

Gender and Public Opinion

What is Gender?

Gender is a social identity. A social identity is a social group that is integral to one's conception of self. Everyone has a unique set of social identities of varying importance to them. These identities include fixed identities such as race and nationality as well as changeable identities like partisanship and sports teams. Of course, some of these identities are more impactful than others and some are seriously politically charged. Two such identities are race and gender. In Burns and Kinder's analysis of race and gender, they break down three similarities between the two and one key difference. A basic understanding of these four attributes is critical for further exploration of gender's function in politics and public opinion.

The first of the similarities is that they are social constructs. The differences between men and women's roles in society (gender) go far beyond any biological differences (sex). The second is that they are mental categories, essentially meaning that everyone classifies themselves and others as a certain race and gender from a young age. The third is that they are both causes of lasting inequality in our society (Burns and Kinder 2011). These first three attributes serve to explain why gender is such a politically relevant social identity. Gender is one of the first identities a person develops, it is ubiquitous, and it has the power to determine one's place in society. The key difference between gender and race lies in their social organization. Race emphasizes isolation, while gender emphasizes intimacy. All this means is that racial groups tend to split up into their own neighborhoods and families, while men and women are allocated throughout families and neighborhoods (Burns and Kinder 2011). This intimacy-focused social

organization is what makes gender a unique and interesting social identity. Most racial groups are willing and able to surround themselves with other members of their group. Men and women, however, spend most of their lives in relationships with each other as children, spouses, and parents.

What Does Gender have to do with Public Opinion?

Gender's role as a prominent source of inequality is one of the reasons it is highly politically relevant. Despite making up half of the population, women face notable gender-based discrimination. Understanding the effect of sexism and gender on public opinion for women as both candidates and voters is critical to understanding public opinion as a whole. One important area of study in political science is that of political knowledge and more specifically, knowledge gaps. One such knowledge gap exists between men and women.

Jerit and Barabas demonstrate that the political knowledge gap between men and women is real, persistent, and not explained by measurement error. They attribute the gap to a difference in the availability of information between men and women. To prove their hypothesis, they compare the knowledge of control groups of men and women to groups of men and women given a treatment of factual information. Women benefit more from the treatment than men do and therefore, the knowledge gap decreases (Jerit and Barabas 2016). This supports their proposal of an information gap, but it does not explain its source. Jerit and Barabas posit that women may be off-put by the presentation of political news or simply believe that it is not for them. Whatever the reason may be, this gap has startling implications for public opinion. If women have less political knowledge, how can they competently vote in their best interest? Even when women enter the political scene as candidates, they are hindered by the gendering of certain political issues like national security and terrorism. These issues of safety are often at the

forefront of voters' minds, especially in a post-9/11 America, placing women at a severe disadvantage in tight elections (Valentino et al. 2018).

There is a bounty of evidence for gender-based inequality, but gender's intimacy-focused social organization makes its role in public opinion more complex than sexism or knowledge gaps. Like any political lobbying group, a social group's cohesion and strength of identity directly tie into its political power. Women, usually, do not live together in groups or families the way that members of the same racial group do. This renders women's group identities and ties to one another weaker than a racial group's. For social groups, the strength of group identity hinges on their ability to organize and meet in person. This allows them to recognize their shared experiences as well as identify out-groups, two important conditions for fostering a strong sense of group identity (Walsh 2004). Since women spend most of their time around a mix of men and women, they are not afforded the opportunity to strengthen their group identity. This weak sense of group identity reduces both the salience of gender identity for women and solidarity among women. Therefore, although all women experience notable discrimination due to their gender, they lack unity that assists the mobilization of other marginalized groups.

Wait, Gender Identity isn't that Important to Women?

In the era of Me Too and women's rights marches, it seems ridiculous to suggest that women do not possess a strong sense of group identity and solidarity, but it's true. In comparison to other marginalized groups, women have a weaker sense of identity and cohesion. Looking at partisanship is one easy way to demonstrate this lack of cohesion. There is a consistent and significant gap of around thirty percentage points between whites and African Americans who identify as Democrats. African Americans overwhelmingly identify as Democrats, with the average hovering at around 80% from 1964 to 2008. When looking at the same period of time for

men and women, there is a small gap of around 5 percentage points in Democratic identity, with women being slightly more likely than men to identify as Democrats in any given year (Burns and Kinder 2011). If there is no large difference in partisanship based on gender, and partisanship is the most concrete way of expressing political preferences, then women are not voting as a group.

