Different Governments, Different Interests: The Gender Gap in Political Interest

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In recent decades, differences between men and women have blurred in many social dimensions, including levels of educational attainment or access to the labor market. However, this increase in equality has not been reflected in a proportional reduction in the gender gap in political interest. This paper evaluates the extent of gender differences in political interest regarding different arenas, considering the moderating effect of marriage and caring for others using data from the Citizenship, Involvement, and Democracy Project. Although women generally find local politics more interesting than national politics, family, and caring responsibilities are still a source of disadvantage.

Introduction

The literature has found abundant evidence across countries of women stating that they are less interested in politics than men (Fraile and Gomez 2017; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012). However, in her study of the United Kingdom, Coffé (2013) added a “but” to this apparent lack of interest. When asked specifically about different political arenas, the gap between men and women (also known as the gender gap) disappeared. Women declared similar levels of interest in local politics to men, while a gap appeared when they were asked about arenas that might be considered more distant, namely, national and international politics. This article analyzes this field of research in two ways. First, by examining a broader number of countries to further validate these findings. Second, by connecting Coffé’s research with that exploring the sources of gender-based differences in political orientations. What makes local politics more appealing to women than other political arenas?

Many academics believed that the incorporation of women into the labor force and gender equality in levels of educational attainment were going to
reduce the gender gap (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). It was argued that education and the experience of paid employment would provide women with the skills needed to understand and engage in politics, as it did for men. However—and here lies the conundrum—this did not happen. The starting point of my argument is that women nowadays frequently work both at home and outside in what might be called “double-days.” And they are socialized to accept this distribution of roles. Thus, I expect their relationship with different forms of political interest to be mediated by family and care commitments.

The literature addressing the gender gap has focused on the available resources to develop such an interest. In the theoretical section below, I review the two main hypotheses, which center on either situation or socialization. I do so because the evidence does not allow me to refute either causal mechanism driving the phenomenon observed. The situational explanation focuses on a broad definition of resources; not only material but also cognitive (Thomas 2012; Verge and Tormos 2012). In contrast, the socialization hypothesis argues that women are taught roles and values that lead to an estrangement from politics (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Mayer and Schmidt 2004). I explore how gender-based differences in declared interest in national and local politics relate to these explanations.

Articles by Coffe´ (2013) and Stolle and Gidengil (2010) have argued that local politics are different from national politics, and that the former attracts women’s attention to a greater extent. While citizens’ direct participation in national politics is usually limited to significant events like general elections, local politics can seem more closely linked to day-to-day preoccupations, such as the provision of public services or the solution of conflicts within the community (Stokes 2005). Women’s traditional caring roles, it is argued, may increase their awareness of these issues when they look for a school for their children, go to the doctor’s office, or talk to neighbors. And this awareness might also increase their willingness to look for solutions. The direct experience of national politics is usually circumscribed to elections, while local politics is more likely to comprehend both elections, and more direct forms of engagement.

To my knowledge, the relationship between resources and varying levels of political interest remains largely unexplored, probably due to the very limited amount of relevant empirical evidence. However, the study launched in the framework of the Citizenship, Involvement, and Democracy (CID) Project (Andersen et al. 2007) is an exception. This project undertook a comparative study of social capital, political behavior, and the motivations for political engagement. Although the fieldwork of this dataset (1999–2001) precedes that used by Coffe´ (2013), it has the advantage of including several countries. Thus, the contribution is two-fold, broadening the scope of the first study and generalizing its results across various institutional contexts. Furthermore, I extend this research by examining how marital status and providing care for people in the community can help shape these interests. Specifically, married
couples usually participate more in the community because they are frequent users of public services. However, women are often pictured as more caring than men, as I will explain in the following section. I have used an objective measurement—“commitment to caring for others in the community” (outside of the family, and different from volunteering)—in contrast with existing studies focused on values (Schwartz and Rubel-Lifschitz 2009). Although both caring for others and volunteering may be rooted in similar motivations, the first can be considered more general and flexible than the latter. Particularly this dataset, an in-depth study of social capital, includes such a broad array of activities whose participants may not only hold such caring values but also be previously inserted in participation networks. In other words, someone who cares for a neighbor may not be willing to volunteer in community activities because they do not know someone to introduce them or they lack the time to commit.

