Gendered Political Socialization

Why Women and Men Still Differ in Political Interest

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Preface

1 Introduction: Theories and Explanations for the Gender Gap in Political Interest

Traditional political science studies suggest that men are generally more interested in politics than women (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; M. L. Inglehart 1981; R. Inglehart and Norris 2003; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). However, several recent studies (Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020; Ferrín and García-Albacete 2023; Keeling 2023; Kuhn 2004; Sabella 2004; Tormos and Verge 2022) show that people do not think about the full range of political actions when they are asked questions about their political interest and that men are more interested than women in certain political topics — notably partisan politics — but less interested in others — like health care and education politics. In parallel, studies have found parents and peers play an important role in children's political socialization (Dostie-Goulet 2009; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mayer and Schmidt 2004; Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013), especially when they share the children's gender (Beauregard 2008; Owen and Dennis 1988). While structural, institutional, biological, and life-cycle factors have also been linked to the development of political interest, childhood socialization is one of its most important determinants (Jennings and Niemi 1981) — and political interest remains stable from an early age (Prior 2010, 2019). However, parental transmission of political interest has only been studied using the traditional one-item measure of political interest, while the gendered aspects of peer transmission of political interest have not been formalized. This dissertation wishes to address both issues by suggesting a unified theory: *children's interest in specific political topics mainly comes from socialization by their same-gender parent(s) and peers.* Notably, it is argued that interest in *partisan* politics is distinctly transmitted from men to boys.

Among various topics, interest in partisan politics is important because it is correlated with greater political ambition, which leads to men's higher levels of elite representation (Fox and Lawless 2005). Since policies often have different effects on men and women, which can be influenced by policymakers' gender (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Donato et al. 2008; Rayment 2020), the fact that women are under-represented in the legislative and executive spheres has practical consequences for the kinds of legislation adopted. By studying the origins of gender differences in political interest, potential solutions can be sought by relevant actors who seek assemblies that are more gender-balanced. Moreover, political interest has also been linked with other forms of political participation (Cicognani et al. 2012). It is therefore possible that interest in various political topics increases the range of political actions in which men and women take part.

1.1 Conceptual Definitions

Before defining relevant concepts such as political engagement, political participation and political interest, it is important to first define what *politics* is. Politics is a contested concept and has been for a long time (Gallie 1956). For Weber (1919), "[t]he concept is extremely broad and comprises any kind of leadership in action" (p. 1). Heywood (2019) offers a more recent and comprehensive definition:

> 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 (p. 34).

Other sources have variously described politics as the art of government, as public affairs in general, as the non-violent resolution of disputes, as power and the distribution of resources, or as the conflictual discussion of controversial topics (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002; Fitzgerald 2013; Heywood 2019; Lane 1962; Sapiro 2013; Walsh 2004).

In this dissertation, for the sake of clarity, *politics* is defined using Heywood (2019)'s definition. Importantly, this definition emphasizes the notions of cooperation and competition, therefore going beyond Weber (1919)'s notion of leadership. More than a partisan game, politics includes actions that preserve the policy status quo as well as actions that aim at disrupting it, including contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2015) and interest groups that seek to influence the rules — from the international level to the local level.

The umbrella term *political engagement* is used throughout this dissertation to describe forms of commitment to politics through either *attitudes*, *actions*, or both — leaving aside the ideological content of these attitudes and actions. Political engagement has been used to refer to political interest, political discussion, political knowledge, voter turnout, political efficacy, and/or party membership (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Gidengil, O'Neill, and Young 2010; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). More narrowly, *political participation* is used to refer to political actions, such as boycotting, participating in protests, donating money to candidates, voting, or working with interest groups or voluntary associations that seek to influence policy at any level — international, national, provincial, local, school board, and so on.

Political interest, this study's main variable of interest, is defined as "the degree to which politics arouses a citizen's curiosity" (Van Deth (1990), p. 278). It therefore involves both being aware of politics and caring about it. It is a form of political engagement through attitudes rather than actions. When used in this dissertation, the concept is meant to refer to people's self-reported interest in politics in general. However, studies show that women and men do not think of politics the same way scholars do, and instead emphasize partisan

politics more specifically when answering survey questions on political interest (Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020; Ferrín and García-Albacete 2023).[1] The measure of political interest therefore differs from the theoretical definition of politics used for this dissertation, as it is biased towards partisan politics. For similar reasons, when *political discussion* and *political efficacy* are mentioned in this dissertation, they also refer to concepts that are likely tilted toward partisan politics.

