

Sylvia Kritzinger

Professor

University of Vienna



A persistent knowledge gap?

Political literacy from a gender perspective

Previous research on financial knowledge has shown that a knowledge gap between men and women exists.¹ In this essay, I extend this notion to other areas, namely political knowledge, and ask whether a more general knowledge gap between the genders exists in society. As with financial literacy, research in political science has consistently shown that political literacy is unequally distributed between men and women.² In sum, women seem to know consistently less about politics than men.

From a democratic perspective, this issue is problematic for two reasons. First, the more a person knows about politics, the more likely s/he participates in politics. Hence, political literacy is an important factor for political participation, which can be divided into conventional and unconventional political participation. The former includes voter turnout and the latter participation forms such as joining demonstrations, signing petitions and “boycotting”, which means to deliberately decide against buying certain products out of political beliefs. To sum up, with women knowing less about politics than men, as a result, they also participate less in politics than men.

Second, political knowledge is also of importance with regard to vote choice. A well-established concept in political science is economic voting. It means that voters consider their country’s current economic situation when casting their vote. In other words, is the economy doing well, the government is doing well too in the eyes of the voters, who then “reward” their government party or parties by voting for them. In the opposite

case, if the economy is doing badly, the voters want to “punish” the government and “throw the rascals out”. Therefore, economic voting can be used as a tool to – at least to a certain degree – hold governments accountable. However, to be able to form an opinion about whether the government should be rewarded or punished for its past actions, voters need to know about its performance in general and its economic performance in particular. Thus, a gender gap in political knowledge might distort the accountability mechanisms available to both female and male voters.

Considering the aspects of turnout and vote choice, two central electoral skills in liberal democracy, the fact that women know less about politics poses a major problem, as they not only participate less in democratic processes but also with a different level of knowledge quality.

But what exactly is this knowledge gap literature talks about and how can it be explained? There are some “traditional” explanations for this gender gap.³ The first set of explanations focuses on social norms. For one, parenting and caring activities hamper women’s possibility to become and stay politically informed or to participate actively in political actions. For another, social norms determine the roles women ought to fulfil in society – and which not. For example, having active roles in politics is still primarily attributed to men, not to women. Data from the European Values Study 2018 for Austria reveal that many Austrians still share this sentiment.

Chart 1 shows some social norms concerning women and their roles in

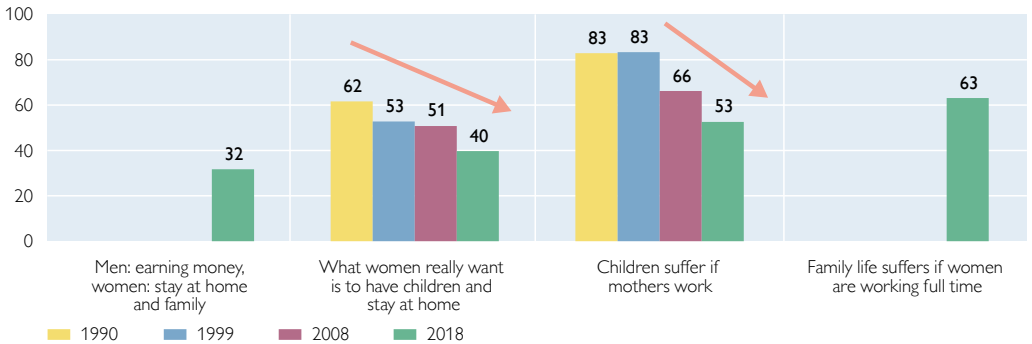
¹ See also other contributions to this conference.

² For instance, see Fraile, M. 2014. Do women know less about politics than men? The gender gap in political knowledge in Europe. *Social Politics* 21. 261–289.

³ For an overview, see Fraile, M. and R. Gomez. 2017. Bridging the enduring gender gap in political interest in Europe: The relevance of promoting gender equality. *European Journal of Political Research*, 56: 601–618.

