

More Subject than Citizen: Age, Gender and Political Disengagement in Canada

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Over thirty years ago, the mobilization of the second-wave women's movement appeared to hold the key to opening up the world of electoral politics for women. Studies of women's engagement with and participation in this male-dominated arena suggested that once women had access to higher education, personal income and higher-status occupations at the same rate as men, gender gaps in political engagement and participation would close.

In the Canadian context, however, this has not proven to be the case. The best-educated generation of women in Canadian history – those who are currently under the age of 27 – are in fact less interested in the formal political arena, less knowledgeable about it, feel less political efficacy, and are less involved in the formal political process than their male peers or previous generations of women.

Using data from the 1984, 1997, 2000 and 2004 Canada Election Studies,¹ this paper will demonstrate that young Canadian women are less engaged with and participate at lower rates in the formal political process than do either their male peers or older Canadian women. We find that once it is unpacked, the political disengagement of young Canadians is in fact a gendered phenomenon, produced in large part by young women's lack of interest in and knowledge about formal politics. Probing the patterns of disengagement more deeply, we conclude that socialization and the acquisition of political knowledge play a particularly important role in cueing political engagement for young women. Our findings suggest that childhood exposure to politics is a more important trigger for political engagement among women. The youngest cohort of voting-age Canadians has had less exposure to political socialization than prior generations. This has had a disproportionately larger negative impact on young women than young men.

Understanding Political Engagement: the inter-section of gender and generation

When focusing on the political orientations and behaviour of young women, it is important to note the two sets of forces being brought to bear. As *young* women, these individuals are part of a generation that has been identified as the most politically disengaged and non-participatory in recent memory (Blais *et. al.* 2002 and 2004; Gidengil *et. al.* 2004; Rubenson *et. al.* 2004; Putnam 2000). As *young women*, they belong to a group that has experienced exclusion from the formal political arena, and that has been demonstrated to express less interest in this arena and to participate at lower rates in several political activities, including membership in interest groups and political parties (Burns *et. al.* 2001; Gidengil *et. al.* 2004; Young and Cross 2003; Young and Everitt 2004). Paradoxically, however, much of the literature focusing on gender differences suggests that this generation of young women should not experience the same disengagement from the formal political arena, as deficits in formal education have been

¹ Data analyzed in the thesis come from the 1984, 2000, 1997, and 2004 Canada Election Studies. The principal investigators and funding sources for each CES can be found in the Data Citation. Neither the principal investigators nor the funding sources are responsible for the analysis or interpretations of data presented in this paper.

all but eliminated, and deficits in other aspects of socio-economic status have been significantly reduced.

To come to terms with the different sets of social forces being brought to bear on young Canadian women, we make reference to two sets of literature: that examining the political disengagement of young people and that examining the determinants of women's political engagement.

Generational Patterns of Political Engagement in Canada

There has been no shortage of discussion in both academic and media circles in recent years about the political disengagement of young Canadians. Studies have demonstrated that declining voter turnout in Canada can be attributed in large part to generational replacement, as Generation Y, whose members are unlikely to cast a ballot, replace prior generations for whom voting was a key element of citizenship and civic duty (O'Neill 2001; Pammett and LeDuc 2003; Blais *et. al.* 2004).

Discussions of young people's political behaviour are often framed in terms of lifecycle and generational effects. Lifecycle effects encompass changes that normally occur during an individual's life in a predictable pattern. Most notable among these changes are "the demands of family (that is, marriage and parenting), the slackening of energy (declining from adolescence to old age) and the shape of careers (that is, entering and leaving the labour force)" (Putnam 2000: 248-249). Entry into the labour force, starting a family and owning a home are all factors likely to trigger interest in politics, suggesting that across generations, political engagement will increase as individuals move from young adulthood to middle age. Generation effects, in contrast to this, are products of broader sets of social changes. Generational differences are usually understood to reflect the impact of formative events as generations were coming of age.

Cohort analysis allows social scientists to distinguish between lifecycle and generational effects. When applied to patterns of political participation in Canada over time, such analysis suggests that both lifecycle and generational changes are contributing to lower rates of political engagement among young Canadians. Analysis of the Canada Election Study has demonstrated a distinct generational change, with young people scoring lower on measures of political engagement and participation than did older generations at the same age (Blais *et. al.* 2002; Gidengil *et. al.* 2004). Moreover, Adsett (2003) finds that lifecycle effects have been amplified, such that the gap between the youngest and oldest generations is now large when it was negligible in the past. This may, in part, reflect the emergence of a period of prolonged adolescence, as triggers such as purchasing homes, starting families and entering the workforce are delayed (Boyd and Norris 1999; Meunier *et. al.* 1998; Ravanera 1995; Ravanera *et. al.* 2002, 2003).

To the extent that youth disengagement from and non-participation in the political arena are generational phenomena, the source of the generational change is unclear. Adsett (2003) attributes it to the retrenchment of the welfare state, in particular the reduction or elimination of social programs used by baby boomers to establish themselves in early adulthood, and to the declining weight of younger generations of voters relative to the dominant aging baby boomers.

Explaining Women's Political Disengagement

Studies of gender differences in political engagement and participation have focused on three distinct sets of explanations: gendered patterns of access to relevant resources, gender differences in patterns of socialization, and access to networks and social capital. All three sets of explanations will be tested in this study.

Resources

Numerous studies of gender differences in political engagement and participation have concluded that these gender differences can be traced to women's lesser access to key resources, including income, education, socio-economic status and time. Burns *et. al.* (2001: 359), for instance, find in their study of American women's political participation that gender differences stem largely from women's disadvantage with respect to income, education and occupational status, all of which are "long known to be associated with political activity." Similarly, Schlozman *et. al.* (1994: 980) conclude that a "redistribution of resources would diminish considerably the gender gap in [political] participation."

In many of the resource-based accounts, education is singled out as the key variable. Hailed as the great equalizer, access to education is seen to open the doors to increased income, social status, and access to political life for disadvantaged groups. Several studies of American women's political participation have identified education as a key predictor of women's political interest (Koch 1997), political knowledge and willingness to offer opinions on political questions (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003) and women's political participation (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Schlozman *et. al.* 1994).

While not disputing the importance of education, a growing body of evidence suggests that it cannot fully explain persistent gender differences in political interest, knowledge and efficacy (Bennett and Bennett 1989: 116-7). Verba *et. al.* (1997: 1060) find that education has a positive impact on political interest, efficacy and knowledge, but that within any educational level or occupational category "women are less likely than men to be interested in and knowledgeable about politics." Similarly, in the Canadian context, Gidengil *et. al.* (2004: 49-50) demonstrate that even though education is the strongest single predictor of political knowledge, gender differences persist such that women with post-secondary education are no better informed about politics than men who had not finished high school.

Education and socio-economic status are not the only resources relevant to political engagement and participation. Time is also necessary both for acquiring political knowledge and for engaging in political participation. Since women have entered the paid work force *en masse*, it has been suggested that the double shift between work and home has acted as a temporal constraint for women's political engagement. Several studies have, however, rejected this claim. Burns *et. al.* (2001: 51) found that neither child care responsibilities nor family structure predicted American women's rates of political interest, knowledge or efficacy, and Bennett and Bennett (1989) concluded that parental status, occupation, income and marital status were not significant predictors of political interest. In Canada, Gidengil *et. al.* (2004: 52) found that gender gaps in political knowledge persisted whether women were married or single, had children, or were employed outside the home.

It must be noted, however, that mass surveys measuring political engagement are seldom designed to probe the division of labour within the household. Qualitative evidence indicates that women are disproportionately affected by family obligations

(Lowndes 2004; Sapiro 1982) and that young women are not immune to these patterns (Ravanera *et. al.* 2002, 2003). The possibility remains that focus on the home and family continues to stand in the way of women's political engagement, either by reducing the time available for such activities, or reducing women's inclination to enter this public sphere.

