

# Gender Gap in electoral behaviour

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## Abstract

The ongoing discussion regarding gender inequalities in electoral participation has been given considerable attention in political science. This paper focuses, in particular, on women and men's different levels of engagement in voter turnout. It is generally accepted that, since women's empowerment, gender disparities in electoral behaviour have disappeared or even reversed. Nonetheless, women still participate less than men in specific contests e.g., second order elections. First order and second order voter turnouts are compared, confirming that gender gap still arises in the latter. I consider two possible casual mechanism accountable for these inequalities. The first one, taking into consideration resources and rational choice model, is deemed inconsistent. It is proved that social-economic status does not have an impact on the gender gap. The second argument refers to political interest as the mobilizing force of voter turnout. Since second order elections are perceived as more abstract and less rewarding, only politically motivated individuals participate. Indeed, the literature points out that women are generally less psychologically involved than men, therefore they do not cast a vote in supranational contests. Lastly, cultural stereotype and socialization are identified as the primary cause for the general disparities in interest.

**Keywords:** Gender gap, electoral behaviour, second order elections, political interests

## Trends in Electoral Participation

According to initial research, men were more likely to participate than women (Verba, *et al.* 1978) as gender itself was considered a significant predictor of political involvement (Norris, 2000). This traditional conception of male-female disparities in voting behaviour, namely the

'Gender Gap', was supported by comparative analysis (Kittilson, 2016). Empirical evidence from Verba *et al.*'s study across seven nations, showed that the gender gap in favour of male electors persisted in each country (Verba, *et al.* 1978). Moreover, findings suggested that women appeared disadvantaged in political participation when considering differences in individual and institutional resources (Verba, *et al.* 1978). However, after accounting for those inequalities, the traditional gender gap still emerged; indicating that gender 'was related to political activity' (Norris, 2000) (Verba, *et al.* 1978).

Nevertheless, due to the generational replacement and political progress made by women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Norris, 2000), scholars agree that the previous gender divide is no longer present. Indeed, contemporary figures not only clearly demonstrate the absence of gender inequalities in voter turnout, but also indicate that original male-female differences have reversed (Kittilson, 2016). For instance, considering the 1980 U.S presidential elections, women have been voting at higher rates than men. As the data show, female voters' share corresponds to 59.4 % while male's turnout rate to 59.1 %, meaning a difference of 0.3 % (O'Neill, 2020). This 'New' gap kept increasing over time. It reaches the peak in 2008 when the discrepancy between women and men's percentage amounts to 4.7 points in favour of female electors (O'Neill, 2020). The data illustrate that the historical political dynamics between male and female voters has deeply evolved and the original view that women are disadvantaged when participating (Verba, *et al.* 1978) is discarded. Overall, it is clear how conventional wisdom establishes that gender is no longer an important indicator of turnout in election (Smets, Van Ham, 2012). As a matter of fact, when gender is taken into account it usually confirms that women are more politically active than men (Smets, Van Ham, 2012).

After having explored the development of the Gender Gap, one may argue that generally male-female disparities in voting behaviour have faded away. However, this last assumption presents various limitations which may illustrate whether gender inequalities in voter turnout still exist. First, it is crucial to point out that claims related to the absence of the gender gap are mostly based on national elections figures (Kostelka, *et al.* 2019). Thus, considering only one level of government, it is not possible to fully analyse different gender attitude in voter turnout. Instead, evidence from second order election is needed. In fact, taking into account subnational and supranational contests' data, we are able to acquire a bigger and, perhaps, more precise picture of

the divergencies in political participation. Indeed, early studies already highlight different gender tendencies referring to engagement in local and national environment. As an example, Rokkan's examination of the 'Mobilization of the periphery' estimates that the traditional gap between men and women when voting, tended to be larger in local election and smaller in national contests (Rokkan, 1970). Similarly, modern research indicate that the overall turnout is, generally, lower in elections considered less important (Soderlund, *et al* 2011). Therefore, it is suggested that individuals participate differently in second order and in first order elections. This argument presents strong implications in regard to the original gender inequalities in voting behaviour: although male-female disparities have vanished in general elections, it is observed that men still tend to vote at higher rates than women in other type of contexts, for instance considering the European ballot (Kostelka, *et al* 2019).

### **Gender Gap in Second Order Elections**

To prove the last statement, gender differences in second order and national elections turnout are compared. As we have already demonstrated, in the latter, the gender gap is relatively small and not significant (Smets, Van Ham, 2012). However, while a positive correlation between female individuals and voting in parliamentary election persists, scholars have identified a negative relation among the same terms but in other types of elections e.g., European ones (Soderlund, *et al.* 2011). Empirical data from Kostelka *et al.* study confirms this claim showing that women do participate less in subnational, supranational and Swizz elections. The authors write 'In those electoral contests, the gender gap in the predicted probability of voting reaches 8, 9, 16 percentages point, respectively' (Kostelka, *et al* 2019). Thereby, considering a multilevel analysis of gender inequalities in voter turnout, it would be false to claim that male-female disparities in voting behaviour have completely disappeared. Moreover, another important aspect to focus on, is how the absence of a gender gap in national contests translates into different level of engagement in supranational election. Kostelka *et al* point out that in countries, where there is no significant difference in turnout in national elections, female electors participate less than male in supranational contests (Kostelka, *et al* 2019). Conversely, in countries, where in general election women tend to vote at higher rates than men, the gender gap in European elections is not substantial (Kostelka, 2019). On one hand, this argument proves that inequalities still emerge despite the apparent lack of gender gap in national elections. On the other one, it is vital to

understand that what drives individual to cast their vote is mainly political interest along with motivation.

