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Do Women Vote Less Correctly?
The Effect of Gender on Ideological Proximity Voting and Correct Voting

Abstract

Studies on political knowledge routinely find that women have lower levels of political knowledge than men. This gender gap in political knowledge is usually interpreted as troublesome for democracy, because a lack of political knowledge could imply that women's participation in politics is less effective and that their interests will be represented less well than those of men. In this short article, we present a direct test of the assumption that women are less effective voters because of this lack of political knowledge. We make use of CSES data to study gender differences in proximity voting and correct voting. Our results do *not* suggest that women vote less correctly than men—a conclusion that prompts important questions about the role of different forms of political knowledge, and the seemingly gendered nature of the vote choice.

Keywords: proximity voting; correct voting; gender gap; political knowledge; representation.

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Introduction

One of the most consistent findings in the field of gender and politics is the observation that women have lower levels of political knowledge than men (Dassonneville and McAllister 2018; Fraile 2014). This gender gap is found in a varied set of democracies (Fortin-Rittberger 2016; Fraile and Gomez 2017)—and appears to be remarkably stable over time (Fraile 2014: 262). While observed gender differences in political knowledge can be partly explained by measurement factors such as survey mode, question format (Fortin-Rittberger 2016; Mondak and Anderson 2004), or the content of the knowledge questions (Stolle and Gidengil 2010), differences in men’s and women’s levels of knowledge remain significant.

The gender gap in political knowledge is consistently interpreted as worrisome, given the importance of political knowledge; it enables effective participation and the representation of one’s interests (Dolan 2011: 97). The literature offers ample evidence of the important role that political knowledge has for voters and citizens. Political knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of electoral participation (Smets and van Ham 2013), and hence influences whose voices will be heard. In addition, political knowledge influences the ways in which citizens decide what party or candidate to vote for (Singh and Roy 2014). Furthermore, higher levels of factual political knowledge increase the odds of choosing the most ideologically proximate party (Jessee 2010) or the party that aligns best with one’s issue positions (Milic 2012). There are also indications that higher levels of knowledge strengthen the role of retrospective evaluations on the vote (de Vries and Giger 2014). Such findings suggest that higher levels of political knowledge increase the likelihood that voters will ‘make political decisions (...) based on rationally considered principles reflecting their own self-interest and the common good’ (Lau and Redlawsk 1997: 585). Several studies

indeed confirm a strong and positive effect of political knowledge on correct voting (Dusso 2015; Lau et al. 2008).

Hence, if women generally possess a smaller amount of the ‘currency of citizenship’, there is a risk that their interests will be represented less well. However, while the connection between political knowledge and voting in line with one’s interests and preferences is strong, political knowledge is only one of multiple factors that influence the likelihood of voting ‘correctly’ (Lau et al. 2014). Because other determinants, including a variety of different political heuristics, are important as well, the gender gap in political knowledge does not deterministically lead to lower levels of correct voting among women. The analogy with work on electoral participation is useful in this regard.¹ Even though political interest and political knowledge are strong predictors of turnout (Smets and van Ham 2013), women’s lower level of political interest and political knowledge does not imply a gender gap in electoral turnout (Inglehart and Norris 2003, but see Kostelka et al. 2019). To assess the implications of the gender gap in knowledge, and its consequences for women’s political representation in particular, a more direct test of gender differences in ‘correct’ voting is needed.

We perform such a direct test and investigate gender differences in correct voting—operationalized as voting for the most proximate party and as a weighted measure that takes into account different determinants of the vote choice (directional ideological considerations, retrospective evaluations and partisan attachments). Our analyses draw on the data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project. While there is evidence of a

¹ We thank one of the reviewers for referring to this literature as a point of comparison.

substantial gender gap in political knowledge, we find that women are about as likely as men to vote for the most proximate party or the ‘correct’ party.

DATA AND MEASURES OF CORRECT VOTING

For analysing gender differences in correct voting, we make use of the first four CSES-modules, covering 134 elections worldwide between 1996 and 2016. As the dataset includes measures of political knowledge, it allows validating whether there is a gender gap in political knowledge, before investigating gender differences in correct voting.

