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The Gender Gap in Political Knowledge

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THE GENDER GAP IN POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

*By Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter**

Signs of the growing presence of women in politics are all around us. As of this writing six women have won nomination for U. S. Senate seats, with another eight Senate primary races featuring women candidates. Record numbers of women have recently contested and won other state and local offices. Voter turnout among women now exceeds that of men in presidential elections, and the gap is widening. The increasing number of

than men, feel less efficacious about their participation, and engage in fewer types of political participation beyond voting (though the definition of "political" in this context is controversial). As a consequence, men are better informed than women about a variety of political topics. This relative lack of political information, we argue, has muted the force of women's voices in the making of public policy in the United States.

edge questions covering a broad range of political topics (institutions and processes, public figures, political parties, and substantive issues). On only 4 of the 51 items did a larger percentage of women than men correctly answer the question, and on no question was the net advantage for women greater than 2%. On 2 questions men and women were tied. Men did better than women on the other 45, with the net advantage ranging from 1% to 29%. Table

Table 1
Gender Differences in Knowledge of National Politics
1989 National Survey
(percent correct)

	Men	Women	% Men minus % Women
Percent vote required for veto override	50%	21%	29
Did U.S. support Contras?	80	60	20
Describe recent arms agreement	57	39	18
What are the first 10 Amendments called?	53	39	14
Who reviews constitutionality of laws?	72	60	12
Name Vice President	79	69	10
Party in control of House	73	64	9
FDR's party	67	59	8
Party in control of Senate	58	52	6
Who appoints judges?	60	56	4

Source: 1989 national survey designed by the authors and conducted by the VCU Survey Research Laboratory.

women in politically-relevant professions such as law portends even greater participation as candidates, officeholders, and activists. At the same time, the increasing differentiation of women from men in many of their political views and preferences, reflected in the "gender gap" in partisanship, voting, and attitudes on a host of public issues, sets the stage for the emergence of women in American national politics.

Despite these indicators of their growing political power, women as a group continue to be less interested in politics

Gender Differences In Knowledge of National Politics

We draw on two national surveys for much of our discussion: a telephone survey of 610 adults, designed by the authors and conducted in 1989 by the Survey Research Laboratory of Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU); and the 1988 National Election study (NES), conducted through in-person interviews with 1775 respondents by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan.¹ The VCU survey included 51 knowl-

1 presents the 10 items that proved to be the most valid and reliable measures of general political knowledge. The mean advantage for men across all 51 items was 9.8%.

The 17 knowledge items included on the 1988 NES survey showed even greater gender differences (Table 2). All 17 items had net male advantages in the percentage answering correctly, with a mean difference of 17.1%. On only 1 of the items was the difference less than 10%.

In both surveys, the median score for men (27 in the VCU survey and 13 in the NES survey) was located at approximately the 75th percentile for women, while the women's median (21 and 9, respectively)

to earn more, even in comparable jobs. Child care and household responsibilities often restrict the career progress of women and limit the time and energy available for following and engaging in politics. Among

In fact, some of the gender differences do diminish, but most of the gap remains. For example, if you compare the survey results for college graduates with the total results, you find college gradu-

Table 2
Gender Differences in Knowledge of National Politics
1988 National Election Study
 (percent correct)

	Men	Women	% Men minus % Women
Identify Yasser Arafat	55%	23%	32
Identify George Schultz	53	28	25
Interviewer rating of respondent's information level (% above average)	50	30	20
Which party controls U.S. House?	71	51	20
Which party controls U.S. Senate?	65	46	19
Parties' positions on defense spending	68	49	19
Identify Mikhail Gorbachev	82	63	19
Parties' positions on government guarantee of jobs	57	38	19
Ideological placement of the candidates	66	48	18
Parties' positions on health insurance	54	37	17
Parties' positions on government spending	60	45	15
Ideological placement of the parties	63	48	15
Identify Jim Wright	22	8	14
Identify Ted Kennedy	77	63	14
Identify Margaret Thatcher	67	55	12
Name one House candidate and his/her party	34	24	10
Identify William Rehnquist	5	3	2

Source: 1988 National Election Study conducted by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center.

was at the 25th percentile for men. Stated another way, approximately half of the men in both surveys had higher scores than three-fourths of the women.

Explanations for the Knowledge Gap

One plausible explanation for gender differences in political knowledge is the persistence of social and economic differences between the sexes. Men are still more likely than women to work outside the home, to work in jobs that increase one's political interest and efficacy, and

older cohorts, women also have lower levels of formal education. All of these factors should contribute to the gender gap in political knowledge, since each of them individually is correlated with attitudes (for example, efficacy or interest in politics) and behaviors (such as reading the news or discussing politics) known to increase political knowledge. Thus if we compared women and men with similar levels of income, education, and employment status, we would expect the gender differences in knowledge to diminish or disappear.

ates knowing more than the sample average, as one would expect. Perhaps one wouldn't expect, though, that the overall knowledge index gap of 3.2 correct responses shrunk only .8 for college graduates. Even among the most educated, men maintain a lead of 2.4 correct answers.