In the analytical section that follows, citizens’ general interest in politics, interest in local politics, and interest in national politics are examined. The former serves as a benchmark to interpret the results of the latter two specific measurements. The variables measuring a general interest in politics and interest in national politics show a persistent gender gap that reaches its greatest expression (in terms of a score) amongst married respondents. In contrast, the gender gap reduces across every category when local politics are the object of interest, except for married respondents. Although married men and women are amongst the most interested, there is a small but significant gender gap. Tentatively, it might be suggested that interest in local politics is a result of women’s traditional assumption of roles, while an interest in national politics would require an additional effort, on top of their other obligations. These results provide evidence about where differences in political interest are located, and the steps that can be taken to make politics more egalitarian, and thereby be equally attractive to both men and women.

**Does Care Lead to Not Caring About Politics?**

The literature on gender gaps in public opinion continues to debate why local politics might be more appealing to women than national politics. Arguments have included the suggestion that men and women seem to hold different conceptions about politics (Corbetta and Cavazza 2008), or at least that they relate differently to politics (Coffé 2013). Understanding the sources of women’s lack of political interest can provide clues about what makes local politics more appealing and how other political spheres can become more inclusive.

Economic development in recent decades has deeply changed how Western societies are organized, including social views on equality. In spite of these efforts, some political inequalities persist (Fortin-Rittberger 2016; Fraile and...
Gomez 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2000; Jerit and Barabas 2017; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012). The main explanations of this phenomenon can be articulated around two hypotheses, closely linked to one another: situation and socialization.

Both socially and at home, women frequently assume the role of caregivers, and men that of providers. This assumption of roles often reproduces what citizens learn during socialization from their parents and peers. In other words, characterizing women as caregivers, and men as providers, is a description of how society works, but also of normative perceptions of society that are transmitted through socialization (Jennings 2007). Even though much has changed in recent decades, these associations persist (Batalova and Cohen 2002; Knudsen and Waerness 2008), rendering the direction of causality hard to identify.

The situational explanation has much evolved since its early propositions (Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). The point of departure of this literature is the cognitive and material resources available for citizens to develop and interest in politics. This interest was considered the main motivation for citizens to engage in politics and pursue their political objectives. The only caveat that they found in their explanation were women. They were always less interested, less engaged, less knowledgeable, etc. To solve the puzzle, they argued that once they joined the usual networks of political activation, the gender gap would dilute. In other words, once they joined the labor market, and were as educated, they would come “up to speed.” However, despite the great progress made in improving educational equality, women remained “less interested” in national politics (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012).

More recent research on the situational hypothesis has focused on understanding how women being as educated as men and working has not given them the skills to be as interested in politics. In terms of educational achievement, the social entitlement and skills conferred by university degrees seems to have decreased, as they became more common (Thomas 2012). As higher education seems less valuable, it is less key to building political orientations. Similarly, Dow (2009) finds that women’s political knowledge benefits less from education than men’s.

Within this same line of research, Gidengil, Giles, and Thomas (2008) and Verge and Tormos (2012) have looked at “time availability” as a resource instead of education. They argue that it is not a matter of educational attainment, where there is no gap, but of having the time to be interested and informed about politics. And women lack the time because they are busy with “double work-days” or “double shifts” (Hochschild and Machung 1990). Sociologists have shown that women increasingly balance a full-time job and are primary caregivers in the family (Batalova and Cohen 2002; Gupta 1999; Knudsen and Waerness 2008). Engaging with politics would imply the time and energy for a third work-day. In a similar vein, Rotolo (2000) finds that
marriage has different effects on men and women’s civic engagement. While it boosts the participation of men, who become increasingly aware of social and economic problems and how they might act to address them in the public arena; women decrease their participation and commit to the household.

