Summary and Keywords

The burgeoning field of gender and political behavior shows that the way in which ordinary citizens connect to the democratic process is gendered. Gender differences in voting behavior and participation rates persist across democracies. At the same time, countries vary substantially in the size of these gender gaps. In contemporary elections, women tend to support leftist parties more than men in many countries. Although men and women vote at similar rates today, women still trail men in important participatory attitudes and activities such as political interest and discussion. Inequalities in political involvement undermine the quality of deliberation, representation, and legitimacy in the democratic process. A confluence of several interrelated factors (resources, economy, socialization, political context) work together to account for these differences. Today, scholars more carefully consider the socially constructed nature of gender and the ways in which it interacts with other identities. Recent research on gender and political behavior suggests that political context affects different kinds of women in different ways, and future research should continue to investigate these important interactions.

Keywords: gender, women, political participation, voting behavior, political engagement, inequality, gender gap

Introduction

Inequalities in political involvement undermine the quality of deliberation, representation, and legitimacy in the democratic process. After enfranchisement, women traditionally participated less than men in democracies around the world. In recent decades, women have made great strides in voter turnout. However, women continue to report less political involvement across a host of participatory activities and attitudes—from joining political parties to attending demonstrations to political interest to discussion to efficacy. Further, these gender differences persist across a set of industrialized democracies. Gender differences are largest in the attitudes and orientations that lead to active electoral participation. Gender equality in political interest and discussion has the potential to widen the scope of policy demands and even perhaps change the nature of the democratic process.
In the United States, the seminal research of Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001, p. 2) demonstrates that when survey findings are translated into actual activity, even seemingly modest gender gaps accumulate to sizeable differences in total political inputs: “2,000,000 fewer phone calls or letters to public officials from women than men ... 7,000,000 fewer campaign contributions from women than from men ... 9,000,000 fewer women than men affiliated with a political organization.” Importantly, women are least engaged with the stages of the political process when new issues are introduced to the agenda.

The persistence of gender gaps in political involvement yields both empirical and theoretical questions for the field of political behavior. Broadly, we ask here: Under what conditions do different kinds of people most effectively connect to the democratic process? Are men and women’s propensities to participate motivated by different factors? Among women, how do different groups of women vary? Can we expect gender differences to narrow over time? The growing body of research on gender and political behavior does not yield simple answers to these important questions. Although often overlooked in early political behavior research, gender is woven into the fabric of electoral politics in an intricate pattern.

This article focuses on mass-level voting behavior and political participation. We examine three areas of political behavior: political preferences (vote choice, and ideology), political participation (voting, campaign activity, and contentious actions), and political engagement (interest, discussion, persuasion, knowledge, and efficacy). After sketching the contours of gender gaps in political behavior, we explore the contributions of four general sets of explanations for these differences: resources, economic development, gender role socialization, and political context. No single category of explanation offers sufficient leverage to explain these gaps. Instead, it is clear that a confluence of explanatory forces narrow and exacerbate gender gaps over time. Finally, we consider some fruitful avenues for future research. The trajectory of research on gender and political behavior suggests that political context affects different kinds of women in different ways. Our review of research in this subfield shows that we have a great deal of work ahead to unpack these important interactions.

Gender Differences in Political Behavior

The term “gender gap” is commonly used to refer to gender differences in voting preferences and to levels of political participation. Research on voting preferences has identified gender differences in vote choice, partisan attachments, ideology, and political attitudes. For political involvement, the role of gender has been studied across an array of political activities and orientations toward the political process. Rather than a single “gap,” it is more insightful to discuss the dynamics of multiple gender gaps. Taken together, research finds that gender gaps in voting preferences and political involvement share considerable variation over time and across nations, modes of participation, and different groups of women.
Gender and Political Behavior

