

SEX AND POLITICS: UNDERSTANDING GENDER DIVIDES IN AMERICAN POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION

by

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Introduction

Gender profoundly affects the lived experience. One's gendered identity shapes how they are perceived, socialized, and view themselves. While gender is an abstract social construction subject to change, quantitative sociopolitical analysis demonstrates the long-felt and concrete implications of normative gender ideology. By studying collective political behavior with consideration of gender, a clear divide can be seen between men and women. In the United States, women have long been underrepresented and under-involved in formal political bodies and other forms of political action (Carreras 36) (Cook and Wilcox 1111).

This underrepresentation and under-involvement are antithetical to American democracy. Women's political interests and preferences differ from men's on the aggregate level (Miller 1287). When women or any demographic group is not involved in the collectivist political process, our political system and policies cannot truly represent the public will. So long as the gender gap affects our political landscape, gender inequality will continue to persist throughout American society. Therefore, the gender gap must be researched and resolved.

This paper seeks to examine the gender gap in political participation in the United States and assess the causes of this disparity. Innumerable studies have been conducted on the intersection of gender and politics in the United States. This work seeks to place existing research in conversation with and thereby provide a more comprehensive exploration of the causes of gender imbalances in American political participation. Doing so will inform future policy redress. For gender equality measures to be effective, political actors must clearly understand the root causes of the gender gap. As electoral studies have shown that expanding political rights and incorporating historically underrepresented groups into the political process

quickly leads to changes in legislative proceedings and government spending (Miller 1287), addressing the political gender gap is apt to change our political culture more generally.

Definitions

It is first necessary to establish clear definitions and boundaries for this study. As many of the concepts central to this work have several definitions, a precise framing of this analysis is required for clear and meaningful discussions.

Here, political participation is defined as an observable action aimed at influencing government officials' selection or government policy choices. Whereas traditional assessments of political participation tend to exclude or imply the notion of visibility, it is important for this analysis that participation is observable and quantifiable. While some political action cannot be seen or directly accounted for, such action does not represent participation in the public arena. It lays beyond the scope of this work.

As gender is also a central topic of this study, it is important to address the definitional limitations of that term. Gender is a complex social construct related to one's identity and self-perception. Traditionally, collective American society has adopted a binary, essentialist view of gender; one is either male or female. Although I reject this premise, the available research and data tend to adopt a rather binary lens. Herein, political participation is assessed between groups who self-identify as men or women. Examining trends in transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming groups is also beyond the scope of this work.

Assessing Political Participation

To make assessments of political participation, this study relies upon data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). This database has information on American political behavior from 1948 onwards. This work examines data from the ANES related to voting, voting registration, political meeting attendance, campaign working, and campaign donations to visual political participation. While other forms of political participation could be studied, limiting the analysis to these specific behaviors allows for a common data source and controls for data collection practices. Analyzing various forms of political behavior along gender lines demonstrates the gender gap in political participation and some associated trends.

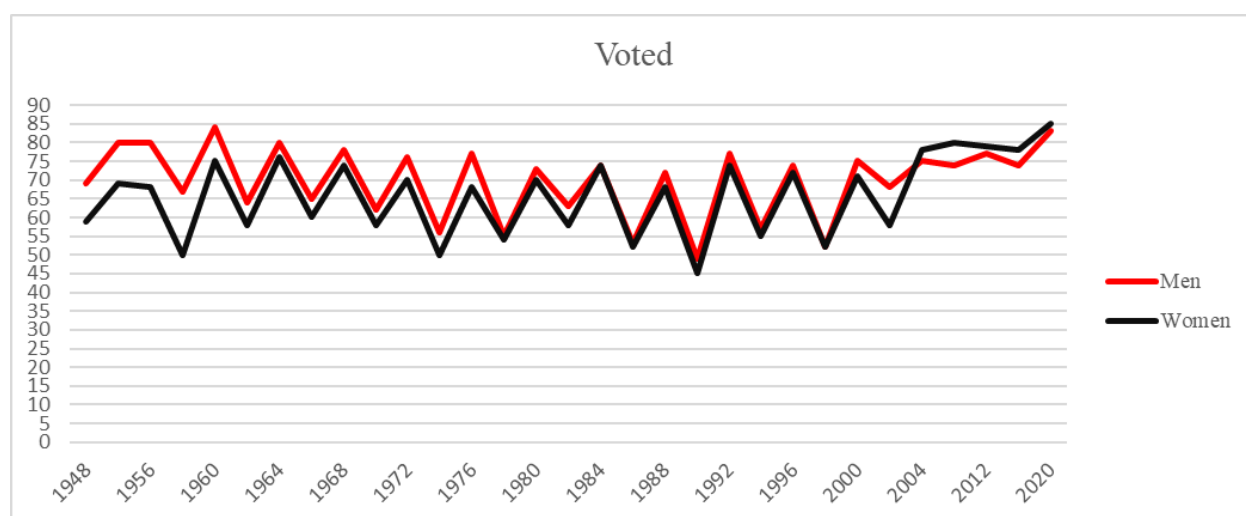


Figure 1: This figure shows the rates of survey respondents who voted, grouped by gender (ANES).

Figure 1 reveals that men's and women's voting rates have moved in close tandem for most of the dataset period, with a gradually decreasing divide. Voting rates by gender have equalized over time, with women now seeming to outperform their male counterparts. The narrowing trend seen in this graph demonstrates an improvement in women's political participation rates.