Socialization and Role Models

Political socialization refers to the mechanism through which citizens learn how to behave and adapt to their political environment. At the macro level, political socialization sets out the norms and practices in the political system, while at the micro level it teaches the "patterns and processes by which individuals engage in political development and learning (Sapiro 2004: 2-3). Classic accounts of political socialization assert that what is taught earliest is kept the longest, indicating that childhood socialization leads directly to adults' approaches to the political system (Easton 1965, Easton and Hess 1961; Massey 1975). Certainly, there is evidence that gender differences in political engagement appear early in life: Mayer and Schmidt (2004) find evidence of a gender gap in political interest among junior high school students in the United States, and conclude that political socialization cues boys to be more interested in politics and girls to be more passive. Boys, they note, feel politics belong to them while girls are more likely to see politics as something that boys ought to be interested in.

Many studies cite gender differences in socialization as explanations for persistent gender gaps (Gidengil 1995; Everitt 1998 and 2002; Gidengil *et. al.* 2000 and 2003) and gender gaps in political engagement (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Verba *et. al.* 1997; Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Kunkel *et. al.* 2003; Tong 2003). In these analyses, socialization helps reinforce traditional gender roles, characteristics and stereotypes. Most relevant for our purposes is Atkeson and Rapoport's (2003: 517) analysis which finds that women's levels of political interest are more susceptible to cues within the home. More specifically, they found that "greater levels of mother's political interest directly and significantly influenced daughter's political communication, while neither father's nor mother's political interest affected sons."

Role models outside the home – notably women holding or contesting elected office -- are also relevant to women's political engagement. Atkeson (2003) studied state-wide elections in the United States where female candidates were competitive, and found that, in states where a female candidate was present and competitive, women were more internally efficacious, more likely to express an opinion on the parties and less likely to give "don't know" responses to attitudinal questions. Verba *et. al.* (1997: 1064) note that in Canada in 1993, women were more likely to be able to name Kim Campbell, the woman leading the Progressive Conservative Party at the time than were able to name the male leader of Liberal Party; the reverse was true for men. Recent cross-national research indicates that the number of women in a nation's legislature is positively related to the engagement of girls with politics, but negatively related to the engagement of boys (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2005).

Networks and civic engagement

The idea of civic engagement, or social capital, is outlined by Putnam in several works. In general terms, Putnam argues that civic engagement, or informal connections

between people, constitutes a resource that individuals bring to bear on their engagement with democratic political life. Putnam asserts that levels of social capital and civic engagement are declining in the United States, and that this decline is detrimental to democracy (2000: 336). Of particular note is a shift from hands-on political participation to participation via monetary contributions, staff-led rather than volunteer-driven politics, and declining voter turnout (*ibid.* 41).

Feminist scholars have been among the most vocal critics of Putnam, pointing out that there is “little interest in gender within the social capital debate” and that this lack of interest in gender dynamics has “tended to produce male bias rather than gender neutrality” (Lowndes 2004: 46-7). As a result, social capital theory tends to be blind to gender inequalities (Gidengil *et. al.* 2003). Analyzing patterns of civic engagement and their consequences among Canadian women, Gidengil *et. al.* find that women have comparable levels of social capital and associational activity to men, and enjoy networks that are as diverse. They argue, however, that “gendered forms of social capital may mean that men get exposed to more information about [politics] than women do.” As Gidengil and O’Neill (2006: 380) observe, a gendered analysis of social capital casts considerable doubt on the idea that social capital is readily translated into political engagement, at least for women. Women’s motivations for activism often differ from men’s, and consequently do not lead them in the same directions as men’s activism or civic engagement might.

Data and Method

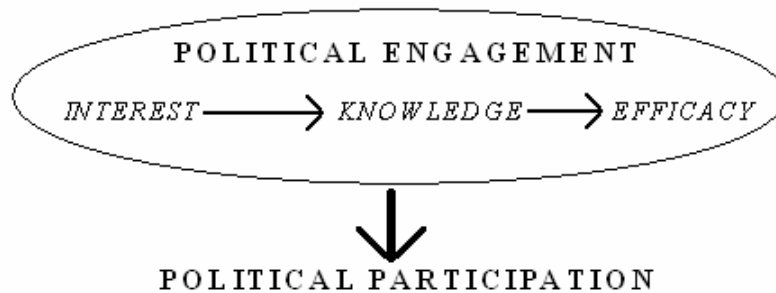
The data analysis in this paper is undertaken in two stages. The first part of the analysis traces gender differences in political engagement and participation among different generations of Canadians over time, while the second part seeks to better understand the determinants of political engagement and participation by undertaking a multivariate analysis broken down by gender. The first part of the analysis is based on the 1984, 1997, 2000 and 2004 Canada Election Studies, while the second part concentrates only on the 2004 data. These CES datasets were selected because they contained analogous (although not always identical) measures of political interest, knowledge, efficacy and participation and allow us to trace patterns of change over a twenty year period. The 2004 CES was selected for multivariate analysis first because it represents the most recent data available, and second because it contains measures of political socialization unavailable in earlier versions of the CES.

Bivariate analysis will be used to determine the magnitude of gender and age based gaps in political engagement and participation. This allows us to determine the magnitude of these gaps and if these gaps are changing over time. Age is used as the independent variable in each bivariate model. The dependent variables are political interest, knowledge, efficacy, and participation; each dependent variable was tested individually to determine the unique effect age has on each variable. Additionally, each bivariate relationship was conducted twice using gender and post-secondary education as control variables. The latter is significant as it allows us to determine how education affects the gaps between genders and generations.

Multivariate Analysis

The theoretical model that will be used to test our theory and answer our research questions assumes that each measure of political engagement contributes to the next, creating an additive effect that measures political engagement as a whole. This model is used to structure the multivariate regression analysis of the measures of political engagement. Figure 1 illustrates this additive linear model.

Figure 1: Political Engagement Model



The multivariate model is developed in two stages. In the first, we use the three measures of engagement – interest, knowledge, and internal efficacy – as dependent variables. We use OLS regression to develop a causal model of the predictors of engagement, first for all respondents, and then for women and men separately. In this model, we test the resource argument (using income and education as proxies for political resources), the socialization explanation (using a measure of exposure to politics in childhood), and the civic engagement explanation (using a measure of involvement in non-political activities). The model is additive, in that we include other aspects of the engagement measure in each subsequent model; political interest is included as an independent variable in the model of political knowledge; and political interest and knowledge are included as independent variables in the regression equation for efficacy.

The second stage of the multivariate model focuses on the determinants of political participation, which is measured in such a way as to include not only the act of voting, but also membership in an interest group or political party. All three measures of political engagement are used as independent variables in this equation, as are measures of resources, socialization, and civic engagement.

Measurement

In order to proceed with this analysis, we needed to create measures for each of the three components of political engagement, as well as political socialization and civic engagement. The construction of each is described below:

Political Interest: The political interest indicator for each CES was created from a single question in each CES. The 1984 CES asked: “How much attention do you pay to politics generally?” while the 1997, 2000, and 2004 CES asked respondents “Using a scale from zero to ten, where zero means no attention at all and ten means a great deal of attention, what is your interest in politics generally?” While the same concept is being measured, it is being measured differently in 1984. This means that the bivariate over-time analysis should be viewed with some caution. This does not, however, affect the multivariate analysis as it employs only the 2004 data.