Early research in political behavior often treated gender as an isolated explanatory variable in a statistical model. Today, scholars more carefully consider the socially constructed nature of gender, taking into account commonly shared perceptions about both men’s and women’s roles in the political arena. Similarly, many studies have also considered race and ethnicity as discrete categories. Importantly, more recent research points out that gender interacts with other individual characteristics and the political context (Burns, 2007). Simply put, women are not a monolithic group: gender intersects with other identities such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socio-economic status in complex ways. Although considering the mutually constitutive nature of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender complicates theories and empirical analyses, Wendy Smooth convincingly argues that it is “a mess worth making” (2006, p. 403). Evelyn Simien cogently notes that “race and gender cannot be reduced to individual attributes to be measured and assessed for their separate contributions in explaining political outcomes, from vote choice to policy preferences” (2006, p. 266). Indeed, only by considering these complexities can we fully understand contemporary political behavior.

While the bulk of previous studies on gender and political behavior focus on the United States, a growing literature compares gender differences across nations. Early cross-national research often compared Western European democracies, and the more recent availability of a wider range of comparative surveys has led to comparative studies of gender and political behavior across a more diverse set of regions. Comparative research offers an ideal design to compare the effects of divergent social, political, legal, and economic contexts on men and women’s engagement with the political process.

Gender and Voting Preferences

After enfranchisement, women were more politically conservative than men in their ideology, party attachment, and vote choice across most democracies (Lipset, 1960). Scholars typically reasoned that women’s higher levels of religiosity encouraged stronger ties to religious and conservative parties. Further, fewer women participated in the paid workforce, and thus they were less likely to join trade unions, the very organizations that historically connected workers to leftist parties.

This “traditional gap” eroded over time, and groups of men and women shifted their voting behavior, yielding new differences. In recent decades “gender differences in electoral behavior have been realigning, with women moving toward the left of men throughout advanced industrial societies (though not in postcommunist societies or developing countries)” (Inglehart & Norris, 2003, p. 441). Recent research bolsters this regional puzzle. Women across Western European countries have increasingly supported leftist parties, while the gender gap in postcommunist countries favors the right (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). Part of the explanation for this realignment lies in declining religiosity cross-nationally. Given that women tend to report higher degrees of religiosity, this secular shift influences vote choice.
This relationship is especially prominent in Western European countries where religion has been historically structured by party systems, with centrist and rightist parties more tightly linked with religious voters (Emmenegger & Manow, 2014). The sea change in women’s entrance into the paid workforce in the post–World War II era may also account for this shift in some countries but does not fully explain the patterns in postcommunist countries. Further, research across Western European countries finds that women are significantly less likely to cast their vote for radical right parties than men (Givens, 2004). Even after controlling for a host of social, economic, and political variables, the gender gap in support for the radical right remains. Although more research is needed to uncover the underpinnings of this relationship, gender differences seem to be rooted in differences over the issue of immigration.

Trends in American elections reflect those found cross-nationally. Figure 1 displays the difference between the proportion of women who voted for the Democratic Party and the proportion of men doing the same in U.S. presidential elections from 1948 to 2008. Positive values signify more women voting for the Democratic Party than men. These data come from survey respondents’ reported vote choice from the American National Election Studies (ANES). Despite the ebb and flow over time, the overall pattern clearly shows that women are more supportive of the Democratic Party over time. For example, the 1960 ANES found that the difference was 8 percentage points in favor of men casting more votes for the Democratic Party. By contrast, in 2012 that very gap had reversed, with more women than men voting for the Democratic Party. In the United States, important recent research attributes the gender gap in choice to the movement of men toward the Republican Party (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, & Lin, 2004; Kaufmann & Petrocik, 1999). While both white men and women have shifted their support in a conservative direction, the movement has been stronger among men.

Figure 1. Gender differences in voting preferences in American elections, 1948–2012.