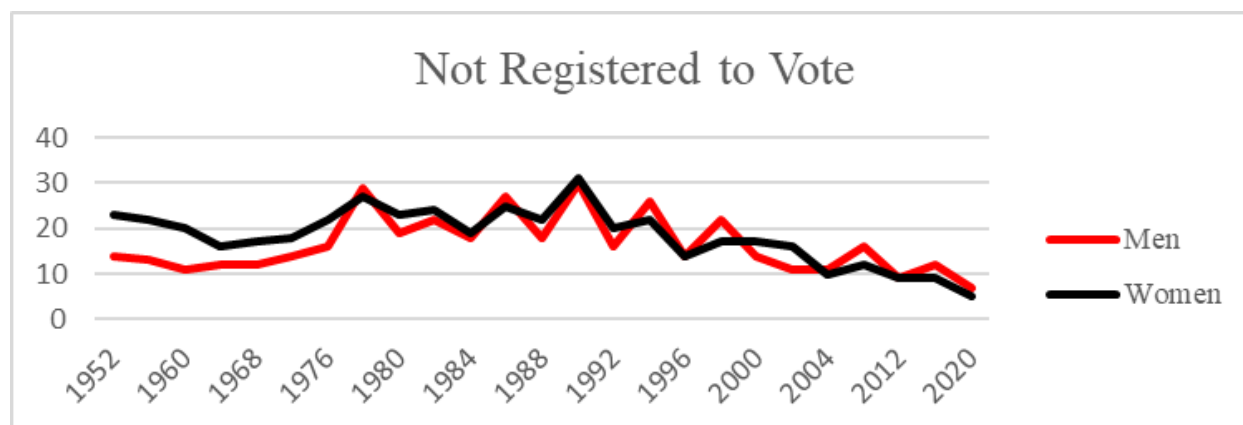


Figure 2: This figure shows the rates of survey respondents who were not registered to vote, grouped by gender (ANES).

Figure 2 shows self-reported rates of non-registration to vote over time. While this chart shows an inconsistent pattern, it can be seen that women have reported higher rates of non-registration than men for the majority of the period under study. The reversal of this trend roughly coincides with that of voting rates shown in Figure 1.

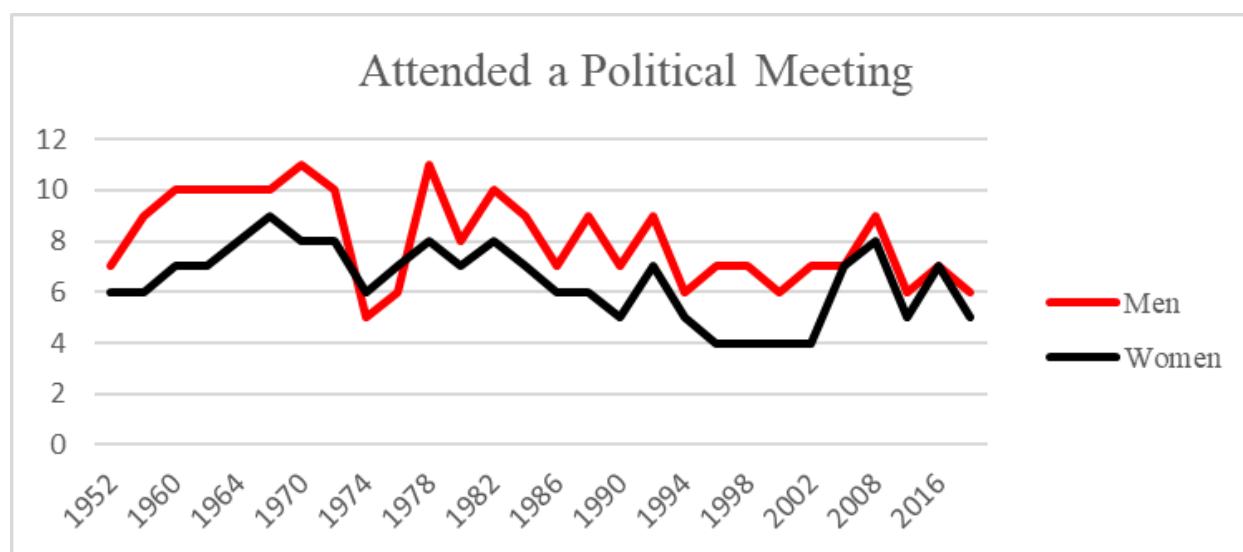


Figure 3: This figure shows the percentage of survey respondents who attended at least one political meeting, grouped by gender (ANES).

Figure 3 shows political meeting attendance rates for men and women. Similar to Figure 2, this data demonstrates an inconsistent gender gap. The divide between men's and women's attendance narrows and widens over time.

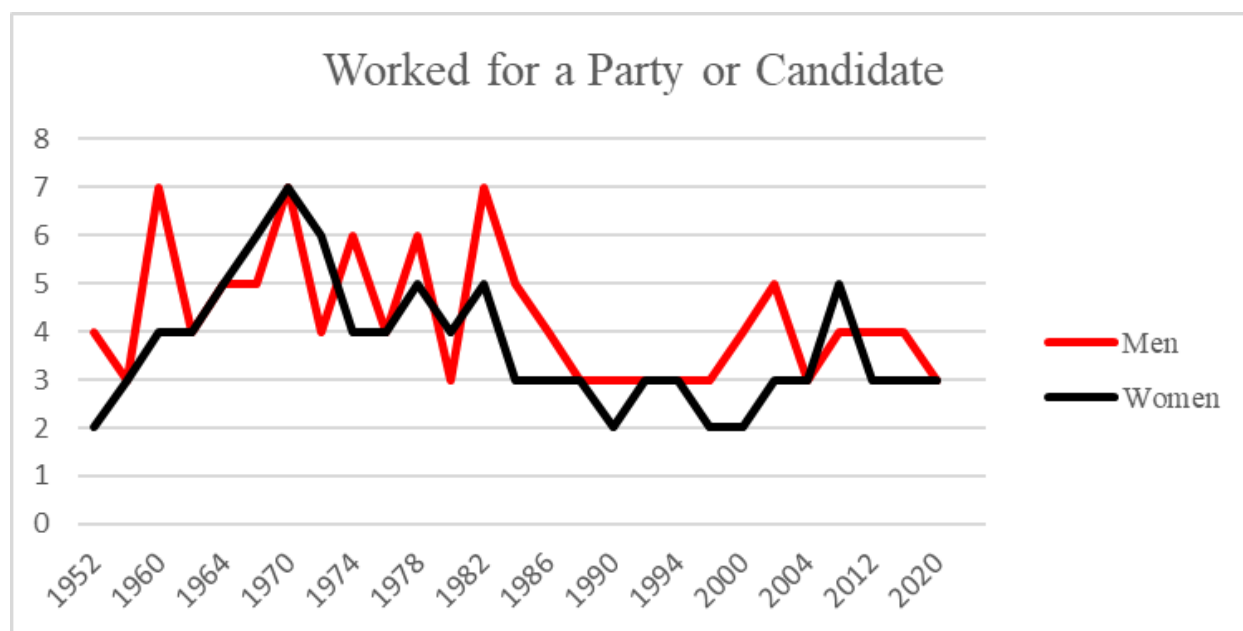


Figure 4: This figure shows the rates of survey respondents who attended a political meeting, grouped by gender (ANES).