Political Knowledge: Measures of political knowledge could be created only for 1997, 2000 and 2004, as similar and identical political knowledge questions are asked on each of these iterations of the CES. It is important to note that each knowledge measure is a snapshot of political knowledge rather than a longitudinal assessment. While at least two questions are identical across all three surveys and other similar questions are asked on each survey, a variety of political events affect respondents’ ability to answer questions correctly. The CES uses a conventionally accepted knowledge battery to gather data on Canadians’ political knowledge.² The CES knowledge battery asks how widely known political figures are and asks respondent to recall the names of selected political figures. The knowledge scales used in this study are constructed using the conventional approach by “[awarding] respondents one point for each correct answer, with incorrect answers and “don’t know” (DK) responses coded as zero” (Mondak and Canache 2004: 541).³ Items used on each scale are included in the Appendix.

Efficacy: Political efficacy is defined as an individual’s perception of their ability to effectively achieve change and affect outcomes in the political system. This concept is sometimes referred to as internal efficacy. Internal efficacy is related to, but distinct from, external efficacy. External efficacy refers to citizens’ evaluations of the effectiveness of the political system itself. This study refers to external efficacy as system satisfaction. To disentangle these concepts, a factor analysis was conducted to separate questions where respondents are indicating their level of internal efficacy and where respondents are expressing satisfaction with the political system as a whole. The factor analysis yielded two factors, one of which measured internal efficacy. The items that loaded most heavily on this factor were: “I don’t think government cares much what people like me think,” “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” and “sometimes

² There is a debate in political science about whether this is the best way to ascertain levels of political knowledge through surveys. The pivotal point of debate is the propensity for respondents to answer “I don’t know”; some surveys ensure the interviewer prefaces the knowledge battery by indicating to the respondent that many may not know the answer to the questions that follow, other surveys allow for respondents to volunteer “I don’t know” as a valid response, and others require that interviewers prompt respondents to give a substantive answer if the respondent initially indicates they do not know the answer to the question (Mondak 2001, Mondak and Davis 2002, Mondak and Anderson 2004, Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993).

³ The knowledge scales constructed from CES surveys cannot distinguish between incorrect and “I don’t know” responses. Knowledge scales constructed from data such as this are very reliable but less valid than those constructed from data where “I don’t know” responses are distinguished from incorrect responses.

politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." These were combined into an index for bivariate analysis; the factor coefficient was used for multivariate analysis.

Political Participation: To measure political participation, an index was created to measure an individual's propensity to vote, and hold membership in a political party and/or interest group. This measure could only be created from the 2000 and 2004 CES; 1997 did not ask respondents about membership in interest groups or political parties.

Socialization: was measured using an additive index based on four questions measuring respondents' exposure to politics as children and adolescents: "When you were growing up, did your family talk about politics: often, sometimes, hardly ever, or never?" "When you were growing up, was any member of your family involved in political parties? In other political activities?" "When you were growing up, was there a daily newspaper delivered to your home?" and "Did you take a Canadian government or politics class in high school or CEGEP?"⁴

Civic Engagement: Two indicators were used to measure civic engagement. The first is a points-based indicator that measures respondents' involvement in groups and associations including religious groups, professional organizations, and service groups. This associational activity indicator is measured by a question asking how many voluntary associations the respondent had been involved with over the past five years. Each associational activity garnered respondents one point, up to a maximum of eleven. The second indicator of civic engagement measured respondents' marital status; a dichotomous dummy variable was created to indicate respondents who are married or living with a partner. Theoretically, individuals who are married or living with a partner will have more diverse networks as a result of their relationships (Putnam 2000). Both civic engagement variables are used only in the multivariate analysis.

Education: The education variable used in this paper contains identifies respondents who have university education. Respondents between the ages of 18 and 21 are considered to have university education if they reported they had completed some university courses or a university degree. Respondents aged 22 or older are considered to have university education if they reported they had completed a university degree.

Young Women Interaction Term: To ascertain whether young women are political disengaged because of the interaction between their age and gender, the gender dummy variable was multiplied by the youth dummy variable. This term identifies women aged 18 to 25 and compares them to all other ages and genders in the sample. For this term to reach statistical significance in a multivariate model indicates that age and gender interact to produce effects on political engagement and participation that cannot be accounted for by examining age and gender as separate measures.

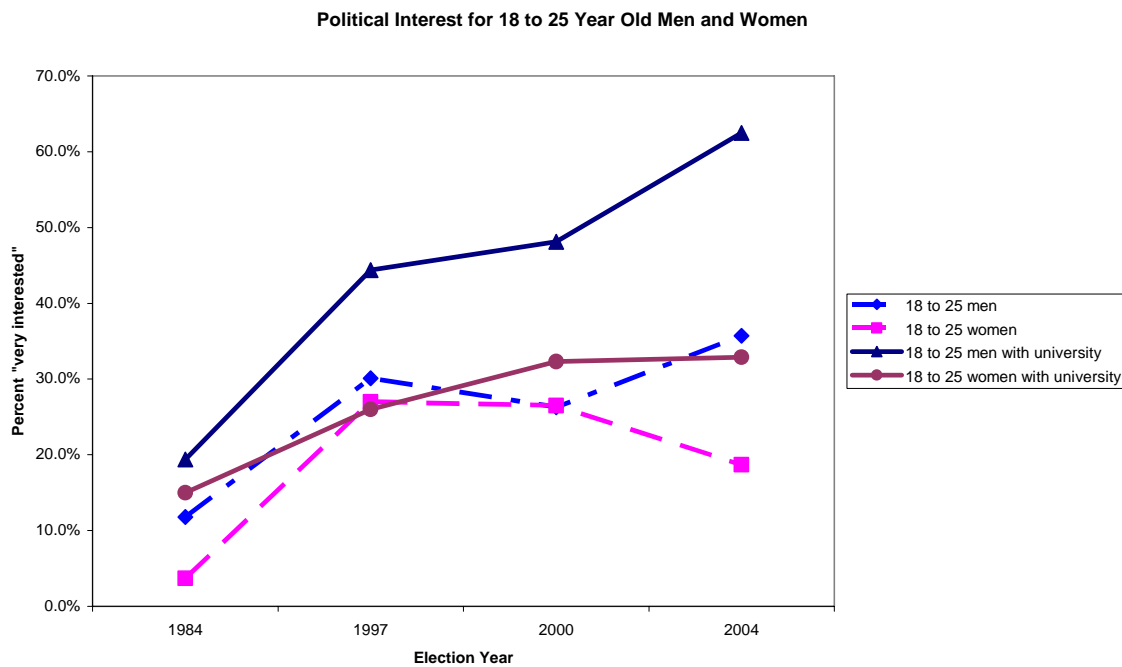
Tracking Gender Differences in Political Engagement and Participation over Time

⁴ The standardized Cronbach's Alpha score for this index is 0.640. While this score may be considered low by conventional wisdom, it is respectable given the small number (5) of items included in the calculation. This index is arguably a very blunt measure of the concept. However, since the study of political socialization has not been in vogue in political science since the 1970s and given the limits of the CES data, this measure is the best indicator of socialization that could be created given the circumstances.

There is every reason to believe that gender differences in political engagement and participation should have waned over the past three decades. The resource thesis, which holds that women’s deficits in engagement with and participation in the formal political arena, tells us that as gaps in income and education decline, so should gaps in political activity. The socialization thesis tells us that cues from role models within the home and without affect women’s political engagement; the mobilization of women in the second wave women’s movement, changing gender roles in the home and workplace, and the slow but notable increase in women’s participation in electoral politics should all have had a positive effect on young women’s interest in the formal political sphere.