Interest in partisan politics is defined as interest in the competition between political parties that happens in political institutions and in election campaigns — as opposed to interest in policies, society issues or contentious politics. When studies explicitly measure interest in partisan politics, this dissertation uses the expression *interest in partisan politics* rather than *political interest*.

Political ambition refers to the desire to run for political office at any level (Fox and Lawless 2005). Political ambition is another attitudinal component of political engagement. This desire can be short-term or long-term.

Finally, the concept of *gender* is defined here as "sets of socially constructed meanings of masculinities and femininities, derived from context-specific identifications of sex, that is, male and female, men and women" (Beckwith (2010), p. 160). While gender is a social construct, it is already observable at a young age and further develops through time due to biological factors — not environmental ones (Hatemi et al. 2012). Other than men and women, various other gender identities have been identified, including transgender, non-binary, gender-queer, and gender-ambiguous people (Matsuno and Budge 2017). According to the 2021 Canadian Census, people who identify as transgender or non-binary made up 0.33% of all Canadians (Easton 2022). Due to concerns with sample size and theoretical grounding, in this dissertation, only people who identify as men, women, boys, and girls are studied, as in most studies of gender differences in political engagement. Further research using purposely selected samples of people who do not identify as men or women will be needed to get a better understanding of the determinants of their political interest.

1.2 Diagnosis: Gender Differences in Political Interest and Engagement

In Canada and other Western countries, differences in political engagement are complex and often subject to disagreement between studies. On some aspects of political engagement, it is hard to tell whether men or women are more engaged. They seem to be about as likely to vote in national elections (Kostelka, Blais, and Gidengil 2019), participate in demonstrations and political rallies (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010), donate money to political candidates (conflicting evidence from Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) and Tolley, Besco, and Sevi (2022)), express high

[1] Women are more likely to view gender issues as political than men, but otherwise men and women seem to define what counts as political in similar ways (Ferrin et al. 2020; Fitzgerald 2013).

levels of political trust (conflicting evidence from Dassonneville et al. (2012) and Schoon and Cheng (2011)), win elections when they run for office (Golder et al. 2017; Sevi, Arel-Bundock, and Blais 2019), and express interest in local politics (Coffé 2013; Hayes and Bean 1993).[2]

However, other aspects of political engagement point in the direction of men being more politically engaged. Studies have found that they are more likely to be interested in politics in general, including national and international politics (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997); to discuss politics (Beauvais 2020; Rosenthal, Jones, and Rosenthal 2003); to have an opinion on political issues (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003); to try to convince other people to vote for a candidate (Beauregard 2014); to feel a sense of political efficacy, both internal and external[3] (Gidengil, Giles, and Thomas 2008; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997); to give correct answers to knowledge questions on political institutions (Dolan 2011; Ferrin, Fraile, and García-Albacete 2018; Fraile 2014; Norris, Lovenduski, and Campbell 2004; Stolle and Gidengil 2010; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997); to vote in second-order elections[4] (Dassonneville and Kostelka 2021; Kostelka, Blais, and Gidengil 2019); to be active political party members (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Stolle and Hooghe 2011); to be politically ambitious; and to run for political office (Devroe et al. 2023; Fox and Lawless 2004, 2005; Lawless and Fox 2010, 2022; Tolley 2023).

Finally, research suggests women are more politically engaged in some aspects. For instance, women are more likely than men to be interested in health care, education and gender issues (Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020; Kuhn 2004; Sabella 2004; Tormos and Verge 2022), give correct answers to knowledge questions on government services and social issues (Ferrin, Fraile, and García-Albacete 2018; Keeling 2023; Norris, Lovenduski, and Campbell 2004; Stolle and Gidengil 2010), and engage in private activism such as boycotting and signing petitions (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010).

Overall, the types of political engagement in which men appear to be more involved are more related to political institutions, while those in which women are more involved are more informal and — in the case of boycotts and petitions — anti-system. Since more power is typically concentrated in political institutions than in private activism in Canada, the aspects of politics in which men feel more engaged, such as interest in partisan and national politics, concern the highest levels of power in the country. The overall influence of women in Canadian politics is therefore limited.

[2] Controlling for some of the other political attitudes mentioned here, women become *more* interested in local politics (Coffé 2013) and *more* likely to vote in national elections (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010) than men, but the current focus is on raw gender differences.