Figure 4 shows political meeting attendance rates for men and women. Similar to Figure 2, this dataset demonstrates an inconsistent gender gap. The divide between men's and women's attendance narrows and widens over time. Interestingly, men's and women's attendance seems to equalize at the end of this window.

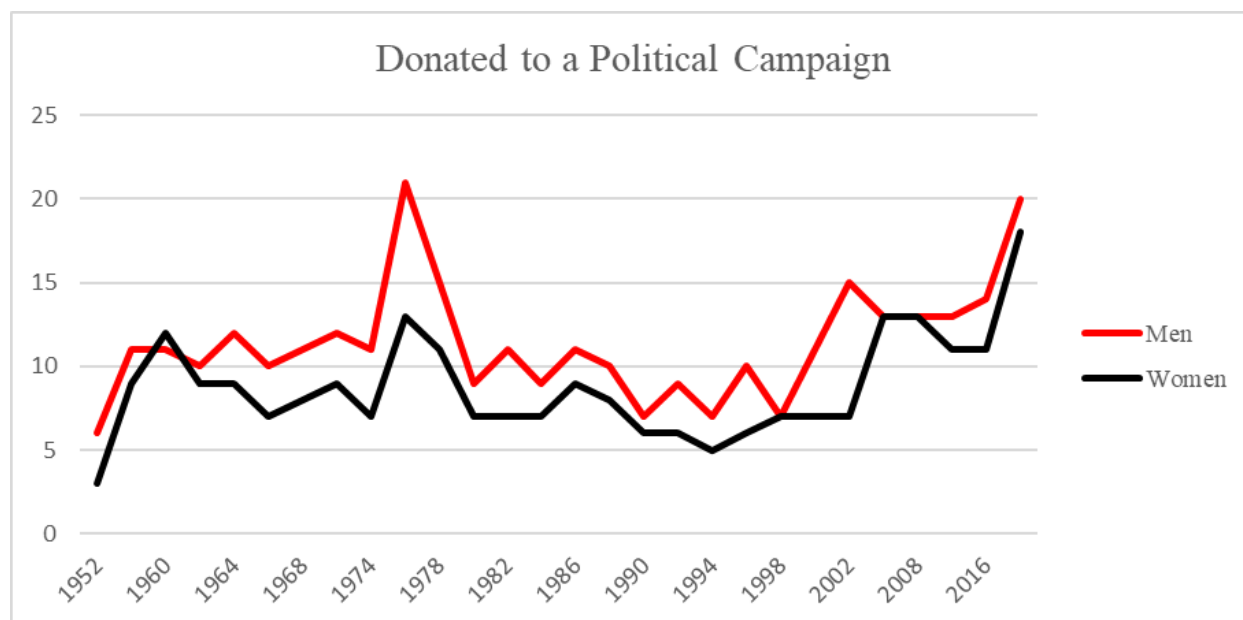


Figure 5: This figure shows the rates of survey respondents who donated to a political campaign, grouped by gender (ANES).

Figure 5 shows the percentage of men and women who donated to political campaigns over time. Given the nature of campaign finances and monetary expression, it is essential to note that this graph does not account for the donation amount. Instead, the graph provides a binary view of donations – those who did donate in contrast to those who did not. Unlike the other graphs, there is no apparent narrowing or trend between men and women over time. There are points where women's donation rates near, match, or equal that of their male counterparts, but there is not a consistent relationship between the two groups' behavior.

In all, these graphs show a clear, albeit changing, divide between men's and women's political participation in the United States. The following sections will examine potential explanations for this divide, including gendered political socialization, social role philosophy, and resource distribution. Understanding these factors and evaluating their impact on political behavior will point toward potential remedies or redress plans.

Existing Explanations of the Gender Gap

Researchers have proposed various explanations for the gender gap between men's and women's political participation. After reviewing the literature, I have identified four major explanations; (1) the political socialization explanation; (2) the masculine political legacy explanation; (3) the social role explanation, and (4) the resource scarcity explanation. Each explanation focuses on different aspects of men's and women's sociopolitical and economic experiences. While these explanations are distinctive, they do not exist in pure opposition. I will explore these various explanations in the following section before assessing their relative applicability.

Political Socialization Explanation

One prevailing theory about the origin of the gender gap focuses on political socialization. There are several existing definitions of political socialization. At the center of each is the process of political value and preference formation. Adler et al. specify that political socialization is "the process whereby children are socialized to the norms and values of society that have to do with political events, institutions, and ideas" (1). A broader interpretation offered by Greenstein suggests that political socialization is "all political learning, formal and informal, deliberate and unplanned" ("Children and Politics" 551). In this perspective, political socialization is the active and passive exchange of ideas between individuals. Children can learn from planned lessons and purposeful discussions, just as from unintentional exchanges and events. This socialization and learning processes can be influenced by social exposure to "family and friends[,] school classmates, organization memberships, religious congregations, and larger groups identified by sexual preferences, socioeconomic status, racial or linguistic distinctions, geographical location, or other marks." (Roots 7).

These definitions all rely on the premise that children interpret, appraise, and internalize information about the world around them and their relationship with it at an early age. As a child gains awareness, she is prone to form beliefs about herself, her community, and her preferences. Early beliefs and observations may center around an individual's race, religion, class, gender, or other identifying characteristics (Roots 7). As a child gains a sense of who she is and which groups her family belongs to, she is likely to form beliefs and preferences that stem from those identifiers (Roots 8). For example, if a child sees that her family receives SNAPs, free school lunches, and other social services, she will gain a basic sense of her socioeconomic class and favor social welfare programs. As a young child, she may lack the ability to voice such ideas and preferences in political terms. Still, these early beliefs can nonetheless inform an individual's political development and subsequent behaviors.

The political socialization explanation for the gender gap in political participation suggests that boys and girls are socialized differently in our society. While boys and girls generally develop in similar environments – the same communities, classrooms, and households – they are typically subjected to different value systems and rearing practices. Socially constructed gender roles and ideologies shape how children are treated by their caregivers and instructors. While sometimes seemingly subtle, these differences have a cumulative and synergetic effect on one's belief formation (Carreras 40). This explanation argues that differences between men's and women's political behavior can be attributed to these differences in their socialization.

