

# What Do Women Want?

## *The Three Reasons for Ronald Reagan's Gender Gap*

Rachel Flick

**C**ontrary to some suggestions from the Right, Ronald Reagan confronts a gender gap that cannot be wished away. Until 1980 men and women voted almost exactly alike, but when Mr. Reagan ran for president, the genders abruptly diverged at the polls. Mr. Reagan won a landslide victory among men—he had a margin of 20 points—but women divided their votes equally between him and Jimmy Carter. Modestly but undeniably, the gender gap reappeared in 1982, with men favoring Republicans and women favoring Democrats by as much as 6 percent each. By June 1983 the gap had widened again—by some estimates, to as wide as 25 points. Although millions of women are still Republicans, and millions of men are still Democrats, campaign strategists can no longer altogether ignore the sex of their voters.

The gender gap does not result, as some women's groups maintain, from Mr. Reagan's positions on the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion. According to Kathleen Frankovic, director of surveys for "CBS News," 55 percent of men and 53 percent of women supported the ERA in 1982. Similarly, polls reveal little difference of opinion between men and women on abortion. It is possible that women are more likely than men to vote on the basis of these preferences, but exit polls do not indicate that they have done so.

Rather, the gap results from three other sources of female dissatisfaction with Ronald Reagan. Two have to do with women's perceived economic interests. The third, and most consequential, involves what might be called women's point of view.

Women are disproportionately the welfare-dependent poor, a population that has long been disproportionately Democratic (logically enough, as the Democrats stand for higher benefits). The preponderance of women in this economic group is not new, so in itself it cannot be linked to the sudden appearance of the gender gap. What are new and can be linked, however, are the ages and circumstances of the female aid recipient.

A significant number of America's poor women have always been aged, and their seniority has somewhat moderated the Democratic tendencies inspired by their poverty. The old are more conservative than the young,

and poor old women are more conservative than poor young women. Today, though, these voters—who would otherwise be a natural constituency for Mr. Reagan—have turned away from Republicanism because they fear that the president will cut their Social Security benefits.

What's more, fewer of today's poor women are old. An increasing percentage of the female poor are young, unmarried, and caring for dependent children—three characteristics that propel them toward welfare dependency and hence toward the Democratic party. Recipients of federal aid have long been women, and Republicans have never had many of their votes, but the changing composition of this income group, combined with the incendiary issue of Social Security, may well have reduced the GOP's total support among the poor.

### Disaffection

The Democratic votes of low-income women thus account for some of the gender gap. But they do not account for all of it. There are simply too few poor voters to make a difference in the final tally. Probably a more significant group of disaffected women comprises workers in "human services"—such fields as health care, social services, and education.

An unwavering theme of the Reagan presidency has been the need to tighten up on that part of the work force that depends on public money. An enormous percentage of America's human services jobs fall into this category, by being directly governmental, dependent on federal demand-inducing programs (such as Medicare and Medicaid), or dependent on federal bloc grants. And seven of every ten of the workers who fill these jobs are women.

In 1980 nearly one third of the 41 million women at work were employed in human services; only 11 percent of men in the work force were so employed. Between 1969 and 1980 social welfare created jobs for 40 percent of the women entering the work force, but only 20 percent of male entrants. The Reagan cutbacks have therefore had a disproportionate impact on women's career

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Demonstration at the UN headquarters  
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prospects. Poverty, health, and education programs supply jobs to a great many people. It is not surprising that human services workers are overwhelmingly hostile to an administration that sees the problems that employ them in a new light and has declared its intention radically to change the system now in place to redress those problems.

It is thus clear that the economic interests of two heavily female groups lie with the Democrats—the interests of those who receive federal aid and of those who dispense it. But the data make it hard to believe that women dislike Mr. Reagan exclusively for reasons of economic interest. He is disproportionately opposed by women who are neither poor nor publicly employed, and they oppose him on issues having only remotely to do with their economic interests. The gender gap has also been molded by a subjective force.

In particular, women appear to be more concerned

than men about the “fairness” of the Reagan program—a concern measured in surveys by asking whether Mr. Reagan “helps the rich and hurts the poor.” Second, women appear to be more averse to risk; women and men divide over those issues where one point of view would incur a hazard in the hope of a possible gain.