The socialization hypothesis shifts the attention from how citizens live to the gendered processes through which they learn their political orientations (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Hooghe and Stolle 2004; Morales 1999). During these years, young people receive distinct messages about the roles and values they should embrace in their adulthood (Pereira, Fraile, and Rubal 2015). However, within this theoretical framework, authors disagree on what is transmitted: values or roles.

On the one hand, there are a group of authors within the socialization approach who argue that young people learn in their childhood and youth what they should become as adults (Jennings 2007). Young women are encouraged to adopt caring roles, while men are taught to favor providing for the family (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Filler and Jennings 2015; Sapiro 1983; Welch 1977). There is evidence to suggest that men and women are increasingly sharing both roles, as both breadwinners and nurturers. If it becomes a trade-off, then, men seem to still generally favor their work while women take the lead role in the house.

On the other hand, a second group of authors has highlighted the fact that socialization goes further than the social division of roles. Cultural feminism, evolutionary psychology, and biosocial role theory have argued for the existence of “feminine values” of cooperation and care, opposed to “masculine values” of confrontation and aggressiveness (Eichenberg and Read 2015; Jelen, Thomas, and Wilcox 1994; Rapoport 1985). The gendered division of social roles reflects these varying sensibilities and has a subsequent impact on career choices. The under-representation of women in sciences, mathematics and engineering is a good example of how these gendered stereotypes dissuade girls from taking this career path (Shapiro and Williams 2012).

To summarize, both streams of literature highlight the fact that the social roles that women adopt (or are taught) hinder them in developing an interest in politics. Prioritizing marriage and commitment to caring for others, either as reflections of values held, and/or because they consume a high proportion of women’s available time, lead to them showing less interest in politics. Women are not excluded per se from politics, but it is argued that they receive subtle messages that their interests and skills are not part of politics. This allows me to derive the first two hypotheses that will guide the analyses of the empirical evidence:

**H1:** Women tend to declare lower levels of political interest than men.
**H2:** Women’s lower levels of political interest relate to marriage and care.

To date, the relevant literature has seemed to hold a pessimistic vision of how women relate to politics. Nonetheless, women run for office, hold seats in
parliaments, engage in civic organizations, and consume political content in the media. Women running for office are frequently linked to placing women’s issues—understood as reproductive rights or family related issues, amongst others—on the agenda (Atkeson and Carrillo 2007). Does this suggest that politics often does not include topics that attract women’s attention? A specific recall of politics in different arenas may trigger respondents’ interest in a broader concept of politics. Although there is some disagreement, the usual political interest question seems to evoke national and partisan politics (Stolle and Gidengil 2010). This way, respondents are stimulated to think specifically about other forms of politics.

One Concept, Several Meanings?

Politics is frequently framed as being an “unfriendly environment for women” insofar as they are not well-equipped with the skills and abilities required to succeed (Renshaw 2012, 197; Stevens 2012). Politics requires a set of values and experiences that women are less likely to share (Karp and Banducci 2008; Murray 2010). Interest in politics is one of the main motivations to participate. Feeling “an unwanted outsider” does not seem to be a likely motivation to cultivate such an interest. Most men do not participate actively in politics either; however, they do declare an interest in politics. This section now turns to how individuals develop their interest in politics, to understand its appeal to men and not women.

The gender gap in political orientations is not homogeneous. In addition to Coffée’s work (2013), women have been found to declare lower levels of interest in, or support for, foreign policy (Bernstein 2005; Nelsen and Guth 2000; Togeby 1994). These authors argue that these differences occur because women’s interests and preoccupations are closer to day-to-day issues, while EU or foreign affairs in general are perceived as being more distant. In other words, the “estrangement” felt from international topics makes it hard for women to relate to, and unwilling to become interested.

Local politics, in contrast, often seems closer to the topics that many women deal with, and it therefore appears to be more useful in addressing their problems. Compared to the distant international sphere, the local arena might be considered to be the “closest politically,” and the first that citizens encounter (Gustafsson 1980; Rodden 2004). In spite of the wide variety of modes of decentralization across countries, and the differences in the division of competences across administrations, local politics generally seems to deal with those issues that comprise citizens’ everyday concerns (Stokes 2005, 204–5).

