Gendered Political Socialization

Why Women and Men Still Differ on Political Interest

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# Introduction

Traditional political science studies suggest that men are generally more interested in politics than women (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). However, recent studies (R. Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020; Rebenstorf 2004) 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, such as health care and education. 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 2014) — and political interest remains stable from an early age (Prior 2010, 2019). However, parent 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 comes mainly from socialization by their same-gender parent and peers*. Notably, it is argued that interest in *partisan* politics is distinctly transmitted by men and 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), 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.

Before digging deeper into concepts such as political interest and political ambition, it is important to define what is understood by *politics*. Politics is a contested concept (Gallie 1956). It has been defined in multiple ways by various authors. For Weber (1919), “[t]he concept is extremely broad and comprises any kind of leadership in action” (p. 1). A more recent and comprehensive definition is provided by Heywood (2007) (p. 34): “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.” Other sources have variously described politics as the art of government, as public affairs in general, as the non-violent resolution of disputes, or as power and the distribution of resources (Heywood 2007).

In this dissertation, for the sake of clarity, *politics* is defined according to Heywood’s main definition. Politics is therefore not necessarily related with the notion of leadership, and it is more than a partisan game. It includes actions that preserve the policy status quo as well as actions which aim at disrupting it, including contentious politics and interest groups which seek to influence the rules — from the international level to the local level.

Throughout this dissertation, the umbrella term *political engagement* is used to describe forms of commitment to politics through attitudes and actions — 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, intending to vote, voting, or working with interest groups or voluntary associations which seek to influence policy at any level — international, national, provincial, local, school board, and so on. *Political interest*, or being aware of politics and caring about it, is this study’s main variable of interest. Unless otherwise specified, it refers to self-reported interest in politics in general — and studies show that women and men tend to think about *partisan politics* more specifically when they answer survey questions on political interest (R. Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020; Rebenstorf 2004). This measure therefore has a bias towards partisan politics. Only when studies explicitly measure interest in *partisan politics*, this dissertation uses *interest in partisan politics* instead of *political interest*. *Political ambition* refers to ambition to run for political office (Fox and Lawless 2005). Unless otherwise specified, when *political discussion* and *political efficacy* are mentioned in this dissertation, they also refer to concepts which are likely tilted towards partisan politics.

*Gender* is understood 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, 160). While gender is viewed as 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). Various other gender identities have been identified, including transgender, non-binary, gender-queer and gender-ambiguous people (Matsuno and Budge 2017). In the 2019 Canadian Election Study, people who identify as “Other (e.g. Trans, non-binary, two-spirit, gender-queer)” made up 0.8% of all online respondents (Stephenson et al. 2020). 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.

While this dissertation focuses on the gender gap in self-reported political interest, different groups of women also differ on political interest. In the Dominican Republic, Spierings (2012) finds that Protestant women report levels of political interest similar to men and higher than Catholic women, while Mestizo women report lower levels of political interest than Indigenous women.

# The diagnosis

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), to participate in demonstrations and political rallies (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010), to donate money to political candidates (conflicting evidence from Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) and Tolley, Besco, and Sevi (2020)), to express high levels of political trust (conflicting evidence from Dassonneville et al. (2012) and Schoon and Cheng (2011)), to win elections when they run for office (Golder et al. 2017; Sevi, Arel-Bundock, and Blais 2019), and to express interest in local politics (Coffé 2013; Hayes and Bean 1993).[[1]](#footnote-1)

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[[2]](#footnote-2) (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[[3]](#footnote-3) (Dassonneville and Kostelka 2020; 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 (Fox and Lawless 2004, 2005).

Finally, research suggests women are more politically engaged on some aspects. For instance, women are more likely than men to be interested in health care, education and gender issues (R. Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020; Rebenstorf 2004), to give correct answers to knowledge questions on government services and social issues (Ferrin, Fraile, and García-Albacete 2018; Norris, Lovenduski, and Campbell 2004; Stolle and Gidengil 2010), and to 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, are the ones that matter the most for the daily conduct of politics in the country. The overall influence of women in Canadian politics is therefore limited.