#### Unpersuaded

The survey data on the economy illustrate those concerns. Two kinds of questions are asked about Mr. Reagan’s economic program. One assesses how well the respondent thinks it is working, and the other concerns its fairness. Women respond more negatively than men to both types of questions. By June only 23 percent of men still doubted that real recovery was under way, but 36 percent of women remained unpersuaded. Women believed much more strongly than men that Mr. Reagan should have done more to end the recession sooner. And



whereas men were emphatic (61 to 34 percent) that he had not done enough to reduce unemployment, women were more emphatic still (71 to 21 percent). Since female unemployment has been lower than male unemployment, those figures suggest that women are concerned about the joblessness of others as well as about their own situations.

Every time they are asked, by every index they are requested to consider, women express worry and disapproval of the American economy under Mr. Reagan.

One of the widest gaps is on fear that Mr. Reagan will get the country into a war. A year ago Ms. Frankovic found the biggest split of all to be on this issue, across age, education, and household status. At one point she found half of all women believing we would have a war under Mr. Reagan and men disbelieving this two to one. She found a significant split, too, on the question that tests "willingness to be more aggressive in foreign policy, even at the risk of war."

More recently, in June of 1983, the *New York Times*/CBS poll found that 31 percent of men feared that there would be a war under Mr. Reagan, compared with 47 percent of women. In fact, it found a military gender gap down the line. Forty-one percent of men but only 28 percent of women thought Mr. Reagan had "done enough" to "reach an agreement to reduce nuclear weapons." Forty-three percent of men thought "Reagan's policies have brought the United States more respect in the Soviet Union, Europe, and Central America," compared with 27 percent of women.

### Alarmed

One possible explanation for these data is that women do not understand Mr. Reagan's style of negotiation as well as men do. Mr. Reagan's foreign strategy has relied considerably more on strength and intimidation than that of his recent predecessors; we now have a president who is willing to shoot down Libyan jets and send gunboats into the Caribbean. Mr. Reagan has tried to use toughness to win concessions. He has called a few bluffs. He has taken risks in the hope of advancing U.S. interests. The polls reveal that a significant number of men accept this policy but that women are both alarmed by it and unpersuaded that it works. Perhaps women simply do not understand what Mr. Reagan is doing abroad.

It is also possible that they do not think the chance of a gain justifies the risk of violent disturbance; it is possible that women are simply averse to short-term risk. Threatening shifts in the global balance of power represent a long-term risk and diffuse injury, compared with war, which represents pressing uncertainty and immediate hardship and loss.

The idea of risk aversion could shed some light, too, on other gender gap statistics. It might well explain, for example, the greater proclivity of women to environmentalism. And it might explain the perplexing extent to which the gap is centered on Ronald Reagan.

Although the gap affects all Republicans, and though to a degree it focuses on issues, it is widest with respect to Ronald Reagan. Several pollsters, in fact, speculate that its effect on other Republicans may only be spillover. Ms.

Frankovic claims that a gender gap shows up every time Mr. Reagan's name is mentioned in a survey question. *Public Opinion* magazine speculates that the reason why the gap was smaller in the 1982 elections than in 1980 is that Mr. Reagan wasn't running.

The Reagan administration arouses both strong support and strong opposition. Under Mr. Reagan's tenure, marginality favors the Democrats. The majority of those 1982 voters who thought both parties or neither party contributed to the recession cast their ballots Democratic, as did those who picked their candidates in the last three weeks of the campaign. (In 1980, by contrast, late deciders went Republican.) Those consistently opposed to Mr. Reagan decided early and voted heavily against all Republicans. In the Reagan era, both Republican and anti-Republican votes are strongly felt; swing votes go Democratic.

What this strength of feeling seems to indicate is that America perceives Mr. Reagan as a very powerful agent. Perhaps the principal thing the Reagan administration has stood for is radical change, both ideological and institutional. Mr. Reagan represents conservative values, of course, but where the status quo is liberal, conservatism is a daring moral assertion. And in his first two years of office he attempted the most fundamental reversal of direction in the American system in the last 50 years. There is no way that a risk-averse voter would *not* dig in her heels against such a politician.

Moreover, the conservative ideology for which Mr. Reagan stands celebrates risk. He has tried to return America to the time when the individual had real opportunity but also bore a real responsibility for himself and his family.

By opposing Mr. Reagan, women have expressed their concern about the suffering of poverty and their anxiety to avoid the hazards incurred in war. But it is not reasonable to conclude from this that masculine support for Mr. Reagan means men are willing to toil in penury or be incinerated in a nuclear blast. It is more reasonable to assume that men are quiescent on these issues under Mr. Reagan's leadership because they are satisfied that he has taken care of them. The gap reveals that the genders differ in style and approach, but it need not be taken to mean that they ultimately want radically different things. Rather, the genders divide on the president's means, which are a broad economic redirection and gunboats off Nicaragua, and on his terms, which are entrepreneurship, economic growth, and "peace through strength." These means and terms require no explanation to men, but large numbers of women have not understood what ends they are intended to serve.

