The Roots of Political Interests
How Gender Still Shapes Childhood Socialization

Alexandre Fortier-Chouinard

October 21, 2024

UNIVERSITY OF **TORONTO**

Table of contents I

Context: A Gender Gap in Political Interest?

How do people conceptualize political interest?

▶ They typically associate politics with partisan politics &
foreign policy

How do people conceptualize political interest?

▶ They typically associate politics with partisan politics & foreign policy

▶ But they do not associate politics with health care or education

How do people conceptualize political interest?

▶ They typically associate politics with partisan politics & foreign policy

▶ But they do not associate politics with health care or education

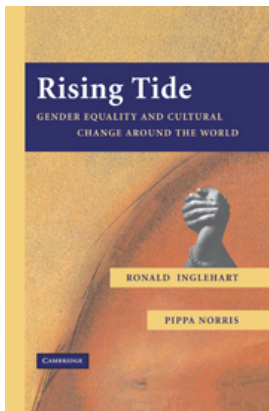▶ Politics refers to both agency & communality

Why Does this Matter?

Table 1. Men's and women's interest in politics and political issues

Cohort	1 Interest	2 Education	3 NHS	4 Foreign policy	5 Partisan politics	6 Law and order
18–24	−0.294***		0.372***	−0.423***	−0.300**	−0.306**
25–34	−0.522***		0.284***	−0.413***	−0.370***	
35–44	−0.480***	0.407***	0.403***	−0.387***	−0.364***	
45–54	−0.400***			−0.373***		
55–64	−0.321***		0.182*	−0.305***	−0.174**	
65+	−0.273**			−0.329**		
All	−0.391***	0.147***	0.243***	−0.359***	−0.240***	−0.075*

*** $p = >.001$; ** $p = >.01$; * $p = >.05$. Weighted data: *N for each age cohort*: 18–24 year olds – 236; 25–34 year olds – 500; 35–44 year olds – 433; 45–54 year olds – 341; 55–64 year olds – 1003; 65 and over – 367; All – 2,887.

Figure 1: Political interests by gender (Campbell and Winters 2008)

Sources of the Gender Gap in Self-Reported Political Interest

Structural factors (Inglehart and Norris 2003)

Life-cycle events (Gidengil, Giles, and Thomas 2008)

Genetics (Bell, Schermer, and Vernon 2009)

Prior (2019)

Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete (2013)

A more robust explanation for the Canadian context: socialization

Parents' Role in Political Interest Transmission

▶ Significant relationship between parents' political interest and their children's political interest

- ▶ Significant relationship between parents' political interest and their children's political interest
- ▶ Growth in parent–child political interest correlations between ages 11 and 15

- Significant relationship between parents' political interest and their children's political interest

- Growth in parent–child political interest correlations between ages 11 and 15

- Causal link between parents' and children's political interest

- ▶ Significant relationship between parents' political interest and their children's political interest

- ▶ Growth in parent–child political interest correlations between ages 11 and 15

- ▶ Causal link between parents' and children's political interest

- ▶ Main causal mechanism: parent–child political discussions

Gender Differences in Transmission of Self-Reported
Political Interest

▶ Transmission works better for parent–child pairs of the same gender

- ▶ Transmission works better for parent–child pairs of the same gender
- ▶ Mother–daughter correlations particularly strong

- ▶ Transmission works better for parent–child pairs of the same gender
- ▶ Mother–daughter correlations particularly strong
- ▶ Mothers and fathers talk as much about politics with sons and daughters

Social Learning Theory

▶ **Social learning theory**: Children learn by observing their parents, modelling their behaviour, attitudes, habits & values after them

▶ **Social learning theory**: Children learn by observing their parents, modelling their behaviour, attitudes, habits & values after them

▶ Social learning is easier when the role model shares the child's gender (observer–model similarity)

- ▶ **Social learning theory**: Children learn by observing their parents, modelling their behaviour, attitudes, habits & values after them
- ▶ Social learning is easier when the role model shares the child's gender (observer–model similarity)
- ▶ Works through social pressure