Many 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.

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 politics (R. Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020; Rebenstorf 2004). Still, per Heywood (2007)’s definition, partisan politics is only one way in 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,[[4]](#footnote-4) since partisan politics is only the means through which relevant issues are 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). It therefore 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).

Studies find men have more political ambition than women. This might be due to the fact that 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 parental encouragement” (Fox and Lawless 2005, 654). 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,[[5]](#footnote-5) might therefore help to explain why women are under-represented in legislative assemblies in the vast majority of countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021). In Canada too, political issues are most often settled by assemblies and executives where men are the majority. At the time of writing, while the Canadian federal cabinet is gender-balanced, nine out of ten provincial premiers and most of their ministers are men. Ten years earlier, Tolley (2011) also found that women represented less than 25% of Canadian legislators at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, and only 15% of mayors.

Women’s lower level of political ambition is not the only factor contributing to their legislative under-representation. 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. Still, women are not discriminated against at the polls by Canadian voters (Sevi, Arel-Bundock, and Blais 2019) and are *more* likely than men to win elections at the municipal level when they run (Lucas et al. 2021). An international study also finds voters discriminate against *men* candidates by 2 percentage points (Schwarz and Coppock 2021). Moreover, Canadian elites discriminate against men when it comes to providing advice to political aspirants (Dhima 2020).

# Explaining the emergence of gender differences in political interest

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 overall levels of self-reported political interest. This includes structural, institutional, and individual factors. The conclusion is that no convincing unified theory has been proposed thus far to account for the emergence of this gap.

## Structural factors

Women politicians’ relative absence in politics might explain part of the gender gap in political interest. Mayer and Schmidt (2004) and Bos et al. (2021) 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 due to the fact that citizens in these four countries, like almost all countries in the world, are represented by a majority of men legislators (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021). Bühlmann and Schädel (2012)’s study of 33 European countries finds political interest is higher among men than women, 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.[[6]](#footnote-6) Still, predicted probabilities show that women would be significantly less interested in politics even in a country whose parliament has reached gender parity.

Broad cultural differences between countries and through time also 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 countries’ trajectory. Dassonneville and Kostelka (2020) 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.

## Institutional factors

Electoral systems could also have an influence on 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.

## Individual factors

### Life-cycle events

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

First, parenthood might have a negative impact on political interest, especially for women. In a British study, R. Campbell and Winters (2008) find that being a mother has a negative effect on political interest similar in size to being a father, though women are more likely to report lacking time to keep up with politics due to family time pressures. However, 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 with 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).

Second, labour force participation could have a different impact on political interest for women compared with men. However, Jennings and Niemi (2014) fail to find strong effects of labour force participation on the gender gap in political interest in the United States. Similarly, Schlozman, Burns, and Verba (1999) “had expected that 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), but they instead find null results.

### Biology

The impact of genetics on political engagement has been confirmed by many recent studies (Dawes and Loewen 2009; Fowler, Baker, and Dawes 2008; Loewen and Dawes 2012). Klemmensen et al. (2012) specifically 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. These studies also emphasize that genetic differences, when they are found, add to but do not replace differences in political socialization. This relatively recent literature therefore suggests some biological differences in political engagement are independent of environment and socialization.

### Socialization

While life-cycle events do not seem to have an effect on gender differences in political interest, some individual factors instead focus on socialization and, as biological studies themselves admit, find promising results.

First, women might simply be interested in those aspects of politics that are not viewed as “typical” politics. 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 (R. Campbell and Winters 2008; Ferrin et al. 2020; Rebenstorf 2004). Some topics, such as taxes, seem to be equally interesting to men and women. Both studies 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.[[7]](#footnote-7) This therefore leads women to report lower levels of overall political interest.