Source: Data from American National Election Study, Cumulative File.
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These differences among men and women vary across racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Among Latinos, women are more likely to hold liberal ideology and to support the Democratic Party than their male counterparts, and this gender gap is especially pronounced among younger Latinos (Bejarano, 2014). Among African Americans, support for the Democratic Party is strong among men and women alike, and so gender differences in voting behavior are minimal. Comparison among groups of women illuminates some important patterns. Smooth (2006) points out that Democratic support among Latinas and black women account for much of the total gender gap. Despite the importance of Latina and black support, the news media most often relies on stories about white suburban “soccer moms” to account for the gender gap.

Some studies link gender gaps in partisan support to gender gaps in political attitudes. Studies of Western Europe, Canada, and Australia since the 1980s consistently find that women are more leftist in their issue preferences and, specifically, more supportive of feminist values, welfare state, and social spending and less supportive of market-based solutions than men (Gidengil, Blais, Nadeau, & Nevitte, 2001; Jelen, Thomas, & Wilcox, 1994; Studlar, McAllister, & Hayes, 1998). The salience of particular issues in any given election can shape fluctuations in the gender gap in the vote across elections. Men and women prioritize different issues, and feminist values and social spending appear to be more important to women in the American electorate (Kaufmann & Petrocik, 1999). For instance, elections that highlight social welfare issues may yield larger gender gaps in vote outcomes. In addition to salience, men and women often react differently to policy shifts. When government spending rises, both men and women’s attitudes become more conservative—men’s more rapidly than women’s (Kellstedt, Peterson, & Ramirez, 2010).

Gender and Political Involvement

Do women participate in politics at similar levels to men? Research shows that sweeping generalizations are often inaccurate. Instead, the answer instead depends on the decade, country, type of participation, and subsets of women under consideration. Therefore, we map patterns in the gender gap across types of participation, beginning with the most pervasive forms of electoral participation and moving on to newer forms of protest participation and then to the participatory attitudes and activities that encourage engaged participation.

Gender and Voting Turnout

In the decades after enfranchisement, women’s voting participation trailed that of men. First identified in American politics, the gender gap in favor of men was supported by comparative research. For all seven countries in their cross-national study in the 1970s, Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) found that men voted at higher rates than women. Yet recent decades ushered in more equal rates of voter participation. Among whites, blacks, and Latinos alike, women have voted at higher rates in the last eight presidential elections. In U.S. presidential elections, women have outvoted men. In the 2012 presidential election,
the proportion of eligible women voting was 63.7% and the proportion of men 59.8% (Center for American Women and Politics, 2014). And comparative research offers support for this trend as well. Across several European democracies in the 1980s, women were voting at similar rates to men (Christy, 1987).

In contemporary elections, we observe only small gender gaps in voter turnout. Figure 2 presents gender differences in voter participation across 16 countries. Differences are found by subtracting the percentage of men who cast a ballot from the percentage of women. Thus, negative values signify more men casting a ballot in a given election. For 11 of the 16 countries in the figure, men still turn out to vote at higher rates in recent elections. Yet countries vary in the size of the gap. For example, in Germany the gender gap reaches nearly 8 percentage points in favor of men’s turnout. At the same time, in the United States the gap is 3 percentage points in favor of women’s voter participation.

![Figure 2. Gender differences in voter participation across nations.](image)

Figure 2. Gender differences in voter participation across nations.


More egalitarian levels of voter turnout in recent decades can be attributed to greater equality in some of the factors that encourage voting for men and women alike. Relative to the past, many societies today witness greater gender equality in education and workforce participation. It is important to note that women have not yet achieved full equality in these areas. Further, voting is a unique political activity because it is pervasive and, among different modes of participation, requires the fewest resources such as time, information, and civic skills.

**The Gender Gap and Other Electoral Activities**

Although women’s voter turnout has caught up to men’s in recent decades, women’s participation in other forms of electoral activity continue to trail. Even in recent years Burns, Scholzman, and Verba (2001) find that U.S. women are consistently less likely to partici-
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partake in many activities in American politics—including making campaign contributions, joining political organizations, and writing letters to elected representatives.

