Female vs. Male: Political Interest, Knowledge and Participation

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Female vs. Male: Political Interest, Knowledge and Participation

Poliana Nazareth

Traditionally, society did not encourage women to have an active political or public life. For decades, women were deprived of many social and political privileges. This custom has continued to be an obstacle in society’s view of women in politics, as well as women’s own view of themselves in politics. To illustrate, it was not until 1920 that women were granted the right to vote. Women’s unequal political involvement has been a detriment to society because it deprived society of the benefits that it would have had, had women been more politically involved due to the fact that many women would have made great political leaders. In recent years women have steadily progressed in their involvement in politics, in professional careers and in high-profile leadership positions that were previously dominated by men. Today, the number of women who are politically interested and involved has greatly increased. They have shown great potential and capability to perform well in male dominated jobs, including the practice of law, medicine, and journalism, among others careers as well as in the political arena. Women hold many high leadership positions in the political world. They have entered Congress and the judicial system, however, due to cultural factors, women are still proportionately underrepresented in many areas of politics, and therefore, America has never elected a female president.

This research project aims to examine and explain women’s political level of knowledge, participation and interest. It intends to show whether or not there is a difference in political interest, knowledge and participation between males and females, and if such differences exist, the study will attempt to explain the reasons why they do. Is it a feminine characteristic not to be politically involved or interested or is that aspect due to society’s perception of what femininity means? Women are discouraged from entering the political world by various means. For instance, the media’s arbitrary portrayal of women in high leadership positions often generates a stereotypical view of a successful woman. Moreover, this project intends to prove that the lack of interest of many women in politics is due to the cultural, gender-biased, and sexist society in which they were raised, and that the view of women may vary within different generations of individuals and their education about the value of women and their role in society.

This study will be performed using a quantitative approach. It will attempt to uncover society’s current view of women in the political realm. I hypothesize that women are less likely than men to be interested, knowledgeable and involved in politics. However, I anticipate that younger women are more politically interested, knowledgeable and involved than older women. This study will examine whether men are naturally more interested and involved in politics than women and why. The population tested will consist of a non-random sample of males and females, from age 16 to 66. They will be selected from various parts of Danbury, Connecticut in order to differentiate the level of political interest, knowledge and participation of females as compared to males, and whether or not race, income, or educational background play a significant role in that process.

The research will employ survey methodology. The questions will vary as to individual’s political knowledge, interest and participation, voting history, educational background, politician’s and heads of state identification, the type of media coverage that they watch, whether or not they think it is important to be aware of current political issues, whether or not they are registered to vote, and whether or not they have ever been part of a political protest. These, among other questions, will establish whether or not women are less politically interested, involved and knowledgeable than men and the reasons for this phenomenon.

Literature Review

Women’s descriptive political representation is a theme of concern to many individuals who hope to understand whether or not women are less politically interested and involved than men and, if so, how this came to be and the reasons why. There is a misconception among many about the actual number of women who hold high political leadership positions within government.

In “Female Empowerment: The Influence of Women Representing Women” (1998), High-Pipper and Comer study “whether being represented by a woman in Congress as opposed to a man has empowering consequences similar to those for African Americans in cities with black mayors” (53). In addition, the research examines “whether women represented by a woman in the House of Representatives are more likely to be interested in, discuss, and participate in politics, have a greater
sense of political efficacy, political competence, and political trust, and are more positive toward the institution of Congress” (55). High-Pippert and Comer expected that women who were represented by other women did benefit from it and were positively politically empowered and influenced by such event.

The authors compared data from the 1990 and 1992 National Election Study (NES). They took the gender of the representatives elected in 1990 and re-elected in 1992. With that information, they sought to “distinguish between women represented by a woman, women represented by a man, men represented by a woman, and men represented by a man” (58). Moreover, in 1992, High-Pippert and Comer conducted interviews in thirty-nine districts in different states. Of those thirty-nine districts, they investigated ten districts that were represented by a woman in 1990 and twenty-nine districts that were represented by a man in 1990. The population of their study consisted of one thousand five hundred and fifty-five males and females. The researchers focus was on the comparison between “women represented by a woman with women represented by a man” (58).

