EFFECTS WITHOUT CAUSES: EXPLAINING ENDURING GENDER GAPS IN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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This study examines the gender gaps in political interest and self-confidence in Canada using data from the 1965 to 2006 Canada Election Studies.

Introduction

- Women’s lives have changed dramatically since 1965: women have met and exceeded men’s educational attainment in Canada (Statistics Canada 2006).
- Women’s labor force participation has increased 16 percentage points between 1976 and 2006 (Statistics Canada 2006).
- Canada has better relative pay equity compared to other post-industrial democracies (Hauserman, Tyson and Zahidi 2008).
- Conventional wisdom suggests that as women’s socioeconomic status increased and the gender gaps in education attainment and income began to close, political gender gaps would also begin to close.
- However, women remain less interested in politics and less confident in their own political abilities when compared to their male peers.
- That these gender gaps in political behavior persist in the face of such significant changes in women’s lives presents political scientists with a perplexing puzzle.

Documenting the Gaps

- The proportion of women who report being “very interested” in politics is compared to the proportion of men who report the same high level of political interest.
- Figure 1 documents the gender gap in political interest over time.

Decomposing the Gaps (continued)

- Two different forms of the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition are used.
- Political interest is a continuous variable scaled from 0 to 1. The decomposition is estimated using OLS.
- Figure 2 shows that the gender gap in both measures of political engagement has changed little over time.
- The proportion of women who reject the idea that politics is “too complicated” for a person like them to understand is compared to the proportion of men who also reject this idea.
- In 1965, women were 15 percentage points less likely than men to reject the idea that politics is too complicated to understand. In 2004, women remained 15 percentage points less likely than men to reject this idea.

Findings

- There is a 33% gap in women’s and men’s political self-confidence.
- The logit model only estimates the ‘explained’ portion of the gap, and no interaction is calculated.
- Independent variables included in the full model are age, age squared, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, the 1980s cohort, high school education or less, university degree, low income (salary), high income (salary), employment status, occupational status, marital status, number of children present, a double day measure (kids*employ), and religiosity.

Conclusion

- Past research on gender gaps in political behavior focuses on finding retiree/pushout conditions that will narrow or eliminate the gender gaps.
- The results of this study show that this emphasis is misplaced.
- Avenues for future research include an examination of how the gains Canadian women made since 1965 are being offset by countervailing factors.

Literature cited