Investigating this matter further, political activity is considered in terms of two elements: resources and political engagement (Verba, *et al.* 1997). To understand the casual mechanisms by which gender gap arises in specific environments, two hypotheses are formulated. The first assumption is based on the rational choice model and the role played by resources in the latter. It is generally accepted that having resources lowers the cost of political participation (Brady, *et al.* 1995) and that women are overall more socially and economically disadvantaged than men (Howell, Day, 2000). Therefore, the unequal distribution of resources might explain why the act of voting is costlier for female citizens and not for men. Furthermore, the second thesis refers to the role of political interest in second order election as suggested above. Psychological factors, such as motivation, are considered to be the real mobilising elements of political participation. Hence, as women are less interested in general politics (Verba, *et al.* 1997), they will not participate as much as men in voting behaviour (Soderlund, *et al.* 2011).

In the following sections, the first argument is examined. Primarily, it is important to emphasize that the rational choice model is based on the analysis of costs and benefits related to forms of participation. If the profits outweigh the costs, the political activity in question is considered to be rational, thus, people are more likely to be involved (Blais, 2000). On the contrary, if the price is too high, citizens are less eager to participate as, the action, is deemed to be illogical. However, it is recognized that the ownership of social and economic resources including money, time and civic skills might help to overcome the issue of rationality (Brady, *et al.* 1995). For instance, activities such as donating money for a civic cause, protesting or being a member of a political party are clearly easier for individuals who have those specific tools. Hence, people, who are able to diminish the costs of participatory acts, would evaluate the latter as rational and no longer as unreasonable. In conclusion, since men are generally reputed to have with a higher level of SES (Social Economic Status) (Howell, Day, 2000), they would be more advantaged than women to engage in various forms of participation. Accordingly, the unequal allocation of resources within male and female electors would be accountable for the gender disparities still noticeable in voter turnout.

Nevertheless, this argument is particularly inconsistent. It does not explain why gender gap is not present in national elections. In fact, if the women's lack of social and economic resources really influences voting behaviour, gender inequalities would be evident in all type of election and not only in second order. Indeed, significant limitations to this claim are found. Although the rational approach is applicable to most political activities, academic literature claims that it is not valid for the act of voting. As we formerly stated, resources help to predict who is more likely to participate when the costs of an activity are relatively high. However, considering the specific voting action, researchers have shown that the price of casting a vote tends to be small and almost equal to zero (Blais, 2000). Individuals do not perceive voting as a costly action because it is generally easy and less demanding than other forms of participation (Blais, 2000). In comparison to other political activities, voting is recognized as the 'great equalizing political act' (Verba, *et al.* 1978), where gender differences related to SES are less likely to be identified. In addition, empirical evidence have demonstrated that, in the case of the gender gap, when controlling for socio-economic variables e.g., income, education and occupation, female and male disparities remain unaffected (Howell, Day, 2000). Therefore, something else has to explain those inequalities. Eventually, even if there was an unequal distribution of resources among women and men, this disparity would not have any real impact on the act of voting. On one hand, its costs are already extremely low to be affected by ownership of resources, on the other one, data have proven that differences in SES cannot be responsible for the gender gap in voter turnout.

Consequently, given that the cost of voting is non-existent and the physical act of casting a ballot for first or second order election is the same, why do gender inequalities only emerge in the latter? To provide an answer to this question, the second hypothesis regarding the role of political interest in electoral participation is explored. First, it has been acknowledged that motivation along with other psychological elements, is the driving force of voter turnout (Brady, *et al.* 1995). In particular, scholars emphasize the importance of political interest in specific contests such as subnational or supranational ones (Soderlund, *et al.* 2011). The reasons behind this last statement, lay in the different perception that citizens have in regard to second order election. Indeed, the latter are widely considered to be less salient, having lower stakes and being more demanding (Kostelka, *et al.* 2019). As an example, in the event of European elections, the overall low levels of turnout reflect how individuals view the institution as abstract entity (Smismans, 2015). They

believe that the outcome of second order election does not have a great impact on their lives, in contrast to national election. Therefore, voting in supranational contests is regarded to be less rewarding, explaining why only politically interested citizens will participate (Kostelka, *et al* 2019). In addition, if people conceive this type of elections as less important, they will experience a weaker social pressure: in national contests, deemed to be more significant by the majority of the society, unmotivated individuals can be mobilized by media, friends or party members (Soderlund, *et al.* 2011). This does not occur in European elections as the public attention and media coverage diminish (Soderlund, *et al.* 2011). In summary, second order election are recognized to be 'costlier and less gratifying for those who are less psychologically engaged in politics' (Kostelka, *et al* 2019). Thereby, disparities arise between more interested individuals, generally men, and unmotivated citizens e.g., women (Verba, *et al.* 1997).