Even if this arena is not always women-friendly in its practices (Verge 2010), the likelihood of interacting directly with local politics would make it more interesting to women than the more “distant” arenas. Local politics are
part of citizens’ daily lives, even though they do not make the front cover of national newspapers or news broadcasts. Studies in the United States have shown that the gender gap in political knowledge is reduced when items include also local issues (Shaker 2009, 2012). In addition, women are more likely to participate in school boards and local politics (Bond et al. 2008; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). Knowledge and political participation imply an active relationship with politics that interest does not, however, they can offer insight of what processes could be driving political interest. In the European sphere, Coffé (2013) found for the United Kingdom that the gender gap in political interest vanished when asking about political interest in local issues, but the argument has not been tested in other countries.

It could be argued that interviewers define “political interest” loosely in questions, precisely to be inclusive in their definition of politics. Nonetheless, patterns of response vary across political arenas, suggesting that this broad definition is not as broad as researchers assumed it to be. Previous research has shown that the term “politics,” broadly used, predominantly evokes the idea of national and partisan politics (Hooghe and Stolle 2004). Local politics, however, has a weaker link to politics with a big P, to the big issues, because they form part of citizens’ daily conversations about, for example, how the streets should be repaired or how the local budget should be apportioned. While macroeconomics are part of national news daily, these kind of topics largely pertain to local media (Shaker 2009). I expect that, insofar as local politics can be understood as a closer political arena, the gender gap should diminish. When citizens are asked about politics without further specification, only politics with a big “P” seems to be in their minds. When citizens are stimulated to think more broadly by changing the wording of the question, and mentioning their object of interest, a broader concept of politics may emerge. Thus, the last hypothesis is:

_H3: The gender gap in political interest should reduce when the object considered is local politics (and it should remain regarding national politics)._  

In sum, women are not necessarily more apathetic, they are just inaccurately reported. Politics, without any further defining adjective, seems to recall national or partisan politics rather than other forms of politics such as local politics.

**Operationalization and Data**

Conventional, survey-oriented studies on political involvement normally employ the classic question, “how interested are you in politics?” or an equivalent wording. It is less frequent to find questionnaires that specify the object of interest, for instance, in terms of levels of government. As aforementioned, the most recent comprehensive comparative dataset can be
found in the study of political capital and citizenship in the CID Project (Andersen et al. 2007). This study includes representative samples of thirteen countries, namely Denmark, Germany (Eastern and Western Germany are considered separately), Moldova, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. The fieldwork was undertaken in periods of approximately six months between 1999 and 2002. Supplementary appendix table S1 lists the variables employed in this study. The heterogeneity of the countries considered provides the empirical evidence necessary to test the generalizability of Coffe’s (2013) results beyond the British context. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the CID Project might be establishing the grounds for an improvement in how political interest is assessed.

To measure political interest, I follow Coffe’s strategy (2013), using three operationalizations, according to the different objects of interest: the usual question for political interest (“general interest”), acting as baseline; interest in local politics; and interest in national politics. General political interest provides a baseline to interpret the results of the other two forms of interest. The expectation is that interest in politics in general and interest in national politics should show a more similar distribution, while local interest should be different as a result of the reduced gender gap.

The three variables share metrics. Originally, they comprised a four-item variable that ranged from “very interested” to “not at all interested.” Pearson correlations were estimated to examine the association between the variables (results are reported in Supplementary appendix table S2). The magnitude of this association varies between countries, but the magnitude is relatively large, pointing to a strong association between the variables. This strong association is in line with the expectation of them being different dimensions of the same political orientation.