From an early age, boys are led to adopt the standards of hegemonic masculinity. The term hegemonic masculinity refers to our society's prevailing image of manhood and maleness, and this gender philosophy is based on divisive power relations (Hill Collins 188). In this

framework, men are defined by their “unwomanliness”; they are led to idolize and embody characteristics that are antithetical to the prevailing social vision of femininity (Hill Collins 188). Men are “forceful, analytical, responsible, and willing to exert authority” (Hill Collins 188). These characteristics function together to create an ideal vision of manhood that is distinctive from and superior to womanhood. Boys who were raised with this expectation of conventional manliness form a “male morality [which] emphasizes justice, fairness, impersonal rules, and individual rights” (Howell et al. 859). This male morality is also known as the ethics of justice (Gilligan 489). This philosophical framework asserts that individuals function with the guiding value of justice – a concept based on the needs and satisfaction of the self (Gilligan 489). Hegemonic masculinity's valorization of independence, activeness, and force aligns with this ethical code, as both constructs focus on the strengthening and gratification of selfhood. This view associates self-development with self-satisfaction.

The value preferences and assumptions associated with these male-coded philosophical constructs underlie many socio-normative boyhood experiences and tokens. A trip to any typical American toy aisle demonstrates this trend. With their Nerf guns, army men, and footballs, boys are encouraged to develop a sense of competition, leadership, and individual fulfillment. These values are further developed in typical boyhood activities like football, basketball, baseball, and wrestling. As seen through the toys, activities, and media content that adults create for them, boyhood heroes are predominately athletes and superheroes. Through these experiences and exposures, boys tend to develop the aforementioned artificially male-coded characteristics. While this development pattern is a product of social conditions boys experience, the results seem to validate prevailing gender ideologies and rearing practices.

Concurrently, girls are reared within the complementary framework of hegemonic femininity. Like the aforementioned code of hegemonic masculinity, this social standard asserts that women should be defined in opposition to men (Hill Collins 193). The ideal woman is both physically and behaviorally antithetical to her male counterpart (Hill Collins 193). Whereas men are to be strong, active, and assertive, the ideal woman is meek, passive, and nurturing (Hill Collins 193). She dwells in the lovely realm of the domestic, and she molds herself to those around her. Women who have developed with the pressures of domesticity and collectivism generally form a “female morality [which] tends to be more cooperative, caring, and nurturing” (Howell et al. 859). This female morality is also known as the ethics of care (Gilligan 489). This ethical code bases moral value, meaning, and worth on one's relationship with their community (Gilligan 490). Accordingly, women are prone to adopt the roles of mothers, homemakers, and community caretakers to satisfy that collectivist calling (Sandberg et al. 375).

We can see how these philosophies appear during girlhood by examining the other side of the toy department. There, girls are offered Barbies, baby dolls, and Easy-Bake Ovens. With these toys, they are led to a more stereotypically feminine worldview. In this value system, girls are taught to appraise their worth through service to their community and the domestic sphere. They are encouraged to idolize motherhood, cooking, and conventional beauty standards. Girls further develop a sense of feminine sentimentality and refinement through typical female enrichment activities, like dance and art classes. The typical girlhood role models are princesses (Disney princesses), mystical hyperfeminine figures (mermaids, fairies, etc.), or caretaking figures (Doc McStuffins). Like their male counterparts, girls who grow up in these social conditions are likely to develop in accordance with the gender philosophies that they were exposed to. Girls reared under our society's prevailing gender philosophy are likely to exhibit

idealized female-coded characteristics, artificially validating such gendered rearing philosophies (Cook and Wilcox 1111).

In the framework of female morality, good is seen not as what gratifies the self but rather what benefits those around the individual (Cook and Wilcox 1112). Sometimes, what is good for the community requires the reduction of self – thus requiring the paradoxical abdication of self for the actualization of self. This unresolvable tension is one of the central topics explored in First Wave Feminist theory (Gilligan 491). This state of being motivated by appeasing, serving, or benefitting others is also referred to as interpersonal concordance (Gilligan 489). It is often seen as a lower state of ethical development where many women's moral state stagnates (Gilligan 489). By viewing women's generalized morality as a more rudimentary code than men's, this social philosophy reinforces gender divides and hierarchies. It also denies womanhood the same maturity and authority as manhood.

Taken together, the forced opposition created by these social philosophies serves to intensify and validate the idealized characteristics of both men and women in a heteronormative society. It creates a dynamic in which one sex seems to need the counterbalance and symmetry of the other. Within this system, the meek female needs the strong male to protect her, and the independent male needs the domestic female to nurture him. Given that this gender ideology informs the formation of one's worldview, men and women are apt to construct different points of view. As a result, they are likely to form different relationships with the world around them and, as a result, behave differently.

These differences are rooted in each group's relationship between self and others (Gilligan 509). Male morality suggests that political action is both the right and duty of the male citizen (Carreras 39). Normative male morality encourages values such as individualism,

activeness, and competition (Howell et al. 859). With the competition, leadership, and individualism associated with politics, formal political participation strongly aligns with the masculine code of morality. As such, within this traditional socio-gender philosophy, engaging in the world of politics may carry a sense of masculinization. Additionally, the correlation between male-coded values and politics may bolster a sense of participatory obligation (Carreras 39).

While female morality is centered around one's connection to the community, the valorization of ideals such as meekness and domesticity may deter many women from engaging in the political and public sphere. Moreover, with hegemonic femininity relying on a diametric opposition between men and women, engaging in the male realm of politics would jeopardize the purity of one's womanhood.

In sum, the political socialization explanation of the gender gap asserts that gendered divides in how children are socialized affect how they develop and interact with the world around them, including the political realm. While each little thing a child is exposed to is not a conscious message or measurable influence, the synergetic effect is a clear gender philosophy. This implicit notion creates restrictive pressure for both girls and boys. When a child is socialized within this social context, their development is likely to conform to this pattern. Those who do not fit easily into this system can feel unrepresented, unnatural, and unwanted. If this explanation for the gender gap is accurate, we should expect differences in male and female political attitudes to emerge at an early age. We would also expect the narrowing of this gap to coincide with the maturation of a generation reared under different conditions or who challenged prevailing gender philosophies.

