Politics and Gender:

Perceptions, Participation, and School Environments

XXXXXXX

Introduction

Though a great deal of literature exists surrounding voter's perceptions of women in politics, how gender affects political engagement, and civic education's effect on civic participation, research relating these fields is scarce. Studies presented in this paper show that these fields have significant effects on political participation; they find that gender stereotypes affect how voters perceive political leaders, that there is a gap between young women who intend to participate in politics and adult women who do not, and that a person's level of education and participation in school can impact their participation in politics later in life. These studies lead to the questions of how young women internalize gender stereotypes in their school environments, particularly with regard to leadership roles, and whether such experiences cause young women to shy away from engaging in politics as adults.

Perceptions of Women as Political Leaders

There is a wealth of literature regarding voters' perceptions of women in politics. The results show that a candidate's gender affects how voters perceive them. Huddy and Terkildsen's 1993 study and Sanbonmatsu's 2002 study found that gender stereotypes played a role in voters' choices and preferences for male or female candidates. Interestingly, Sanbonmatsu's study cites negative stereotypes about women and positive stereotypes about men as reasons why voters would prefer male candidates over female candidates—yet it does not cite negative stereotypes about men to explain why voters would prefer female candidates over male candidates. (Sanbonmatsu, 2002, 31) Huddy and Terkildsen's study shows that voters are generally more favorable towards candidates who possess what the researchers' deemed to be male characteristics. (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993, 512) This could potentially allude to a more negative general predisposition towards female candidates. However, an experiment conducted for this study also showed that voters were just as likely to vote for women candidates as men

candidates. (Huddy & Terkidlsen, 1993, 513) It is possible that response bias could be involved here, as respondents might be more willing to have an open mind in a hypothetical situation than in a real life election; on the contrary, voters may better understand how to put stereotypes aside when casting their ballots than expected.

Sigelmen and Welch's 1984 study found that only 81.6% of respondents were willing to vote for a woman and that women were not likely to be any more supportive of women candidates than men. (Sigelmen &Welch, 1984, 471) Though this study is older than the ones described above, it results show a clear negative gender bias towards women in politics. In addition to this, Klofstad, Anderson, and Peters examined a candidate's voice pitch in relation to vote choice. They found that both women and men were more likely to vote for men and women with lower pitched voices. (Klofstad, Anderson, & Peters, 2012, 3-4) While the study attributes this to a biological human preference, it could also be the result of internalized gender stereotypes negatively impacting voters' perceptions of women in politics.

Yet, some studies report no negative bias in respondents' perceptions of women in politics. A study by Ekstrand and Eckert in 1981 gave evidence to show that in general, respondents were not biased against female candidates. Yet, the study did show that there was a relationship between a respondent's gender, party, and perception of female candidates. (Ekstrand & Eckert, 1981, 86) Similarly, research by Rosenwasser, Rogers, Fling, Slivers-Pickens, and Butenmeyer shows that when 286 college students were interviewed about their perception of a candidate's ability to complete what the researchers deemed masculine and feminine tasks, the students rated women more highly on feminine tasks and men more highly on masculine tasks. (Rosewasser et al., 1987, 196-197) The authors perceived this to mean that the sample did not display sexist tendencies. Yet, it must be noted that the sample was composed

purely of college students, who are not completely representative of the total population. In addition to this, the idea that students would consider women to be better at "feminine tasks" and men to be better at "masculine tasks" seems to show some stereotype bias in their reasoning— which could potentially reflect negative approaches to female political candidates if further research was conducted.

While studies' results vary as to whether voters as a whole are negatively biased against women in politics, there is evidence that voters hold some stereotypes in their minds when they see women running for office. Next, this paper will review literature regarding how gender and gender stereotypes interact with citizens' engagement with politics, particularly voting.

Gender and Political Engagement

Studies show conflicting results regarding women's participation in politics. Verba, Burns, and Scholzman's 1997 study *Knowing and Caring about Politics: Gender and Political Engagement* gives evidence to show that women are less likely to be concerned about, involved in, and up-to-date on political matters. (1054) As the paper cites, this finding is consistent with previous literature in the field. Interestingly, the study also reports that women were more likely to be politically informed if they lived in a state where a woman held statewide office. (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997, 1066) Thus, the difference in political interest between men and women found in Verba et al.'s study could be attributed to gender stereotypes and the idea that politics is a man's field, as is noted in the paper. The study gathered some evidence to support this claim, but this evidence was not substantial enough to solidly conclude anything. (Verba et al., 1997, 1069)