The explanation of the differences has focused on women putting care first, before their careers and other social engagements. Due to socialization dynamics or their socioeconomic status, compared to men, women seem to find themselves “differently positioned” in their relationship with politics. In terms of civic engagement, Rotolo (2000) has found marriage to be a crucial moment, even amongst those who previously had more egalitarian values. I test this explanation for the case of a “passive political orientation.” Ideally, a panel or pseudo-panel data structure would allow me to test the impact of marrying or having a child, as the usual indicators of family status (Quaranta 2016; Voorpostel and Coffe 2012). However, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for this kind of testing. For this reason, I have used only marital status as the operationalization for having family. The original variable in the questionnaire included over five categories, rendering it difficult to handle statistically. To overcome this inconvenience, the variable has been recoded into three categories: (i) those that have never been married or in a partnership, (ii) those who are currently married or in a stable partnership,
and (iii) those who “have been,” that is, who are divorced or widowed. This strategy focuses on the experience that marriage or an equivalent situation provides in terms of social interconnectedness, comparing them to those who have never experienced it, and those who have experienced it but are no longer in it. Supplementary appendix figure S1 describes the distribution of the variables by country.

Throughout the theoretical framework “caring for others” and “holding values that encourage caring” were frequently mentioned as qualities that clash with those needed to succeed in politics, explaining to some extent the gender gap in women’s political interest (Fox and Lawless 2014). Previous research has focused on self-assessment to operationalize the extent to which individuals hold caring values (Eagly and Wood 2013; Schwartz and Rubel-Lifschitz 2009) but, to the best of my knowledge, an objective indicator has not been used before. Asking respondents whether they help people around them, outside professional activities or altruistic commitments (such as volunteering), provides a way of measuring their commitment to caring as part of their daily lives. Not caring for others is a negatively sanctioned behavior, thus, this wording is a way of bypassing social acceptance and measuring accurately whether individuals uphold “care values.” The variable has been operationalized so that 0 stands for never having offered any care and 1 for having provided care to others. Supplementary appendix figure S2 describes the distribution of respondents by country in terms of having provided care or not.

To capture the impact of gender, care, and marital status in relation to the respondent’s political interest, a triple interactive term has been specified in the final equation. Gender is a binary variable where 0 represents men and 1 represents women. The estimations also include a set of typical control variables (age and education). Age is a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 99. Education has been collapsed into a three-category variable that includes those who have not finished their primary education or are uneducated, those who finished their studies before pursuing a degree, and those who earned some type of degree or pursued advanced vocational training. Education has been used as an indicator for cognitive resources to deal with complex issues (Almond and Verba 1963, 1980; Fligstein 2009).

Finally, the countries included are identified with very different institutional arrangements and values. To control for this source of heterogeneity, given the limitations in the data structure, a hierarchical model is specified.

Findings

To identify under which circumstances the gender gap occurred, figures 1 and 2 show the average levels of each operationalization of political interest for men and women across the countries in the sample (these figures in full
can also be found in Supplementary appendix table S3). These figures confirm the expectation that the question on “general political interest” reveals that every country has a gender gap, but there is room for variance.

Figure 1 shows a consistent gender gap across countries for general political interest, with some variation in the size of the differences. First, there is a substantive cross-country variation in the general level of declared interest in politics. However, there is no clear correlation between the general level and the size of the gender gap. For instance, some countries with generally low levels of interest such as Spain, Portugal, and Romania, are different in the sizes of the gap. Similarly, countries that could be identified as “interested,” like Germany or the Netherlands, show gender differences of about 0.5 (on a scale of 1–4).

Figure 2 shows the average interest in local and national politics by gender. The expectation is that gender-based differences should disappear regarding local politics but remain in national politics. The graph on the left shows that declared levels of interest in local politics do not differ by gender in most countries, except for Romania and Moldova, where it remains around 0.3 points. On the right, the graph shows that levels of declared interest in national politics seem to increase compared to local politics, for both men and women. However, the gender gap persists, and reproduces the trend already depicted in figure 1.
Figures 1 and 2 provide preliminary evidence in favor of hypotheses 1 and 3. However, further tests have been performed to test the hypotheses fully. To robustly test the second and third hypotheses, I estimate a multilevel ordinal logit. The distribution of the variable in four categories that are not strongly skewed allows for this estimation. Countries such as Spain or Romania have their samples’ levels of declared political interest lean toward the non-interested categories, but this does not affect the results. Given the complexity of the fully specified equation, I will also briefly mention intermediate estimations (the full report of these models is found in Supplementary appendix tables S4–S6).