▶ **Social learning theory**: Children learn by observing their parents, modelling their behaviour, attitudes, habits & values after them

▶ Social learning is easier when the role model shares the child's gender (observer–model similarity)

▶ Works through social pressure

▶ Research questions: *When and how does political interest transmission occur? To what extent do mothers influence political interest development in their children? Do they have a greater influence on their sons or daughters? What about fathers?*

▶ **Hypothesis 1a**: *Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their same-gender parent(s) than other-gender parent(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1a**: *Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their same-gender parent(s) than other-gender parent(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1b**: *Children's interest in the politics of health care and education is more affected by political discussions with their mother(s) than father(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1a**: Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their same-gender parent(s) than other-gender parent(s).

▶ **Hypothesis 1b**: Children's interest in the politics of health care and education is more affected by political discussions with their mother(s) than father(s).

▶ **Hypothesis 1c**: Children's interest in law and crime, international affairs, and partisan politics is more affected by political discussions with their father(s) than mother(s).

▶ **Hypothesis 1a**: *Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their same-gender parent(s) than other-gender parent(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1b**: *Children's interest in the politics of health care and education is more affected by political discussions with their mother(s) than father(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1c**: *Children's interest in law and crime, international affairs, and partisan politics is more affected by political discussions with their father(s) than mother(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1d**: *Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their mother(s) than father(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1a**: *Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their same-gender parent(s) than other-gender parent(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1b**: *Children's interest in the politics of health care and education is more affected by political discussions with their mother(s) than father(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1c**: *Children's interest in law and crime, international affairs, and partisan politics is more affected by political discussions with their father(s) than mother(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1d**: *Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their mother(s) than father(s).*

▶ **Hypothesis 1k**: *Children's interest in specific political topics becomes more and more affected by political discussions with their parent(s) between ages 11 and 15, after which the parental effects stabilize.*

Data and Methods

Children Political Interest Survey (CPIS): Data collected among 698 students aged 8–18 from 7 elementary & secondary schools + 1 school board's Student Senate between August 2022 & January 2023

▶ Schools include various urban areas of Quebec & Ontario

Children Political Interest Survey (CPIS): Data collected among 698 students aged 8–18 from 7 elementary & secondary schools + 1 school board's Student Senate between August 2022 & January 2023

- ▶ Schools include various urban areas of Quebec & Ontario
- ▶ 15-minute bilingual Qualtrics online survey questionnaire filled during classroom time

Children Political Interest Survey (CPIS): Data collected among 698 students aged 8–18 from 7 elementary & secondary schools + 1 school board's Student Senate between August 2022 & January 2023

- ▶ Schools include various urban areas of Quebec & Ontario

- ▶ 15-minute bilingual Qualtrics online survey questionnaire filled during classroom time

- ▶ Multilevel regressions, classroom fixed effects, controls for SES & personality traits

Measuring children's interest in different political topics: how?

▶ Survey questions with *concrete examples*:

Measuring children's interest in different political topics: how?

▶ Survey questions with *concrete examples*:

    ▶ Health care (i.e., pandemic restrictions, working conditions of nurses)

Measuring children's interest in different political topics: how?

▶ Survey questions with *concrete examples*:

  ▶ Health care (i.e., pandemic restrictions, working conditions of nurses)

  ▶ International affairs (i.e., diplomatic disputes between Canada and China, Ukrainian war)

Measuring children's interest in different political topics: how?

▶ Survey questions with *concrete examples*:

  ▶ Health care (i.e., pandemic restrictions, working conditions of nurses)

  ▶ International affairs (i.e., diplomatic disputes between Canada and China, Ukrainian war)

  ▶ Law and crime (i.e., police funding, sentences for violent crimes)

Measuring children's interest in different political topics: how?

▶ Survey questions with *concrete examples*:

  ▶ Health care (i.e., pandemic restrictions, working conditions of nurses)

  ▶ International affairs (i.e., diplomatic disputes between Canada and China, Ukrainian war)

  ▶ Law and crime (i.e., police funding, sentences for violent crimes)

  ▶ Education (i.e., university tuition, funding of public and private schools)

Measuring children's interest in different political topics: how?

