**Research Note: Women in Party Leadership, Partisanship, and Political Support**

Evidence from national and cross-national data shows that citizens’ expressed levels of political support are guided by party affiliation (Anderson & Guillory 1997, Anderson et al. 2005, Banducci and Karp 2003). The resulting legitimacy gap between winners and losers of electoral contests has concerned scholars for normative reasons. While partisanship can be expected to influence orientations toward institutions with partisan office holders, evidence suggest that the legitimacy gap extends to non-partisan institutions (Bartels and Kramon 2020). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the effect of partisanship on levels of political support is not ephemeral (Anderson and LoTempio 2002). Yet, scholars have been able to identify conditions under which the effects of winning and losing are more or less pronounced. Among the factors that condition the effect of partisanship are electoral institutions (Anderson and Guillory 1997, Anderson et al. 2005), margins of victory (Plescia 2019), and political turnovers (Moehler and Lindberg 2009).

More recent research has been dedicated to exploring the effects of factors that are not directly related to the election or governing institutions (Williams et al. 2020, 1[[1]](#footnote-1)). Among the most noteworthy theoretical contributions is recent work that explores the role of gender, partisanship, and satisfaction with democracy (Williams et al. 2020). Williams et al. argue that the observed divergence in levels of satisfaction with winning is a result of differences in levels of political socialization. The authors argue that the effect of winning will be greater for men than women because of the historical exclusion of women and the resulting gender gap in political socialization (Williams at al. 2020, 2). Williams et al. also argue that the gender gap in satisfaction with winning is smaller where there is greater descriptive representation of women. (Williams et al. 2020, 3). Using cross-national data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), the authors find evidence of the gender gap in satisfaction after electoral victory. Additionally, descriptive representation seems to reduce the gender gap in satisfaction with winning. These findings illustrate the importance of symbolic representation on levels of political support. However, the argument does not account for characteristics of the winning political party.

In this article, I argue that understanding the gender gap in satisfaction with electoral victory must consider the winning party’s commitment to gender equality. The argument presented by Williams et al. suggests that the effect of symbolic representation, measured using the proportion of women in the national legislature, can be seen through the increased levels of political support exhibited by women affiliated with parties that won the election. I argue that characteristics of the political party respondents affiliate themselves with clarifies the mechanism that links symbolic representation to satisfaction with winning the election. More specifically, I expect that the increased presence of women in party-leadership positions leads to a reduction in the gender gap in satisfaction with winning. Additionally, I argue that characteristics of the party in power are important even for respondents not affiliated with the party that won. I expect, among losers, the gap in disappointment with not winning increases when the winning party is more committed to gender equality. The enlargement of the gender gap is a result of the heightening of efficacy among women and the withdrawal of support resulting from men’s resentment of women in political leadership positions.

The argument is tested using cross-national survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Party commitment to gender equality is measured using an expert coded variable from the V-Party Dataset. A party’s commitment to gender equality is measured using the proportion of women in national-level leadership positions.

**Winning, Losing, and Levels of Political Support:**

Previous literature categorizes forms of political support from most diffuse to most specific (Norris 2017). According to this categorization, confidence in political institutions and approval of incumbent officeholders are the two most specific forms of political support. Examples of more diffuse forms of political support are attitudes toward and approval of core principles of governance (Norris 2017, 23). Across indicators of systems support, partisanship has been shown to be an important predictor (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Moehler 2009). Citizens that identify with parties that won the elections express higher levels of political support than respondents not affiliated with the winning party.

Although approval of the incumbent is the most specific form of political support, previous literature shows that citizens are guided by partisanship when expressing even the most diffuse forms of support. That is, the partisanship of the current officeholders determines the amount of political support granted to the regime. Previous scholars have referred to the divergence in political support between winners and losers as a legitimacy gap (Moehler and Lindberg 2009). Scholars frequently cite the normative concerns associated with political support granted and withheld according to partisanship (Moehler 2009). However, it is not always clear whether the gap is driven by the satisfaction of winners or the disappointment of losers.