Masculine Political Legacy Explanation

Another explanation for the gender gap in political participation focuses on the socio-historical context of the phenomena. Traditionally, women's roles and careers have existed outside the political realm. Our nation's political structure and culture were designed by and for men. For most of America's history, the totality of our formal political sphere has been controlled by men. This has solidified the male coding of politics itself. The concurrent formal barriers to political participation and socially constructed masculinity of politics may have historically dissuaded women from political involvement.

Throughout early American history, women were denied full legal and political recognition of their humanity. Until the nineteenth century, women lost their legal individuality and autonomy in marriage; a wed woman was legally seen as the dependent and property of her husband – making her legally similar to children, enslaved people, and livestock (Doepke et al. 346). According to common law, “[t]he very being and legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage” (Doepke et al. 347). In this state of non-existence, women did not have a legal claim to their bodies, children, or wages (Doepke et al. 347). Such formal erasure of female agency and individuality created a barrier for women to engage in the world outside of the domestic sphere. Actively participating in the formal political sphere was nearly impossible in a social system that denies one's basic existence.

Change in women's legal status and treatment in America was sporadic and decentralized. Throughout the nineteenth century, some states individually reevaluated the issue of women's rights (Doepke et al. 347). Kentucky, Iowa, Mississippi, Kansas, and Maine all made important extensions to women's legal rights during this period within their jurisdictions (Doepke et al. 347). By 1895, most states recognized a woman's right over her income and property (Doepke et

al. 347). This critical development granted women the opportunity to engage with the American socioeconomic scene. As workers and property rights are significant topics of debate within a capitalist society, this economic inclusion provided a new foundation for women's political development and participation. A significant milestone for women's rights came in 1920 when women were extended the right of suffrage through the nineteenth amendment (Doepke et al. 347). This amendment provided legal recognition and legitimization of women's right to political involvement, but it did not signify the end of their marginalization in the public sphere.

Although the legal state of women has profoundly changed since the founding of our country, gender-based discrimination still deeply shapes contemporary American society. Women's integration into the labor force was a major achievement for early feminists, but it birthed the new challenge of securing equal treatment of women in the workplace. The movement of women into the workforce was accompanied by the institution of gender-based labor laws (Doepke et al. 349). The legislation limited the jobs, hours, and wages available to women in many states (Doepke et al. 349). These policies reinforced the cultural notion that women were inherently lesser than men, creating obstacles to women's advancement in the public realm. Some such restrictive labor practices and laws actively restricted women's ability to participate in traditionally male-dominated fields until the 1965 Supreme Court decision in *Weeks v. Southern Bell* (Doepke et al. 347). Women have also seen continued marginalization in the legal sphere in contemporary America. It was legally permissible to exclude women from sitting on juries until 1975 (Doepke et al. 347). The belittling of women in the public sphere reflects and shapes our society's gender philosophies – both economically and politically.

While they have now had the right to vote for over a hundred years, American women's historical disenfranchisement created a persisting social system that hinders women's political

development. After decades of legal devaluation and delegitimizing women's humanity, voting was a radical step forward. However, this move toward political equality did not automatically change the country's centuries-old attitudes surrounding gender and politics. Women who were socialized in the context of disenfranchisement were unlikely to model political activism at comparable levels to their male counterparts even after they gained suffrage (Carreras 36). With the continued masculine perception and domination of politics, generations of American women felt the lingering effects of disenfranchisement (Carreras 36). Lasting social barriers to their political involvement contributed to “less cognitiv[e] engage[ment] with the political process” and “lower levels of political interest and political efficacy” compared to their male counterparts (Carreras 36). Without knowledge, interest, or trust in the political system, these women were wholly disconnected from politics.

That disconnection shaped the relationships that subsequent generations of young women formed with politics. The delayed realization of women's suffrage and political rights in the United States left generations of young girls without many politically active female role models. Their mothers, grandmothers, female guardians, and community women were largely uninvolved in politics. That lack of female representation in the political sphere extended beyond the microcosm of the home. For decades following the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, women saw the offices of the president, governors, mayors, and representatives held exclusively or predominately by men. It was not until 1978 that the first woman was elected to the Senate, and, at that time, only 5% of the House of Representatives was held by women (Fox and Lawless 59). While the percentage of women in our formal political bodies has increased since then, progress has stagnated since the early 2000s (Fox and Lawless 59). Without models of political women and their success, the political system retains a sense of masculinity.

Moreover, the historical male domination of politics creates logistical obstacles to women's involvement. Building momentum and moving away from stasis is a difficult task. Without formal representation and incorporation in the political system, marginalized groups have a limited ability to affect the formal political process – this prevents them from advocating their rights or inclusion through formal political means. In this arrangement, the politically dominant group can promote their interests and deny institutional acknowledgment of other policy matters (Lukes 11). Through this process, those in power can solidify their position, and this power maintenance is also supported by the incumbent advantage (Fox and Lawless 60) (Lukes 25).

Should gender-related policies be made in a male-dominated, homogenous setting, such policies cannot be conclusive solutions. Formal political intervention to address gender inequality is unlikely to occur without the involvement and empowerment of women. Therefore, the demonstrated trend of women's under-involvement in politics represents the effects of exclusion from power and contributes to perpetuating such exclusion. In other words, if women's political under-involvement is caused by their underrepresentation, they need increased representation to increase their involvement, but their under-involvement perpetuates their underrepresentation. This convoluted connection makes redress complicated.

In sum, this explanation chooses to focus on the historical framework of American politics and the impact of representation. Suppose the masculine political legacy explanation for the gender gap is accurate. In that case, we should expect to see increases in women's political behavior in response to increases in women in formal political offices and the public rise of women activists.

Social Role Explanation

An additional explanation about the gender gap focuses on the traditional social roles held by men and women in their communities. Some researchers contend that the social roles an individual holds within their community affect their psychological processing and their subsequent political attitudes (McCammon and Banaszak 53). This argument is similar to that of the political socialization explanation; both assert that individuals develop politically as they form relationships with their community. The primary difference between these explanations is time. The political socialization explanation focuses on the original belief formation period that occurs in early childhood, and the social role explanation is more centered around adulthood. In brief, this explanation examines the effects of gendered roles and spheres adopted later in life, and it maintains that the political divides between men and women are solidified by their divergent experiences in adulthood.