▶ Survey questions with *concrete examples*:

  ▶ Health care (i.e., pandemic restrictions, working conditions of nurses)

  ▶ International affairs (i.e., diplomatic disputes between Canada and China, Ukrainian war)

  ▶ Law and crime (i.e., police funding, sentences for violent crimes)

  ▶ Education (i.e., university tuition, funding of public and private schools)

  ▶ Partisan politics (i.e., federal elections, political parties)

Results

Table 1: Interest in Topic by Gender, CPIS

	Politics (general)	Health care	International affairs	Law and crime	Education
Without Controls					
(Intercept)	4.579***	4.041***	5.724***	4.956***	4.219***
	(0.184)	(0.167)	(0.180)	(0.173)	(0.206)
Gender (1 = girl)	-0.434*	0.128	-0.980***	0.488*	-0.103
	(0.207)	(0.197)	(0.229)	(0.231)	(0.223)
SD (Intercept Class)	0.651	0.542	0.473	0.377	0.771
SD (Observations)	2.499	2.397	2.802	2.837	2.701
Num.Obs.	617	623	620	619	623
R2 Marg.	0.007	0.001	0.029	0.007	0.000
With Controls					
(Intercept)	1.413	1.138	4.458***	2.838*	0.218
	(1.337)	(1.187)	(1.315)	(1.254)	(1.436)
Gender (1 = girl)	-0.432*	0.128	-0.973***	0.492*	-0.122
	(0.212)	(0.201)	(0.232)	(0.237)	(0.229)
Age	0.218*	0.192*	0.099	0.176*	0.253**
	(0.086)	(0.076)	(0.084)	(0.079)	(0.092)
Ethnicity (1 = white)	0.160	-0.024	0.570*	-0.143	-0.107
	(0.250)	(0.237)	(0.270)	(0.276)	(0.267)
Immigrant	-0.255	0.273	-0.794*	-0.702+	0.385
	(0.322)	(0.308)	(0.352)	(0.360)	(0.349)
English spoken at home	-0.781+	-0.253	-1.801***	-0.632	0.118
	(0.454)	(0.429)	(0.492)	(0.497)	(0.491)
French spoken at home	-0.112	0.136	-0.402	-0.293	0.389
	(0.284)	(0.271)	(0.308)	(0.313)	(0.305)
SD (Intercept Class)	0.598	0.470	0.442	0.318	0.665
SD (Observations)	2.476	2.375	2.738	2.811	2.680

▶ For each of the following topics, which parent do you discuss most often with?

  ▶ Health care
    ▶ My mother
    ▶ My father
    ▶ Don't know/Prefer not to answer
  ▶ International affairs
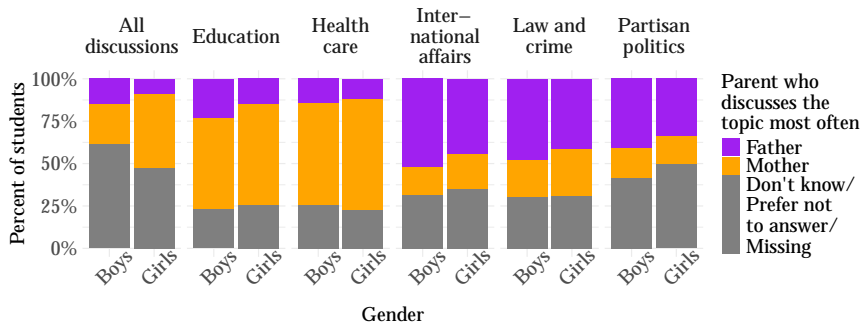 ▶ Law and crime
  ▶ Education
  ▶ Partisan politics