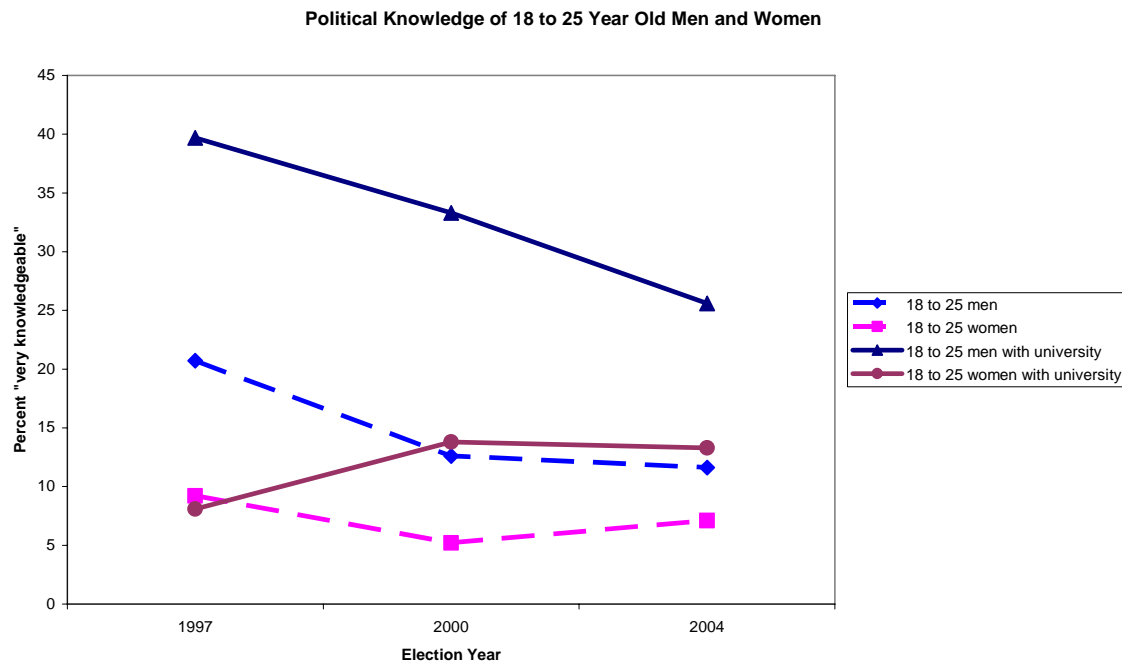
But this has not been the case. In fact, as Figures 2 through 5 illustrate, gender gaps among the youngest group of respondents to the CES over time (18-25 year olds) have either remained relatively stable or have grown in recent years. Figure 2 traces the percent of respondents in this age group who identified themselves as “very interested” in politics (albeit with slightly different question wording in 1984). It shows that gender gaps among members of this age cohort increased in 2004, driven in large part by growing political interest among young men with university education. This upswing in interest was not shared by their female counterparts.

Figure 2: Political Interest of 18 to 25 Year Old Canadian Women and Men⁵



⁵ The Ns for this figure are as follows: *18 to 25 men* $N = 187$ (1984), 279 (1997), 262 (2000), and 277 (2004); *18 to 25 men with university* $N = 31$ (1984), 63 (1997), 54 (2000), and 40 (2004); *18 to 25 women* $N = 242$ (1984), 285 (1997), 234 (2000), and 267 (2004); and the *18 to 25 women with university* $N = 40$ (1984), 73 (1997), 65 (2000), and 76 (2004). The relationships between political interest and age shown in Figure 3.3 are all significant at the $p < .05$ with the exception of 1984. For both 18 to 25 year old men and women with university education in 1984, the relationship between interest and age is spurious.

Figure 3: Political Knowledge of 18-25 Year Old Women and Men⁶



The gender gap in political knowledge has remained relatively static over the period between 1997 and 2004. As Figure 3 illustrates, women with university education remain as knowledgeable about the formal political arena as men without university education. Although there is a discernible downward trend, young men with university education remain vastly better informed about the formal political arena than do other young Canadians.

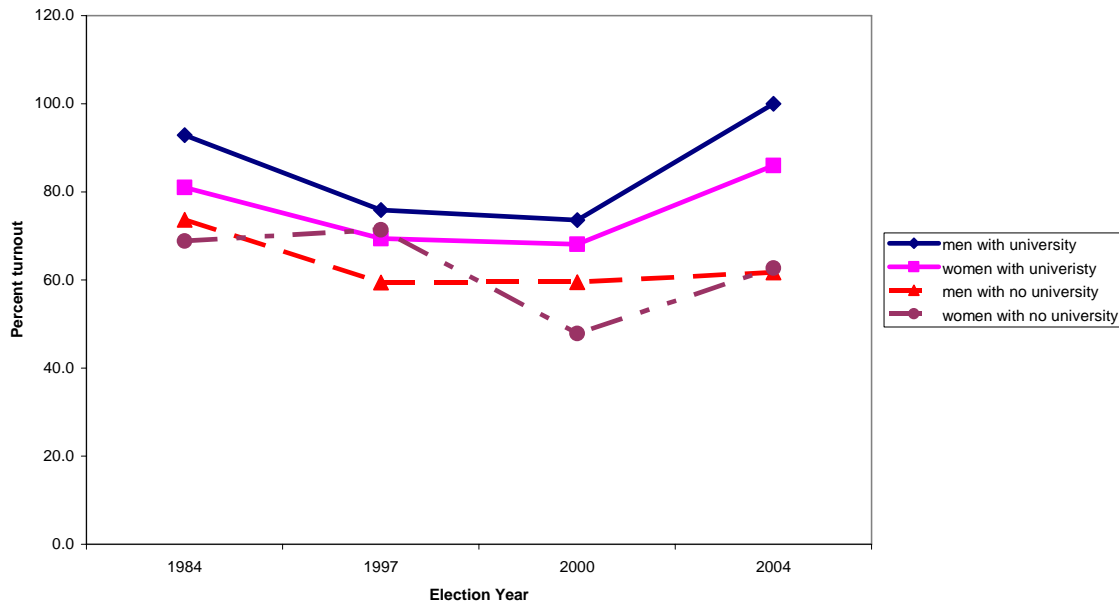
Finally, Figure 4 shows that, among respondents aged 18 to 25 between 1984 and 2004, there is a persistent gender gap in reported voter turnout among individuals with university education. While there is only a modest overall gender gap, the persistence of the gender gap among young people with university education is striking. Once again, it does not disappear as young women gain resources, occupational status and different socialization cues.

Figure 4: Voter Turnout for 18 to 25 year olds over Time⁷

⁶ The Ns for this figure are as follows: *18 to 25 men* $N = 280$ (1997), 261 (2000), and 276 (2004); and the *18 to 25 women* $N = 284$ (1997), 233 (2000), and 266 (2004); *18 to 25 men with university* $N = 63$ (1997), 54 (2000), and 39 (2004); and the *18 to 25 women with university* $N = 74$ (1997), 65 (2000), and 75 (2004). The relationships between political knowledge and age shown in Figure 3 are significant at the $p < .001$ level.

⁷ The Ns for this figure are as follows: *18 to 25 men with university* $N = 31$ (1984), 54 (1997), 53 (2000), and 33 (2004); *18 to 25 women with university* $N = 40$ (1984), 62 (1997), 47 (2000), and 57 (2004); *18 to 25 men with no university* $N = 156$ (1984), 175 (1997), 158 (2000), and 154 (2004), and the *18 to 25 women with no university* $N = 202$ (1984), 175 (1997), 115 (2000), and 126 (2004). The relationships between voter turnout and age shown in Figure 4.2 are significant at the $p < .001$ level with the exception of 18 to 25 men and women with university in 2004 and 18 to 25 men with university in 1984. The relationship between voter turnout and age for 18 to 25 men with university is significant at the $p < .05$ level. The relationships between voter turnout and age for 18 to 25 men and women with university in 2004 is

Voter Turnout of 18 to 25 Year Old Canadians



Although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions based on analysis of these data, particularly given the problem of low numbers of respondents in these sub-samples, we do appear to find a consistent pattern over time. While university education does confer some necessary resources upon young women to boost their political engagement and participation, it does not do so to the same extent as their male counterparts. This suggests that the relationships between gender, age, political resources, socialization and political engagement and activity warrant more careful examination.