As a first indicator of ‘correct voting’, we focus on ideological proximity, in terms of left-right self-positioning. Respondents’ left-right self-placement and their assessments of the ideological position of political parties in their country are included in most CSES-surveys. We match respondents’ ideological self-placement to the ideological position of parties. Parties’ positions are estimated as the mean ideological position assigned to the parties by higher educated respondents in the samples. Measuring parties’ positions by means of respondents’ perceptions of the ideological placement of parties correlates well with other indicators of parties’ positions, such as expert placements (Dalton and McAllister, 2015). Across all election samples, 31% of the respondents votes for the most proximate party (Appendix 1).

However, we acknowledge that ideological proximity is only one indicator that can guide the vote choice of an informed voter. That is, a rational voter can increase their voting utility by means of other considerations as well, such as retrospective evaluations. We therefore complement the analysis of proximity voting with an investigation of gender differences in correct voting—relying on previous operationalizations of correct voting as

the vote cast when ‘fully informed’. This is approximated with survey data on voters’ values and interests (Lau et al. 2008). For these analyses, we rely on the coding from Lau et al. (2014), which they applied to data from the first two modules of the CSES project (69 elections between 1996 and 2005 in 33 countries).² We present the results for their preferred measure of correct voting, but our results are robust to using alternative measures of correct voting (see Appendix 5). Across the election samples for which we have information, 71% of the respondents votes ‘correctly’ (see Appendix 2).

RESULTS

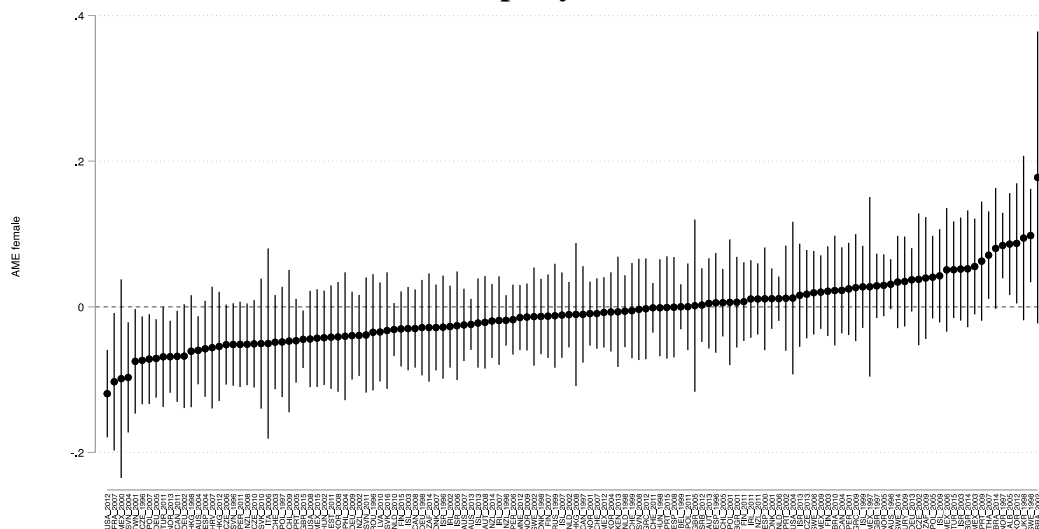
We first validate whether male and female respondents in the sample have different levels of political knowledge. These analyses (Appendix 3) show a substantial gender gap in political knowledge. On average, when controlling for differences in survey-mode and question format, women’s level of political knowledge is about 10 percent lower compared to men’s. However, what matters most is whether women have sufficient resources to be ‘efficient’ voters, that is, to choose the parties that will represent their preferences. We therefore proceed with an analysis of gender differences in proximity voting and correct

² Given the heterogeneity in terms of countries and party systems in the CSES-data, some might wonder whether ‘correct voting’ can be operationalized in meaningful ways in this dataset. We should point out that Lau et al. (2014) find substantial between-country variation in levels of correct voting. However, they also find that this variation is correlated in expected ways with context-level variables, such as the number of parties and the information environment, giving credence to the validity of their operationalization of correct voting.