Figure 2: Topic most often discussed with parents, 2023 CPIS data

▶ Among these five topics, which one do you discuss most often with your mother(s)?
  ▶ Health care
  ▶ International affairs
  ▶ Law and crime
  ▶ Education
  ▶ Partisan politics
  ▶ Don't know/Prefer not to answer
▶ Among these five topics, which one do you discuss most often with your father(s)?
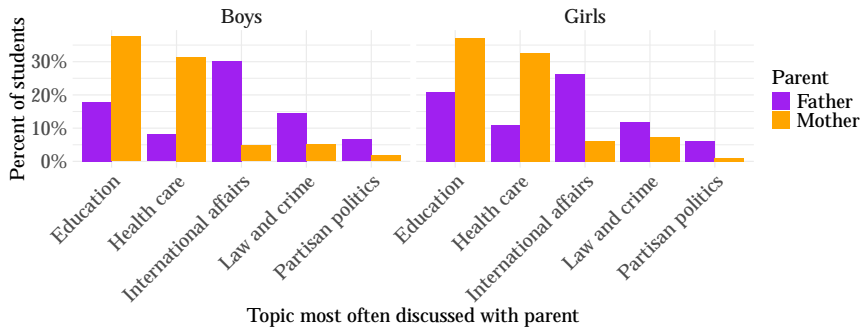
Figure 3: Topic most often discussed by mothers and fathers, 2023 CPIS data
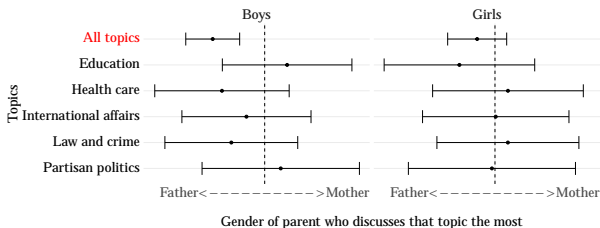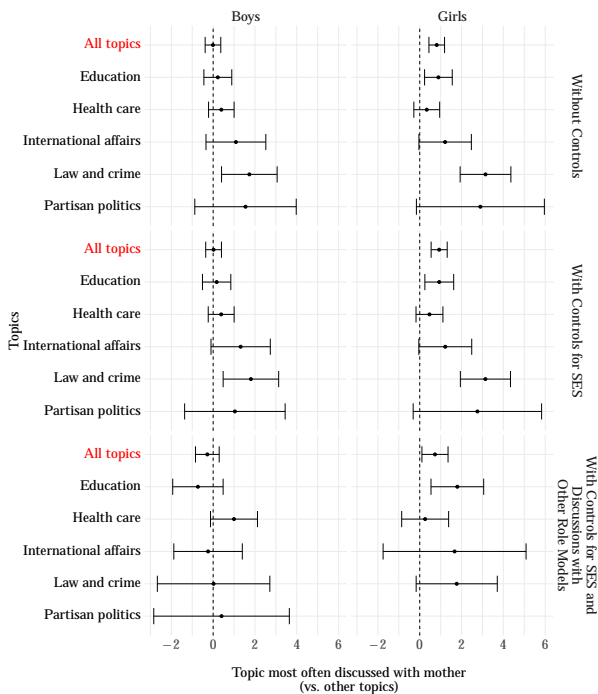
Figure 4: Interest in topic by gender of parent who discusses that topic the most (with controls)