High-Pippert and Comer found strong support for their hypothesis. They found that “women represented by a woman are more likely to engage in a number of political activities, feel that they can influence the political process, and feel that they are sufficiently competent to do so than women represented by a man” (60).

In “Stereotype Threat and the Gender Gap in Political Knowledge,” McGlone, Aronson and Kobrynowicz (2006) focused on the way surveys negatively influence the accuracy of female interviewees’ responses. They argue that when the surveys are conducted by male interviewers and the interviewees are females, and when female interviewees are advised beforehand that “the current test had previously been shown to produce gender differences” they feel pressured to break and afraid to confirm negative stereotypes (395).

The study consisted of a telephone survey. The population of the study consisted of one hundred forty males and females undergraduates from Lafayette College between the ages of 18 to 23. In order to measure the level of the participant’s political knowledge, a ten question index was used where the “items were selected from a list of 39 knowledge items that had yielded high corrected item-total correlations in past NES telephone surveys and are generally considered indicative of political awareness among scholars in government and politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not females had a high level of inaccuracy when answering surveys administered by males. In addition, the authors examined whether female respondents tended to have a higher level of inaccuracy on their answers due to the pressure they felt once told that their responses have yielded gender differences in the past.

The authors found that female’s responses were prejudiced when they had a clear cue that the interviewer was a male and when they were told ahead of time that their responses could give away gender differences. They would perform poorly under pressure, threatened by the idea that they would confirm negative gender stereotypes.

The results of this research were interesting because they suggested speculation about the margin of error that might have occurred on previous telephone surveys that might have unknowingly prompted female respondents to have a high level of inaccuracy on their answers.

**Methodology**

This research project aimed to examine and explain women’s political level of knowledge, participation and interest. It intended to show whether or not there was a difference in political participation, interest and knowledge between males and females and if so, what was the cause.

For the purpose of this study, political interest is understood as the level in which one is interested in politics in general (e.g. whether or not one browses online for information on political issues, reads more political newspapers, the type of media one watches) as well as current political issues (e.g. the war in Iraq, immigration, social security). Political knowledge is understood as the basic political knowledge and non-alienation (e.g. whether or not one knows what the three branches of government in the U.S. are, is aware of who is the vice-president of the U.S. or the Secretary of State, the length of a presidential term). Political participation or involvement is understood as the level at which one is politically involved (e.g. municipal, state, national) as well as and how one is involved (e.g. whether or not one is registered to vote, how often one votes or has ever donated to or volunteered in political campaigns, whether or not one has ever participated in a political protest).

I hypothesize that women are less likely than men to be interested, involved and knowledgeable in politics. At the same time, I hypothesize that women of different age cohorts have different levels of political involvement, interest and participation.
Moreover, I anticipate that younger women are more politically involved, interested and knowledgeable than older women.

The study used survey methodology that prompted responses that revealed whether or not women are less politically involved, interested and knowledgeable than men. See appendix A. The questions helped to measure with accuracy the thesis of this research project as well as to acquire an understanding of the reasons why women are not more active political participants.

The population tested consisted of non-random sample of males and females, from age 16 to 66. They were selected from various parts of Danbury, Connecticut in order to differentiate the level of political interest, involvement and participation of each age cohort and whether or not race or educational background played a significant role in that process.

**Independent Variables**

The first seven questions constituted the independent variables of the study and aimed at the participant’s background. The independent variables were: gender, age, race, marital status, educational level, approximate individual annual income, and political leaning (conservative, very conservative, liberal, very liberal, independent, and not sure).

**Dependent Variables**

Questions eight through fourteen consisted of closed-ended questions that attempted to measure the participant’s level of political participation.

A Likert Scale, where respondents specify their level of agreement to a statement, was used in questions fifteen through twenty-three in order to measure the participant’s level of political interest, which was added at the end and grouped accordingly.