The main expectation of this article is that not every political arena attracts the same degree of interest from men and women. The social embeddedness provided by marriage and caring for those around oneself makes local politics more appealing to women, reducing the gender gap. This is something that does not occur with national politics, where differences amongst married and “caring respondents” are expected to be larger than amongst the other categories.

Before exploring the analyses more deeply, two considerations must be made. It could be argued that the gender gap in local politics is smaller for two reasons: because mainstream media do not talk about this political arena, and therefore, that it is much more difficult to become interested; or because no one, in general, is interested about what happens in town halls.

**Figure 2.** Average declared interest in local and national politics for men and women across countries.
The media has a key role in shaping citizens’ relationship with politics because most political experiences are not direct, but are mediated by what makes the news (Kahn 1994, 154). National media outlets usually focus on national politics and raise topics and introduce actors from the national arena. Local politics seldom receives attention from this media, except for on very specific occasions. It is mostly local or regional media that address these issues, and they are often considered “second-class”; dealing with less important issues. This treatment could be another manifestation of how local politics is considered a less important form of politics. When respondents are asked specifically about it, they declare their interest. When the question is broader, it does not come to mind automatically.

The gender gap regarding local politics could be due to a general lack of interest amongst citizens. The absence of a gender gap would not be due to women being more interested, but men not being interested. A preliminary examination of the evidence does not point this way. Men’s declared levels of interest in local politics seem to be slightly lower than with national issues but not notably as figure 1 in the following section shows. Overall, the average interest score for men is around 2.5 in all three items under consideration. Variation occurs regarding the size of the gap. Be it due to the proximity of the politics and/or because local media can foster interest, citizens seem to have substantively different attitudes toward the various political arenas.

The baseline model was estimated for each of the three dependent variables (interest in politics in general, interest in local politics, and interest in national politics). Marriage and caring were introduced separately at this stage to get a better grasp of their impact on the equation. Figure 3 reports the impact of gender on the probability of choosing each category of the dependent variable (the estimates are also reported in Supplementary appendix table S4). Across the three forms of political interest, being a woman seems to increase the chances of respondents being “not interested at all,” or “not very interested.” In line with expectations, it also represents a decrease in the probabilities of declaring themselves to be “quite” or “very interested” in politics. For instance, women are 8 percent more likely to declare not being interested at all in politics in general. Regarding national politics the percentage is close, at 6 percent. In contrast, regarding local politics, this gap reduces to a 4 percent. Turning to those who declare themselves to be “quite interested,” one of the categories with the largest number of respondents in every country, women are 7 percent less likely than men to declare themselves being interested in politics in general, 5 percent in national politics, and 3 percent in local politics.

Since the expectation is that marital status and “care” produce a different impact on men and women’s political interest, I have specified an interactive term following Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006). The third hypothesis predicts differences between political arenas, thus the following estimates will also be the result of three different equations. The full model specification
includes a triple interactive term combining gender, marital status, and care. Before discussing this, I will briefly cover two intermediate specifications, one with an interactive effect between gender and marital status, and another with gender and care (results are reported in Supplementary appendix figures S3 and S4 and table S5).

The interactive terms between gender and marital status, and gender and providing support for others introduce the role of these variables in the interaction between the three dimensions. In the argument, they are both considered possible sources of political interest, even though their effect on men and women varies. As in the preceding figure, there seems to be a common trend between the categories that respond negatively to the question, and those that respond positively. Being a woman increases the likelihood of responding “not at all” or “not very interested in politics” and decreases the likelihood of declaring being “quite” or “very interested.”

Overall, married women seem the least likely to be interested in politics. Even when the arena is local politics, the gender gap persists. Those who have never been married show the smallest gaps across categories, giving a certain amount of support to the idea that there is some association between being in a stable union or married and orientations toward being political.