Figure 5: Intercept interior points after discussed with mother vs. other topics

Figure 6. Interest in topics most often discussed with one's father
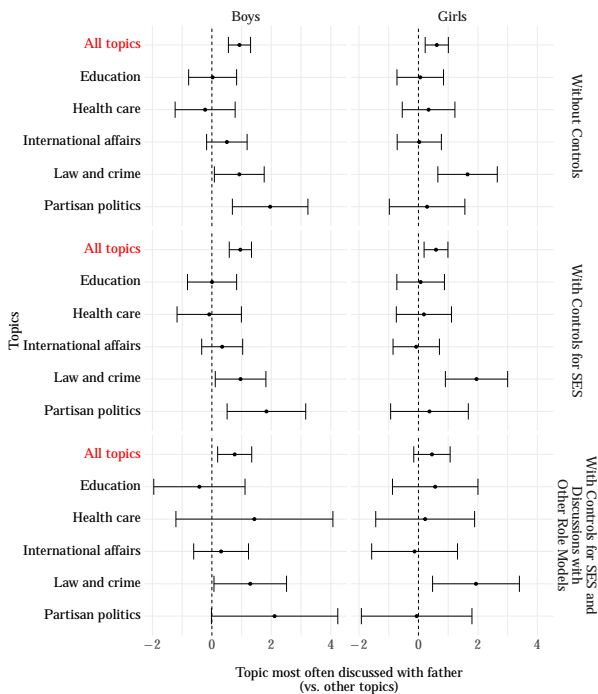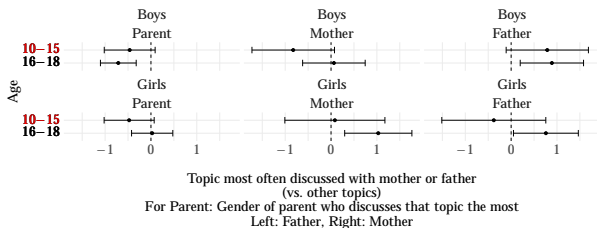
Figure 7: Parent-child political interest relationships by age group (with controls)

Conclusion

► Social learning theory mostly corroborated: there seems to be stronger transmission of interest for parents of the same gender than their child

▶ Social learning theory mostly corroborated: there seems to be stronger transmission of interest for parents of the same gender than their child

▶ Mothers and fathers discuss different political topics with their children, but discuss them as much with their sons as with their daughters

▶ Social learning theory mostly corroborated: there seems to be stronger transmission of interest for parents of the same gender than their child

▶ Mothers and fathers discuss different political topics with their children, but discuss them as much with their sons as with their daughters

▶ Topic-by-topic patterns to be further investigated

- ▶ Social learning theory mostly corroborated: there seems to be stronger transmission of interest for parents of the same gender than their child

- ▶ Mothers and fathers discuss different political topics with their children, but discuss them as much with their sons as with their daughters

- ▶ Topic-by-topic patterns to be further investigated

- ▶ Results by age groups: mixed results => need for larger-n studies among teenagers

▶ Social learning theory mostly corroborated: there seems to be stronger transmission of interest for parents of the same gender than their child

▶ Mothers and fathers discuss different political topics with their children, but discuss them as much with their sons as with their daughters

▶ Topic-by-topic patterns to be further investigated

▶ Results by age groups: mixed results => need for larger-n studies among teenagers

▶ Parent–child studies needed

THANKS!

References

Bell, Edward, Julie Aitken Schermer, and Philip A Vernon. 2009. "The Origins of Political Attitudes and Behaviours: An Analysis Using Twins." *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 42 (4): 855–79.

Campbell, Rosie, and Kristi Winters. 2008. "Understanding Men's and Women's Political Interests: Evidence from a Study of Gendered Political Attitudes." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 18 (1): 53–74.

Conover, Pamela Johnston, Donald D. Searing, and Ivor M. Crewe. 2002. "The Deliberative Potential of Political Discussion." *British Journal of Political Science* 32 (1): 21–62.

Fitzgerald, Jennifer. 2013. "What Does "Political" Mean to You?" *Political Behavior* 35: 453–79.

Gallie, Walter Bryce. 1956. "Essentially Contested Concepts." In *The Importance of Language*, 167–98. Cornell University Press.

Gidengil, Elisabeth, Janine Giles, and Melanee Thomas. 2008. "The Gender Gap in Self-Perceived Understanding of Politics in

Appendix

Hypotheses

Figure 8: Dissertation Hypotheses
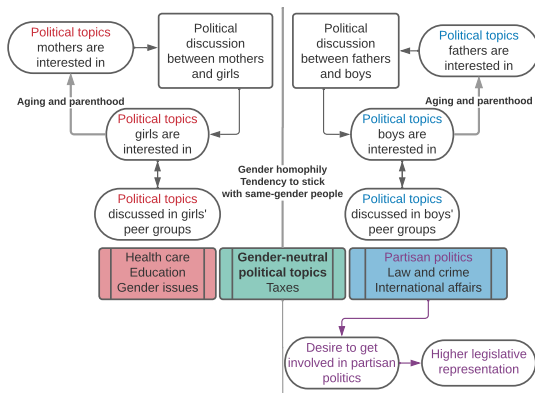
Questionnaire

▶ How interested are you in politics generally? Set the slider to a number from 0 to 10, where 0 means no interest at all, and 10 means a great deal of interest.