Patterns from the United States hold up in comparative perspective: men remain significantly more likely than women to have contacted a politician, joined a political party, or attended a political meeting. Across 18 industrialized democracies, “controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, women’s odds of participation in political parties are 32.8% less than men’s …” (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010). Recent research shows that in nearly all of the 31 democracies in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), men continue to outpace women in persuading others, working on campaigns, and contacting public officials (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012). At the same time, however, substantial variation exists across democracies.

The bulk of the literature on gender and political behavior focuses on the United States, and most of the cross-national research is limited to Western, industrialized nations. Recently, however, important research has considered the gendered nature of political participation in other regions of the world. Across Latin America, men’s participation in both electoral and protest participation is noticeably higher than women’s (Desposato & Norrander, 2009). Similarly, across sub-Saharan Africa, Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010) find that women are less likely than men to contact a politician or participate in collective actions.

Only recently has research begun to compare levels of political participation across different types of women. In the United States, black men and women participate at similar rates. Among women, Brown (2014) finds that across forms of electoral participation, white and Asian women record higher levels than Latina or black women.

One of the most prominent sets of explanations for gender gaps in participation emphasizes individual-level factors, such as women’s lower levels of the sorts of resources that enable political participation. Women simply have fewer resources, relative to men, and resources are crucial predictors of engagement. Women average lower levels of education, income, occupational prestige, civic skills, and ties with mobilizing groups such as trade unions (Norris, 2002; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Importantly, gaps in political participation stem “much less from gender differences in the way that participatory factors are converted into activity than from gender differences in the levels of participatory factors, and not from a big difference in a single factor, but from the accumulated effects of deficits in a variety of factors” (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, p. 38).

Another set of explanations for gender gaps rests upon socioeconomic development. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2003) argue that perceptions of appropriate roles for women and men in politics are shaped by broader patterns of societal values and priorities, which in turn rest on economic development and religious traditions. More economically developed and secular countries are associated with more egalitarian gender attitudes. Given the speed of secularization in Europe and other democracies since the 1970s, religion may play a smaller role in structuring traditional gendered patterns.
among contemporary electorates. With fewer women tied to traditional social roles, the political arena has opened up to women’s participation in politics.

The structure of the economy may influence gender and political behavior in a variety of ways. In addition to shaping values and attitudes, economic growth has also been considerably gendered. As more women have entered paid employment, they have often found themselves in particular sectors of the job market, often the types of occupations that are undervalued and underpaid. In this way, the gendered nature of paid employment continues to shape the distribution of resources. In a different fashion, Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006) highlight the role of the welfare state in influencing men’s and women’s connections to the political landscape. Because public sector employment offers opportunities for women’s paid employment, countries with a larger public sphere see strong support from women for leftist parties.

Group ties can encourage political participation. Shared gender identities or common “women’s interests” may bolster women’s participation. However, we have noted that gender is only one identity among many. Instead, among groups of women, shared interests may hold greater potential for mobilization. Given the historic importance of the civil rights movement, collective consciousness may be especially important among black women. Brown’s (2014) research shows that a psychological sense of collective group consciousness has the strongest impact among African American women, relative to other groups of women.

Nonelectoral Participation

Since the 1960s, citizens have increasingly participated in new forms of political activity. Whether categorized as “protest” or “unconventional” participation, these new activities are less electoral or partisan in nature and more focused on single issues. Examples of these protest activities include signing a petition, attending a demonstration, or boycotting a product. Following the complex patterns found in electoral participation, we cannot make blanket statements about gender differences in protest participation. Instead, gender differences vary across different forms of protest participation.

In the United States, women and men are equally likely to attend a protest or sign a petition (Burns, Scholzman, & Verba, 2001). And among these women, protest participation is higher among white and Asian American women (Brown, 2014). Across 18 industrialized democracies, women are more likely to sign a petition or raise money for a social or political group but less likely to join a demonstration (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010). Political consumerism, a set of political activities including buying or boycotting products or services for political or ethical reasons, is on the rise across most democracies. The pioneering work of Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti (2005) reveals that women are more likely to engage in political consumer activities than men.

