

Gender, National Security, and the Election of 2004

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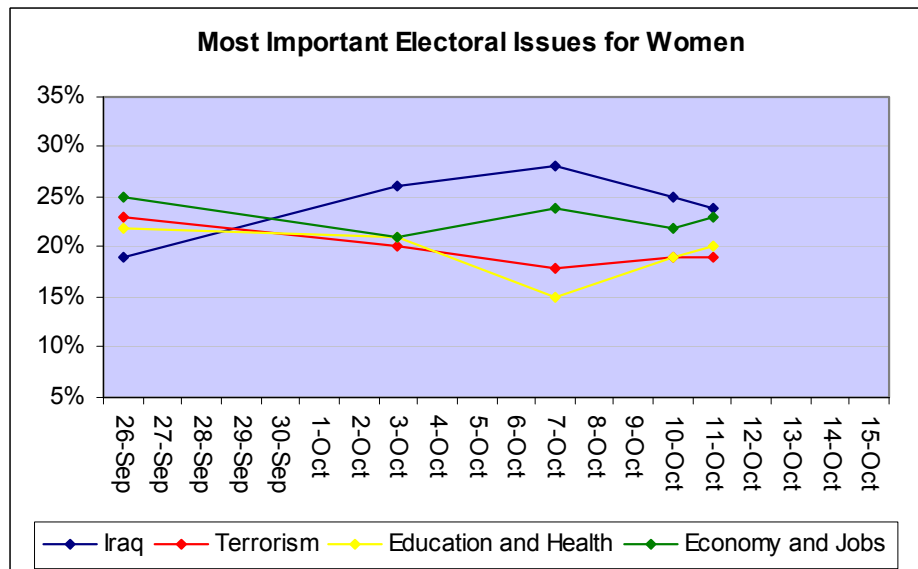
In this brief report, I update my analysis of the impact of gender and national security issues on voter preferences in the 2004 election.¹ I do not review the earlier analysis in detail; it is available [here](#).

The Salience of the Iraq War to Women

I argued in my earlier analysis that Senator Kerry was lagging behind the historical advantage of democrats among women for two reasons: i.] President Bush had successfully diverted attention from the difficulties in Iraq to the issue of terrorism, an issue on which women's views are similar to men's (both men and women are supportive of forceful action against terrorism); and ii.] more speculatively, I argued that President Bush had redefined the Iraq war by insisting that it was part of the "war on terror". I also argued that both of these tactics had successfully diverted attention from three aspects of the war that would normally render women disproportionately critical of the war and thus the President: continuing casualties; the elusiveness of success; and the prospect (or indeed fact) of US involvement in a civil war.

However, I also argued that Senator Kerry's renewed criticism of policy in Iraq after September 20 (NYU speech), especially if amplified by the Presidential debates beginning on September 30, could have the effect of re-focusing attention on precisely these issues. Senator Kerry has emphasized the failure of policy; the growing casualties; and in one debate he pointed raised the prospect of civil war in Iraq. In my earlier analysis, I predicted that this campaign approach was likely to yield disproportionate gains for Kerry among women voters.

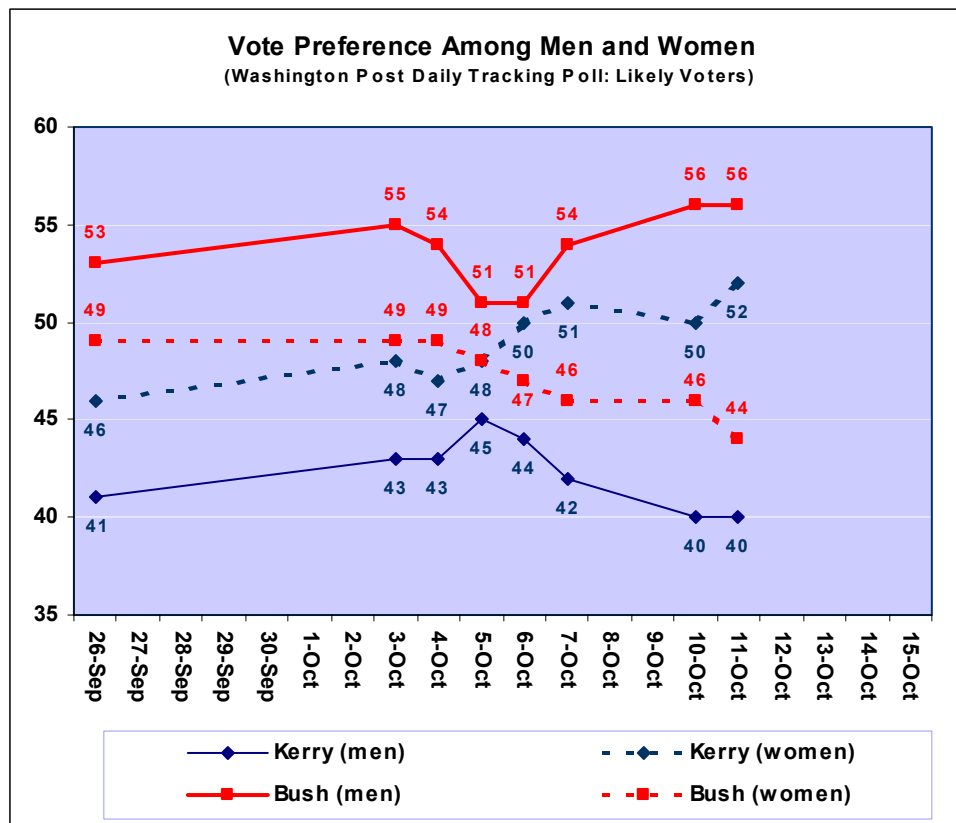
The graphic immediately below suggests that this is indeed what happened after the first and second presidential debates –both of which focused on the Iraq issue intensively.