  ▶ (0–10 slider)
  ▶ Don't know/Prefer not to answer

▶ If you were to open a news website and see the following articles how interested would you be in reading each article? Set the slider to a number from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Not at all interested, I would not read it," and 10 means "Very interested, I would most likely read it."

  ▶ Health care (i.e., pandemic restrictions, working conditions of nurses)
  ▶ International affairs (i.e., diplomatic disputes between Canada and China, Ukrainian war)
  ▶ Law and crime (i.e., police funding, sentences for violent crimes)
  ▶ Education (i.e., university tuition, funding of public and private schools)
  ▶ Partisan politics (i.e., federal elections, political parties)

- ▶ What is the gender of most of your friends?
  - ▶ Girls
  - ▶ Boys
  - ▶ About the same for both genders
  - ▶ Don't know/Prefer not to answer
- ▶ Among these five topics, which one do you discuss most often with your male friends?
  - ▶ Health care
  - ▶ International affairs
  - ▶ Law and crime
  - ▶ Education
  - ▶ Partisan politics
  - ▶ Don't know/Prefer not to answer
- ▶ Among these five topics, which one do you discuss most often with your female friends?
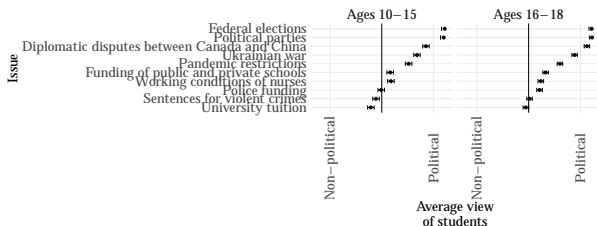
How Political is Each Topic?

Figure 9: Views of Topics as Political or Non-Political By Canadian Students, 2022
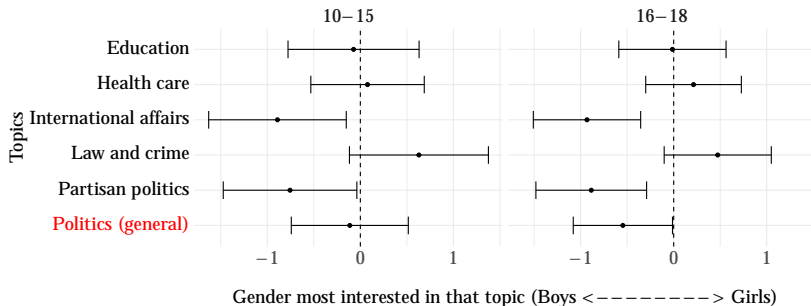
Figures Without Controls

Figure 10: Gender Differences in Interest for Specific Political Topics by Age Group Among Canadian Children, 2022 CPIS
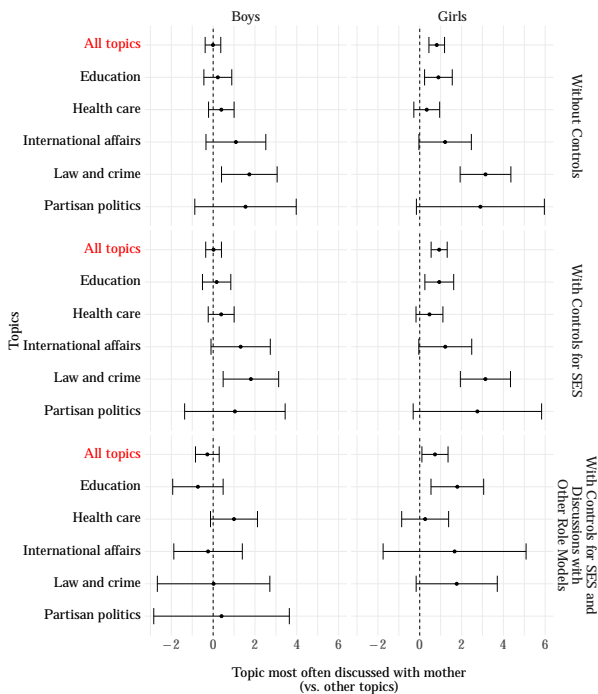*Notes*: No controls are added.