In government, means and terms are obviously everything. Mr. Reagan's gunboats and entrepreneurialism and all that they represent about what America ought to be are the very reason he is in office. Beyond a certain point, he cannot explain his programs in the language of pacifism and compassion without misrepresenting and ultimately undercutting them. It would make no sense for him to reassure women about his ends by abandoning the approach for which he stands. He can reassure them only by going further to explain his own terms.

## *A Cheap Way to Feel Good about Feeling Lousy about America*

*Daniel*, directed by Sidney Lumet (Paramount Pictures).

**M**ost American Communists, Whittaker Chambers observed in *Witness*, were not flamboyant people. They were not, like John Reed, romantics who made up for mediocre writing abilities by an adventurous outlook on life; on the contrary, they were rather humdrum sorts with a rather narrow view of what life had to, or even ought to, offer. They were the kind of people who worked the bureaucracies of state agencies, did not read surrealist poetry, bought reproductions of perfectly ordinary pictures, shopped at Macy's, not Saks, and were, in short, tacky.

Like most people, Chambers added, Communist party members required faith. This was Chambers's great insight and the cause of the mistrust he provoked among liberal anti-Communists in the fifties, as well as the admiration he evoked among traditionalists like William F. Buckley, Jr. What was really at issue—Chambers was convinced of this—was not so much a political system as man's soul, and communism must be opposed not by liberalism but by Christianity. For he saw that the Communists, at least the American Communists whom he knew, were above everything else believers.

You can carry on back and forth as to the accuracy of Whittaker Chambers's insight, its applicability to Communists outside the United States, and any number of other issues that it raises. But I think it is very likely that a large number of Communists were people such as Chambers claimed he knew in the party, ordinary people with a big emptiness in their souls, which they filled by believing in the Soviet Union, the working class, the revolution, or whatever the party might refer to at a given moment as the central tenet of its creed. And this spiritual atmosphere is absolutely crucial to understanding one of the most famous judicial cases in American history, the Rosenberg espionage conspiracy, and all subsequent comment upon it, including Sidney Lumet's new film, *Daniel*. The film opened in September and has been enjoying a feeble run at the box office—and causing a good deal of impassioned controversy among the critics.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were tried, convicted, and,

after appeals all the way up to the Supreme Court, executed for conspiracy to commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. The trial took place in 1951, the execution two years later. The alleged goal of their conspiracy was the secret of the atomic bomb, and the principal witness against them was one of their alleged coconspirators, Ethel's younger brother David Greenglass (who drew a long sentence in his own trial). A third codefendant, Morton Sobell, was given 30 years.

### Scapegoats or Spies?

This case has been the object of a great amount of controversy and has given rise to a substantial literature. Legal critics of the case, such as Louis Nizer, have agreed, in general, that the trial was fair. Historians of the case have also agreed that the trial was fair, as far as judicial procedure goes, but have been divided over the more fundamental question of whether it was possible to get a fair trial, in the deeper sense, in 1951, when the United States was at war in Korea and had recently lost its nuclear monopoly. A rapidly dwindling pro-Rosenberg faction is convinced that the FBI framed innocent people because the government needed scapegoats to get away with its imperialistic, anti-Soviet foreign policy (otherwise known as the Cold War). The anti-Rosenbergians are convinced that there really was a spy ring coordinated by Julius Rosenberg, indeed an effective one, which aided the Soviets. This side has just been given a boost by *The Rosenberg Files*, a new book by Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, who obtained previously unreleased government files, expecting to prove the Rosenbergs innocent but instead concluding that Julius was guilty and Ethel was aware of what he was doing.

The Rosenbergs' own insistence, to the very end, that they were innocent has been crucial to the mythology that surrounds them. That they were young parents, that the sentence was harsh, that the whole affair was depressing and gruesome—no doubt, all this contributed to making them popular martyrs for the Left, both Communist and non-Communist. But it was their "We are innocent" that was the most important thing, that led people to identify with them. Somewhere, despite the horrors of Stalinism and every other revolutionary Eldorado—or rather, precisely because of them—somewhere in his soul the revolutionary true believer must believe that he is right: "We are innocent." You can show the trial to have been fair, you can prove there was indeed a spy ring under Soviet control, still they meant to do the right thing: "We are innocent." If they had confessed, what good would they have been once the Soviet Union lost its charm—as, over the years, it did even to members of the