (where they gained over 8 percent of the vote, and the overall percentage of women in the Duma reached just over 11 percent) inspired other political parties in the 1995 national elections to include twice as many female candidates on their electoral lists as they had in 1993. Yet, this did not lead to an increase in the number of women elected to the state Duma; parties including women tended to place them further down on electoral lists, so few women were able to gain seats. The percentage of women in Russia's Duma today has declined to a mere 7 percent.

Data gathered by Shvedova shows that men's dominance of subnational legislatures has been pervasive as well. As of June 1997, legislatures of several subjects of the Federation contained no women at all. Only in four subjects of the Federation did women's representation reach 30 percent. Overall, only 9 percent of Russia's subnational legislators were female, a number which remained constant over time; in February 1999, only 9 percent of the deputies elected to the Russian Federation's legislatures were women. In several local legislatures, no women were elected at all.

The gender gap within Russia's executive branch is even more dramatic. In 1999, there was only one woman among Russia's governors and heads of republic governments and administrations—the governor of the Koriak autonomous okrug. Within Russia's state bureaucracy, a glass ceiling largely restricts women to lower levels of power. As of 1999, women occupied only 1.3 percent of leading posts in Russian executive bodies, working as ministers or heading state committees.

According to Russian sociologist Olga Kryshstanovskaia, women are at a growing disadvantage within Russia's ruling elite. A comparison between the composition of Russia's ruling elite in the Brezhnev era with that of the present Putin administration shows that the percentage of intellectuals and women has clearly declined. One striking difference is that approximately 35 percent of new appointees at the deputy ministerial level under Putin's administration (between 2000 and 2002) were formerly employed in the military or intelligence fields. This fact suggests an explanation for the growing gender gap in Russia's state administration: because Russia's military and security/intelligence apparatus are so thoroughly male-dominated, if these institutions are an increasingly significant route to political power, then women's path will be limited.

Policy Implications of the Russian Gender Gap

What are the policy implications that can be garnered from this information? First, there is a definite gender gap in the Russian political arena. It is evident in both voter choice and in the paucity of women participating in high politics in both elected and appointed positions. In the electoral realm, the gender gap suggests that women and men are voting for and against particular parties. This may be due to party programs or attempts to appeal to particular constituencies. Alternatively, the gender gap may be capturing other differences, as is in part the case in the United States, where the gender gap often overlaps with an ethnicity gap; in Russia, the equivalent may be age gap.

A second implication of this data is a reminder that women are a critically important constituency in any polity. Although women are often excluded from high-level participation in the political arena, women tend to vote in larger numbers than men and to play a large role in the nongovernmental (NGO) sector, which is less prestigious and lower paid than the private sector or high politics. The NGO sector is nonetheless crucial for the development and entrenchment of civil society, which provides a check on state power—an essential element of any stable, consolidated democracy. Women are thus highly engaged in the political realm and ignored by political parties and leaders at their peril. One concern of any transitional democratic regime should be to ensure popular participation in the polity, especially the participation of groups subject to systematic status-based discrimination. Russia's political parties would be well advised to develop competing agendas for attracting women's votes.

Finally, the female vote in Russia could be mobilized based on issue opinions, which, according to Colton, do not currently play the most significant role in determining voter choice (except in presidential runoff elections). One of the likely sources of the gender gap in U.S. presidential elections stems precisely from an issue choice—social service spending. Specifically, Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks claim that the gender gap in U.S. presidential elections is rooted in women's increased involvement in the paid labor force. This involvement corresponds with a concern about social service spending, which pushes women's votes in a more Democratic direction than men's. Social welfare spending may similarly become a motivating issue for Russian women voters. Manza and Brooks point out that women, more than men, rely on the public sector for jobs, social welfare services related to childcare and other parenting responsibilities, and income support (this is particularly true of single mothers whose earning potential is limited by their circumstances). Of the two main parties, the Democratic Party comes closest to advocating these policies in the United States. All of these concerns are significant for women in Russia, who also predominate in state-budget sector jobs (such as civil service, education, and health care). Such policy concerns may begin to have a more evident impact on women's votes over time, although the policy agendas on these issues among some of Russia's political parties are not as easily distinguished from each other as are the Democratic and Republican Party agendas in the United States. Russian political parties promoting social service spending may thus become the beneficiaries of women's votes.