In a patriarchal social system, women's traditional social roles are distinctive from men's. Often acting as the primary caretakers of children, stewards of the domestic realm, and traditional moral pillars of their communities, women within a normative American gender philosophy see decreased access to formalized public power (McCammon and Banaszak 53). These positions exist outside of institutional power structures, and they carry little economic potential. While these traditionally female-coded roles are essential to community stability, they do not directly lend themselves to political development.

Additionally, due to their divergent social roles, the cultural experiences and perceptions of men and women are distinctive (Carreras 36). Related to the gender philosophies discussed in the political socialization explanation, the division our society perceives between the sexes influences the development of differences between many men and women. As many women experience the female cultural rites of passage like marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood, their

adulthood is largely framed by their association with others. While men may also experience marriage and parenthood, their maturation and journey into adulthood are not culturally tied to or defined by such events. Rather the transition into a man's adulthood is more tied to his entrance into and success in the workplace (Carreras 37).

In a capitalist, liberal democracy, our political system is based on competition and individualism. Many acquire and refine these skills in the labor force. There, success is often tied to networking, performance, and strategy. Unlike in the domestic sphere, the workplace often functions with a greater emphasis on the guiding principle of competition rather than collaboration (Lueptow et al. 2). The worker is encouraged to be and perceived as being agentic; the worker adopts an individualistic perspective and acts in self-interest (Lueptow et al. 2). In the home and community center, the goal is to gratify collective needs, and there is no inherent pressure toward restructuring. Rather, these spaces are relatively stable and static. On the other hand, the office and factory floor operate with the goal of efficient production, and one's place is more volatile. Whereas collectivist collaboration maximizes domestic functions, the personal insecurity of the workplace makes strategic individualism much more advantageous. Given the overlap between the skills and traits associated with individualism and the political sphere, adopting this perspective facilitates political development. In sum, the shifting world of politics is much more resemblant of and compatible with traditionally male-dominated spaces than the traditionally female-coded domestic realm.

It is particularly important to note the underrepresentation of women in the business and law fields (Fox and Lawless 60). With these two male-dominated sectors producing many of our nation's politicians, those in these fields are more apt to develop political skills and be exposed to pseudo-political pressures (Fox and Lawless 60). If women are underrepresented in these

incubating political fields, they are less likely to gain the experiences and skills that we culturally value in politics. As a result, some researchers posit that they are less likely to feel qualified to participate in politics or run for office (Fox and Lawless 60). This sense of incompetence that comes from non-integration into male-dominated fields creates internal barriers to a woman's political participation. If an individual feels unqualified and inexperienced for something, they are likely to avoid such activities. In this case, the avoidance of politics is apt to intensify those feelings of inadequacy and perpetuate disconnection.

A subpoint in this explanation that some researchers forward is specifically focused on the experience of motherhood. They contend that distinctly female experiences like pregnancy and childbirth inform the formation of women's political consciousness and behaviors (Cook and Wilcox 1114). This argument does fall within the realm of the social role explanation as it contends that gender-based divides in political attitudes form in adulthood, but this particular argument is difficult to integrate into a discussion of the gender gap. If the specific experience of motherhood were the root cause of divides in political participation, we should see a difference in the political behaviors of women who have children and those who do not. Further, if this were the predominant factor driving the gender gap, the phenomenon has not been correctly named or described. Motherhood is not interchangeable with womanhood, nor is motherhood interchangeable with pregnancy. That said, motherhood is deeply linked to domesticity. In that way, the experience of motherhood may contribute to domestic pressures shaping women's political development. Interestingly, the narrowing of the political participation gap roughly coincides with the decreasing birth rate and an increasing number of women entering the workforce (Fox and Lawless 63). This correlation supports the notion that gendered social roles affect political behaviors.

In brief, the social roles explanation for the gender gap accepts many of the premises central to the other explanations concerning American gender ideology and gender-based division in society, but it forwards a different chronology. Those who offer this explanation presume that the adoption of political attitudes and practices occurs in adulthood as one solidifies their place in society and settles into a gendered social role.

Resource Scarcity Explanation

A final theory about the nature of the gender gap focuses on resource distribution in America. This explanation centers around the practicalities and likelihood of political participation. It posits that those most likely to engage in politics have higher levels of education and wealth (Berinsky and Lenz 357). Political participation also often requires other resources such as time, transportation, infrastructure, and information. Those who lack access to such resources must take on a more significant burden of engaging in politics. As American women have historically had less access to these resources, it follows that political engagement would carry a larger burden for them.

Long having been educationally and socioeconomically marginalized, women in the United States have historically seen lower levels of education and wealth (Howell and Day 860). In colonial and early America, most communities had educational systems which either barred girls from enrollment or confined them to separate girls' schools (Solomon 16). Within this system, boys and girls saw different opportunities, curricula, and educational standards (Solomon 16). Up through the eighteenth century, arguments for the expansion of women's education were predominately centered around the notion that educated women would be better suited for marriage and motherhood (Solomon 16). With such ideas shaping educational expansion, women's curriculum and experiences in the education system were fundamentally different from

men's in early American society. In general, they were not offered the same rigor, resources, or opportunities for individual development. For lower and some middle-class families, educating their daughters was seen through a lens of economic utility (Solomon 17). These young women were able to enter the workforce as school teachers, textile workers, or factory laborers (Solomon 17). While these positions placed women outside of the household, these jobs were still largely centered around domestic skills, and they did not offer women the same economic empowerment or compensation they did for men (Solomon 17). With the stigmatized exception of the spinster, early working women remained the dependents of their families until they became the dependents of their spouses (Solomon 17). As such, their educational and economic status was not within their control.

Over time, education and socioeconomic opportunities gradually became more accessible to women. Public primary education came to embrace both boys and girls, thus giving them a more equal foundation, but barriers remained for women in higher education. By the early twentieth century, a college education was still not accessible to many women (Solomon XX). Those who lacked an advanced education, skill, or trade, saw limited economic potential (Solomon XX). At that time, women only made up approximately one-quarter of the workforce (Sbrocchi 840). Without education or financial independence, most women at this time only saw stability or potential upward mobility through marriage (Solomon XX). The resulting arrangement perpetuated a feminine disconnect from the world beyond the domestic sphere. During World War II the percentage of women in the labor force increased by over 50%, and women were able to fill traditionally male-dominated positions (Sbrocchi 845). Unfortunately, the economic empowerment seen in this period was short-lived. As the war came to an end, many women left the factories, and a significant portion of those who stayed saw their income

reduced (Sbrocchi 845). While now more educated and legally entitled than their predecessors, these women remained somewhat closed off from the public sphere, and they lacked the means to advance their individual resource wealth and educational development.