### Gender Gap in Political Interest

The claim concerning women being less psychologically engaged than men is supported by academic findings. Verba *et al.* focus on gender differences within two elements: political information and motivation. The authors measure political knowledge by asking both women and men names of public officials along with general awareness of government (Verba, *et al.* 1997). The data show that men are more likely to answer correctly compared to women (Verba, *et al.* 1997). Similarly, when evaluating political interest, evidence illustrate that men are also more likely to discuss about national and local politics (Verba, S. *et al.* 1997). On the contrary, female individuals hardly reported curiosity in watching public affair programs or reading newspaper (Verba, *et al.* 1997). All these results indicate that, estimating political interests, men generally score higher than women. Thus, being more motivated to engage in forms of political participations as voting. This gender gap in interest is often attributed to the lack of female politicians in significant institutions (Fox, Lawless, 2014) or to the absence of policies aiming to reduce overall gender inequalities (Fraile, Gomez, 2017). However, although these arguments have great explanatory power for female-male inequalities, the literature suggests that culture is the strongest factor accountable for the latter (Dassonneville, Kostelka 2020).

In particular, it is notable that men's and women's socialization process has been deeply different. Throughout history, conventional gender stereotypes contributed to the development of specific

expectations regarding women's and men's role in the society (Fraile, Gomez, 2017). For instance, it is known that the cultural perception of female position corresponds to the traditional figure of the housewife. As a consequence, women's purpose has always been associated with caregiving and household responsibilities. Nowadays, since they still experience these types of pressures, they are more likely to encounter difficulties to remain politically active and, in general, to 'keep up with politics' (Campbell, Kristi, 2008). For the same reasons, male and female preferences have grown into distinct political domains (Ferrin, *et al.* 2020). Whereas men are concerned with issues as leadership, economy and conflicts, women express their interest in social norms, education and health services (Campbell, Kristi, 2008) Given both dimensions, it is clear that female individuals prioritize policies tied to the family scope which have a direct effect on their lives (Campbell, Kristi, 2008). Therefore, considering the former argument regarding the perception of second order election, it is obvious that women do not recognize those contests as important for their specific preferences. Hence, as they are less psychologically involved than men, (Kostelka, *et al* 2019) the gender gap emerges.

The fact that women and men's interests are diverse, paves the way for another argument. It is suggested that females are not less politically interested but, instead, they only focus on separate political matters (Coffe, 2013 cited in Ferrin, 2020). Studies have concluded that interest has two components: domestic and general (Campbell, Kristi, 2008). While women's preferences are strongly correlated to the former, men's political priorities are linked to the second element. (Campbell, Kristi, 2008). Moreover, when measuring levels of motivation, the latter is usually conceived as a unidimensional idea (Campbell, Kristi, 2008). This implies that there is a socially accepted indicator by which individuals' political interest is estimated. Indeed, it has also been proven that men's general interest is more likely to be associated with this standard conception (Ferrin, *et al.* 2020). Therefore, women may report lower level of political curiosity as they refer to topics they believe are closest to the conventional notion of politics (Ferrin, *et al.* 2020). Hence, fostering the perception that they are less emotionally engaged in politics. In reality, they may be simply interested in different policies such as domestic issues which are not included in the 'abstract understanding of politics' (Ferrin, *et al.* 2020).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, although the traditional gender gap in voter turnout seems to have disappeared in national election, it still emerges in second order contests. While in the former, female and male disparities are not present, men still participate in higher rates than women in supranational environment. It is proved that the unequal distribution of economic and social resources between men and women is not accountable for the gap. As the costs of voting are almost equal to zero (Blais, 2000) electoral participation cannot be influenced by different level of SES. Instead, the driving force of voter turnout is deemed to political interest. Since second order election are perceived to have lower stake, less incentives and more demand, only politically motivated individuals are mobilized (Kostelka, *et al* 2019). In this case, women are generally considered to be less interested in politics than men, hence, the gender gap arises. Due to cultural socialization of the gender roles, female and male preferences have developed interests in distinct political fields. This process eventually led to the idea that women are more concerned with domestic issue and do not have time to be properly informed (Campbell, Kristi, 2008). Nevertheless, it could also be argued that women are not less interested than men, but only curious about different issue. As politics is conceived a unidimensional concept (male dominant), women believe their political preferences are not comprehended in the standard indicator of political motivation (Ferrin, *et al.* 2020). In the end, the casual process between the existence of a gender gap in voting behaviour and motivational factors is accepted. However, we cannot exclude that male-female disparities in turnout are due to different perceptions of politics and not different level of interest.

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