[3] *Internal efficacy*: an individual's "self-perception that they are capable of understanding politics and competent enough to participate in political acts such as voting." *External efficacy*: an individual's "perception of being able to have an impact on politics" (Gidengil, Giles, and Thomas (2008), p. 538).

[4] Second-order elections include European elections, municipal elections, and most types of other sub-regional elections.

1.3 Consequences from the Point of View of Democratic Theory

Different aspects of political engagement are correlated and influence each other (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Coffé 2013; Ondercin and Jones-White 2011). This means that a gender gap in one aspect of political engagement can contribute to a gap in another aspect. More importantly, when gender differences in *partisan political interest* emerge, they can have consequences for at least two types of substantive citizen participation: discussing partisan politics with other people and running for elected political office.

1.3.1 Political Discussion

Studies report men are more likely than women to discuss politics, but men and women tend to think about *partisan politics* more specifically when they think about the concept of politics (Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020). Still, Heywood (2019)'s definition of politics goes beyond partisan competition and elections, including all the ways through which people make and change the rules that govern them. Traditional political discussion survey questions therefore mostly measure discussion of partisan politics, which is one aspect of politics on which men typically report more interest. As people usually discuss the topics they are most interested in, it seems likely that women discuss more often political topics for which they report more interest, such as health care or gender issues, although survey questions typically do not ask what kinds of political questions people discuss the most. Political discussion of various topics is seen as something desirable in participatory democracy,[5] since partisan politics is only a means through which relevant issues are often addressed.

Discussing with people with different ideas and views also creates a phenomenon of collective intelligence (Landemore 2013), which is seen as a desirable outcome from a democratic point of view, since it has been found both to reduce political polarization and to produce better reasoning, i.e., a better capacity at finding and evaluating arguments in deliberative context (Mercier and Landemore 2012). Therefore, it seems relevant to identify the socialization elements that lead to more diversity in political discussions — and men and women have different life experiences but also, often, different ideological viewpoints (Gidengil et al. 2005).

1.3.2 Running for Elected Political Office

Studies have repeatedly found that men have more political ambition than women. For instance, there are twice as many men as women who seek to be nominated as candidates in Canadian elections (Tolley 2023). This might be because, in other contexts, women "are more than twice as likely as men to consider themselves 'not at all qualified' to run for office (29% of women, compared to 14% of men) [and] are roughly 22% less likely than men to report

[5]The long-standing concept of participatory democracy is also well accepted among feminist and intersectional theorists (Collins 2017; Phillips 1992).

parental encouragement" (Fox and Lawless (2005), p. 654). These two factors still stand in a 2021 follow-up study (Lawless and Fox 2022). Political interest, self-perceived qualifications, and family socialization all predict political ambition — i.e., having previously considered the possibility of running for office. Gender differences in partisan political interest and political efficacy, while not the only causes,[6] might therefore help to explain why women are under-represented in legislative assemblies in the vast majority of countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline 2023). In Canada, too, political issues are most often settled by assemblies and executives where men are the majority. In 2009, women represented less than 25% of Canadian legislators at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels and only 15% of mayors (Tolley 2011). At the time of writing, while the Canadian federal cabinet is gender-balanced, eight out of ten provincial premiers and most of their ministers are men.

Women's lower level of political ambition is not the only factor contributing to their legislative under-representation, but other factors often point in different directions. Discrimination against women by gatekeepers (Ashe and Stewart 2012) and by parties who make them candidates in hopeless ridings (Thomas and Bodet 2013) might explain part of the gender gap in legislative representation in the country, among other factors. Moreover, female candidates tend to be more qualified than male candidates, and voters hold them to more stringent qualification standards compared to male candidates (Bauer 2020). Still, in Canada, women receive as many votes as men on average (Sevi, Arel-Bundock, and Blais 2019). They are also *more* likely than men to win elections at the municipal level when they run (Lucas et al. 2021). An international study also finds female candidates get on average 2 percentage points *more* of the popular vote than male candidates (Schwarz and Coppock 2022). Moreover, Canadian elites discriminate against men when it comes to providing advice to political aspirants (Dhima 2022).

1.4 Potential Explanations: The Emergence of Gender Differences

This dissertation answers the following question: *"How do gender differences in interest in different political topics emerge?"* This section reviews the main theories that have been suggested to account for women's lower levels of self-reported political interest. This includes structural, institutional, and individual factors. Overall, no convincing unified theory has been proposed thus far to account for the emergence of this gap.

