

# Gender, National Security, and the Election of 2004

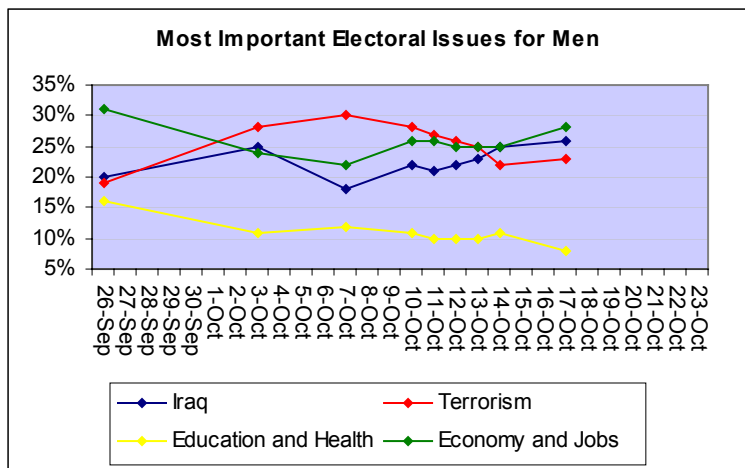
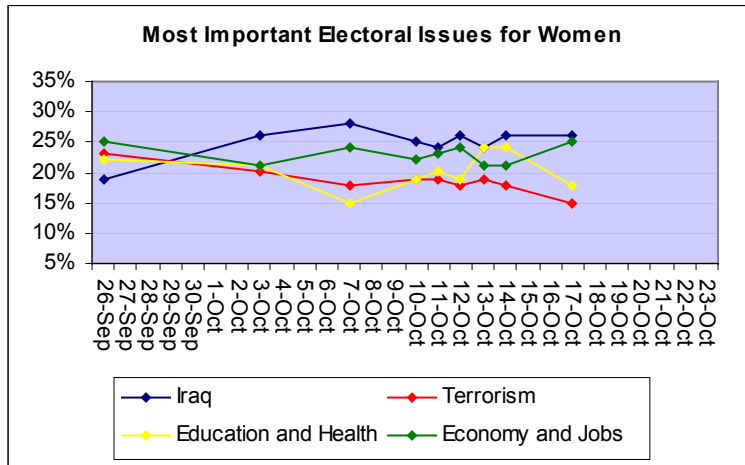
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Update: October 26, 2004

In this brief report, I update my analysis of the impact of gender and national security issues on voter preferences in the 2004 election.<sup>1</sup> I do not review the original analysis in detail; it is available [here](#); the first update from October 13 is [here](#).

## The Salience of the Iraq War

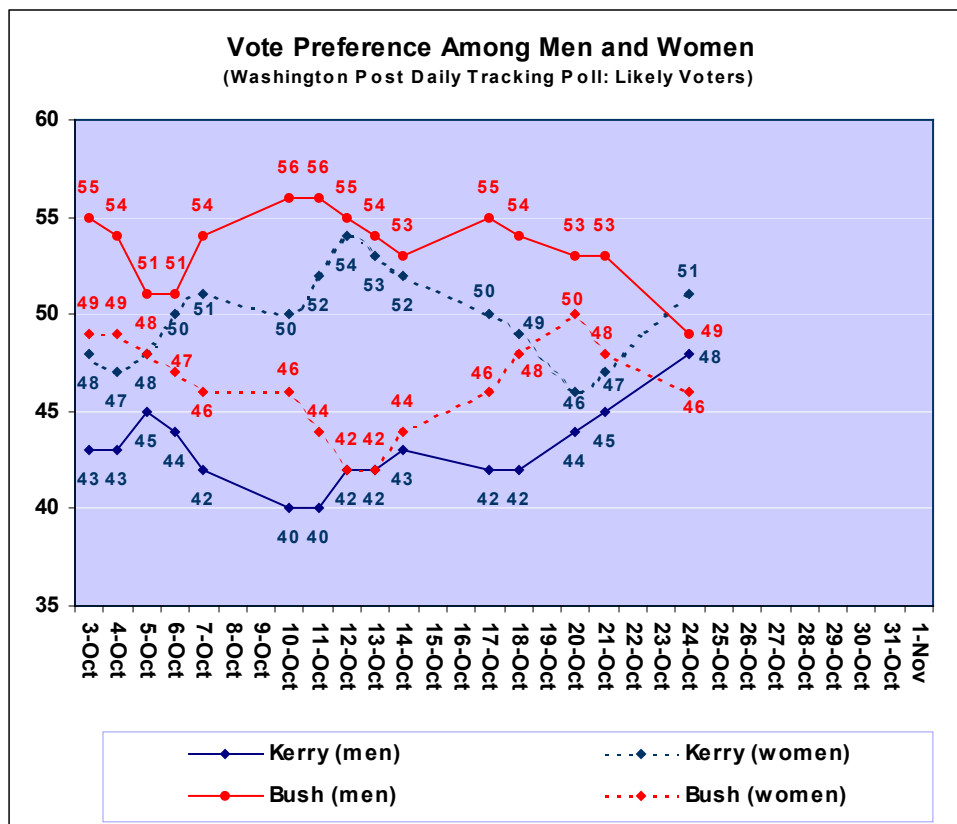
The last gender breakdowns for the ABC/*Washington Post* question on the single most important issue in the election was reported on October 17<sup>th</sup>; it is shown below with its trend for women and men:



What is notable is that, among women, the Iraq war remained (narrowly) as the most important issue even after the third debate on domestic issues on October 13, although economic issues did increase in importance and concern for education and healthcare did blip upward briefly. Still, I would expect that the continuing concern for Iraq would reinforce the growing support for Kerry among women that I reported in the first [update](#), all the more so as terrorism remained lowest as an electoral concern among women.

### Voter Preferences

As shown below, however, this is *not* what happened.



Beginning on the day of the last debate (October 13), Kerry begin losing ground among women, with Bush gaining, a trend that continued through October 20.

Why the shift contrary to what one would expect given the continuing salience of Iraq to women?

Two (speculative) explanations come to mind:

1. *Domestic Issues Dominate the Campaign and Media Coverage.* Although women remained *concerned* about Iraq, my impression is that the week after the last debate was dominated by the candidates' focus on domestic issues. Following my argument, Kerry's best issue among women is the Iraq war, so the shift in

attention may explain the weakening of his support among women. However, the plausibility of this explanation is weakened by the fact that women are generally receptive to the Democratic message on domestic issues (especially so-called “caring” issues such as social security), so the drop in Kerry’s support remains puzzling. Recall also that Gore outpolled Bush 53-41 among women on a domestic platform that is hard to distinguish from Kerry’s.

2. *The Mary Cheney Flap.* Kerry’s decline among women occurs during the period after the last debate. Two things are significant about this (week-long) period: First, the news cycle was dominated by discussion (and criticism) of Kerry’s mention of Mary Cheney and her sexual preference –Iraq *and* domestic issues took a back seat; and Second, the discussion of the Cheney mention drowned out discussion of the widely perceived judgment that Kerry had prevailed in all three debates.

Why this explanation should apply to women and not to men (Kerry actually gained among men during this period) is an interesting question for which I have no answer. The possibilities include the obvious hypothesis that women were more put off by the violation of privacy that the remark was held to represent, or it may simply be that the controversy distracted attention from issues on which Kerry was stronger among women (Iraq). In any case, the plausibility of the Cheney explanation is strengthened by the fact that its effect seems to have reversed after about a week –about the life of a flap in the news cycle. Nonetheless, even after some improvement through October 25, Kerry has some way to go to match Al Gore’s totals among women.

Of course, Kerry’s surprising strength among male voters somewhat offsets Kerry’s weakness among women relative to prior elections, but explaining that puzzle is a task that I will leave to a later update.

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<sup>1</sup> 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* uses seven variables to define likely voters, including whether the respondent states they are registered to vote, their intention to vote, past voting history, interest in the presidential campaign, age, whether the respondent is voting for the first time in 2004 and whether the voter knows the location of his or her polling place. These variables produce a sample of likely voters that is largely composed of individuals who regularly vote in presidential elections but does include newly registered as well as other first time voters. In a typical sample, about one in 10 likely voters are self-described first-time voters and one in six are between the ages of 18-29.

The *Post* adjusts, or “weights,” each day’s randomly selected samples of adults to match the voting-age population percentages by age, sex, race, and education, as reported by the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey. The *Post* also adjusts the percentages of self-identified Democrats and Republicans by

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partially weighting to bring the percentages of those groups to within three percentage points of their proportion of the electorate, as measured by national exit polls of voters in the last three presidential elections. “

[The daily rolling sample size is reported here.](#)