Multivariate Analysis

Multivariate analysis was undertaken using OLS regression, with each of the elements of political engagement (interest, knowledge and efficacy) being used as a dependent variable. In keeping with the additive model described above, elements of engagement were added to subsequent regressions (i.e. interest as a predictor of knowledge and efficacy; knowledge as a predictor of efficacy). For each dependent variable, the model was run first including all respondents, and then run separately for women and men in order to determine whether the model applied in a similar fashion to both genders. Full regression results are found in Tables 1 through 3

Interest in Politics

Holding other factors constant, we find that being female has a negative effect on political interest. Being a woman reduces political interest by half a point on a ten-point scale of political interest, and being a young woman (the young woman interaction term)

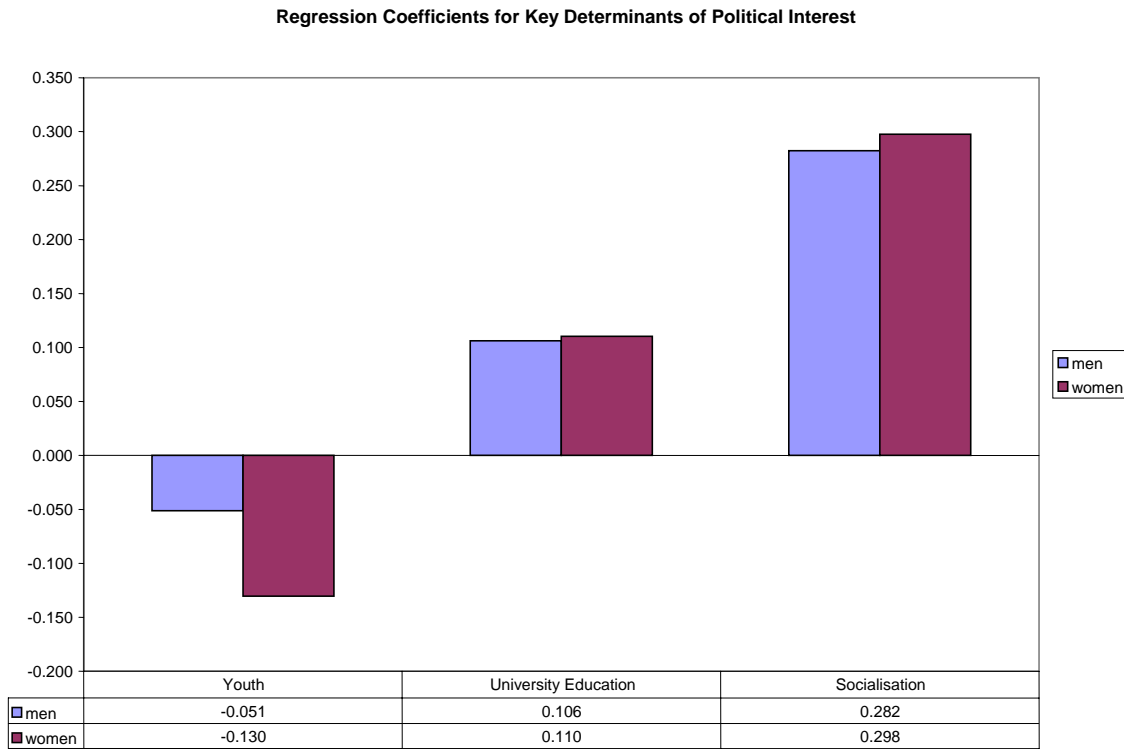
significant at the $p < .1$ level; for all intents and purposes, the relationship between voter turnout and age for 18 to 25 year olds with university education in 2004 is spurious.

further reduces political interest by almost another full point.⁸ This affirms the findings in the bivariate analysis. Keeping in mind that regression analysis allows us to hold other factors included in the model constant, we are left with the conclusion that being a woman, and particularly a young woman, reduces political interest even after differences in income, education, political socialization and the like are accounted for.

When we break the analysis down by gender, we find quite similar patterns of predictors of political interest for both genders. The notable exception to this is youth, which has a much stronger negative effect on women than men. Figure 5 illustrates the standardized regression coefficients for three independent variables that have a significant effect on political interest. It shows that childhood socialization has a substantial positive effect on political interest for men and women, as does university education.

⁸ This latter finding must be interpreted with some caution; although it is in the expected direction, it is not statistically significant.

Figure 5: Regression Coefficients for Key Determinants of Political Interest



Knowledge

When we examine the determinants of political knowledge, we find once again that being either young or female reduces one’s level of political knowledge significantly – by close to half a point on a seven-point scale for women, and almost a full point for young people. In contrast to the model for political interest, however, we find no additional negative impact for young women. That said, it must be noted that young women are substantially less interested in politics than other survey respondents, and that political interest is the strongest predictor of political knowledge.