Previous scholars emphasize the attitudes of losers because losing is expected to be more influential than winning. Anderson et al. suggest that losing is more important for two reasons. First, drawing on research in psychology, they argue that losing weighs more heavily on people than winning (Tversky and Kahneman 1997; cited in Anderson et al. 2005, 6). Additionally, with regards to regime stability, winners are more likely to favor the status quo and losers are more likely to instigate political change (Anderson et al. 2005, 7). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the legitimacy gap is driven, at least in part, by the dissatisfaction of losers.

That being said, the effect of partisanship is also studied with an emphasis on winners. For example, work on the gender gap in political socialization argues that the effect of descriptive representation can be seen in women’s levels of political support in cases where they vote for the winning party (Williams et al. 2020). The decision to emphasize winners or losers is one of consequence. An example of the implications of such decisions is related to how non-partisan respondents are included in measurement strategies.

An argument emphasizing the role of satisfaction with winning, for example, categorizes voters that did not indicate attachment to a party and voters affiliated with parties that lost as non-winners (Williams et al. 2020). Other work focuses on respondents that affiliate with parties that did not win (Nadeau and Blais 1993; Anderson et. al 2005; Craig et al. 2009). Underlying both approaches is an assumption that winners grant the regime additional levels of political support and losers withhold support. In both approaches, the authors have theoretical reasons to emphasize one category or the other. For example, work that explores the role of political institutions suggest that majoritarian systems yield satisfied winners and disappointed losers. On the other hand, more consensual institutions, such as ones that include proportional mechanisms of seat allocation, are expected to reduce disappointment among losers and reduce satisfaction among winners (Anderson et al. 2005).

Institutions are an important predictor of the legitimacy gap because they have the potential to shape policy outcomes and impose limits on the power of elected incumbents (Anderson et al. 2005, 121). Additionally, more consensual institutions tend to give supporters of minority parties more of a voice in the political process (Anderson and Guillory 1997, 68). While minority parties are not always in government, their inclusion in, for example, national legislatures can mitigate disappointment among supporters. Similar to minorities, women have experienced a history of exclusion from political life. However, unlike supporters of minority parties, women can more often be affiliated with winning parties. Therefore, scholars explore the influence of increased political inclusion on the satisfaction with winning (Williams et al. 2020).

**The Effect of Symbolic Representation:**

Evidence suggests that, when affiliated with a party that won the election, women tend to be less satisfied with winning compared to men (Williams et al. 2020). Williams et al. look to two factors that may explain the gender gap in satisfaction with winning. First, the divergence could be a result of men exhibiting traits culturally understood to be masculine. An example of gender performance is that men engage in risky behavior and are more competitive. On the other hand, women are more risk averse than men (Williams et al. 2020, 3). Second, the gender gap in political satisfaction can also be explained by women’s withdrawal from politics due to it being a male dominated environment. This argument is consistent with what is posited in work that examines descriptive representation and its effects on political engagement (Verba et al. 1997; Gay 2002, Lawless 2004).

Williams et al. argue that the gap in satisfaction with winning can be reduced when more women are in visible political positions (Williams et al. 2020, 4). This argument builds on previous literature that emphasizes the role of symbolic representation (Piktin 1967; Mansbridge 1999; Lawless 2004; cited in Williams 2020, 4). When comparing symbolic representation to descriptive representation, Pitkin argues that “symbol-making need not be a matter of working on the symbol; it seems rather to involve working on the minds of those who are to be represented or who are the audience accepting the symbolization” (Pitkin 1967, 111). Thus, the election or appointment of women in visible political positions is expected to alter the attitudes of women in ways that foster increased political engagement.

It is important to unpack the mechanisms used to link symbolic representation to increased levels of political support. However, it is difficult to identify ways in which women’s inclusion in public office can have an effect independent of substantive representation, underlying attitudes of citizens, and the partisan attachments of women politicians. That being said, scholars have theorized several mechanisms that account for public perception and elite behavior. For example, Lawless (2004) focuses on several mechanisms. First, women, once elected, either act in ways or are perceived to act in ways that makes women representatives seem more responsive and trustworthy. Second, being represented by a woman can increase gender consciousness among women. (Lawless 2004, 83). Third, the inclusion of women may foster change in the political discourse in ways that facilitate communication between political elites and citizens (Lawless 2004, 84).