However, Hooghe and Stolle's 2004 study found that young fourteen year old girls were just as likely, if not more likely, to be politically informed and intend to vote later in life than boys their age. (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004, 9) This study entitled *Good Girls Go the Polling Booth, Bad Boys Go Everywhere* does note that literature, such as Verba et al.'s study, shows that adult women are less likely to participate in politics than men. Hooghe & Stolle's study interprets these contradictory findings as showing that at the age of fourteen, young women aren't fully experiencing gender stereotypes and bias. (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004, 10) It is important to note that this study also reports female participants showed an inclination toward participating in activism and putting together petitions, and male participants were more interested in being politicians or "party members." (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004, 11) Thus, some sort of difference in perceived gender roles is evident. Further research is necessary to understand why young women in this study imagine a different role for themselves in politics than young men. Perhaps this is where subtle gender cues and stereotypes, as Verba et al. mentioned, begin to affect how women view themselves, particularly gender cues young women receive in their school environments. Thus, this paper will move on to review the potential that education and civic activities during adolescent years have to influence political involvement.

Civic Engagement and Education

There are a number of studies that examine how education and civic activities during adolescent years affect political participation later in life. Lit's 1963 study *Civic Education, Community Norms, and Political Indoctrination* examines how classroom resources and influential members of the community in which students attend school affect students' perception of civic duty and civic engagement. Lit found that the narrative of political processes was different for students in upper middle class, lower middle class, and working class

communities. Students in lower class communities were likely to see politics as more of an "idealistic" process in which people didn't really participate, while students in upper class communities were more likely to understand politics as a "realistic" process in which citizens were active participants. These different perceptions were likely caused by variations in textbook emphases found by the study and in matters emphasized by influential adults among the upper-middle class, lower-middle class, and working class communities. (Lit, 1963, 72) Though this information may not be accurate of present day differences in political narratives among communities, it is important to note that the way information is presented to youth can significantly affect their perceptions of politics and the political process—particularly their ideas of who can participate and how.

In fact, Hahn's 1996 study *Gender and Political Learning* examines how gender interacts with students' political understanding and perception. The study notes that in the civics curriculums of the classes participating in the study, there was no mention of women in politics. (Hahn, 1996, 23) Further, when students were asked to name notable politicians in interviews for the study, the only woman politician who was mentioned was known for a scandal. (Hahn, 1996, 22) However, evidence gathered in the study showed no statistically significant differences between genders in the categories of political efficacy, interest, trust, confidence, media, discussion, and future participation (Hahn, 1996, 18). Yet, as Lit's study suggests, the way information is presented to students should impact their perceptions of the political system and who can participate in it. Thus, it would follow that when the narrative presented to students is one of male dominated politics, young women would be less likely to intend to participate in politics than young men. This was not the case, which could be due to possible response bias in the results of either paper, whether that be in the wording of either study's student questionnaire

or in the interaction between interviewers and participants in Hahn's study. However, this could suggest, as stated above, that students had yet to have internalized cues enforcing gender stereotypes in their school environment.

Lit's study also gathered evidence to suggest that while students who received a civic education were more likely to believe in a "democratic creed," these students' dispositions toward electoral participation were no different than students in the control group who did not receive a civic education. (Lit, 1963, 73) While this may be true, literature shows that higher levels of education correspond with political engagement. (Campbell, 2009, 783) As is shown in Campbell's 2009 study *An Empirical Test of the Sorting Model*, the higher level of education a person has, the more likely they are to participate in civic engagement, with the exception of men engaging in electoral politics. Regardless of their environment, Campbell states that a woman's level of education has a positive association with voting. (Campbell, 2009, 783) A study on high school community service also shows that community service and extracurricular activities are predictors of presidential voting later in life. (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007, 207-209) It is necessary to note here that higher levels of education could predict voting because students must often involve themselves in community service and extracurricular activities to get into college. Yet, if continuing education does cause women to be more inclined to vote, this raises the question of whether gender stereotypes are enforced in school environments at all—a question which must be explored further.

Conclusion

As is stated in this review of literature, new research must combine perceptions of women as political leaders, women's engagement in politics, and gender stereotypes presented in women's educational environments. There is a gap in young women's intentions to participate in

politics and adult women's actual participation in politics that needs to be further explored. A

government that lacks civic participation from such a large group of its constituents cannot

properly serve its people. When women engage more fully in politics, the political system can

move towards better representation and consideration of everyone's needs. Research that finds

the cause for the gender gap in politics can help find the solution. Thus, scholars must find how

the fields discussed in this paper interact to affect young women's political choices later in life.