In contrast, estimates considering the combined effect of gender and caring show that this variable affects the probability of being interested, but not the size of the gap. Political interest is often considered as one of the main motivations to participate and give voice to political demands. Lower scores of
interest reduce the likelihood of women attempting to put their concerns in the public agenda. However, in terms of care, women do not seem to experience differences in their motivation.

Figure 4 reports the effect of gender on the prediction of being in each category of the dependent variable, conditional on an interactive term that also includes marital status and caring for others. In the theoretical framework I described how women are frequently expected to embrace a more private life (in marriage), which is focused around caring for the family and other social connections. This strategy allows me to test the extent to which this can be a combined source of hindrance to women’s political interest. Results confirm that, controlling for marital status and provision of care, men tend to display higher probabilities than women of being politically interested, with some exceptions. To evaluate the robustness of the results, the equation was also estimated for each country individually. Countries fall predominantly under the same pattern with no relevant deviations.5

The specified equation requires a high amount of statistical efficiency; thus, results are less clear-cut than in previous specifications. Results largely confirm what was observed in the simpler specifications, giving partial support to H2 and confirming H3.

Care does not seem to produce any difference in the size of the gap within the categories of marital status that is statistically significant. Were differences due to care to be significant, this would seem likely produce a decrease in the likelihood of women being in the interested categories—very or quite—and an increase in the likelihood of being in the not interested categories—not at all and not quite. Even amongst those who never married, where differences are at the lowest, the gender gap amongst those who are “not very interested in politics” is 1.7 percentage points for those not providing care and 3.1 amongst those who do provide care.

If marital status is taken as the point of reference for the analyses, the evidence points to stable partnerships as something to explore further. Those who have never been married or in a stable union show the lowest gender gaps across all three forms of political interest.

In terms of their interest in general politics, married and divorced respondents are those least likely to be interested. For instance, the gap amongst married (or in a stable partnership) and caring respondents who provide support for others in the “not caring at all about politics” outcome is seven percentage points. A similar score is obtained from divorced or widowed respondents.

Turning to local politics, estimates show that differences are smaller. In fact, they are so small that they overlap with the reference line drawn at zero on the y axis. This means that differences observed are not statistically significant. In other words, single men and women are not different from one another in terms of their declared interest in politics. Widowers and divorced respondents show very small differences, which are almost non-significant, and errors show that there are probably a small number of respondents in
these categories. Lastly, married respondents do display a gender gap, but the size is smaller than that seen in the preceding and following graphs. The disadvantage is around three percentage points in every outcome: increasing the

Figure 4. Effect of gender on the predicted probability of being in each category of interest. Multilevel ordinal logit with a triple interactive term including gender, marital status, and supporting others.
likelihood for the negative responses (not at all, not very) and decreasing the likelihood of positive responses (quite, very).

The last graph in figure 4 reports the results of the predicted gender gap in political interest. The results, although slightly adjusted, reproduce the trends described when asking about politics in general. Indeed, single men and women show the smallest differences across the four outcomes of the dependent variable. Estimators for divorced or widowed respondents are those with the largest error intervals but they also score the highest, suggesting that these results should be examined with caution. Specifically, amongst divorcees and widowers declaring no interest at all, the gender gap is the largest when they declare not to be caring for others. Amongst this same not-caring divorcees and widowers, the gap in the likelihood of being quite interested in politics decreases eight percentage points. Amongst those who are married and not caring for others, the greatest differences are found in the likelihood of respondents declaring not being interested at all (women have an increased likelihood) and very interested (women have a lower likelihood). The first interpretation of these results is that the large number of variables, and the relationship between them, make it quite hard to interpret. However, some conclusions can be made. The results show a varying but persistent gender gap across the different forms of political interest. Women are more likely to rate their political interest negatively, by declaring themselves to have no or little interest. The only exception would be local politics, and even there, small differences amongst married women persisted. Thus, the civil status of an individual, broadly understood, seems to have some association with his or her political orientations. In contrast, the relationship between the proxy for caring values seem to have some influence amongst respondents but it is not clear that this influence is different for men than for women.