[6]Studies have also found that highly visible politicians are covered more negatively by the media (Fernandez-Garcia 2016; Goodyear-Grant 2013), are more likely to be the targets of uncivil tweets (Rheault, Rayment, and Musulan 2019) and have a lower income than men — even in Canada (Thomas 2013). Furthermore, when primed about the competitive aspects of politics, women's political ambition declines while men's remains stable (Preece and Stoddard 2015). These factors could also help to explain women's lower political ambition and representation.

1.4.1 Structural Factors

1.4.1.1 Society Values and Culture

Broad cultural differences between countries and through time explain some of the aggregate variation in gender differences in political interest. M. L. Inglehart (1981) shows that women are more interested in politics in traditionally Protestant countries than in traditionally Catholic countries. More recently, R. Inglehart and Norris (2003) further suggest that modernization has a positive effect on cultural attitudes towards gender equality: as societies move from agrarian to industrial and from industrial to postindustrial, people, especially younger generations, become more open to gender equality, though history, religion, and institutions also play a role in shaping country trajectory. Dassonneville and Kostelka (2021) also demonstrate that cultural gender differences — operationalized through differences in boys' and girls' math scores — explain countries' gender gap in political interest. Still, these cross-country variations do not explain why significant gender gaps in political interest remain in countries where gender norms are more egalitarian or where women's rights are stronger.

1.4.1.2 Women's Political Under-Representation

Women politicians' relative absence in politics might also explain part of the gender gap in political interest. Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) find that adolescent girls are more likely to discuss politics with friends in settings where there are more women legislators, while the increase for adolescent boys is non-significant, suggesting women politicians indeed can be role models who can increase girls' political interest. Mayer and Schmidt (2004) and Bos et al. (2022) also find that adolescent boys and girls in the United States, Mexico, Japan, and China all think politics is a men's domain, and girls are more likely than boys to report so. Adolescent boys also report higher political interest. These two findings might be linked to the fact that citizens in these four countries, like almost all countries in the world, are represented by a majority of male legislators (Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline 2023). Indeed, Bühlmann and Schädel (2012) find political interest is higher among men than women in 33 European countries, but this gap is smaller in countries with higher proportions of women in their countrywide legislative assembly. They suggest the relationship is not simply an artifact of reverse causality since it holds just as well in countries with gender quotas as those without gender quotas.[7] Still, predicted probabilities show that women would be significantly less interested in politics even in a country whose parliament has reached gender parity.

[7]There is thus a feedback loop: political interest leads to political ambition, which leads to political representation, which in turn leads to political interest for the group with a higher level of representation.

1.4.2 Institutional Factors

1.4.2.1 Political Institutions

Electoral systems could also influence gender differences in political interest. Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2010) find that proportional election systems — but not federalism and parliamentary systems — reduce gender gaps in political interest and political discussion compared with plurality systems. However, this distinction does not address the root cause of the gender gap in political interest.

1.4.3 Individual Factors

1.4.3.1 Life-cycle events

Some individual factors that might contribute to gender differences in political interest focus on adults and life-cycle events, including motherhood and employment.

1.4.3.1.1 Motherhood

First, parenthood might have a negative impact on political interest, especially for women. In a British study, Campbell and Winters (2008) find that being a mother has a negative effect on political interest similar in size to being a father. However, women are more likely than men to report lacking time to keep up with politics due to family time pressures. Moreover, studies in the United States, Denmark, and Finland have found that the birth of a first child has a negative effect on political discussion and political participation which is stronger for women than men, especially in the short run, since housework duties and child-rearing are disproportionately handled by women (Bhatti et al. 2019; Gidengil, Giles, and Thomas 2008). These findings might also translate to political interest. Nevertheless, while earlier Canadian studies also found that childbirth was negatively related to political participation (Kay et al. 1987), more recent Canadian studies do not find a link between childbirth, political discussion, and political participation (Gidengil, Giles, and Thomas 2008; O'Neill et al. 2017).

1.4.3.1.2 Employment

Second, labour force participation could have a different impact on political interest for women relative to men, as was commonly hypothesized when women started to enter the labour force (Bashevkin 1993). Schlozman, Burns, and Verba (1999) explain the rationale like this: "exposure on the job to a broader array of people and issues would heighten engagement with politics [including political interest], especially among [United States] women" (p. 44). However, both Schlozman, Burns, and Verba (1999) and Jennings and Niemi (1981) fail to find strong effects of labour force participation on the gender gap in political interest in the United States.