While there may be mechanisms that link symbolic representation to political support regardless of party-congruence, I argue that this should not be the case when the effect of symbolic representation is analyzed through partisan victories and losses. Given that gender tends to be a crosscutting identity (Htun 2004) and symbolic representation may heighten gender consciousness (Lawless 2004), respondents may consider both identity factors when granting political support to a regime. While symbolic representation is important for gender consciousness, it is not clear if it is as important for women affiliated with parties that are less committed to gender equality.

Literature on candidate evaluation suggests that, in addition to partisanship, gender is an important cue for women voters (Plutzer and Zipp 1996). However, the evaluation of women candidates is shaped by the political party of the candidate (Dolan 2013). While Williams et al. are looking at diffuse levels of political support and not candidate evaluations, they do not account for the partisanship of women in government. If partisanship can be expected to determine evaluation of women in government in the same way it does at the level of candidates, then we should expect to see an influence of partisanship on evaluations of increased presence of women in government.

**Theory and Hypotheses:**

Affiliation with political parties tends to be a stable identity that is adopted in accordance with other group identity factors at a young age (Iyengar et al. 2019, 130). However, political parties vary according to the degrees in which women are included in leadership positions (O’Brien 2015, 1024; Musella 2017, 39). Previous literature suggests that women’s satisfaction with winning reduces the gender gap in political support when more women are in visible political positions (Williams et al. 2020). Among various mechanisms that explain the reduction in the gender gap in satisfaction with winning is the presence of a role model effect (Williams et al. 2020, 4). Previous literature shows that the presence of more female candidates increases political engagement among women (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; cited in Williams et al. 2020). I argue that the effect of symbolic representation can be seen in the presence of women in visible leadership positions in the political party.

Descriptive representation in the leadership positions of political parties is particularly important when analyzing satisfaction which results from being affiliated with the winning party. Williams et al. show that symbolic representation is important because politics becomes more inclusive in the view of women (Williams et al 2020, 4). This claim is consistent with arguments that emphasize the role of efficacy on levels of political support (Van der Meer and Zmerli 2017, 5). I argue that women’s assessments of the degree of inclusion and efficacy are heightened when their party is in power and that party is more committed to gender equality. An emphasis on the characteristics of the winning party is required because members of the party occupy roles in government or leadership positions in the legislature. Looking only at the proportion of women in the legislature or the presence of women executives, regardless of party characteristics, does not explain why we only see an effect of symbolic representation from increased descriptive representation in the legislature (Williams et al. 2020).

I suggest that the same argument employed by Williams et al. can be employed to explain why symbolic representation in the party can lead to increased satisfaction with winning among women. Considering that women withdraw from politics when they feel excluded and observe gender bias (Williams et al. 2020), I argue that women are less likely to be satisfied with winning when they feel excluded from the political party. When women observe women in leadership positions in the party they will be more likely to be satisfied with winning because the win is for a party they perceive as more inclusive. This argument suggests the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** *The gender gap in satisfaction with winning is reduced when the winning party has more women in leadership positions.*

In addition to the gender gap being reduced by women observing that politics is more inclusive, Williams et al. argue that men perceive the increase in descriptive representation as loss of status (Williams et al. 2020, 4). This argument is built on evidence from literature that shows that men behave aggressively when more women enter political life (Kathlene 1994). At the level of citizens, we also know that macropartisanship is influenced by perceptions of women’s empowerment (Ondercin 2017). Attitudes can also be influenced by gender stereotypes and resentment toward women in leadership positions (Williams et al. 2020, 4).