Prior to the first debate –on Sept 26—the war in Iraq ranked fourth among women in the Washington Post question that asks “What will be the SINGLE most important issue in your vote for president this year: The U.S. campaign against terrorism, the war in Iraq, the economy and jobs, education, health care, or something else?”(education and healthcare are combined in the graphic). After the first debate, it became the top-ranked electoral issue for women, and by a substantial margin over the other three issues. It has stayed the top-ranked issue among women ever since, although it is now declining somewhat as the debates recede and the candidates turn their attention to domestic issues.

Voter Preferences

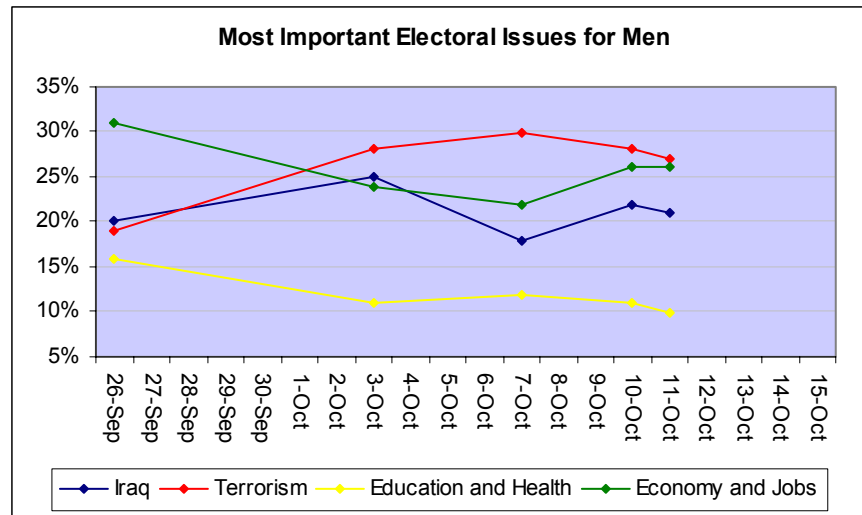
Has the renewed salience of Iraq among women led to gains for Kerry in vote preferences among women? The second graphic shows that it has. Indeed, the tightening of the race to a statistical draw is due entirely to Kerry’s gains among women!



Among women, Kerry has gained 6 points over his standing on September 26th. Among men, he experienced a brief “bounce” among men after the first debate (matched by a downward blip among men for Bush), but it peaked on October 5th. As of October 11th, Kerry has exactly the same standing among men that he had in late September, and Bush has actually improved somewhat among men. All of Kerry’s gains have come among women, and as we saw above, these gains came at precisely the time that Iraq had surged to the top of women’s election priorities.

What Now?

Kerry at the moment is very close to the 54-43 advantage that Vice President Gore polled among women in 2000, but he is running slightly behind the margin (42%) that Gore polled among men. A look at the views of men is therefore in order:



The graphic shows pretty clearly why Bush held his advantage among men through the debate period: for men, the importance of the “war on terror” that Bush emphasized during the debates actually increased to the top election issue. And by October 11, Bush had actually gained a bit in the vote preferences of men.

It is almost as if there are two electorates. At the moment, terrorism is the first priority for men. For women, it is last.

In the short-term at least, the drift of the campaign would seem to favor Kerry. The second debate on October 13 will focus on domestic issues and also provide Kerry an opportunity to highlight the tradeoff between the financial cost of Iraq and the funding of domestic programs. Moreover, domestic issues are highly ranked electoral concerns among women (see above), but more importantly, the economy in particular is also of high concern to men. Thus, the second debate would seem to offer Kerry the chance to build even more support among women and perhaps make some gains among men. Gallup [reports today](#) (October 13) that Kerry enjoys slight to large advantages on most of these domestic issues among the entire population.

It also seems fairly predictable that President Bush will attempt to re-focus the campaign on terrorism once the news cycle of the last debate has run its course. That strategy succeeded brilliantly in August and September (as I wrote in the original report), and the President’s re-election probably depends on his ability to repeat that success.

¹ All of the following analysis is based on the *ABC/Washington Post* daily tracking poll of about 1050 likely voters. According to the *Post*, “This tracking poll is based on a rolling three-day sample. About 350 likely voters are polled each day. To update the numbers, a new day’s sample of respondents is added to the

total sample and the oldest day's sample of respondents is dropped out. The Post typically identifies likely voters as those who say 1) they are registered to vote, 2) they are absolutely certain to vote, and 3) either voted in the 2000 election; or are between 18-21 years old and are closely following the race”