Mestre and Marín (2012) also find that women work on average three more hours of paid and unpaid work than men, and that the amount of unpaid domestic work is negatively related to political interest for women, suggesting women's lower political interest could stem from a lack of time. However, the same study also finds that the amount of unpaid domestic work is unrelated to political interest for men, which means some other factors must be at play to explain gender differences.

1.4.3.2 Biology

1.4.3.2.1 Genetics

The impact of biology, and more specifically genetics, on political interest, has been confirmed by recent studies on twins. Klemmensen et al. (2012) find that political interest and political efficacy are heritable and come from the same underlying genetic factor, but it remains unclear whether this underlying factor is more present among men, women, or none of them. The heritability of political interest, i.e. the proportion of the variability in political interest due to genetic differences among a population, varies in important ways from one study to the other and one national context to the other. It has been estimated that heritability stands at 24% (Weinschenk and Dawes (2017), United States), 36% (Weinschenk and Dawes (2017), Minnesota), 40% (Arceneaux, Johnson, and Maes (2012), United States), 43% (Klemmensen et al. (2012), United States), 50% (Dawes et al. (2014), Sweden and Weinschenk et al. (2019), Germany), 57% (Klemmensen et al. (2012), Denmark), and 62% (Bell, Schermer, and Vernon (2009), Canada and the United States). Canada therefore seems to be a country in which genetics explain a lot of the variation in political interest.

These studies emphasize that genetic differences, when they are found, add to but do not replace differences in political socialization. While estimates vary between samples, these numbers imply that 38 to 76% of the variability in political interest within these populations likely comes from environmental factors. A recent study also finds that "family socialization can compensate for (genetic) individual differences and foster increased political engagement," including political interest (Rasmussen et al. (2021), p. 1).

1.4.3.3 Socialization

Overall, structural, institutional, life-cycle, and biological factors provide a partial explanation of the gender gap in political interest, but socialization seems to be an especially fruitful avenue, as biological studies themselves admit. Hooghe (2022) defines political socialization as "the process where individual actors acquire political attitudes as a result of outside influences from their direct environment" (p. 99).

The idea that gender differences in political interest are rooted in early childhood socialization has been argued by many for a long time (Bashevkin 1993; Fraile and Gomez 2017). Mayer and Schmidt (2004) find that political interest is slightly higher for boys than girls in grades

7–9 in China, Mexico, and the United States, but not in Japan. Bos et al. (2022) find that girls are slightly more interested in politics at 6–7 years old, but then boys become more interested, and the gap grows larger until early adolescence.

Moreover, international and longitudinal studies find that political interest remains remarkably stable throughout life, including for high-school students, whose political interest is already high (Fraile and Sánchez-Vítores 2020; Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013; Prior 2010, 2019). Still, studies suggest that political interest becomes stronger from adolescence through early adult life (Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013), and even more so for men (Jennings and Niemi (1981), p. 276). Political socialization keeps happening at the adult age — but it does so at a lower rate than among children and teenagers, which are therefore at the center of this dissertation.

Socialization can be carried out by multiple actors. Studies have found children's political interest is mostly transmitted or influenced by four agents of socialization: parents (Dostie-Goulet 2009; Mayer and Schmidt 2004; Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013; Shehata and Amnå 2019), peers (Klofstad 2007; Shehata and Amnå 2019; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), media (Holt et al. 2013; Lupia and Philpot 2005; Shehata and Amnå 2019), and schools (Dassonneville et al. 2012; Mahéo 2019; Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets 2016). These agents can also influence each other, with Shehata and Amnå (2019) finding that political news consumption by parents and peers can influence their own political interest and, eventually, their children's. Transmission by parents and peers can take the form of interactions — notably political discussions — while media and schools can be agents of socialization through the contents they produce — notably political news or citizenship education classes — or the agents that bring them — journalists, teachers, or influencers.

The relative importance of these four agents has been studied by many. In Quebec, Dostie-Goulet (2009) finds that 14- to 17-year-old teenagers' political interest is better predicted by the frequency of political discussions with their parents than with friends, while discussions with history class teachers have a significant but lesser influence on children's political interest. In Sweden, Shehata and Amnå (2019) finds that 13- to 18-year-old teenagers' political interest is mostly affected by parents' political interest, with peers also having an important influence but not long-lasting effects. In Finland, Koskimaa and Rapeli (2015) find that 16- to 18-year-olds' political interest is mainly related to the presence of politics in their family and among their friends, with friends being the most important influence, contrary to Dostie-Goulet (2009)'s and Shehata and Amnå (2019)'s results. The influence of school is marginally statistically significant. Finally, Jennings and Niemi (1981) and Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete (2013) find that parents' role in political interest transmission mostly occurs during teenage years, while other factors explain growth among adults.