Considering men’s hostility toward women in leadership positions, I argue that an emphasis on the effect of losing can also contribute to our understanding. As is stated in the first hypothesis, when considering winners, I expect the gender gap in satisfaction with winning to decrease with higher descriptive representation in party leadership positions. However, I expect a different effect to occur between losers. I argue that the characteristics of the winning party also shape levels of political support among losers. Evidence suggests that attitudes of partisans are shape by perceptions of the out-group (Iyengar et al. 2019). Evidence also suggest that conditions that facilitate political inclusion, such as consensus political systems, mitigate the effect of losing (Anderson et al. 2005). I argue that the increased descriptive representation of women in the winning party should increase the gender gap between losers. My expectation regarding losers is made for the following reasons.

First, I expect women to be less disappointed when losing than men when the winning party is more committed to gender equality. While gender evaluations of women candidates are determined by partisanship (Dolan 2013), I argue that this may be the case for two reasons invoked in literature on symbolic representation (Williams et al. 2020). Primarily, more women in leadership positions may contribute to or coincide with an increase in women in government. The fact that the focus is on the winning party is important because the party in power is represented to a large degree in executive positions and, in the case of parliamentary democracies, the legislature. Additionally, evidence suggests that countries with more women in party leadership positions are more likely to adopt gender quotas (Caul 2001). Therefore, in cases where women are represented in leadership positions of winning parties, I expect women associated with losing parties to be less likely to withhold political support. This argument builds on the expectation that increase descriptive representation leads to politics being more welcoming to women (Williams et al. 2020).

However, increased political engagement among women does not necessitate an increase in levels of political support. Gaps in political socialization are shown by Williams et al. to cause a gap in satisfaction with winning. There may be reason to believe that increased engagement of women leads to more commitment to their political parties. Among losers, this may mean that women that feel more efficacious become just as disappointed as men after losing. Therefore, increased engagement of women may also have the potential to narrow the gender gap in disappointment among losers.

An alternative explanation for why the gender gap will remain larger among losers when the winning party is more committed to gender equality concerns men’s response to more women in leadership positions. I expect that when men lose to parties with more women in visible leadership positions, they will be more disappointed in losing. An implication of men’s resentment of women in leadership positions is the enlargement of the gender gap among losers. This argument suggests the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2**: *Increased presence of women in the leadership positions of winning political parties leads to an increase in the gender gap in political support among respondents affiliated with parties that did not win the elections*.

A distinction that may inform our understanding of who drives the gender gap among respondents that are not winners is among partisans and non-partisans. The second hypothesis can be separated in to two parts:

**Hypothesis 2A***: Increased presence of women in leadership positions enlarges the gender gap among respondents affiliated with a party that lost the election.*

The first component tests what is principally suggested in my argument for the second hypothesis. Women affiliated with parties that lost will be less likely to withhold political support when the winning party is more committed to gender equality. However, the first component encompasses the concern that a more gender inclusive political environment may narrow the gap in engagement of partisans. Women partisans may be just as likely as men to be disappointed in losing because they are attached to their political party. Such an effect may undermine the presence on a gender gap in disappointment or cast doubt on our understanding of whether the gender gap in disappointment is driven by men or women. I argue that looking at non-partisans may be informative in that we may be able to identify the presence of men being more likely to withhold support.

**Hypothesis 2B:** *Increased presence of women in leadership positions of winning political parties leads to the enlargement of the gender gap among non-partisans.*

When looking at non-partisans, I find more reason to believe that women may be more likely to increase levels of political support and less reason to expect the effect of not winning to yield disappointment. Observing more women in political positions may still heighten efficacy and support among non-partisans. Alternatively, the effect of women in leadership positions of the winning party may not have an effect on the levels of support of women. The gender gap can still be driven by men with holding political support because of the winning party’s commitment to gender equality. The arguments that explains reason for men to withhold support remain relevant when analyzing non-partisans. Williams et al. expects the possibility of male winners to withhold support when there are more women in visible political positions regardless of the women elites’ party affiliation. Men withhold support because of threats to power and privilege perceived in the inclusion of women in politics (Williams et al. 2020, 4). Reasons to doubt the presence of a

gender gap between non-partisans includes indifference. Non-partisans tend to be indifferent to polarizing behavior of elites (Thornton 2013). Therefore, non-partisans may not rely on gender as a cue for levels of political support in the same way partisans do.