Although higher education became more accessible to women throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, men and women did not see the same returns for their education, skills, and labor (Solomon XX). As aforementioned, women in the workforce have long been forced to operate under different policies, conditions, and expectations. One prominent example of this is the still debated gender pay gap. The term pay gap describes the under-compensation of women compared to men in similar positions (Sbrocchi 839). After several failed legislative attempts and thirteen years of pressure, the Equal Pay Act was enacted in 1963, and it represented the first national protection against gender-based income discrimination (Sbrocchi 839, 845). While such legislation represented an important acknowledgment of economic injustice, the pay gap persisted. In the 1980s, a college-educated woman earned on average 62 cents for every dollar that her male counterpart did (Solomon XX). In 2019, the United States Census Bureau reported that women on average earned 80 cents to every dollar men did (Sbrocchi 839).

When discussing resource scarcity and gender in America, it is also important to note the complexities that race imposes on this situation. The educational, economic, and other resource struggles that women of color have faced are different from those faced by white women. For example in 2019, Black women on average only earned 61 cents for every dollar a white man (Sbrocchi 839). Both Hispanic and Indigenous women on average receive only 53 cents for every dollar their white non-Hispanic male counterpart earns (Sbrocchi 840). While the economic inequality and political marginalization experienced by women of color are complex

and important topics for research, this work is only intended to explore American women's experiences at large. Such nuanced and demographically descriptive research lays beyond the scope of this work.

With less educational and economic opportunities, women have traditionally experienced poverty at disproportionate rates. In the United States, women are the primary recipients of social welfare benefits and need-based community services (Howell and Day 860)(Solomon 17). While reliance on government programs may theoretically contribute to the formation of political interest, the pressures of poverty and subsistence can prevent an individual from actualizing or acting upon such preferences (Berinsky and Lenz 358). Additionally, those experiencing poverty are more likely to see decreased access to other resources like time, transportation, information, and infrastructure (Berinsky and Lenz 358)(Howell and Day 861).

Women's education and economic state are important both as it pertains to the feasibility of political participation and the development of political interests. In the American system, most forms of political participation require disposable income or time and access to those other aforementioned resources. Many metrics used in assessing the gender gap, such as campaign donations, volunteering, and attending political events, reduce an individual's assets or potential to earn income. If someone is financially unstable or dependent, it is unlikely that they will choose to use their limited monetary or time assets on something that does not offer them directly, concrete benefit. For example, there is no guaranteed personal return on a campaign donation for the average citizen; however, there is reliable, immediate gratification available through so many other potential purchases. Allocating money towards necessities (rent, utilities, food, etc.), entertainment (media, hobbies, experiences, etc), or personal maintenance (education, healthcare, mental health services, etc.) enhances an individual's quality of life. If one is living in

relative subsistence, such primary expenses will limit an individual's ability to engage with others, less immediate, and less personal matters. Those with increased education and wealth do not face the same resource limitations.

Resource wealth also correlates with the development of political interests. Studies show that the development of women's economic empowerment is linked to the development of women's political inclusion and legal protections (Doepke et al. 350). When an individual's economic potential and activities increase, she is more invested in her community (Doepke et al. 350). In an interdependent and interconnected capitalist system, individuals are affected by the other entities, institutions, consumers, trends, and policies in their society. Their interests are interlinked with others. As such, active participants in this economic system are more likely to engage with the political sphere to advance their interests (Doepke et al. 351). If a woman's income potential and relative assets are lower than her male counterpart, she is comparatively less integrated into the economic system and less likely to be politically active.

If this explanation for the gender gap is accurate, we should expect to see the narrowing of the gender gap coincide with an increase in women's education rates and relative wealth. As resources become less scarce for this demographic, the barrier to political participation would be decreasing. We would also expect to see increases in public information, infrastructure, and transportation to align with increased political participation.

Discussion

To determine the relative applicability of these various explanations for the gender gap in political participation, we will now put them in conversation with one another. Again, it is important to note that none of these explanations are inherently absolute or exclusive answers to the issue of the gender gap. While they are distinctive from one another, they do not directly

require the nonexistence of each other. On the contrary, I contend that each explanation holds some amount of truth – the real issue is determining their relative weight in the equation. Such information is important as it would suggest where continued gender equality policies should focus.

Establishing a Timeline

To understand the nature of the gender gap in political participation, we must identify when men and women diverge in their personal and political development. The political socialization explanation posits that childhood is the critical stage; the social role explanation suggests adulthood; and both the masculine political legacy and resource scarcity explanations focus on generational trends as a perpetual developmental influence.

Individual political and psychological development do not occur as singular, flashpoint moments (Abbott and Ryan 31). Belief and practice formation are gradual processes, and people are capable of changing such things over time (Abbott and Ryan 31). Nonetheless, there is a tension between the political socialization and the social role explanations on the matter of developmental timelines. Both explanations agree that the gendered groups' political attitudes are influenced by their different self-perceptions and relationships with their communities. Given this commonality, we can test both explanations by looking for when these divergent community-based outlooks emerge. When we do, it is clear that these beliefs first manifest in childhood, as suggested by the political socialization explanation.

Research illustrates divides between boys' and girls' ethical codes at an early stage. By assessing children's career aspirations, we can gain a glimpse of their developing relationship between the community and self. When asked to list both their "ideal" and "realistic" career aspirations, early adolescent boys and girls demonstrated strong adherence to normative

American gender philosophy (Sandberg et al. 375). While the most common male responses in this late-twentieth-century survey were athlete, pilot, and medical doctor, the most common female responses were teacher, nurse, and secretary (Sandberg et al. 375-6). These preferences show a strongly gendered schism already forming in childhood surrounding one's relationship with their community. Whereas the most popular male career aspirations embody the male-coded values of competition and individualism, the most popular female aspirations reflect the feminine values of care and domesticity. These results support the political socialization explanation's argument on gendered codes of ethics.