Gender equality may be stronger for some forms of nonelectoral participation because some of these activities (especially political consumerism) transcend the artificial boundaries between what is considered “political” and “personal.” Historically, women were ex-
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cluded from voting and more recently have experienced subtle (and not-so-subtle) signals that party politics is an arena for men, not women. Given the traditional gendered division of labor, women often spent more time caring for their families than men. In the past, women did more shopping than men, and buying or boycotting a particular product for ethical reasons is a natural extension of careful consumer activity. In fact, it is possible that some citizens do not perceive boycotting as a political act, in the traditional sense. Further, nonelectoral activity may be more gender egalitarian because of the close connections between protest movements in general and the feminist movement since the 1970s. The women’s movement often relied on activities such as signing petitions and attending demonstrations. It is likely that women’s initial involvement in the women’s movement has translated into greater activity in these forms of participation for other issues.

Gender and Political Engagement

Engagement with the political process is one the most direct and important factors in predicting participation. For instance, working on a campaign normally requires certain prerequisites such as being interested in politics, seeking out information on candidate and party policy positions, attending meetings, and making contacts with a campaign organization. Since the 1970s, studies of political behavior show that men are more interested in politics and more frequently discuss politics, tune into public affairs programs on television, read newspapers, and report reading stories about political events (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978).

Gender gaps in political engagement persist today and are found across democracies. Although there is variation across countries, into the 2000s for nearly all 31 countries surveyed, men reported greater political interest, discussion, political knowledge, and attention to news about politics (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012). And these gaps are statistically significant in most instances. At the same time, gender gaps vary across countries. For example, the gender gap in political knowledge is 20 percentage points in Poland and 11 percentage points in the United States. Further, gender gaps in political engagement are not limited to the United States or Western Europe. Across Latin America, statistically significant gender gaps emerge for following political news, talking about politics with friends, and trying to convince others of one’s political opinion (Desposato & Norrander, 2009).

Men also register higher political knowledge scores across democracies, including the United States and Britain (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997; Dow, 2009; Frazer & Macdonald, 2003). During the 1996 American election, men averaged nearly 10 percentage points higher in their correct responses on political knowledge scales (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000, p. 27). Similarly, responses to a question about Britain’s electoral rules elicited correct responses from 83% of men and only 73% of women, excluding those who responded “don’t know” (Frazer & Macdonald, 2003, p. 71).
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Importantly, the types of knowledge questions posed can affect whether or not a gender gap emerges. For standard factual items, such as government structures and party politics, gender gaps in political knowledge are exacerbated. However, gender gaps narrow for questions that are related to gender or more practical types of political knowledge questions, including suffrage, abortion rights and program benefits, and health-related questions (Delli Karpini & Keeter, 1997, Dolan, 2011; Norris, 1999; Stolle & Gidengil, 2010).

In addition to actual political knowledge scores, there are gender differences in perceptions of political knowledge. In a study of social networks of political discussion partners, Mendez and Osborn (2010) found that both men and women perceive women to be less politically knowledgeable than men, without regard to actual levels of knowledge. Given that political knowledge is often regarded as a prerequisite for political discussion and other forms of political involvement, perceptions of women’s political knowledge may inhibit subsequent political activity.

Similar to participation, resource-based explanations have been offered for gender gaps in engagement. However, these resource explanations find less traction in this area than when explaining electoral forms of participation. On the one hand, resources may be connected to gender differences in political knowledge. In the context of U.S. politics, Dow (2009) finds that the gender gap in political knowledge is largely the product of disparities in education and group membership. Higher levels of education disproportionately increase men’s political knowledge relative to women, enlarging the gap. On the other hand, some research finds that after controlling for partisanship and socio-economic status, gender differences in political knowledge and psychological engagement remain (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997, p. 205).

