

# EFFECTS WITHOUT CAUSES: EXPLAINING ENDURING GENDER GAPS IN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT



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Canadian Political Science Association  
May 27 to 29, 2009  
Ottawa, ON  
Poster 19

*This study examines the gender gaps in political interest and self-confidence in Canada using data from the 1965 to 2006 Canada Election Studies.*

## Introduction

- Women's lives have changed dramatically since 1965
  - Women have met and exceeded men's educational attainment in Canada (Statistics Canada 2006)
  - Women's labour force participation has increased 16 percentage points between 1976 and 2006 (Statistics Canada 2006)
  - Canada has better relative pay equity compared to other post-industrial democracies (Haussman, Tyson and Zahidi 2008)
- Conventional wisdom suggests that as women's socio-economic status increased and the gender gaps in education attainment and income began to close, political gender gaps would also begin to close.
- However, women remain less interested in politics and less confident in their own political abilities when compared to their male peers.
- That these gender gaps in political behaviour persist in the face of such significant changes in women's lives presents political scientists with a perplexing puzzle.

## Documenting the Gaps

- The proportion of women who report being "very interested" in politics is compared to the proportion of men who report the same high level of political interest.
- Figure 1 documents the gender gap in political interest over time.

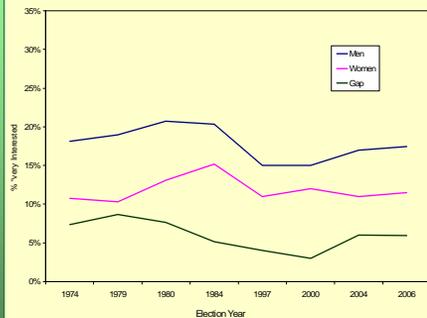


Figure 1: The Gender Gap in Political Interest in Canada, 1974-2006

- Figure 1 shows the gender gap in political interest changes little over time.
- In 1974, women were 7 percentage points less likely than men to report being "very interested" in politics; in 2006, women remained 6 percentage points less likely than men to report being "very interested" in politics.

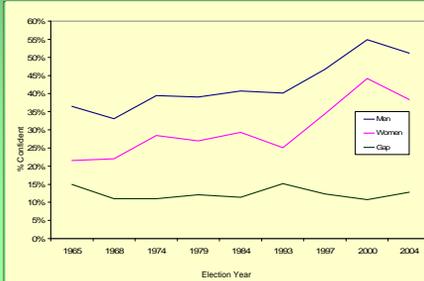


Figure 2: The Gender Gap in Political Self-Confidence in Canada, 1965-2004

- Figure 2 shows that the gender gap in both measures of political engagement has changed little over time.
- The proportion of women who reject the idea that politics is "too complicated" for a person like them to understand is compared to the proportion of men who also reject this idea.
- In 1965, women were 15 percentage points less likely than men to reject the idea that politics is too complicated to understand; in 2004, women remained 13 percentage points less likely than men to reject this idea.

## Decomposing the Gaps

- To determine the mechanisms behind these persistent gender gaps, Blinder-Oaxaca decompositions are used.
- This counterfactual method is well-established in the literature on gender differences in pay.
- Decompositions divide the difference in outcome between two groups into a portion that is 'explained' and a portion that is 'unexplained'.
- The 'explained' portion reflects the differences in the levels of explanatory factors between the two groups, such as differences in educational attainment or income.
- The 'unexplained' portion can be interpreted as the difference in the salience of an explanatory factor between the groups, or as a difference in the processes by which the groups convert a resource into political engagement (Dow 2009; Kaufman and Petrocik 1999; Burns, Scholzman and Verba 2001).
- The 'unexplained' portion also includes the effects of differences between the groups on unobserved predictors/explanatory factors not included in the model (Jann 2008).

## Decomposing the Gaps (continued)

Two different forms of the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition are used.

- Political interest is a continuous variable scaled from 0 to 1. The decomposition is estimated using OLS.
- The OLS decomposition estimates the 'explained' and 'unexplained' portions of the gender gaps, as well as what portion of the gap is explained by the simultaneous interaction between the explained and unexplained portions.
- Political self-confidence is a binary variable. The decomposition is estimated using a logit model (see Fairlie 2006).
- The logit model only estimates the 'explained' portion of the gap. The remainder is considered to be the 'unexplained' portion, and no interaction is calculated.

- Independent variables included in the full model are age, age squared, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, the 1980s cohort, high school education or less, university degree, low income (tertile), high income (tertile), employment status, occupational status, marital status, number of children present, a double day measure (kids' employment), and religiosity.

## Findings

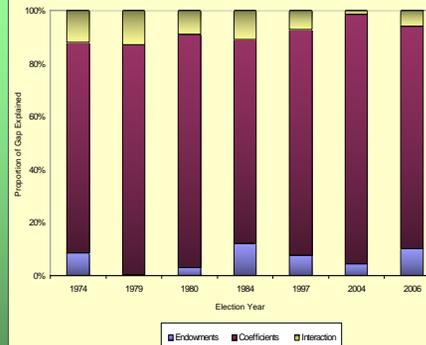


Figure 3: The Proportion of the Gender Gap in Political Interest Explained by Endowments, Coefficients, and the Interaction between the Differences in Endowments and Coefficients, 1974-2006

- Figure 3 demonstrates the gender gap in political interest in Canada persists due to the 'unexplained' portion of the gap.
- Stated differently, even if women and men had the same levels of socio-economic resources, there would still be a gender gap in political interest.

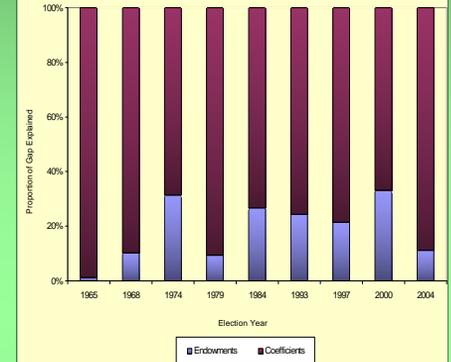


Figure 4: The Proportion of the Gender Gap in Political Self-Confidence Explained by Endowments and Coefficients

- Figure 4 demonstrates that the gender gap in political self-confidence persists due to the 'unexplained' portion of the gap.
  - Like the gender gap in political interest, the gap in political self-confidence will not close by equalising women's and men's political resources.
- Gender differences in resource levels matter somewhat more for political self-confidence than political interest.
  - Positional differences explain as much as 33 per cent of the gender gap in political self-confidence (2000 CES), but only as much as 16 per cent of the gender gap in political interest (1984 CES).

## Conclusion

- Past research on gender gaps in political behaviour focuses on finding *ceteris paribus* conditions that will narrow or eliminate the gender gaps.
- The results of this study show that this emphasis is misplaced.
- Avenues for future research include an examination of how much of the 'unexplained' portion of the gap reflects differences between women and men in converting resources into political engagement.
- Future research may also examine if the gains Canadian women made since 1965 are being offset by countervailing factors.

## Literature cited

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