Question twenty-four inquired about the most important political issue in their opinion, in an attempt to find whether or not there was a relation between the level of interest and what current political issue was attached to that level of interest, if any.

The remaining eleven questions attempted to measure the participant’s level of political knowledge. In order to measure the amount of knowledge of the participants, the survey asked questions such as: who is the vice-president of the United States, what are the three branches of government, how long is a presidential term, how many justices sit on the bench in the U.S. Supreme Court, who is the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and so on. The answers were graded (with A being the most knowledgeable and F the least) and separated into different categories accordingly.

**Findings**

The following pages examine the findings of this study. The findings include the results of a series of frequency as well as cross-tabulation tables that explore the main three dependent variables of this study, which are women’s interest, knowledge and participation in politics as compared to men’s interest, knowledge and participation in politics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table B</th>
<th>Overall Opinions</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
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<td>Valid</td>
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<td>Highly Int.</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderately Int.</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Int.</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highly Not Int.</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
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Table B displays the overall opinions of respondents regarding interest in politics. Surprisingly, statistics show that results in Table B contradicts the results displayed in Table A. It shows that although over 50% of the respondents surveyed strongly agree or agree to be politically interested as illustrated in Table A, when asked for opinions in more specific political questions, that number shifts to approximately 43% of people who are highly interested or interested in politics as compared to 57% who are highly not interested or not interested in politics. Thus, leading to the conclusion that when asked a general question regarding interest in politics most respondents believed to be interested, however, when asked more specific questions regarding political interest, they proved to be not interested or highly disinterested.
Table C displays the differences between female's and male's interest in politics. Of the sixty participants, 27.6% of males strongly agree to be politically interested as compared to 6.5% of females. In addition, 34.5% of males agree to be interested in politics as compared to 58% of females. Two points seem of interest. First, despite the high difference in the percentage of males and females that strongly agree and the percentage of males and females that agree to be politically interested, both males and females were approximately evenly interested in politics. When adding the two categories together (strongly agree and agree) 64% of females as compared to 62% of males strongly agree or agree to be politically interested. A second interesting point is that even though there was an approximately even balance between females and males political interest, more males than females disagreed that they were politically interested, but more males than males strongly disagreed that they were politically interested. A chi-square value of 12.905 with a probability of .005 shows that the results are statistically significant, thus supporting the initial hypothesis of the study that women are less politically interested than men.

Table D presents the results for the overall knowledge between males and females. Statistics show that males are more politically knowledgeable than females. Divided in five different grading categories, A being the most knowledgeable and F the least knowledgeable, 17% of males acquired an A score as compared to three percent of females. 24% of males obtained a grade B while no woman obtained such grade. Interestingly, 10% of males as compared to 29% of females obtained a C grade, which is an average grade. Thus women can be said to have a higher average political knowledge than men. Approximately 24% of males as opposed to 19% of females obtained a D grade. However, the percentage of females (48%) who obtained a failing
grade was twice that of males (24%), thus confirming the initial predictions of the study. As expected, males have a clear advantage over females regarding their level of knowledge in politics as illustrated in Table D. A chi-square value of 15.603 and probability of .004 strongly support the initial hypothesis of the study that women are less politically knowledgeable than men.

Conclusion

Women have never been encouraged by society to have an active political or public life. For decades, women were deprived of many social and political privileges. This custom has continued to be an obstacle in society's view of women in politics, as well as women's own view of themselves in politics. Women's unequal political involvement has been a detriment to society because it deprives society of the benefits that it would have had had women been more politically involved due to the fact that many women would have made great political leaders.

For decades, women were expected by society to be less politically involved, interested and knowledgeable than men and have struggled with such stereotypical view.