voting. In a first step, we analyse voters' likelihood of choosing the ideologically most proximate party. Figure 1 presents the results of a series of separate logistic regression models, where we explain voting for the most proximate party by means of respondents' gender. We present the average marginal effect of being a woman (compared to a man) in each of the 134 election samples in the pooled CSES dataset. Of these 134 estimates, 83 (62 percent) are in the expected negative direction. Only 11 out of these negative average marginal effects, however, are significant at conventional levels. Furthermore, the estimated effect of being female is positive in 51 samples, and five coefficients are significantly positive. In the language of meta-analysis, on a total of 134 tests, there were 11 successes, 118 failures and 5 anomalies, implying a success rate of 8.2% only. In summary, our analyses offer very little evidence for the expectation that women are less likely to vote for the most proximate party.

The results in Figure 1 show that women are about as likely as men to correctly identify the party that is ideologically closest. However, ideological proximity is only one determinant of the vote choice that contributes to 'correct' voting. In a second step, we investigate gender differences in a more comprehensive measure of correct voting, that takes into account multiple issues and factors for measuring whether citizens vote in accordance to their own values and relative priorities (Lau et al. 2008; Lau et al. 2014).

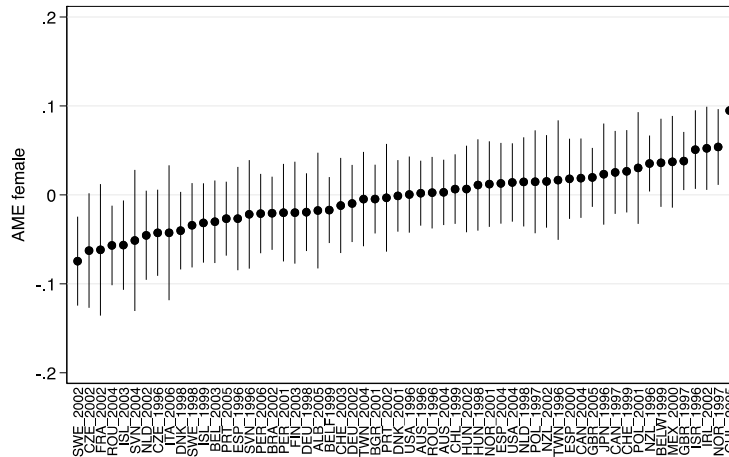
Figure 1. Average marginal effect of being female on voting for the most proximate party



Note: Average marginal effects and 95% confidence intervals. Models only include gender as an independent variable. Sampling and demographic weights were applied when available. Data: CSES modules 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Figure 2 summarizes the results of this second analysis. We present the average marginal effect of being female on voting correctly. These results offer even less evidence for the expectation that women cast lower quality votes than men. The estimated effect of being female is negative in only 29 out of 58 samples (50 percent). Three of these 28 average marginal effects are significant at conventional levels, while the estimated effect of being female is positive and significant in six surveys. This amounts to a success rate of 5.2% only.

Figure 2. Average marginal effect of being female on voting correctly



Note: Average marginal effects and 95% confidence intervals are presented. Models only include gender as an independent variable. Data: CSES modules 1 and 2, data and coding obtained from Lau et al. (2014).

The data of the CSES project include information on a varied set of democracies for over two decades of time. The data are therefore well-suited for getting a sense of general patterns in voting behavior. Using this dataset, we cannot confirm the expectation that women cast votes that are of lower quality compared to those of men.

We report the results of a series of bivariate logistic regression models, in which gender is the only independent variable. Adding more control variables to the models does not alter our conclusions. In fact, the effect of gender on proximity voting and correct voting is further weakened when adding controls (see Appendix 4).

DISCUSSION

Much has been written about the apparently persistent gender gap in political knowledge. In the CSES data as well, we find that the knowledge score of women is significantly lower than the score of men. There is concern about this gender gap in political knowledge because it is *assumed* that women's lower levels of knowledge translate in suboptimal vote choices.

Performing a direct test of gender differences in proximity voting and correct voting, our analyses offer very little evidence of a disadvantage for women. On average, women are about as likely as men to vote for the most proximate party or to vote correctly.