A lack of partisan cohesion alone does not necessarily suggest that women do not feel connected to other women, but their low measurements of linked fate do. Linked fate is the idea among African Americans that their success is linked totally with the fate of their race as a whole (Junn et al. 2011). Although the term predominantly describes a trend among African Americans, it is useful to look at the same type of linked fate measurements in gender. Overall, women's sense of linked fate and interdependence is relatively weak. Burns and Kinder found that just 21% of women feel angry at the way women are treated in society in comparison to 40% of African Americans. Moreover, women were also far less likely to be politically motivated or influenced by their gender. Even when controlling for race and marital status, a 2017 study found that gender linked fate still is not prominent among women. Among the group with the highest sense of linked fate, single Latina women, only 38.9% felt a strong sense of gender linked fate (Stout et al. 2017). These numbers are shockingly low given the gender-based discrimination that women have endured historically and continue to endure today. Perhaps the most concrete and relevant demonstration of this weak connectedness lies in voting data from the 2016 presidential election. Women as a whole favored Clinton by thirteen percentage points, but when that is broken down by race, it becomes clear what is the more politically salient identity. White women favored Trump by two percentage points while 98% of black women voted for Clinton (Pew Research Center, 2018). This suggests that when it comes to social identities and partisanship,

one's race is far more salient for women than gender. Trump's widely publicized sexism toward women is the ultimate test of these weak bonds. The feeling of being personally attacked when one's social group is attacked is a measure of group cohesion and strength. If women felt deeply and fatefully connected to other women, women would have voted for Clinton by a far wider margin.

What About Feminist Identities?

If in general, women do not feel strongly connected to their gender and do not tend to be politically motivated by their gender, then what explains women's rights movements? Surely those movements must indicate that women's gender is important and politically relevant for them. However, the relevant social identity at work here is a feminist identity. Since feminists are advocates for women's rights, gender identity is inherently important to them. Moreover, while gender does not predict partisanship, feminist identities do, with feminists tending to support the Democratic Party. Furthermore, on the issue of abortion, there is a clear partisan split with Democrats supporting pro-choice policies and Republicans supporting pro-life policies. This same trend exists between feminist and non-feminist women, which bolsters the evidence for the connection between partisanship and feminism, rather than gender (Huddy 2018).

Moreover, feminists display a level of group mobilization and political potency more similar to racial groups. Feminist groups organize protests, hold meetings, and cultivate forums for group members to discuss issues and experiences. Feminist groups foster an environment for discussing shared experiences and have a clearly defined outgroup of anti-feminists. Again, both of these factors are crucial for creating a strong sense of group identity (Walsh 2004). The feminist movement and feminist identities are responsible for much of the political action which people attribute to gender identity. In short, the political behavior of the feminist movement is

what one would expect to see from women in general if gender were more salient for them. However, in a 2016 survey of over a thousand women, while 60% identify as feminists, only 17% identify as strong feminists (Hamel et al. 2016). This distinction suggests that even among feminist identities, there are few women who feel very strong ties to their gender-based identities.

Are Information Environments to Blame?

Women's sense of linked fate varies dramatically with their marital status. Single women are far more likely than married women to feel that their success is strongly tied to women's success as a whole. For Latina and white women, single women are more than twice likely as married women to feel a strong sense of linked fate (Stout et al. 2017). The intimacy-focused social organization of gender explains the general weakness of linked fate, but not the specific deficit for married women. So what is it about marriage that causes women to feel less connected to their gender?

A simple explanation is that married women may be inoculated against gender discrimination by virtue of having a husband. (For the purposes of simplicity, heterosexual marriage is assumed.) A married woman's fate is not tied to other women as much as it is to her husband. This explanation is unsatisfying and rings hollow. A more complex reason could be that married women and single women have fundamentally different information environments. A person's information environment is made up of the information sources they have access to and use regularly. These information sources can be media and newspapers or other people (Jerit et al. 2006). When a woman goes from single to married, her information environment shifts to being centered around her husband. The Receive-Accept-Sample model of human cognition,

states that people tend to construct attitudes from a pool of salient considerations. These considerations are drawn from a person's information environment and filtered based on that person's beliefs and preferences (Zaller 1992). Thus, a married woman's more male-centered information environment may result in less woman-centered information making its way into her information environment, resulting in fewer total woman-centered considerations over time. The net effect of this would be that her gender identity becomes less relevant to her.

There is a lot of research into where women vary in their sense of gender linked fate, but not very much on why. Does a woman's sense of gender linked fate lessen when she gets married or are women with a strong sense of gender linked fate less likely to get married? One way to measure this would be to follow a group of women and measure their strength of connectedness to both feminist and gender identities throughout their lives. This method would allow researchers to observe if an individual woman's gender and feminist identities become less salient as a result of her environment or if they remain relatively constant over time. A way to test the effect of marriage to men on women, specifically, would be to compare gender linked fate and gender identity strength of women in heterosexual and homosexual marriages. Granted, other factors like sexuality could potentially skew the results. Whatever the true cause of the varying saliency of gender and feminist identity for women, it is clear that gender plays a complex, but important role in public opinion.

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