Gender roles

4-point scale: fully agree/agree



Source: EVS 1990–2018.

society. Even though these social norms weakened over time (between 1990 and 2018), they are still very dominant. Women are still considered to be mainly responsible for the household and the family as well as many other activities that these two responsibilities entail.

Also, it is more likely that women face socio-economic disadvantages than men – a factor that is generally connected to lower political participation, independently of gender. In other words, persons with fewer resources are less politically educated.

Moreover, some methodological issues might explain the well-observed gender gap in political knowledge. Several researchers claim that the way political knowledge is measured disadvantages women.⁴ As mentioned above, women have diverse life experiences, which influence what kind of knowledge they acquire (and to what extent). In other words, their different life experiences lead to different political knowledge patterns than those of men. However, the majority of knowledge questions ignores gender-specific differences in life

experiences, assessing political knowledge as factual knowledge with biased questions in favor of men’s political views and interests. In other words, the topics commonly chosen for the surveys’ questions might be the reason for the notion that a gap in political knowledge between the genders exists. However, if a different approach were adapted, a gender gap might not even be observed.

Connected with the issue of measurement, gender differences may also be the result of gender-specific “guessing behavior”. Overall, men are more prone to guessing when they do not know the answer for sure, while women are more likely to admit that they do not know the answer, opting for the “Don’t know” response option in surveys. Also, women would rather choose the “Don’t know” response option if they are not 100% sure (thus “hiding” their knowledge), while men are more “adventurous” and dare to guess.⁵ Possibilities to overcome this problem are either to not provide a “Don’t know” option or to ask respondents as a follow-up question how confident they were about the answers they had given.

⁴ For an overview, see Ferrín, M., M. Fraile and G. García-Albacete. 2017. *The Gender Gap in Political Knowledge: Is It All About Guessing? An Experimental Approach*. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 29: 111–132.

⁵ See, for instance, Mondak, J. J. 2001. *Developing valid knowledge scales*. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45: 224–238.

These gender differences in political knowledge can also be observed among young adults aged 16 to 20. In the context of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), young adults were asked several factual political knowledge questions, with the result that no gender differences could be observed. Whether male or female, young adults showed about the same level of political knowledge. However, a follow-up question about *how much they think* they know about politics in general reveals a gender gap: the questioned women thought to have much less knowledge about politics than the male respondents, even though the results of the questions prove that this is not the case – a clear indication of lower confidence among women with regard to their skills and competences.

These various research findings show that a persistent knowledge gap between the genders seems to exist – with several repercussions on democratic processes as outlined before. So, what to do?

As mentioned before, to a certain extent the general knowledge gap seems to be rooted in women being less confident about their political skills. Thus, it is questionable whether closing the gender gap can be accomplished by simply providing more (factual) information. It rather seems more fruitful to not only raise awareness of this confidence issue but to also boost women's confidence. Furthermore, we need to reconsider our approach to collecting data on political knowledge through surveys, experiments,

discourses, etc. Also, when assessing factual knowledge, we need to take into consideration the different life experiences that women and men gain over time and the fact that these influence an individual's political knowledge. With this in mind, deliberation processes may help shed light on how women perceive and evaluate politics, which in turn could lead to new ways on how we get women to better engage in politics and to contribute to political debates with more confidence.⁶

More long-term projects also need to be considered. For one, more investments in gender-friendly socialization about politics during childhood – especially in schools – need to be made to somehow weaken the impact of the traditional views and norms on young girls. As Fraile and Gomez (2017) have shown, promoting gender equality is vital in this regard, and thus citizenship education focusing on these aspects needs to be fostered from an early age on. For another, the socio-economic disadvantages affecting women in particular need to be substantially reduced, with the potential positive impact of also reducing the knowledge gap between the genders.

All these programs are needed for “fearless women” to evolve. Reducing the general knowledge gap is vital in liberal democracies to provide across the genders the same opportunities to participate and engage in political life – and thus to fulfill one of the main principles of liberal democracy: equality.

⁶ See also Fraile, M. 2014. *Does deliberation contribute to a decrease of the gender gap in knowledge?* *European Union Politics*, 15: 372–388