In practice, two main theories may help explain the gendered influence of these four agents in transmitting political interest to children: *social learning theory* and *gender homophily theory*. Both theories point to a broad influence of same-gender role models in socialization.

1.4.3.3.1 Social learning theory

Social learning theory suggests that children learn through the observation of their parents and peers, and model their behaviour, attitudes, habits and values after them (Gidengil, Wass, and Valaste 2016; Shehata and Amnå 2019). Through this process of observation of others, "children gradually learn what is considered appropriate and socially rewarded, and what is not in different contexts" (Shehata and Amnå (2019), p. 1058). Transmission of political attitudes is deemed to be more effective when cue-giving and reinforcement from the socializing agent are strong and consistent (Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009; Prior 2019).

While research about social learning and politics has most often been applied to the transmission of political participation (Gidengil, Wass, and Valaste 2016) or political engagement more generally (Jennings and Niemi 1981), a few recent studies argue social learning can also apply to orientations such as interest — in this case, political interest. Prior (2019) argues social learning can explain the transmission of political interest from parents to children. He suggests this transmission process can only occur at a time when children still live in the family home and after they start acquiring an understanding of what politics is — that is, in the early teens. Shehata and Amnå (2019) also hypothesize parents and peers who value current news affairs knowledge can transmit their political interest to children through both learning opportunities and social pressure. Learning opportunities can occur through political discussions with parents and peers, or through children's exposition to their parents watching or reading the news daily, which can give them a more concrete understanding of how politics affects their lives, a factor that predicts the development of political interest. Social pressure can occur when children feel they need to take an interest in politics to develop a sense of belonging or social identity. Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) also highlight parents' important role in fostering higher political engagement — including political interest — among their children, linking that role to a social learning process.

Research has found that social learning exhibits gender effects: *observer-model similarity* leads children to model their behaviour, values and attitudes based on the behaviour, values and attitudes of models that resemble them (Bandura 1969). Indeed, past research has shown that the trickle-down effect of political engagement from parents to children works in gendered ways, with sons modeling their behaviour after their fathers and daughters after their mothers (Gidengil, Wass, and Valaste 2016).[8] Political interest is also more strongly correlated between mothers and daughters and between fathers and sons than any other combination (Beauregard 2008; Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013; Owen and Dennis 1988).

1.4.3.3.2 Gender homophily theory

Homophily is "the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001), p. 416). *Gender homophily* refers to the ways in which children of the same gender tend to stick together and

[8]This dissertation uses the words "mother" and "father" without implying that there is exactly one mother and one father per family. Other situations are very common.

become friends, from at least the beginning of primary school (Stehlé et al. 2013). Children are even more likely to drop friends who have a friend from the other gender than to add the other-gender friend to their own group of friends (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). These patterns increase during primary school but diminish — without disappearing — after puberty (Shrum, Cheek Jr., and Hunter 1988; Stehlé et al. 2013).

Studies about gender homophily in social networking websites among teenagers and adults have yielded more nuanced results. Thelwall (2009) finds that MySpace users have similar levels of interactions regardless of their gender. However, Laniado et al. (2016) find strong gender homophily among adolescent girls and boys — though not always for the same kinds of online activities — on a Spanish social networking service.

1.5 Political Interest Dissected: Interest in Different Political Topics

Perhaps as a result of social learning processes, research has found that men and women are often interested in different issues. It is therefore possible that women are simply interested in aspects of politics which they do not always see as political. Studies have suggested the typically reported gender gap in political interest might be the result of inadequate measurement (Alozie, Simon, and Merrill 2003; Bourque and Grossholtz 1974; Keeling 2023; Tormos and Verge 2022). While Alozie, Simon, and Merrill (2003) use a very broad concept of "political orientation" including discussion, attention, and participation in various activities, recent studies have found a creative way of addressing the limitations of the traditional measure of political interest. On average, women report more interest in topics such as health care, education and gender issues, while men report more interest in foreign policy, partisan politics, and law and order, and topics such as taxes and local politics seem to be equally interesting to men and women (Campbell and Winters 2008; Coffé 2013; Ferrin et al. 2020; Hayes and Bean 1993; Kuhn 2004; Sabella 2004; Tormos and Verge 2022; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). These studies generally conclude that men and women are simply interested in different domains of politics and that politics is mentally associated with elections and parties, topics in which men have more interest,[9] therefore leading women to report lower levels of political interest overall. Tormos and Verge (2022) find that prompting for interest in several topics for which women typically report more interest, including gender issues and health care, makes women and men rate their political interest similarly, with an increase in political interest stronger among women than among men. Conversely, prompting respondents for partisan politics slightly reduces political interest among both men and women, but more strongly among women. Keeling (2023) uses a similar research design and also finds that prompting for interest in several topics including gender issues reduces the gender gap in self-reported political