Figure 6: Regression Coefficients for Key Determinants of Political Knowledge

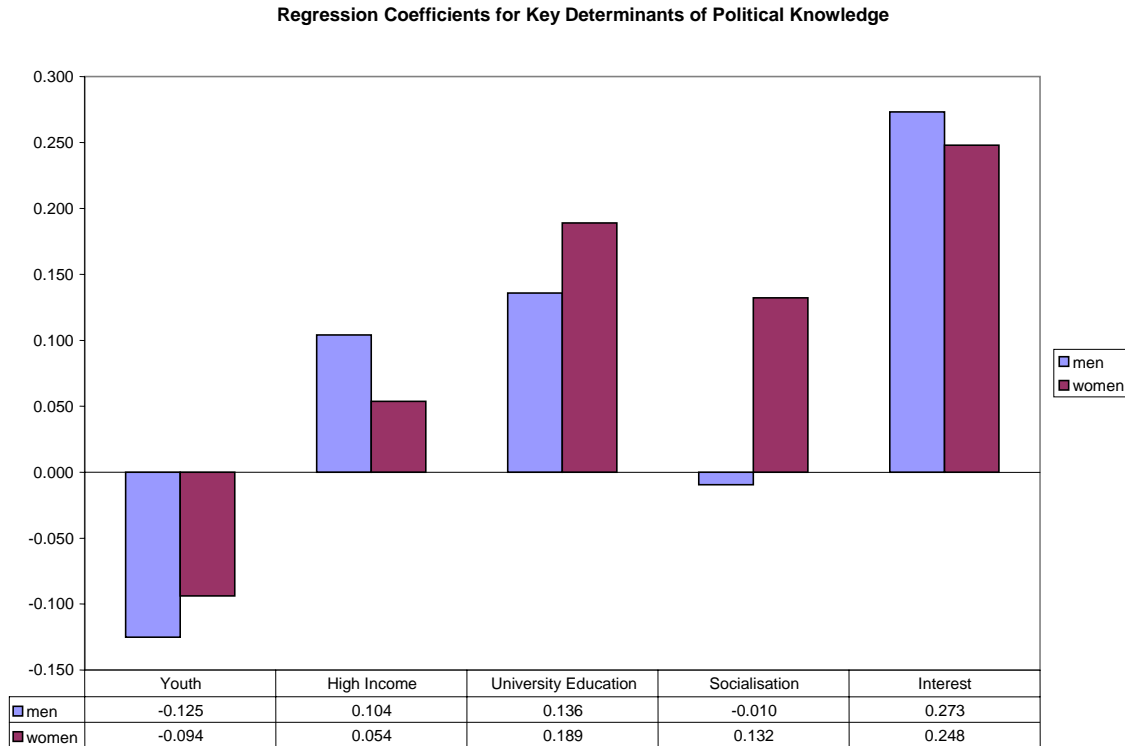


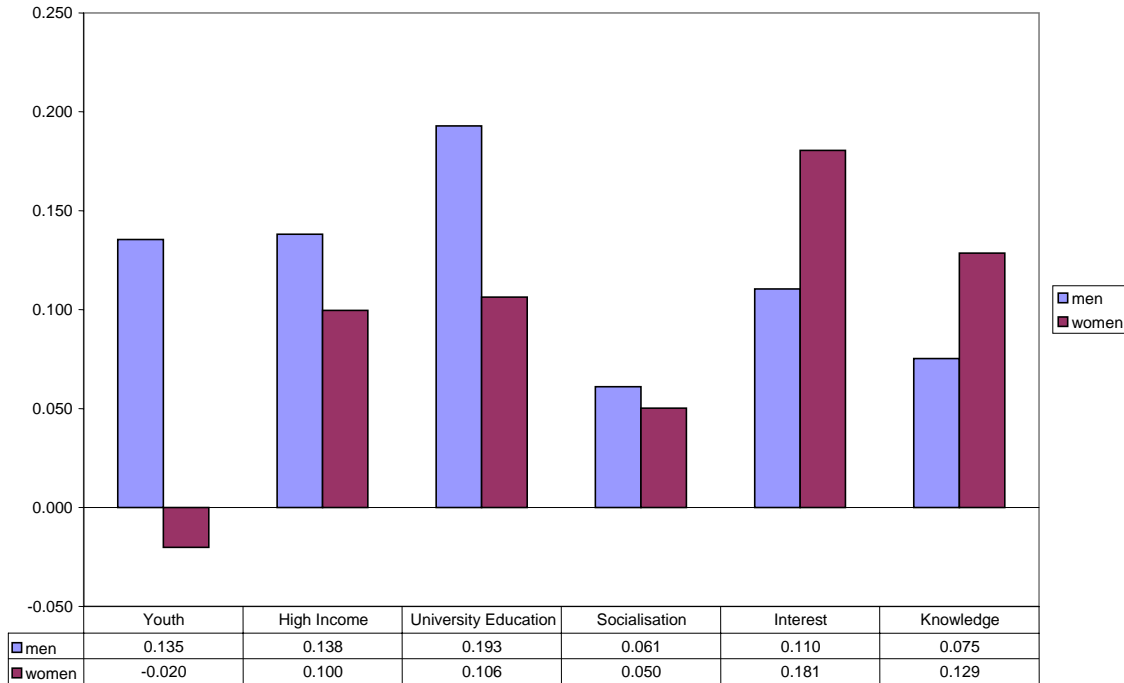
Figure 6 shows that interest in politics is the strongest predictor of political knowledge for both men and women, with university education close behind. Notably, university education has a somewhat stronger effect for women than for men. We find one notable difference between the genders: socialization has a substantial positive effect on women’s political knowledge, but no discernible effect on men’s. While less stark, we also find that income boosts men’s political knowledge to a greater extent than women’s.

Efficacy

For the final element of political engagement, we find that gender has no effect, but being a young woman reduces a respondent’s sense of political efficacy substantially. This is all the more striking, given that being young increases political efficacy by the same amount. Once the analysis is broken down by gender, we find that youth has a negative effect on efficacy for women, but a positive effect for men. University education and higher incomes also increase, with good reason, men’s sense that they can affect the political world.

Figure 7: Regression Coefficients for Key Determinants of Political Efficacy

Regression Coefficients for Key Determinants of Political Efficacy



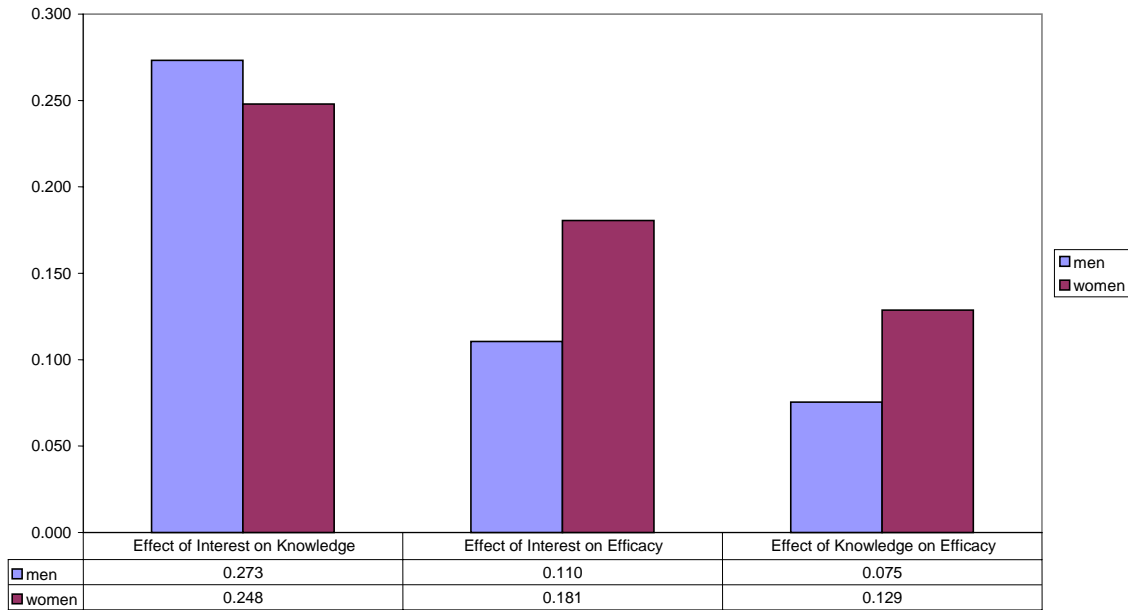
As Figure 7 shows, however, neither of these resources translates as directly into a sense of personal efficacy for women. Although it is positive, the effect of university education for women is about half that for men. For women, the strongest predictors of internal efficacy are interest and knowledge of politics. It is important to recall, however, that these are both areas in which we find women – and particularly young women – tend to be at a disadvantage to their male counterparts.

Political Engagement

This gendered analysis of the determinants of political engagement suggests that a persistent and self-reinforcing set of relationships conspire to limit women’s – and particularly young women’s – psychological engagement in the realm of formal politics. Political socialization is more important for women’s psychological engagement in politics. As practices associated with childhood political socialization – subscribing to a daily newspaper, discussing politics at home, having parents involved in political activity – wane, the impact on women’s political engagement is greater than the impact on men’s. We find that women are less inclined to express interest in politics and, as result, do not gain knowledge about the mechanics and personalities of the political game. The combination of less interest and less knowledge leaves many women, quite understandably, with a sense that they cannot influence political outcomes. In this respect, women remain more subject than citizen in the Canadian political arena.

Figure 8: Cumulative Effect of the Political Engagement Model

Cumulative Effect of the Political Engagement Model



Political Participation

The final element of our additive model relates these attitudinal measures to the act of political participation. Regression analysis, using our measure of political participation as a dependent variable, indicates that many of the gender effects found in our models of political engagement fall out of the model. Neither gender nor the young woman interaction term is statistically significant in this model (see Table 4). We do find, however, that the two measures on which women, and particularly young women, experienced deficits – political interest and political knowledge – are important predictors of political participation.