**Data and Methods:**

The argument suggested in the previous section can be tested at various levels of political support. At the level of diffuse support, I build on previous work that predicts attitudes toward governing principles such as satisfaction with democracy (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Williams et al. 2020). A primary reason to emphasize this level of political support is because this is where we know that symbolic representation matters to winners (Williams et al. 2020). Second, there are increased normative implications for factors that influence diffuse forms of support. In this case, the hypothesized effect does not concern incumbent officeholders or institutions, an area where partisanship is a clearer signal to respondents. Rather, satisfaction with democracy reflects support for the rules and principles that determine political outcomes in society.

Consistent with Williams et al. (2020), to predict satisfaction with democracy, I use survey data from all modules of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (Williams et al. 2020). Data is collected in fifty-five countries between 1996 and 2019. The dependent variable is an ordinal item that measures satisfaction with democracy. The data includes variables measuring relevant political attitudes and demographics. A major drawback from using the cross-national sample included in the CSES is that the sample does not represent many countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Africa, and Asia. The sample overrepresents countries with more experience with elections.

A party’s commitment to gender equality is measured using an expert-coded variable from the V-Party dataset. Experts are asked about the proportion of national-level leadership positions occupied by women in each political party. Responses are ordinal and range from no women in leadership positions to balanced (40 percent or more). The V-party dataset is also used to control for factors at the party level. For example, previous literature suggests that presence of women in party leadership positions is determined by factors such as electoral competition (O’Brien 2015). V-Party includes variables that account for electoral competition both in vote share and seat share in the legislature. We can also account for the positions of political parties on issues. Expert-coded variables on the positions of parties on issues, such as women’s participation in the labor force, will be important to isolate the effect of the presence of women in leadership from ideology or policy positions.

Given that my work builds on the contribution of Williams et al. (2020), I also include the same control variables collected by the authors from the several sources. This includes variables that measure the proportion of women in the legislature, GDP, Polity Score, the presence of Gender Quotas[[2]](#footnote-2). Additionally, I control for demographics measured in the CSES such as age, education, and income.

The unit of analysis will be individual respondents. Considering that I am interested in a variable at the party-level and the multi-level structure of the data, I use multi-level models to test the hypotheses. Respondents are nested in political parties and, more generally, countries. I use a three-level model that allows for a better understanding of the heterogeneity at all levels of analysis. The gender gap discussed in the article is measured using a three-variable cross-level interaction. The effect of being a woman is interacted with winning and the proportion of women in the leadership position of the winning political party. Previous literature employs this approach to measure the gender gap in satisfaction with winning and the effect of symbolic representation (Williams et al. 2020).

**Conclusion:**

This article presents an argument about the importance of characteristics of the winning political party. We know that a gap in satisfaction with winning exists between men and women that identify with the party that won and that symbolic representation in the legislature influences this gap (Williams 2020). I argue that similar explanations to the ones used to explain the importance of symbolic representation suggest the importance of gender inclusion in the political party. I argue that the gender gap in satisfaction with winning will be reduced when the winning party is more inclusive. I argue that looking at the winning political party’s commitment to gender equality reveals an interesting dynamic that occurs among respondents that are not affiliated with the party that won the election. I argue that the gender gap in disappointment with losing, measured by interacting the effect of being a woman and not winning, is increased when the winning party has more women in leadership positions. The increase in the gender gap among non-winners is a result of women respondents potentially granting higher levels of political support and men withholding political support.

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1. Pagination is not yet available. This refers to the first page of the Williams et al article that can be accessed using the url included in the bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Williams et al collect data from the following sources. Information on GDP is collected from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators. Polity Scores are collected from the Center of Systemic Peace. Data on the presence of women in parliament and gender quotas is collected from the Varieties of Democracy Project (VDem) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)