[9]This mental association might be culture-specific to some degree. Conceptions of politics could be more removed from partisan politics in other situations such as Northwest Territories' and Nunavut's non-partisan legislative assemblies, but also in authoritarian one-party regimes.

interest, although this decline is due to a decline in self-reported political interest among men rather than an increase among women.

Why would women be more interested in health care, education and gender issues specifically? Kuhn (2004) argues that women's "political thinking revolves around terms of compassion and cooperation, not around contest and competition. Females are interested in solving concrete problems and are driven by social empathy, egalitarian values, and engagement for other people. [...] Females prefer unconventional forms of political participation" (p. 96). Women's higher interest in gender issues such as abortion and gender-based violence can be explained by the fact that these issues are more likely to affect them directly (Ferrin et al. 2020). For similar reasons, Campbell and Winters (2008) suggest that women's higher interest in health services matches with statistics suggesting that women are more frequent users of these services compared to men. Moreover, women's "continuing disproportionate share of childcare responsibilities may also lead them to be more interested in issues relating to education and social services" (p. 64).

Why would men be more interested in foreign policy, partisan politics, and law and order? The competitive nature of partisan politics seems to tap into men's tendency towards agency, leading them to express more interest in that aspect of politics. While studies are unclear about why men report more interest in foreign policy and law and order, it is possible to argue that men's higher rates of incarceration, stronger presence in the police force, and overrepresentation among world leaders could lead them to take more interest in these areas.

The reasonings behind differences in interest for different topics often center around a dichotomy between competition and cooperation, which may have to do with different personality traits — also potentially resulting from socialization.

1.5.1 Personality Traits

More specifically, gender may affect some personality traits that are relevant to the development and types of political interest. Rancer and Dierks-Stewart (1985) show that biological sex does not predict argumentativeness, while gender identity does, with masculine individuals more argumentative than feminine individuals. They measure gender identity using a scale of *expressive* (feminine) and *instrumental* (masculine) behaviours. In a literature review, Infante and Rancer (1996) similarly find that men are more likely than women to value arguing and engage in it, except for workplace-related arguing. Similarly, Shaw (2002) finds that female MPs in the United Kingdom are less likely to resort to adversarial language than male MPs. Niederle and Vesterlund (2007) also find that men are less risk-averse than women and tend to value competition more than women do. Individuals also tend to think men are better than women at negotiating, something that is then internalized by women who behave according to gender-based expectations, according to a United States study and a literature review (Kray, Thompson, and Galinsky 2001; A. K. Schneider 2017).

These differences seem to be politically relevant since a recent British study by 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, 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 M. C. Schneider et al. (2016).

1.6 Hypotheses: Towards a Unified Socialization Theory

This dissertation asks *"How do gender differences in interest in different political topics emerge?"* It hypothesizes that political socialization plays a central role in explaining the emergence of gender differences in political interest, with parents and peers the most important agents of childhood political socialization.

While gender tendencies towards communality and agency respectively contribute to women's interest in health care and men's interest in partisan politics,[10] a broader application of socialization theories that includes parents and peers would provide a more comprehensive understanding of who influences girls and boys in how much interest they have in various aspects of politics. Gender homophily and social learning both suggest that children are influenced by same-gender role models, but these theories need to be further specified. A broad application of social learning theory would predict a parent's political interest influences the development of their children's political interest more strongly for their same-gender children than other-gender children, but whether this applies to interest in political topics other than partisan politics has not been tested. On the other hand, gender homophily predicts more same-gender than mixed-gender peer discussions, and this finding applies to political discussions as well. However, no study has thus far examined the implications of this theory for gender differences in political interest.

The study seeks to bridge two literatures on gender, socialization, and political interest; one emphasizing personality traits leading to interest in different political topics, and the other emphasizing the transmission of political interest by same-gender role models. The goal is to measure interest in various political topics and link it to parents' and peers' interest in those same topics. This is something that has not been done before; parents' and children's political interest is typically compared using a single measure of political interest, but we do not know if same-gender role models have the same impact on interest transmission for each political topic.