References

Campbell, D. (2009). Civic engagement and education: an empirical test of the sorting model. *American Journal of Political Science, 53*(4), 771-786. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20647950

Ekstrand, L.E. & Eckert W. A. (1981). The impact of candidate's sex on voter choice. *The Western Political Quarterly, 34*(1), 78-87. http://jstor.org/stable/447891

Hahn, Carole L. (1996). Gender and political learning. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 24*(1), 8-35. http://scholarcommmons.usf.edu/coedu_pub

Hart, D., Donnelly, T. M., Youniss, J., & Atkins, R. (2007). High school community service as a predictor of adult voting and volunteering. *American Educational Research Journal, 44*(1), 197-219. http://jstor.org/stable/30069475

Hooghe, M. & Stolle, D. (2004) Gender differences in anticipated political participation among American fourteen-year-olds. *Women and Politics, 26*(3/4). 10.1300/J014v26n03_01

Huddy, H. & Terkildsen, N. (1993). The consequences of gender stereotypes for women candidates at different levels and types of office. *Political Research Quarterly, 46*(3), 503-525. http://www.jstor.org/stable/448945

Klofstad, C. A., Anderson, R. C., & Peters, S. (2012) Sounds like a winner: voice pitch influences perception of leadership capacity in both men and women. *The Royal Society*. http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2012.0311

Lit, E. (1963). Civic education, community norms, and political indoctrination. *American Sociological Review, 28*(1), 69-75. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2090460

Rosenwasser, S. M., Rogers, Robyn R., Fling, S., Slivers-Pickens K., & Butenmeyer, J. (1987).

Attitudes toward women and men in politics: perceived male and female candidate competencies

and participant personality characteristics. *Political Psychology, 8*(2), 191-200.

http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791299

Sanbonmatsu, K. (2002). Gender stereotypes and vote choice. *American Journal of Political Science,*

46(1), 20-34. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3088412

Sigelman, L. & Welch, S. (1984). Race, gender, and opinion toward black and female presidential

candidates. *The Public Opinion Quarterly, 48*(2), 467-475. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2749037

Verba, S., Burns, N., & Schlozman, K. L. (1997). Knowing and caring about politics: gender and

political engagement. *The Journal of Politics, 59*(4), 1051-1072. http://jstor.org/stable/2998592

Reflection

Politics and Gender: A Self-Reflection

"Politics and Gender: Perceptions, Participation, and School Environments" is a literature

review written with the purpose of convincing the scholarly political science communities that

further research regarding gender and political participation is necessary. Specifically, the review aims to convince readers of the importance of examining why adolescent women intend to participate in politics as much as adolescent men, but, as adults, women do not participate in politics as frequently as men. Such a review would likely be published in a social science journal or magazine. The review is organized thematically, using bold headings to guide readers along the different subjects discussed in the paper. It gives the audience a roadmap showing why it is plausible that gender stereotypes interact with education to cause women to perceive their role in politics as being lesser than their male counterparts. However, the review is missing key components of its argument.

First, the literature review fails to show why women's participation in politics is important to begin with. While some reasons are mentioned in the concluding paragraph, the review lacks literature to support the assertion that the political system cannot function to its full potential without equal participation from both genders. I assumed that the scholars in my audience would perceive women's roles in politics to be as important as I deem them to be—without giving any research to support this claim. Thus, in writing this review, I was not fully aware of the rhetorical situation; I did not give proper context for my argument's existence. In a scholarly journal alongside other research papers, an author must give convincing evidence to show that their argument is valid and significant. An effective way to show the importance of my argument would be to add another section with the bolded heading "The Importance of Women in Politics" to the literature review discussing studies about the effects of gender equality in politics.

A more effective literature review would also have included more current sources. Only three of the twelve sources used in this paper were published within the last decade. While such

diversity in research can aid in showing development of literature over time, citing a majority of older sources proved to be a weakness in this paper. Not only did I not discuss the age range of my references in greater detail, I also did not have enough sources of the same topic to merit using older sources as a tool to show significant changes in studies over time. Thus, within my discourse community of social science researchers, much of my review may seem irrelevant and out of place, as political science research tends to evolve with generational, cultural, and sociological changes. To improve my review of literature, I would add more references that have been published within the last 10 years and discuss how they related to older sources already present in the paper.

Finally, the paper did not transition between themes of research effectively. This is especially true with my last transition from the topic of women's participation in politics to the discussion of civic engagement and education. The review of literature surrounding women's political engagement builds up to show the importance of how gender stereotypes can manifest themselves in educational environments. Yet, when I move on to talk about educational environments, the focus shifts to how education impacts political participation and perceptions of the political process. If I had stated the importance of understanding education and civic participation before studying how gender interacts with school environments and political participation, the transition here may have made more sense. However, I did not explicitly state this, and I did not clarify the purpose of the Education and Civic Participation section until the second paragraph. A more effective literature review would tie each topic back to its argument seamlessly.

This literature review sets the stage for further research studying how gender stereotypes and educational environments affect women's participation in politics later in life. Though I was

not as aware of the rhetorical situation in writing the review as I was in evaluating it, the paper

gives a good starting point to return to when I conduct research later in my academic career.