Second, gender might affect some personality traits that are relevant for 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. Women MPs have also been found to be less likely to resort to adversarial language in the United Kingdom (Shaw 2002). These differences seem to be politically relevant, since a recent British study by R. Campbell and Winters (2008) shows that men’s higher *partisan 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. Men are also more likely to engage in verbal aggressiveness, while women tend to believe that arguing is hostile and combative. Beliefs about gender differences in agency and communality also lead people to think men are better than women in negotiating, something that is then internalized by women which behave according to gender-based expectations, according to a United States study and a literature review (Kray, Thompson, and Galinsky 2001; Schneider 2017).

## Towards a unified socialization theory of gender differences in political interest

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. Interest in *partisan politics* stemming from men being more assertive and less communal than women seems to explain the endurance of gender differences in interest in various political topics through life. The findings of Rancer and Dierks-Stewart (1985) suggest agency and communality develop as a result of socialization, but two other theories rooted in *political* socialization could also be mobilized to explain the relationship between gender and political interest: *gender homophily theory* and *parental socialization theory*. Both theories point to a broad influence of same-gender role models in socialization.

*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, 416). *Gender homophily* refers to the ways in which children of the same gender tend to stick together and 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 MacD. 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.

*Parental socialization theory* suggests that parents transmit political interest to their children and that this process is gendered, as political interest is more strongly correlated between mothers[[8]](#footnote-8) and daughters and between fathers and boys than any other combination (Beauregard 2008; Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013; Owen and Dennis 1988).

# The transmission of political interest through childhood socialization

Children’s political interest has been found to be influenced by four main agents of socialization: parents, peers, media and the Internet, and schools. Before making formal hypotheses about their gendered effects, this dissertation assesses their role in transmitting political interest to children.

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. (2020) also find that boys are more interested in politics in elementary school, while Bos et al. (2021) 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 through life, including for high-school students, whose political interest is already high (Fraile and Sánchez-Vıtores 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 2014, 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. It seems worthwhile to study political socialization in the period of life where political interest is developed to better understand gender differences, since there seems to be some level of path dependency in individuals’ political interest afterwards.

## Parents

Parents’ role in transmitting political interest to their children has been emphasized by numerous studies. Political interest can be transmitted in parent–child political discussions (Dostie-Goulet 2009; Mayer and Schmidt 2004; Shehata and Amnå 2019), and parents’ political interest is linked to their children’s political interest (Neundorf, Smets, and Garcia-Albacete 2013; Shehata and Amnå 2019).

Research has found that the trickle-down effect of political interest from parents to children works in gendered ways. Mothers’ political interest has a stronger effect on their daughters than sons’ political interest, while fathers’ political interest has a stronger effect on their sons’ political interest. From the other perspective too, daughters’ political interest seems to be influenced mostly by their mothers’ political interest, while sons’ political interest seems to be influenced mostly by their father’s political interest (Beauregard 2008; Owen and Dennis 1988).

Gidengil, O’Neill, and Young (2010) and Cicognani et al. (2012) also find that a mother’s level of political participation has a positive link with her daughter’s political interest, while Beauregard (2008) finds that parents’ education has a positive influence on their children’s political interest regardless of parents’ gender.

Studies have investigated the gender patterns in parent–child political discussions, but the amount of political discussions does not seem to vary based on parents and children’s gender. While earlier studies found that children discuss politics more often with their fathers than mothers (Noller and Bagi 1985), more recent research has found no significant difference between fathers and mothers (Hooghe and Boonen 2015; Mayer and Schmidt 2004; Shulman and DeAndrea 2014). Similarly, while Noller and Bagi (1985) found that parents discuss politics more often with their sons, Mayer and Schmidt (2004) find they discuss it as much with their daughters as their sons.

## Peers

Friends and acquaintances can contribute to the development of political interest, mainly through political discussions. Political discussions with friends and acquaintances increase political interest among child and adult respondents (Klofstad 2007; Shehata and Amnå 2019). Peer-group diversity can also contribute to the development of political interest. The size of one’s social network has been found to have a positive relationship with political interest, while political disagreement is not related to it (Pattie and Johnston 2009).