Figure 11: Interest in topics most often discussed with own/own mother

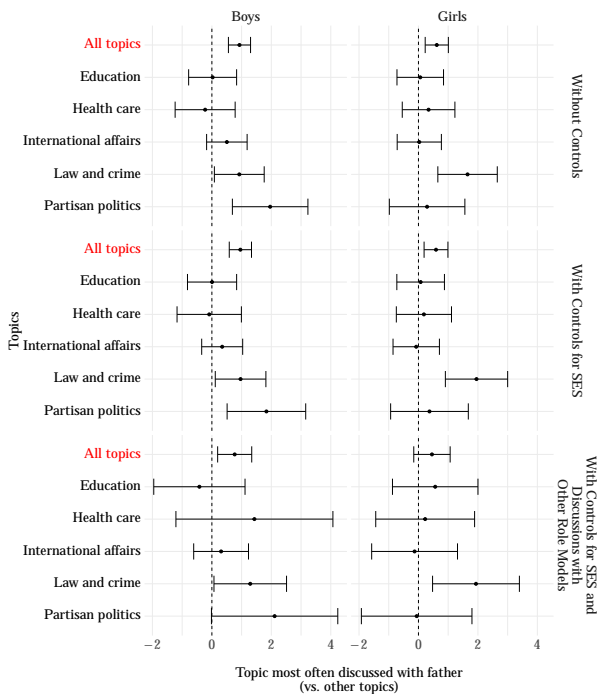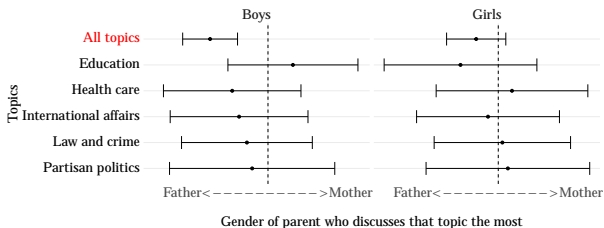Figure 12: Interest in topics most often discussed with one's father

Figure 13: Interest in topic by gender of parent who discusses that topic the most

Definitions

Politics

▶ Contested concept for a long time (Gallie 1956)

▶ "The concept is extremely broad and comprises any kind of leadership in action" (Weber (1919), p. 1)

Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. Politics is inextricably linked to the phenomena of conflict and cooperation. On the one hand, the existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs, and opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live. On the other hand, people recognize that, in order to influence these rules or ensure their enforcement, they must work with others (Heywood (2019), p. 34).

Other definitions (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002; Fitzgerald 2013; Heywood 2019; Lane 1962; Sapiro 2013; Walsh 2004):

- ▶ The art of government
- ▶ Public affairs in general
- ▶ The non-violent resolution of disputes
- ▶ Power and the distribution of resources
- ▶ Conflictual discussion of controversial topics

Agency & Communality

Campbell and Winters (2008) shows that men's higher self-reported political interest derives from the fact that they are more *agentic*, i.e., focused on self-assertion [or competition], while women are more *communal*, i.e., focused on cooperation. Since the concept of *politics* is typically seen as more adversarial, it appeals more to agentic types — mostly men — who then develop higher political efficacy and overall self-reported political interest, a finding also shared by Schneider et al. (2016).

Kuhn (2004): compassion & cooperation vs. contest & competition