This analysis suggests that the changing socioeconomic and political status of women over the past half-century has had only a modest impact on their level of political knowledge. Indeed, an examination of aggregate trends provides little evidence that the knowledge gap has de-

clined significantly over the past 40 years. For example, the difference in the percentage of men and women able to state correctly which party had a majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives remained unchanged from 1947 to 1988 (Figure 1). Similarly, a comparison of eight items from Gallup surveys conducted in the 1940s and 1950s with identical questions asked on our 1989 survey finds that gender differences were a little larger on three items, unchanged on one, and a little smaller on the other four (Table 3). And, based on average scores on the 1988 NES index, the knowledge gap is actually a little *larger* for younger respondents than for older ones.

Why has the knowledge gap proven so intransigent? In pre-suffrage America both the custom and the law held that the “public sphere” of higher education, the work place, and politics was the province of men, while the “private sphere” of the home and family was the province of women. It is easy to forget that most of today’s adults were raised by parents who were at most one generation removed from this pre-suffrage era. The majority of households in the 1940s, 1950s, and even the 1960s were headed by a father who was engaged in the public world and a mother who was not, a vision of the nuclear family reinforced in the popular culture of the day. Thus, even in the best of circumstances today’s adult received mixed messages about the “proper” role of men and women.

Even though few Americans today are willing to express the opinion that “a woman’s place is in the home,” approximately 20 percent of both women and men express less than complete support for gender equality in politics.² A more unobtrusive measure of society’s lack of consensus on women’s roles was the reaction to Hillary Clinton’s remark that she was “no Tammy Wynette standing by her man,” and to her tongue-in-cheek suggestion that she could have “stayed home and baked cookies” rather than become a lawyer and political activist. Furthermore, some attitudes and behavior that decrease the likelihood of women becoming en-

gaged in politics are mostly inaccessible to standard survey items. Despite changes in childhood socialization (from the establishment of coed “little leagues” to the reduction of gender stereotypes in grammar-school readers) and the growing number of public role models (from Sally Ride to Ann Richards), girls continue to be socialized to roles and behaviors that are less compatible with many forms of political involvement. At the same time, boys are raised to think, act, and interact in ways that advantage them in the political world as it is currently constituted.³

We believe that all of these factors combine to make entering the public sphere more difficult for women, and for those who do, to lessen their sense of political efficacy. This, in turn, makes it less likely that women will be as politically engaged—and thus as politically informed—as men.

Despite this rather pessimistic conclusion, we have evidence that there are limits to the effects of socialization and the pre-suffrage legacy. In certain issues of special urgency, such as abortion, the gender gap in knowledge is nearly nonexistent. In our 1989 national survey, the gender gap on a question asking whether states can currently prohibit abortion was a modest 4 points. And in a 1989 gubernatorial election survey in Virginia, women and men are equally likely to know the abortion policies of the two candidates. In addition, while women are significantly less informed than men about national politics, evidence from two community surveys we conducted suggests that this is not the case concerning local politics, a public sphere where women have historically had greater access, and one that more directly addresses issues emerging from the “private” spheres of family, schooling, and home.

Do Gender Differences in Political Knowledge Matter?

The significance of the gender gap in political knowledge depends in part on the assumption that informed citizens, regardless of their gender, are better, more

effective citizens. A growing body of evidence supports this common-sense assumption. One scholar reviewing the research recently wrote that informed citizens are “more resistant to persuasive appeals...less susceptible to agenda setting and priming by the media...more easily persuaded by reasoned argument and less easily by mere symbolic display.”⁴ Research also suggests that better informed voters have opinions that are more consistent and stable, and are better able to discern what Tocqueville described as their “self-interest properly understood.”

We have found that political knowledge also increases the consistency between voters’ attitudes and their vote choice. For example, among all respondents to the 1988 NES survey, self-professed liberals (advocates of abortion rights, and those who favored increased federal spending on public schools, child care, the elderly, and the homeless) were a little more likely than other citizens to vote for Michael Dukakis. However, the relationship between these attitudes and the vote choice was much stronger for better informed people than for the less informed. This finding suggests that women’s relative lack of information diluted at least some of the influence that their increased turnout during the 1980s might have made possible. Perhaps the surge in the number of women candidates and the emergence of women’s issues in 1992, deemed “The Year of the Woman” by some, are both a sign of growing political engagement by women voters and a catalyst for closing the gap in political knowledge.