Figure 9: Regression Coefficients for Key Determinants of Political Participation

Regression Coefficients for Key Determinants of Political Participation

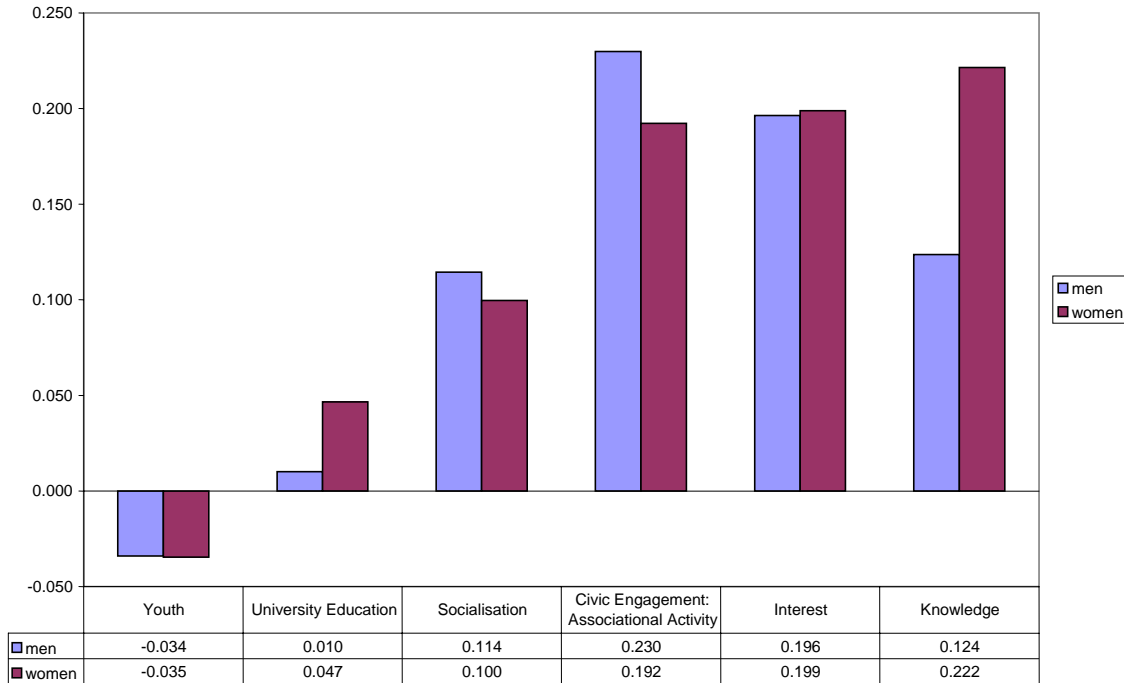


Figure 9 summarizes the findings of this model, and shows that political interest is a significant determinant of participation for both men and women, and that political knowledge is a particularly important determinant of participation for women. Civic engagement, which did not affect measures of psychological engagement with politics, also predicts political participation for both genders. While statistically significant, socialization plays a less important role than it did in the models of engagement.

Conclusion

While there are limits to this analysis, it has shed some light on the patterns of women and youth’s political disengagement in Canada. The bivariate and multivariate analyses indicate that women’s political engagement is not an issue that will gradually go away over time as women become more equal to men in other respects. Gender differences in political engagement are stable, and in the case of young women, actually growing.

Socio-economic resources are important predictors of political engagement and participation. However, university education is not the panacea it was once thought to be. It helps engage young men in the formal political process, but it is less effective for young women. This analysis lends more support to the socialization argument. While the data available to us is a crude tool for making sense of the effect of socialisation on political engagement and participation, the results are suggestive. Childhood socialization matters more to women’s political engagement than men’s. Because socialization matters more to women’s political engagement, declining rates of political socialization over time produce gender gaps in political engagement among the youngest cohort of adult Canadians. Moreover, many girls apparently still believe that politics is the purview of

boys. This is no evidence that civic engagement produces engagement with the formal political system, though it does affect participation in it.

The extent to which women, and especially young women, continue to believe that politics is not of interest, they will not inform themselves about politics. This leads directly to a lesser sense of efficacy in the political process. While this does not necessarily negatively affect women's participation in formal politics, it does mean that women are not articulating their interests to policy makers, and in many cases relegating themselves to a lower form of citizenship. Governments do not hear these less engaged, less forceful voices; instead, they listen to those who engage with it because of a greater sense of political efficacy. This analysis indicates that those with the strongest voices are, and will continue to be, educated, well-off men.

Remarkably, the data presented in this analysis demonstrates that young men with university education consistently stand out as the most interested, best informed and markedly most efficacious group of young Canadians. They collectively appear poised to inherit the mantle of political privilege uncontested. Young women with and without university education, by contrast, are the least interested, worst informed, least efficacious, and least participatory group of young Canadians. The larger social trends and equality of resources that some claim will completely ameliorate this situation are simply not having this effect. Youth disengagement in Canada is a gendered phenomenon, and this disengagement will likely continue unless its gendered nature is addressed.

TABLES

Table 1: OLS Estimation of Model Effects on Political Interest, Knowledge, and Efficacy

<i>Independent Variables</i>	INTEREST			KNOWLEDGE			EFFICACY		
	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>
(Constant)	4.818 (0.208)****		23.119	3.066 (0.169)****		18.142	-0.853 (0.102)****		-8.316
Female	-0.543 (0.142)****	-0.100	-3.806	-0.426 (0.098)****	-0.112	-4.332	0.013 (0.053)	0.007	0.253
Youth	-0.459 (0.402)	-0.044	-1.140	-0.844 (0.276)***	-0.115	-3.054	0.508 (0.151)***	0.132	3.365
Young Women Interaction Variable	-0.950 (0.524)	-0.068	-1.811	0.133 (0.361)	0.013	0.369	-0.566 (0.196)***	-0.109	-2.887
High Income	0.173 (0.151)	0.031	1.148	0.323 (0.104)***	0.081	3.109	0.251 (0.056)****	0.120	4.414
University Education	0.614 (0.153)****	0.107	4.008	0.639 (0.106)****	0.158	6.043	0.319 (0.058)****	0.151	5.476
Socialisation	0.525 (0.047)****	0.287	11.032	0.080 (0.034)**	0.062	2.341	0.039 (0.019)**	0.058	2.117
Civic Engagement: Associational Activity	0.065 (0.044)	0.039	1.489	-0.013 (0.030)	-0.011	-0.422	0.030 (0.016)	0.048	1.804
Civic Engagement: Marital Status	-0.113 (0.169)	-0.019	-0.670	-0.187 (0.116)	-0.044	-1.614	-0.093 (0.063)	-0.041	-1.471
System satisfaction/external efficacy	0.181 (0.069)***	0.067	2.620	0.174 (0.048)****	0.091	3.667	-0.069 (0.026)***	-0.070	-2.675
Interest				0.183 (0.019)****	0.260	9.808	0.053 (0.011)****	0.146	5.123
Knowledge							0.053 (0.015)****	0.101	3.570
<i>Adjusted R2</i>	0.152			0.197			0.132		
<i>Standard Error of the Estimate</i>	2.496			1.713			0.933		
N	1356			1356			1356		

Note: Standard Error in Parentheses.