The political implications of such divided perspectives also begin to emerge in childhood. Surveys of school-aged children showed that girls on average held less political knowledge and interest than their male counterparts (Dowse and Hughes 55). Researchers also found that girls elected to use nonresponsive survey options more often than boys – saying that they “did not know” or were “unsure” about their political beliefs or context (Dowse and Hughes 58). This early, female cognitive disconnection from politics mirrors normative gender philosophies. While children are categorically excluded from most forms of formal political participation, early knowledge and interest serve as a foundation for future behaviors. As such, this childhood divide represents the beginning point of the gender gap in political participation.

Our understanding of neuroscience and neuroplasticity supports this childhood belief formation timeline. While individuals are always learning and taking in new information, the brain itself is most malleable during early childhood, particularly up until the age of ten (Abbott and Ryan 31). Children enter the world lacking both an understanding of society and the ability to navigate it independently. They are dependent on adults to fill these knowledge- and behavior-based voids until they are capable of doing so themselves. In essence, children's

short-term survival is dependent on their guardian's care, and their long-term survival is dependent on their ability to emulate their guardians (Abbott and Ryan 32). As such, early experiences and exposures play an important role in shaping how individuals develop (Abbott and Ryan 31).

Applying all of this to our explanations of the gender gap, it follows that initial political development occurs in childhood – as the political socialization explanation argues – and such beliefs continue to form and manifest through political action or inaction later in life – in relative accord with the social role explanation. One's ability to learn and act later in life is connected to their initial development in the formative years (Abbott and Ryan 31). Although primary development may not reflect full-fledged political thought, the childhood realization of identity and community relationships represent the foundation of politics.

To be clear, I am not attempting to forward a developmental determinist argument. Individuals are not limited to living within the framework or confines of their childhood experiences, but such experiences inform the development of their outlook and color their perspective. In a fluid social space, there is always some potential for change; however, potential is not always realized, and stasis is a very stable state. As individuals enter adulthood, they are presented with opportunities to solidify or challenge their foundational ethics, values, and preferences.

Understanding Change

When we examine the figures offered in this work to visualize the gender gap, it is clear that this dynamic is not static. Over time, the gap between men's and women's political participation has fluctuated and gradually, inconsistently narrowed. I argue that these combined explanations can account for these changes, and they offer a pathway forward. Suppose that

political socialization represents the initial origin of gendered political divides. In such a case, addressing this issue requires us to direct our attention not toward children, but rather, toward adults. A generation is socialized by the generations that preceded them. It is in this way that we can connect the political socialization explanation with all of the others. The masculine political legacy, gender social roles, and resource distribution in America informs one's personal development and societal conditions.

If women lack models, pathways, and resources to participate in the political world, the self-abdication and non-participation normalized by hegemonic femininity and the female-coded ethics of care are perpetuated. For many, the proto-political attitudes and practices established in childhood by the process of political socialization become fully realized in adulthood – solidifying the gender gap. If a generation or cohort continues to develop in accordance with the prevailing social philosophies and expectations introduced in youth, gendered divides will only augment over time. Diverging from the prevailing social system is daunting, and meaningful cultural change requires a critical mass of non-adherents.

With their historical marginalization in education, labor, politics, and the public sphere at large, women have long faced complex and interconnected barriers to their empowerment. Lacking representation in many sectors of society, there has traditionally not been an established foundation for women's socioeconomic mobility. Education represents a key gateway into the skilled labor force and political realm. As such, women's decreased access to education has supported their underrepresentation in male-dominated career fields and government. In turn, that exclusion delays the realization of policies promoting women's interests and informs the development of younger generations. In the aforementioned childhood career aspiration study, researchers noted that there were approximately 10% fewer women incumbents in the girls'

chosen “ideal” career fields than in their “realistic” choices (Sandberg et al.380). This shows how the lack of representation can deter some women and reinforce division through perceived path dependency.

As women have gradually gained access to education, legal rights, and economic empowerment, they have become more politically cognizant and involved (Carreras 37)(Howell and Day 860). With critical thought being a key tenant of liberal higher education, the increase in women’s education has contributed to a rise in feminist movements and thought over time in the United States (Solomon XXI). The experience of education does not necessarily cause an individual’s ideological transformation, but it exposes individuals to provocative and critical perspectives (Solomon XXI). In these conditions, students of all genders have the opportunity to explore and challenge the social framework of our society. Additionally, increasing access to education decreases the barriers facing women’s entry into other traditionally male-dominated realms, such as business, law, and politics. Through this gradual, informal integration process, resource distribution may also shift. As such, educational expansion can interrupt many of the processes and problems associated with normative American gender philosophy.

Moreover, women’s increasing education and rising socioeconomic potential have beneficial externalities to consider. The expanding women’s rights and opportunities alters the experience of adult women who immediately benefit from those opportunities and the children who are socialized in that shifting environment. In this way, I contend that the gender gap’s general narrowing trend is the result of gradual changes in our nation’s gender conditions. Moreover, those who do not have higher education, who do not identify as feminists, or who have not seen upward socioeconomic movement still exist within the context of this cultural transformation. As our nation’s socio-gender philosophies are challenged and changed, everyone

has the potential to be impacted. As women gain political power, both as voters and representatives, American spending on education and public services has increased (Doepke et al. 350). Whether it be through changed social welfare programs, labor policies, rearing practices, or some other policy, women's empowerment deeply shapes the conditions of our everyday lives.

Conclusion

While several different arguments seek to explain the nature of the gender gap in political participation, it is impossible to fully understand this phenomenon without a holistic viewpoint. A review of the literature indicates that political attitudes begin to develop in childhood, are refined over time, and inform later behaviors. The differences between men's and women's political behaviors are therefore connected to their divergent socialization. Prevailing American gender ideology creates an artificial diametric opposition between the genders. This in turn contributes to the adoption of antithetical ethical codes and outlooks. Responding to different social pressures and expectations, men and women engage with politics differently.

In sum, the gender gap in political participation is a product of a sexist social legacy that affects youth development, rearing philosophies, resource distribution, and institutional power structures. Changing patterns in participation rates requires an interruption of this interconnected social cycle. America has seen significant changes over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but there remains room for improvement. Addressing women's representation in leadership positions in political and non-political systems will support continued empowerment. For women's interests to be addressed, there must be room for them to influence decision-making and societal conditions.

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