Endnotes

*This research was recently presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Names of the authors are listed alphabetically. Several of the surveys reported here were supported by grants from Virginia Commonwealth University and Barnard College.

¹ For evidence regarding participation, see Sidney Verba, “Women in American Politics,” *Women, Politics, and Change*, in Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin, eds. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990). The gender

gap in interest is examined by Linda L. M. Bennett and Stephen Earl Bennett, "Enduring Gender Differences in Political Interest: The Impact of Socialization and Political Dispositions," *American Politics Quarterly*, Volume 17, January 1989, pp. 105-122. The way in which political science has defined political participation has been criticized by Susan Bourque and Jean Grossholtz, "Politics an Unnatural Practice: Political Science Looks at Female Participation," which appeared in *Women and the Public Sphere: A Critique of Sociology and Politics*, Janet Siltanen and

Michelle Stanworth, eds. (London: Hutchinson, 1984).

² The VCU survey is described in Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, "Stability and Change in the U.S. Public's Knowledge of Politics," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 55, 1991, pp. 583-612. The NES data were made available by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

³ Stephen Earl Bennett and Linda L. M. Bennett, "From Traditional to Modern Conceptions of Gender Equality in Politics:

Gradual Change and Lingering Doubts," *Western Political Quarterly*, Volume 45, 1992, pp. 93-111.

⁴ See, for example, Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1990); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁵ Robert C. Luskin, "Explaining Political Sophistication," *Political Behavior*, Volume 12, 1990, pp. 331-361.

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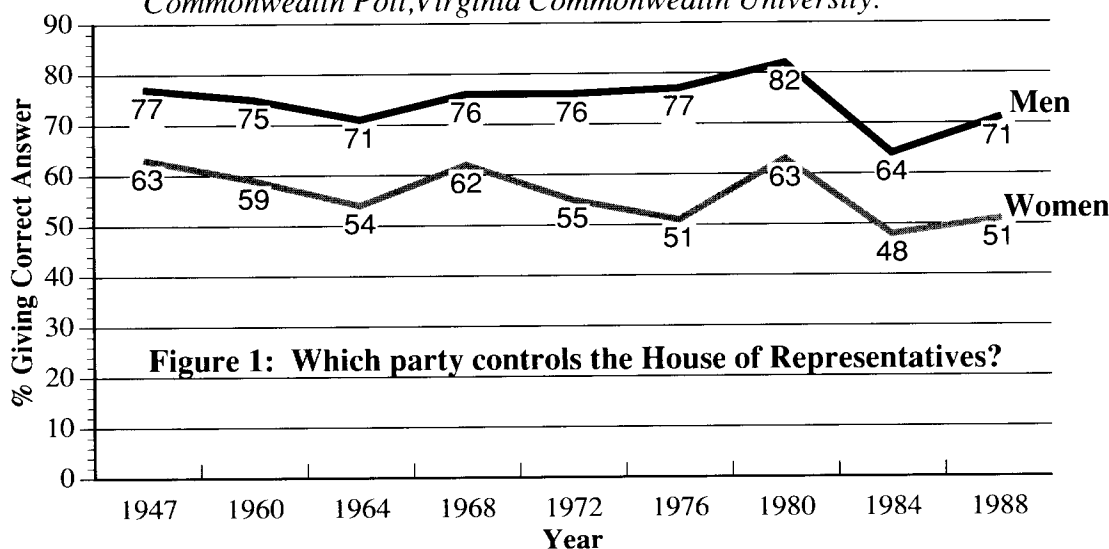


Figure 1: Which party controls the House of Representatives?

**Table 3
Gender Differences in Political Knowledge
Same Question Responses, Gallup Polls of the 1940s and 1950s, and the
1989 National Survey**

	Gallup Surveys			1989 Political Knowledge Survey		
	Men	Women	%M-%W	Men	Women	%M-%W
First 10 Amendments are called "Bill of Rights" (1954)	34%	27%	7	53%	39%	14
Named both U.S. Senators (1954)	37	20	17	31	19	12
2/3 vote required to override presidential veto (1947)	54	33	21	50	21	29
What is a presidential veto? (1947)	86	74	12	94	85	9
Name the Vice President (1952)	71	66	5	79	69	10
Length of President's term (1952)	94	91	3	96	95	1
Name your U.S. Representative (1947)	49	36	13	31	27	4
What does Fifth Amendment mean to you? (1957)	50	35	15	56	46	10

Sources: Gallup surveys provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research: USAIPO 52-0491; USAIPO 47-0401; USAIPO 47-0392; USAIPO 57-0581; USAIPO 47-0396; USAIPO 54-0526. For 1989, the national survey of political knowledge designed by the authors and conducted by the VCU Survey Research Laboratory.