Mars and Venus at the Polls
April 10, 2001

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Time and accumulated experience often give familiar ideas sharpened meaning. Nothing better illustrated this principal recently than the political implications being drawn from relationship guru John Grey’s widely discussed ideas about gender differences.

Gray’s famous gender metaphor, "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus," is now firmly embedded in popular culture. As he explains in his best selling book, “Martians (men) value power, competency, efficiency and achievement.” They, therefore, find fulfillment in success and in results. Venusians (women), on the other hand, value “love, communication and beauty.” They, therefore, are defined by their feelings and their relationships.

The political implications of Grey’s ideas find their most common expression today in the notion that a gender gap exists in politics: Men and women vote differently, with males tending to favor the Republican Party and females the Democratic Party.

What is interesting is that these gender differences--now routinely observable in most elections--were not apparent until relatively modern times. In fact, in the patriarchal years before 1980, men and women largely voted for the same candidates and for similar reasons. Among married couples, this was especially prominent. If you knew the voting intentions of one spouse, you could predict with 90 percent accuracy the other spouse would vote the same way.

During the past two decades, however, the tendency of some women to vote more Democratic and some men to vote more Republican has become more pronounced. Reams of data have been collected to explain these trends.

For females, these data show that women are more liberal than men, generally show higher support for government safety net programs, feel more deeply about poverty programs, and are more likely to support affirmative action. Overall, women are more likely to support the role of big government in underpinning government solutions to societal problems. In John Grey’s terms, women are from Venus.

For males, similar data show that men are more conservative than women, generally are less supportive of government programs, more critical of social welfare policies, and less likely to approve affirmative action. Overall, men are less likely to approve the role of big government in underpinning government solutions to societal problems. In John Grey’s terms, men are from Mars.

The electoral consequence of these trends is important to both political parties--a large number of women now more readily identify with the Democratic Party (or Venus), while a large number of men have remained loyal to or identify with the Republican Party (or Mars).

A good example of Venusian style politics comes from former President Bill Clinton, whose feel-good political style had great appeal to American women. No one could feel someone else’s pain better than Clinton.
A good example of Martian style politics comes from President Ronald Reagan, whose no nonsense, tough talking approach, had its greatest appeal among men.

But all of this is useful only to a point. The hard cold fact is that not all women are from Venus, and not all men are from Mars. Not every woman voted for Clinton or every man for Reagan. Ignoring this salient reality has spread much confusion about gender differences in voting.

In particular, two crucial aspects of gender voting matter greatly here. One is the difference between married and single women. The gender gap exists because single women provide enormous margins in favor of Democratic candidates. Bill Clinton won the single female vote in Pennsylvania in 1992 and 1996, by substantial margins. He defeated George Bush by almost 20 percentage points and Bob Dole by 16 percent, which largely explains Clinton’s victory among women voters. Similarly, Gore easily defeated President Bush in Pennsylvania among single women. If you take away the single women margin, both Clinton and Gore lose, and there is no gender gap.

The second way in which gender matters deals with whether women remain in the home or work outside of the home. Although Gore beat Bush in Pennsylvania among women, 55 to 43, he beat Bush 62 to 35 among working women, a 27 percent point gap. As with single women, if you take away the working women margins, Gore loses, and there is no gender gap.

Simply put, much of the thinking about the traditional male-female voting divide is misleading. The Democrats do exceptionally well among single and working women, while the Republicans do well among married and stay-at-home women. Gender is less important than working and marital status.

And, as interesting data gleaned from the 2000 census findings shows, both single women and working women are large and growing population segments. Some of the findings:

--Only one-half of adult females are married and live with a spouse.

--Women marry on average at age 25, much later than earlier.

--Approximately 22 percent of women between the ages of 30 and 34 have never married, a three-fold increase since 1970.

--About 59 percent of women with infants work outside of the home, compared to 31 percent in 1979.

The census documented increase in the number of women who are single and who are in the workforce is ominous for the GOP. Clearly Republicans have to find a way to appeal to these women. At the same time, Democrats must address their electoral weakness among males.

In the end, however, neither party wins the gender gap. American elections are won by putting together broad coalitions of supporters from diverse groups. But, gender gap electoral strategies only divide and isolate. Democrats cannot consistently win elections without substantial support from males. Similarly Republicans, to win consistently, need substantial support from females. Men may be from Mars, and women from Venus, but voters always come from earth.