Note: * $p > .10$, ** $p > .05$, *** $p > .01$,

**** $p > .001$

Table 2: OLS Estimation of Model Effects on Women's Political Interest, Knowledge, and Efficacy

<i>Independent Variables</i>	INTEREST			KNOWLEDGE			EFFICACY		
	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>
(Constant)	4.251 (0.266)****		15.990	2.486 (0.213)****		11.686	-0.845 (0.122)****		-6.947
Youth	-1.351 (0.389)***	-0.130	-3.476	-0.685 (0.268)**	-0.094	-2.560	-0.074 (0.140)	-0.020	-0.525
High Income	0.143 (0.228)	0.024	0.625	0.228 (0.156)	0.054	1.466	0.212 (0.081)***	0.100	2.599
University Education	0.653 (0.225)***	0.110	2.906	0.789 (0.154)****	0.189	5.111	0.222 (0.082)***	0.106	2.705
Socialisation	0.553 (0.068)****	0.298	8.105	0.173 (0.049)****	0.132	3.552	0.033 (0.026)	0.050	1.282
Civic Engagement: Associational Activity	0.019 (0.061)	0.012	0.319	-0.040 (0.042)	-0.035	-0.962	0.030 (0.022)	0.052	1.368
Civic Engagement: Marital Status	-0.041 (0.234)	-0.007	-0.177	-0.155 (0.159)	-0.036	-0.975	-0.146 (0.083)*	-0.069	-1.754
System satisfaction/external efficacy	0.220 (0.102)**	0.078	2.151	0.190 (0.070)***	0.095	2.718	-0.097 (0.037)***	-0.098	-2.652
Interest				0.175 (0.026)****	0.248	6.686	0.064 (0.014)****	0.181	4.519
Knowledge							0.064 (0.020)***	0.129	3.215
<i>Adjusted R2</i>	0.140			0.195			0.123		
<i>Standard Error of the Estimate</i>	2.554			1.742			0.907		
N	689			689			689		

Note: Standard Error in Parentheses.

Note: * $p > .10$, ** $p > .05$, *** $p > .01$,

**** $p > .001$

Table 3: OLS Estimation of Model Effects on Men's Political Interest, Knowledge, and Efficacy

	INTEREST			KNOWLEDGE			EFFICACY		
<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>
(Constant)	4.866 (0.277)****		17.590	3.228 (0.230)****		14.027	-0.847 (0.150)****		-5.663
Youth	-0.527 (0.419)	-0.051	-1.260	-0.897 (0.288)***	-0.125	-3.118	0.547 (0.165)***	0.135	3.311
High Income	0.185 (0.203)	0.035	0.912	0.384 (0.139)***	0.104	2.762	0.287 (0.080)****	0.138	3.601
University Education	0.580 (0.0210)***	0.106	2.761	0.517 (0.145)****	0.136	3.565	0.413 (0.083)****	0.193	4.952
Socialisation	0.501 (0.067)****	0.282	7.491	-0.012 (0.048)	-0.010	-0.246	0.043 (0.037)	0.061	1.560
Civic Engagement: Associational Activity	0.124 (0.065)*	0.074	1.908	0.011 (0.045)	0.009	0.243	0.030 (0.025)	0.046	1.187
Civic Engagement: Marital Status	-0.218 (0.249)	-0.036	-0.877	-0.194 (0.171)	-0.046	-1.134	-0.029 (0.098)	-0.012	-0.294
System satisfaction/external efficacy	0.144 (0.094)	0.056	1.534	0.158 (0.065)**	0.089	2.449	-0.043 (0.037)	-0.043	-1.175
Interest				0.191 (0.027)****	0.273	7.127	0.043 (0.016)***	0.110	2.744
Knowledge							0.042 (0.022)*	0.075	1.909
<i>Adjusted R2</i>	0.126			0.153			0.133		
<i>Standard Error of the Estimate</i>	2.444			1.678			0.956		
N	667			667			667		

Note: Standard Error in Parentheses.

Note: * $p > .10$, ** $p > .05$, *** $p > .01$,

**** $p > .001$

Table 4: OLS Estimation of Model Effects on Political Participation

<i>Independent Variables</i>	PARTICIPATION		
	<i>B (Standard Error)</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-score</i>
(Constant)	0.502 (0.070)****		7.162
Female	-0.043 (0.035)	-0.031	-1.207
Youth	-0.126 (0.101)	-0.047	-1.247
Young Women Interaction Variable	0.035 (0.131)	0.010	0.265
High Income	0.044 (0.038)	0.030	1.162
University Education	0.044 (0.039)	0.029	1.109
Socialisation	0.051 (0.012)****	0.107	4.077
Civic Engagement: Associational Activity	0.091 (0.011)****	0.211	8.289
Marital Status	-0.058 (0.042)	-0.037	-1.379
System satisfaction/external efficacy	-0.027 (0.017)	-0.039	-1.556
Interest	0.052 (0.007)****	0.200	7.304
Knowledge	0.066 (0.010)****	0.178	6.594
Efficacy	0.004 (0.018)	0.006	0.247
<i>Adjusted R2</i>	0.217		
<i>Standard Error of the Estimate</i>	0.622		
N	1356		
<i>Note: Standard Error in Parentheses.</i>			
<i>Note: *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, ****p<.001</i>			

APPENDIX A: Knowledge Measures

A knowledge scale was created from each survey based on those used by Gidengil *et. al.* in their 2003 and 2006 studies. For these studies, Gidengil *et. al.* examined how well Canadians could recall the names of party leaders, election promises, and a set of questions testing general political knowledge from the 2000 CES. This study eliminated the election promises questions from the knowledge scales as these questions are more temporally sensitive than questions asking respondents to recall the names of party leaders and historical political figures. Gidengil *et. al.* awarded correct responses one point each and incorrect answers and “don’t know” responses were coded as zero. The knowledge scales used by this study use the same coding scheme.

The 1997 knowledge scale consisted of the following four questions:

- i) Do you recall the name of the Premier of your province? (1997 cps_112)
- ii) Do you recall the name of the Finance Minister of Canada? (1997 cps_111)
- iii) Do you recall the name of the President of the United States? (1997 cps_16)

The 1997 scale ranged from zero to three, where zero indicates a respondent who either answered all three questions incorrectly or did not know the answer to all three questions and three indicates a respondent who answered each question correctly. Respondents who scored three points are considered to possess a high level of knowledge in the 1997 scale and are included in the bivariate analysis of political knowledge. One third of Canadians possess high levels of political knowledge in 1997.

Another question was asked in the 1997 knowledge battery about the first female Prime Minister. This question was eliminated from the 1997 knowledge measure as the gendered nature of the question introduced a gender bias to the scale.

The 2000 knowledge scale consisted of the following ten questions:

- i) Do you recall the name of the Premier of your province? (2000 cps112)
- ii) We’re wondering how well known the various federal party leaders are. Do you happen to recall the name of the leader of the XXX party? (2000 pes_b12, 13, 14, and 16).
- iii) Do you recall the name of the Finance Minister of Canada? (2000 cps111)
- iv) The Prime Minister of Canada at the time of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States? (2000 cps113)
- v) And do you happen to know the capital of the United States? (2000 cps114)
- vi) Some people talk about political parties being on the left or the right. Do you think the NDP is on the left, on the right, or in the centre? (2000 cpspla31)
- vii) And the Alliance party? (2000 cpspla32)

The 2000 scale ranged from zero to ten, where zero indicates a respondent who either answered each question incorrectly or who did not know the answer to all ten questions and ten indicates a respondent who answered all ten questions correctly. This

scale was recoded into categories of low (0 through 3), moderate (4 through 6) and high (7 through 10). The high category was used for the bivariate analysis of political knowledge.

The 2004 knowledge scale consisted of the following eight questions:

- i) Do you recall the name of the Premier of your province? (2004 cps_know1)
- ii) We're wondering how well known the various federal party leaders are. Do you happen to recall the name of the leader of the XXX party? (2004 cps_e1, 2, 3, and 4)
- iii) Do you recall the name of the Finance Minister of Canada? (2004 cpsknow2)
- iv) The name of the British Prime Minister? (2004 cps know3)
- v) The name of the female cabinet Minister who ran against Paul Martin for the leadership of the Liberal Party? (2004 cps know4)

The 2004 scale ranged from zero to eight, where zero indicates a respondent who either answered each question incorrectly or who did not know the answer to all eight questions and eight indicates a respondent who answered all eight questions correctly. This zero to eight scale was used for the multivariate analysis of political knowledge. This scale was recoded into categories of low (0 to 2), moderate (3 through 5) and high (6 through 8) for the bivariate analysis where the high category was analysed in relation to the high categories from the 1997 and 2000 scales.

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