Overall, the findings of the study confirm the initial hypothesis presented. This paper demonstrates that there are gender differences regarding male's and female's levels of political interest, participation and knowledge and that a variety of measures show males to be more politically interested, involved and knowledgeable than females. The main hypothesis regarding women's low level of political interest as compared to men's is clearly defined as illustrated on Table C as the percentage of males who strongly agreed to be politically interested is approximately four times higher than that of females. Thus, women were considerably less politically interested than men as illustrated in Table C. Interestingly, statistics showed that results in Table B contradicted the results displayed in Table A. It showed that almost fifty percent of the respondents surveyed strongly agreed or agreed to be politically interested as illustrated in Table A. When asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the general statement “I am interested in politics,” as illustrated in Table A approximately 64% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed to be politically interested as compared to 36% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. When adding the two categories (strongly agree and agree) both males and females obtained an approximately even percentage regarding interest in politics. However, if broken into two separate categories, a high difference between the percentage of males and females that agreed or strongly agreed to be politically interested was clear as compared to the percentage of males and females who disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, when asked for opinions in more specific political questions, that number shifted from 64% to approximately 43% of people who were highly interested or interested in politics and from 36% to 57% who were highly not interested or not interested in politics. Thus, leading to the conclusion that when asked a general question regarding interest in politics most respondents believed to be interested, however, when asked more specific questions regarding political interest, they proved to be not interested or highly disinterested. These findings contradict those by Bennett and Bennett (1989) in “Enduring Gender Differences in Political Interest: The Impact of Socialization and Political Dispositions.” Bennett and Bennett found that political interest was shaped by different factors according to the different age groups that males and females belonged to. However, age was not an important factor in the overall findings of this study. On the other hand, this study is in accordance with Bennett and Bennett’s study regarding the educational level of participants. Like Bennett and Bennett’s study, this study did not find enough evidence to support that education level influenced women's political interest since more women than men had a higher level of education but were, nonetheless, less politically interested than men.

The findings also support the second hypothesis of this study, that women are less politically knowledgeable than men. As illustrated in Table E, approximately 41% of males as compared to 3% of females had either a grade A or B regarding their overall level of knowledge in politics. In “Stereotype Threat and the Gender Gap in Political Knowledge,” McGlone, Aronson and Kobrynnowicz (2006) argue that when male interviewers conduct surveys and the interviewees are females; the interviewees tend to have a low level of accuracy in their responses regarding political issues. In contrast, this project did not find any connection between the gender of the interviewer and the gender of the interviewees.

The results of this study offer several insights into a much-debated question among many researchers of gender politics. Why are women less politically knowledgeable than men? The fact that they are less interested may be one of the answers. Since women are less interested in politics than men they are less likely than men to be aware of current political issues alienating themselves from it and from general political knowledge. Why are women underrepresented in the political arena? It might be that because of their lack of political interest, knowledge and participation they naturally pursue careers outside the political
world. A second reason might include the fact that women are not aware (do not have the political knowledge) of how underrepresented they are in the political arena, therefore not supporting a higher number of women in the political world.

On a broader level, the findings of this study also speak to another aspect of women's lack of political interest, knowledge and participation—theories about the causes of the gender gap in the political world, which may also be explained by their political alienation, lack of interest, knowledge and involvement.

This study shows that women are, in fact, less politically interested, involved and knowledgeable than men regardless of age, income, and educational background. However, race might have played a role in the findings. The race sample group mainly consisted of Caucasians and Hispanics, accidentally excluded African Americans almost entirely. Therefore, it was difficult to make generalizations regarding race in the findings.

The sample size consisted of small non-random selection, which did not represent the entire population of Danbury because of various time constraints. A larger sample would have helped the generalization process of the study as well as its reliability. In addition, there were a few values that were left blank due to the unanswered questions in the survey. Maybe if the questions on the surveys were worded differently it would have obtained a higher number of answered questions. Thus the findings might have been slightly different had all the survey’s questions been completely answered by all of the respondents.

While the findings of this study were in accordance with the main predictions proposed initially, there were some intriguing facts that demand more research. Therefore, the findings of this study are not necessarily the last word on the matter and additional study is suggested.

References