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

[10] These processes might be reinforced by societal expectations about men's and women's roles, although this explanation is more structural than socialization-driven.

Hypothesis 2: *Children's interest in specific political topics is more affected by political discussions with their same-gender peers than other-gender peers.*

According to Hypothesis 1, on average, a mother will have more transmission potential of her interest in specific political topics to her daughters than sons through political discussion, for example. Hypothesis 2 uses the same logic for same-gender peers. Hypotheses 1 and 2 are summarized in Figure 1.1, with a few additional background details. Put neatly, the general theory is that *children's interest in specific political topics comes mainly from socialization by their same-gender parent(s) and peers.*

1.7 Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation mostly relies on survey data collected among Canadian children and teenagers. Chapter 2 outlines the data and methods used in all other chapters of this dissertation. It also provides descriptive statistics about some of the main variables used in the data analysis, including gender, personality traits, role models, interest in various political topics, and socio-demographic variables.

The next four chapters are empirical. Chapter 3 studies the evolution of political interest through life, answering questions about the stability of political interest and of the gender gap in self-reported political interest. Chapter 4 explores the role of parents in the transmission of political interest and provides the answer to Hypothesis 1. Chapter 5 does the same for the role of peers, answering Hypothesis 2, while Chapter 6 assesses the influence of teachers and social media influencers. The role of school and media has been emphasized by some studies, but the extent to which gendered effects will be present is less certain.

Finally, the conclusion provides an overall assessment of the influence of role models on the development of political interest among children and teenagers, and of the extent to which socialization can explain political interest gender gaps.

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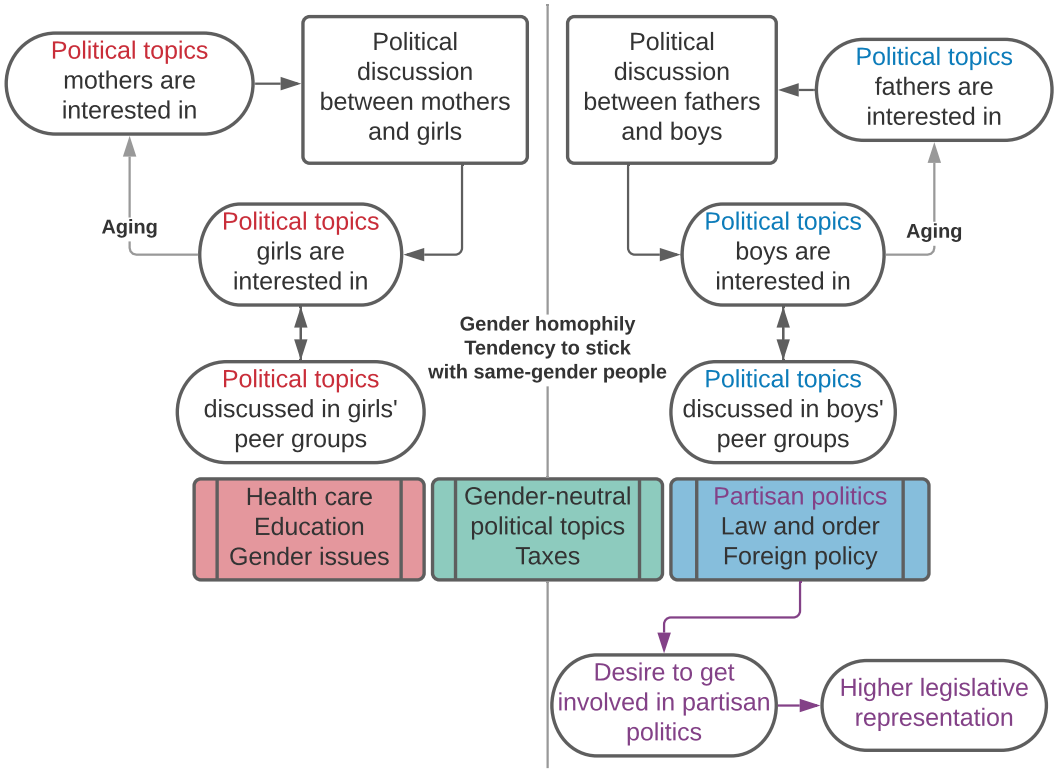

Figure 1.1: Theoretical Framework

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