This paradox—that despite significant gender gaps in political knowledge, there is no evidence that women are worse at voting—has a number of possible explanations. First, perhaps women use the resources that they have more efficiently than men. We pursue this possibility in Appendix 6. We first develop explanatory models, focusing on a limited number of important predictors of proximity voting and correct voting (summarized in Appendix 7). Subsequently we interact each of these predictors of with gender, in this way directly testing whether the effect of these predictors is stronger (or weaker) among women than among men. As evident from the results in Appendix 6, none of these interactive effects is significant at conventional levels, suggesting that—at least for the indicators that are available in the CSES data—we do not find evidence of women compensating their lower level of political knowledge by means of a reliance on other factors.

Second, we considered the possibility that country and institutional contexts offer clues about what aids or hinders women’s correct voting, helping to explain the ways that women might be compensating for their lower levels of knowledge. From previous work in the field of gender and politics, we know that women’s political attitudes are systematically correlated with contextual-level variables. For example, work shows that women’s descriptive representation moderates the gender gap in political engagement (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Fraile and Gomez 2017). Scholars have also shown evidence of long-term socialization effects on women’s political attitudes and behaviors, with studies indicating that the timing of women suffrage in a country correlates with the size of the gender gap in

participation (Beauregard 2018). In addition, proportional electoral rules have been reported to reduce the gender gap in turnout (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012). In Appendix 8, we report the results of a series of additional analyses in which we seek to explain country-level difference in the gender gap in correct voting. Inspired by the literature, we evaluate the role of women's descriptive representation, the timing of women suffrage and electoral rules. As can be seen from the results in Appendix 8, however, none of these contextual-level variables is significantly associated—in expected ways—with gender differences in correct voting.

Third, the knowledge items that are traditionally included in survey research might be less relevant for making informed vote choices. The knowledge questions that were included in the CSES-surveys in particular focused mainly on knowledge of national institutions and international relations, while it is known that gender gaps are smaller or even reversed when the focus is on local politics (Coffé 2013) or practical political knowledge (Stolle and Gidengil 2010). The CSES-items do not cover local politics, but there is sufficient variation in knowledge question to distinguish between institutional knowledge, knowledge about politicians, knowledge of international relations and policy knowledge. Most importantly, additional analyses show that even when focusing on policy knowledge, a significant gender gap remains (see Appendix 3). All these items, however, still cover 'factual political knowledge'. For voting for the ideologically most proximate party, or for voting correctly, it might be more important that citizens have a certain level of 'ideological understanding' (Converse 1964; Jennings and Niemi 1981).

For studying this possibility in more depth, we have created a measure of respondents' 'ideological understanding' that captures the similarities between respondents' and experts' ideological placement, on a left-right scale, of the three top parties in each

election. From our supplemental analyses, reported in detail in Appendix 9, we draw two important conclusions. First, we find that in contrast to what holds for factual political knowledge, women have about the same level of ‘ideological understanding’ as men. Second, when comparing the explanatory power of factual political knowledge and ideological understanding, the latter appears much more important in explaining proximity voting and correct voting. As a result, the fact that women tend to get lower scores on the factual political knowledge quiz-questions, that are traditionally included in survey research, does not appear to be a disadvantage when voting. The key to casting a vote for a proximate or ‘correct’ party is a certain level of ideological understanding, and on such measures, women do about as well as men.

Our results are important, for two main reasons. First, the fact that women are about as likely as men to vote ‘correctly’ offers an important nuance to debates on the gender gap in factual political knowledge. Even though women have lower levels of factual political knowledge, this does not appear to affect the quality of their vote choices—and therefore the quality of women’s representation. We find evidence that women manage to do well in terms of ‘correct voting’ because they have levels of ‘ideological understanding’ that are similar to those of men. Second, our results more generally speak to scholars interested in political knowledge. While we do not deny that factual political knowledge is an important resource for citizens and voters, our findings suggest that its importance should not be exaggerated. Lower levels of factual knowledge do not deterministically reduce the quality of voters’ choices, as other resources and shortcuts can help voters to vote ‘correctly’. In this regard, voters’ ‘ideological understanding’ seems a particularly valuable resource.

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BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENTS

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