Political discussions among peers typically exhibit gender effects. Among adults, leaving aside relatives, 84% of men report discussing politics only with men, while 64% of women report discussing politics only with women (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). This could be a by-product of gender homophily, since people generally spend more time with other people of the same gender.

## Media and the Internet

Research has been done on the influence of political news on the development of political interest among adolescents. Although political interest can influence news media consumption, studies have shown the relationship also works in the other direction: watching more political news on traditional media and on social media has a positive effect on political interest (Holt et al. 2013; Shehata and Amnå 2019).

Websites can also have a positive influence on people’s political interest. Lupia and Philpot (2005) find young adults can gain political interest by visiting informative websites under certain conditions.

Studies mostly find boys use the Internet more frequently than girls. Willoughby (2008) finds that boys use the Internet just as frequently as girls in early high school, but girls’ Internet use decreases in late high school, notably due to a decline in gaming, making older teenage boys more active on the Internet than girls. Tsai and Tsai (2010) also find boys use the Internet more than girls in junior high school, but purpose-wise, girls use the Internet for communication while boys use it more for Web exploration.

Online political engagement is more prevalent among boys than girls according to Cicognani et al. (2012), but Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper (2005) find that girls visit more political and civic websites.

## Schools

Schools can influence childhood socialization in many ways, including citizenship education classes, classroom political discussions, extracurricular activities and active learning strategies.

While earlier studies found only weak links between citizenship education classes and political interest (Langton and Jennings 1968), more recent studies find a positive link (Dassonneville et al. 2012; Mahéo 2019; Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets 2016). *Citizenship education* and *civic education* classes include classes teaching facts about government and politics but also promoting political engagement (Althof and Berkowitz 2006; Themistokleous and Avraamidou 2016).

Extracurricular and active learning activities can have an impact on youth political interest. The quantity of class group projects and membership in school council are positively related to political interest, but not participation in voluntary associations nor parliamentary visits (Dassonneville et al. 2012).

Classroom political discussions in general can also increase students’ political interest. For instance, students’ perceptions of an *open classroom climate* marginally increases their political interest (Dassonneville et al. 2012). An *open classroom climate* is one in which “students experience the discussion of social and political issues while in class and [in which] they feel comfortable contributing their own opinions during such discussions” (D. E. Campbell 2007, 62).

The role of classroom political discussions in political socialization might be gendered. For instance, Mahony (1985) finds that girls are less likely to participate in classroom discussions of politics because boys make the classroom climate aggressive. However, Rosenthal, Jones, and Rosenthal (2003) show that, while girls’ presence has a slight positive impact on girls’ speaking time, interruptions occur as frequently between adolescents whatever their gender, and studies find that 8th- to 12th-grade girls are *more* likely than boys to report an open classroom climate (Blankenship 1990; D. E. Campbell 2007; Maurissen, Claes, and Barber 2018).[[9]](#footnote-9)

## Summary

Overall, studies generally find parents, peers, media and schools play an important role in the transmission of political interest. Mothers and fathers, despite speaking to their children about politics as much regardless of gender, have different influences on them that also vary based on children’s gender. However, studies have not tested whether peers, teachers or media personalities also have a stronger influence on political interest when they share the child’s gender. For peers, gender homophily theory provides a strong reason to believe this would also be the case. Also, most of these findings imply definitions of politics that implicitly emphasize partisan politics over other aspects, but without formally hinting at it. Deconstructing by topic parents and peers’ influence on political interest therefore seems relevant.

# Hypotheses

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 agency vs. communality contribute to women’s interest in health care and men’s interest in partisan politics, a broader application of socialization theory that includes parents and peers would provide a more comprehensive understanding of who influences girls and boys in how much interest they have in varied aspects of politics. Gender homophily and parental socialization both suggest that children are influenced by same-gender models, but these theories need to be further specified. Parental socialization predicts a parent’s political interest influences political interest more strongly for their same-gender children than other-gender children, but it is not clear if this applies to interest in political topics other than partisan politics. 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.