The inability of individual-level factors to fully account for gender differences in the participatory attitudes and activities that lead to full political engagement has led scholars to consider the ways that social, economic, and legal change have altered gender differences in political involvement. Socialization of traditional gender roles may discourage women from participating in politics. Examining gender differences in political knowledge, Delli Carpini and Keeter (2000) theorize that women’s psychological connections to the political arena may be weaker due to “the legacy of de jure gender discrimination and attendant societal views of the ‘proper’ (i.e., nonpolitical) role of women” (p. 32). However, measuring the impact of gender role socialization on political activity at the individual level has proved difficult.

Even as women’s levels of education and workforce participation have increased, gender differences in political engagement stubbornly endure in most countries. Socialization processes may work differently across political systems. Nancy Burns (2007) points out that the social and political context can make gender more or less relevant. The salience of particular issues or policies may highlight gender inequalities in a given election. In addition, policy changes can mobilize certain groups around gender issues.
One of the most promising contextual influences has been the presence of women in politics at the elite level. The very presence of women in elected office may have a transformative influence on women and men, altering shared perceptions about the appropriate role of women in the political arena. In studies of the United States, there are mixed findings linking the presence of women in elected office to mass-level participation. Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) and Atkeson and Carrillo (2007) suggest that women who live in U.S. states with women elected to visible political offices are significantly more likely to be politically informed, interested, and efficacious than similarly situated men. Sapiro and Conover (1997) find that women residing in districts with women candidates are more politically engaged than women residing in districts without. However, other studies of American politics offer contradictory findings. Dolan (2006) controls for party congruence among representative and constituent and finds little support for women in office bolstering women’s efficacy or political activity. These contradictory findings may be explained by the fact that only particular forms of descriptive representation heighten women’s participation. Having women in highly visible elected positions appears to be a crucial mechanism in linking the effects of women in office to increased political activity and more positive attitudes toward politics (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Highly visible offices are covered more often in the news media and signify power. In the United States, Atkeson (2003) finds women candidates must be both competitive and visible to affect women’s political efficacy, discussion, and knowledge.

Similarly, comparative studies of the links between women in office and mass participation offer contradictory results. Within Latin America, the gender gap in political participation narrows in countries where women have a greater share of seats in parliament (Desposato & Norrander, 2009). Across a set of European nations, Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) find descriptive representation narrows gender differences in political participation. Drawing on a cross-national survey of adolescents, differences in intentions to participate between girls and boys decline in countries with more women in office. The findings suggest a socialization effect in which women politicians serve as role models, inspiring young women to become active in politics. In contrast, other cross-national studies find little relationship between women in office and increased political involvement (Karp and Banducci, 2008; Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012).

Others have hypothesized that gender quotas, as symbolic policies, may reshape attitudes and orientations toward women’s roles in politics (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005). However, there has been little empirical support for this expectation. Across Latin America, Zetterberg (2009) finds that gender quota policies have little association with women’s political involvement. Similarly, Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2012) uncover only limited support for the effects of quota policies across a set of democracies in the areas of political interest, persuading others, and campaign work. Case studies examining the effects of gender quotas over time do not record a boost in women’s participation rates after the adoption of quotas. For example, Uruguay adopted gender quotas in 2009. Comparison of survey data before (2008) and after (2010) the passage of the quota policy reveals largely static levels of political interest, knowledge and participation among men and women. Yet the impact of quota policies on participation rates may take some time to be observed.
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The effects of quota policies for mass political behavior may be positive, or perhaps even negative. On the one hand, gender quotas may have their strongest influence on young men and women, and we may witness greater equality in future participation rates. Further, it is possible that there is limited public knowledge about these quota policies. On the other hand, gender quota policies may encourage a backlash against women in politics. Quotas may be seen as allowing unqualified women to enter politics, reifying traditional stereotypes surrounding the suitability of men for elected office and for political engagement more generally.