At the beginning of this section it was mentioned that the results had been reproduced individually for each country to check their robustness and identify possible outliers. One of the unexplored avenues of the argument that I proposed is whether the institutional setting within which individuals lived has an impact on the differences in interest observed, in line with existing research on power-sharing institutions, and how they foster more egalitarian participation (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012). Future research with updated evidence for a larger number of countries could test whether countries that are more decentralized manage to induce a greater equality of interest amongst their citizens.

**Concluding Remarks**

Throughout this study I have sought to describe how women’s lower levels of declared political interest masked a more complex story. The gap has been identified in the literature; however, the explanatory mechanism behind it remains under-researched. Progress in education, equality, and incorporation
into the labor market in recent decades has not contributed to the disappearance of this gap, as expected. This research has inquired whether, despite changes in recent decades, politics still need to be feminized.

The literature on the gender gap seems to find a mismatch between existing gender role stereotypes and stereotypes regarding what it takes to comprehensively understand politics (Stolle and Gidengil 2010). Even though women are joining the labor market in increasing numbers, they still put their private life first. In a similar vein, they are expected to put care and cooperation before competitiveness and aggressiveness. These gendered stereotypes are fed to men and women through two main mechanisms, as was mentioned in the theoretical framework: their socioeconomic situation and socialization processes. Women may find themselves without the skills to deal with politics; or they learn social norms that encourage them to drift away from politics. The evidence does not allow us to disentangle the effects of these two processes, which may also be operating in a loop. In any case, the outcome is that women who are married or in a stable partnership, and care for those around them, are those with the lowest likelihoods of being politically interested.

Much has been done in recent decades to make politics more appealing to women, from the introduction of quotas to public agendas that relate more closely to family life and reproductive health issues. However, these issues remain the domain of women and female politicians. Even if they are being discussed in the political arena, they do not seem to truly belong in politics. Only local politics seem to show very slight differences between men and women. The sphere where the “closest social issues” are discussed seems to be the arena that is most appealing to women.

The cross-sectional structure of this dataset does not allow for a meaningful interpretation of how transitions from being single to married affect individuals. Or how other events of the transition to adulthood such as having the first child shape this association. An increase in the availability of comparable panel data studies could help fill this gap in the literature. Political interest remains one of the strongest predictors of political involvement and different forms of political engagement. Better understanding the hindrances faced by a good half of the world’s population may provide strong clues about how gender equality may be improved and perhaps, one day, allow every citizen’s voice to be heard.

**Supplementary data**

Supplementary data are available at SOCPOL online.

**Notes**

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1. Russia was not included in the final analyses because there was some variation across country questionnaires in terms of the variables included. Some of the relevant variables were not included in the Russian questionnaire.

2. The wording of the question is: “In general, how interested in politics are you? Would you say you are very interested, fairly interested, not very interested, or not at all interested?”

3. The wording of the question is: “People’s interest sometimes varies across different areas of politics. How interested are you personally in each of the following areas? (i) Local politics, (ii) National politics.”

4. The literature on transition to adulthood has highlighted: first employment, and forming a family (understood as getting married and having the first child), as crucial events for the development of political orientations (Garcia-Albacete 2014). These variables were included in preliminary estimations of the explanatory equation that is presented in the following section, however, they did not add substantive differences to the results. Rather, they made the analysis more complex. Thus, I have chosen to exclude them from the final estimates.

5. The triple interactive term is statistically demanding, requiring a large amount of observations to be tested. Individual countries are unable to provide sufficient observations, thus, in most countries the results are not statistically significant, but they do follow the pattern observed in the pooled estimation.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank professors Alexander H. Trechsel, Marta Fraile, Mónica Ferrin, Hilde Coffé, Gema García-Albacete, Javier Lorente and two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 5th European Conference of Politics.

Funding

This research has received funding from the EUI Researchers’ Mission Funding and from the GENPOL grant awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (reference CSO2016-75090-R).

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