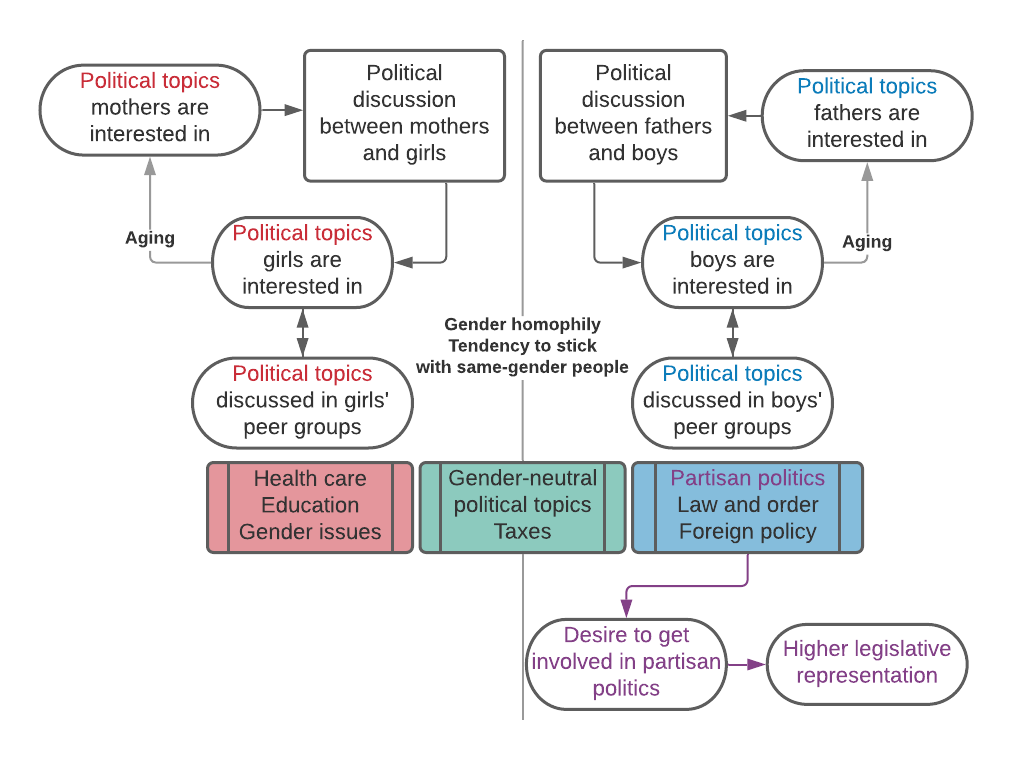
The study seeks to bridge two literatures on gender, socialization and political interest; one that emphasizes agency/communality leading to interest in different political topics, and the other suggests the transmission of political interest by same-gender models. The goal is to measure interest in various political topics and link it to parents’ 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 don’t know if same-gender 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 than other-gender parent.*

***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. This reinforces gender gaps in interest in individual political topics. Hypothesis 2 uses the same logic for same-gender peers. Hypotheses 1 and 2 are summarized in Figure 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 and peers*.



Theoretical Framework

# Data and methods

This study relies on four sets of data, all collected in Canada. Canada is often classified by reports as one of the best countries for women (Conant 2019; Equal Measures 2030 2020; US News & World Report 2020), but only 29% of its elected MPs are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021). Moreover, CES data since 1997 show that the gender gap in political interest has remained fairly stable despite a recent increase in the percentage of women politicians at the national and provincial levels (Sevi 2021). Still, studies that measure interest in different political topics have been conducted in Europe and the Middle East, so it is unclear how the gender differences they find apply in North America. These characteristics make Canada a country worth studying to better understand the underlying reasons behind the stability of the gender gap in the aggregate measure of political interest, which mainly taps into interest in partisan politics. The transmission of political interest to children seems like the logical place to look for explanations.