Contextual influence includes more than the economy and women's numerical representation. Important research has recently examined the ways electoral institutions and party systems influence political behavior (Dalton & Anderson, 2011). Indeed, political institutions and party systems may also condition gender gaps in political involvement. Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2012) find that inclusive electoral institutions that produce more proportional electoral outcomes narrow gender differences in mass political engagement. Examining an array of political activities and orientations across 31 democracies, they find proportionality heightens women's participation even more than men's by incentivizing parties to reach out to a variety of social groups. Indeed, electoral rules originally designed to promote social inclusion at the elite level also promote inclusion among the electorate.

Conclusions

Importantly, the burgeoning field of gender and political behavior shows that the way that ordinary citizens connect to the democratic process is gendered. On average, relative to men, women prefer different parties, are less engaged and less active in politics, and participate in different ways. Overall, voting is the mode of participation that yields the most gender equality. Casting a ballot is the most ubiquitous form of participation and carries the least amount of policy-specific input. Far fewer citizens engage in campaign work, donate to a party or candidate, or engage in other forms of electoral participation. These forms of participation also require more political resources, information, skills, and time. Gender differences in other forms of electoral participation mean that party and elected officials hear less from women in the electorate.

Measuring the scope of gender gaps in political preferences and political activity has proven easier than explaining the forces behind these dynamic gaps. Established explanations tend to fall within four categories: 1) women's lower levels of resources; 2) economic development and the welfare state; 3) socialization of gender roles; and 4) political context. To date, no single explanatory factor accounts for gender gaps across all types of participation, nor across different types of women. Certainly these sets of explanation are interrelated and likely interact in complex (and to date largely untested) ways.

Recent research in the context of American elections may offer some lessons for cross-national research. First, studies in the United States simultaneously examine patterns of men’s and women’s voting behavior (Kaufmann & Petrocik, 1999; Norrander, 1999). In
contrast, much of the cross-national research focuses on explaining movement in women’s voting preferences with explanations such as women’s entrance into the workforce, divorce rates, and secularization. Gender is not synonymous with women, and we must account for shifts in men’s voting patterns as well.

New research also highlights that gender interacts with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Following Hancock (2007), future research in political behavior should account for multiple identities. These interactions are important not only for predicting political preferences but also for understanding how and why citizens engage with the democratic process in the first place. Studying these interactions is another important area of research because it helps us understand who has voice and the causal factors affecting these patterns. Research in the American context has begun to consider patterns among different types of women. Comparative research should follow suit by unpacking the relationships among gender, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. If we are to understand how parties can connect with subsets of women and men, then we must compare these relationships across a variety of party systems.

Individual-level, resource-based explanations for gender gaps in political involvement implicitly place the burden of equal participation on women themselves. The implications are that if—over time—women gain more resources, more education, more free time, and higher incomes, then women’s political involvement will catch up to men’s. In contrast, more recent contextual explanations offer an alternative perspective. Political institutions are not neutral but rather privilege some groups over others. To gain a rich understanding of contemporary political behavior, we must account for the contexts that hinder or bolster the political engagement of different types of people.

The role of political parties in shaping gender differences in political involvement may be an important avenue for future research. Parties decide whether or not to mobilize on the basis of gender. In this way, the gender gaps observed in political preferences may connect with gender gaps in political involvement. When and where political parties mobilize on the basis of gender or reach out to women as a potential bloc of voters, new issues may be prioritized in the political process. The very social and economic inequalities that are often cited as explanations for gender differences in participation are also sources of women’s perspectives and interests in the political process. By highlighting specific interests and policy issues, parties may mobilize particular groups of women, drawing them into the political process.

Theories of gender and political behavior have evolved in recent years. As a discipline, we have come a long way since the early days of entering a dichotomous explanatory variable to “control for” gender, or for race or ethnicity, in that regard. Recent research highlights the rich diversity among women and reminds us that gender itself is a contested and dynamic concept. Future research on gender and political behavior must include more theorizing about complex interactions and a wide variety of methodological approaches to examine these relationships.
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