First, Canadian Election Study (CES) data on various aspects of political engagement will be analyzed, including political interest, political knowledge, internal efficacy, external efficacy, political discussion, political debating, participation in protests, participation in boycotts, participation in petitions, party membership, donations to parties, and voting. CES data allows time series analyses of the evolution of gender gaps through time, as some political engagement questions have been asked since 1965. Time-series World Values Survey (WVS) data will also be used to provide better descriptive statistics on these elements when available. After being weighted to better represent the Canadian population, these data will visually represent descriptive statistics by age and gender on political engagement.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Second, data will be gathered among Canadian high-school students. A partnership with a Canadian non-profit organization such as CIVIX or myBlueprint will also be sought in order to conduct a survey experiment in a citizenship education program. Three of CIVIX’s programs are especially worth considering: Rep Day, Student Budget Consultation, and News Literacy. They are all school-directed citizenship education activities in elementary and high schools that are offered in a large number of classes throughout Canada. The survey experimental design would compare the evolution of political interest for boys and girls in classrooms that took part in the program and in classrooms that did not by measuring political interest both before and after the program, while the descriptive part of the survey would look at broader trends among both groups. For descriptive purposes, schools would be selected randomly to be part of the survey without regards to their participation in the program. Panel data would be collected before the program (time 1) and after it (time 2). Questions would be asked about students’ interest in various political topics, the political topics they discuss with their mothers, fathers and peers, and in school political discussions, as well as the political topics discussed by the people they follow in traditional and social media, among other things. The Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence and Helmreich 1978; Ward et al. 2006) will also be used to assess students’ degree of agency and communion and see if same-gender parent/peer–child interest correlations remain when controlling for the child’s degree of agency/communality. These data will be analyzed using multilevel modelling to help disentangle student-level, classroom-level, school-level and provincial-level effects (if it applies). In total, thousands of students should respond to the survey questionnaire.

Finally, data will be gathered among surveyed children’s parents, to cross-validate their children’s perceptions and increase the robustness of findings. Parents will be contacted by selected schools and given the questionnaire to be filled if they so wish.[[11]](#footnote-11) Only one poll will be conducted with parents. Questions will be asked about parents’ interest in various political topics and the political topics they discuss with their sons and daughters. To further test if parents speak about different topics to their sons and daughters, a question will be asked about the number of children of each gender parents have: families with daughters only might speak about different political topics than families with sons only. These data will provide cross-validated data to help respond to Hypothesis 1. In total, thousands of parents should respond to the survey questionnaire.

The second and third parts of the analysis will be performed by the researcher himself if no partnership can be established with a citizenship education organization. In that case, the survey experimental part will need to be abandoned, although other questions in the students and parents’ questionnaires will be kept.

# Dissertation chapters

1. Introduction
2. Gender differences in political interest in Canada: trends from childhood to adulthood
3. Parents’ influence in boys’ and girls’ political interest
4. Peers’ influence in boys’ and girls’ political interest
5. The impact of citizenship education on gender differences in political interest
6. Conclusion

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1. Controlling for some of the other political attitudes mentioned here, women become *more* interested in local politics (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010) and *more* likely to vote in national elections (Coffé 2013) than men, but the current focus is on raw gender differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *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, 538) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Second-order elections include European elections, municipal elections, and most types of other sub-regional elections. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The long-standing concept of participatory democracy is also well accepted among feminist and intersectional theorists (Collins 2017; Phillips 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Studies have also found that highly visible politicians are covered more negatively by the media (Fernandez-Garcia 2016), 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). These factors could also help to explain women’s lower political ambition and representation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This mental association might be culture-specific to some degree. Conceptions of politics cannot be based on partisan politics in other situations such as Northwest Territories’ and Nunavut’s non-partisan legislative assemblies, but also in authoritarian one-party regimes. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Among adults, Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) and Beauvais (2020) also show that women and men’s relative speaking time in a deliberative and decision-making setting depends on the number of women. When decisions are made by a majority, the presence of more women leads to more speaking time for each woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Descriptive statistics will also be analyzed by age, gender and ethnicity, and age, gender and immigrant status. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Each classroom will need to assign a personal number to children to be matched with their parents, while keeping data anonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)