

100 Years of Suffrage and Girls Still Struggle to Find their “Fit” in Politics

Angela L. Bos, *College of Wooster*

Mirya R. Holman, *Tulane University*

Jill S. Greenlee, *Brandeis University*

Zoe M. Oxley, *Union College*

J. Celeste Lay, *Tulane University*

“I have lived to realize the great dream of my life—the enfranchisement of women. We are no longer petitioners, we are not wards of the state, but ‘free and equal citizens.’”

— Carrie Chapman Catt, after ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment

When women gained the national right to vote 100 years ago, remarkable possibilities for their voice and presence in politics opened. However, despite gains in women’s representation, numerous gaps continue to exist in which adult women engage less in politics than men. In identifying and explaining adult gender gaps, little attention has been given to whether gaps emerge among children. This is a pressing issue because children’s perceptions are likely to influence their participation as adults. This article explores whether and how girls and boys differently view politics and their role in it. We report survey data from more than 1,600 children ages 6 to 12 to explore basic gender gaps in political interest and ambition. We argue that these results may reveal the roots of a larger problem: 100 years after women gained suffrage, girls still express less interest and enthusiasm than boys for political life and political office.

The struggle for suffrage in the United States was fought at the local, state, and national levels, with women organizing, lobbying public officials, pressuring parties, and running for office to push political parties, gatekeepers, and political elites to extend women the right to vote (McConaughy 2013; Ondercin 2018; Teele 2018; Wolbrecht 2000). These activities, it was assumed, would translate into women becoming full political citizens after suffrage. Moreover, that political citizenship would provide women’s political equality.

After the United States ratified the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 and gave white¹ women the national right to vote, the national narrative became one of “disappointment” with the low level of women’s engagement in politics (Rice and Willey 1924). The subsequent women’s movement, civil rights movement, and increases in women’s education and workforce participation also provided promising developments for increasing gender equality in political involvement and representation. However, gender inequality persists today. Women are less engaged in politics across every form of political participation except

voting, including political knowledge, participation, and ambition (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). These differences mean that women’s voices are weak or absent from many political arenas.

We might expect these gaps to disappear as younger generations—socialized in seemingly promising times for gender equality—replace older generations in our polity (Diekman and Eagly 2000). These expectations have not yet been fulfilled. Indeed, our data of more than 1,600 students, grades 1–6, show that elementary school children already display gender gaps in which girls, particularly white girls, report lower levels of political interest and ambition than boys. Despite women gaining suffrage rights 100 years ago, our findings indicate that children’s early socialization to politics is *gendered* and that proactive steps and interventions must be taken to encourage girls to view themselves as vital members of the polis.

BACKGROUND

Soon after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, researchers noted that women were not turning out to vote at the same rate as men (Rice and Willey 1924). However, early analyses cautioned patience: with time, women’s equality was coming. Apart from women now outvoting men, the dream that suffrage would achieve broader political engagement for women has not yet materialized. The increase of women in the workforce, the women’s movement beginning in the 1960s, and the so-called Year of the Woman in 1992 have not resulted in equal rates of political engagement or interest between men and women. Moreover, women continue to be underrepresented in elected political offices at the federal (Dietrich, Hayes, and O’Brien 2019), state (Osborn 2014), and local (Holman 2017) levels.

Despite suffrage and rapid changes thereafter, evidence documents gender differences—adult women have less enthusiasm for politics generally (Preece 2016) and for political careers and seeking office (Crowder-Meyer 2018; Schneider et al. 2016)—but also focuses on white women’s experiences. Different (and often smaller) gaps emerge for women of color (Farris and Holman 2014; Silva and Skulley 2019). These gender gaps are consequential because political interest predicts many forms of political action, including running for political office. Because running for office must occur before holding office, political interest gaps contribute to the

underrepresentation of women's voices in formal political activism and in political office.

It is not clear when these gaps begin because most studies of the gender gaps in political interest and ambition examine adult American men and women (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Silva and Skulley 2019). Research from political socialization and gender studies highlights the importance of understanding what girls and boys think about politics early on in life.

Despite women gaining suffrage rights 100 years ago, our findings indicate that children's early socialization to politics is gendered and that proactive steps and interventions must be taken to encourage girls to view themselves as vital members of the polis.

We argue that gender gaps may exist among children due to a *gendered* socialization process. From an early age, children experience gender socialization (Letendre 2007). Boys are encouraged to develop traits associated with leadership and agency and girls to develop traits oriented toward caring and interpersonal relations (Diekman and Murnen 2004). According to social role theory (Eagly and Wood 2012; Schneider and Bos 2019), when children observe more men than women in public-sphere roles, they infer that male-typical traits are needed to be successful in those roles.

One century after women's suffrage, we demonstrate myriad ways that girls continue to be socialized to underestimate their political potential.

There also are reasons to believe that the *political* socialization process—that is, how children learn not only about the world generally but also about politics—is gendered. For example, young women (compared to young men) are less likely to have their parents speak to them about politics and less likely to have anyone encourage them to run for office (Lawless and Fox 2013). Because children learn that men predominantly hold political office and their social studies curricula is likely to emphasize men's contributions to US politics (Cassese, Bos, and Schneider 2014; Lay et al. 2019), they associate men and masculine traits with success in politics. Indeed, “both boys and girls learn that adult political expression is more of a male than female gender role” (Jennings 1983, 365). Yet, when gender cues exist in their political surroundings, girls pay attention to these cues. Adolescent girls' political interest is bolstered in response to a highly visible, novel woman running for political office (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). Furthermore, recent research on interest in politics since the 2016 election suggests that teenage girls are paying close attention to the ways that gender is discussed in politics (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2019). Like adult women (Freeman 2002), girls also may be likely to participate in nonformal political activism (Brinkman 2016), including working for social and political change.

At the same time, we know little about gender gaps in traditional measures of participation, including political interest and ambition, before adulthood. Our research filled this scholarly gap by directly asking children about their political interest and ambition, which allowed us to measure and examine gender differences. One century after women's suffrage, we demonstrate myriad ways that girls continue to be socialized to underestimate their political potential.

METHODS

We examined girls' and boys' political interest and ambition through data collected in interviews and surveys with primary-school-aged children in late 2017 and early 2018. Researchers recruited students from 18 elementary schools across four research locations to participate (Oxley et al. 2020). After obtaining parental consent and student assent, we interviewed (i.e., first, second, and some third graders) or surveyed (i.e., some third and all fourth through sixth graders) each student.

FINDINGS

We used a battery of questions adapted from science education to measure interest in politics. Students provided their level of agreement with the following statements using a four-point scale (i.e., from strongly disagree to strongly agree): “Politics, government, and history is something I get excited about”; “I am curious to learn more about politics, government, history, and current events”; “I would like to have a job in government or politics in the future”; and “Learning about history and how the government works is boring” (reverse coded). We examined responses on each statement as well as an averaged scale of all items.

To examine gender differences in political interest, we used a simple regression model (see the online appendix) with controls for race and ethnicity and clustered errors based on research location. In figure 1, which presents the differences between boys and girls, the dots indicate the coefficient and the bars indicate the confidence intervals (95%). Coefficients that are below the zero line indicate that boys expressed higher levels of interest than girls, holding location and race and ethnicity constant. We found that girls express lower levels of aggregate interest, as compared to boys, suggesting that even at an early age, girls are not socialized to see politics as an area

Figure 1
Gender Differences in Interest in Political Materials

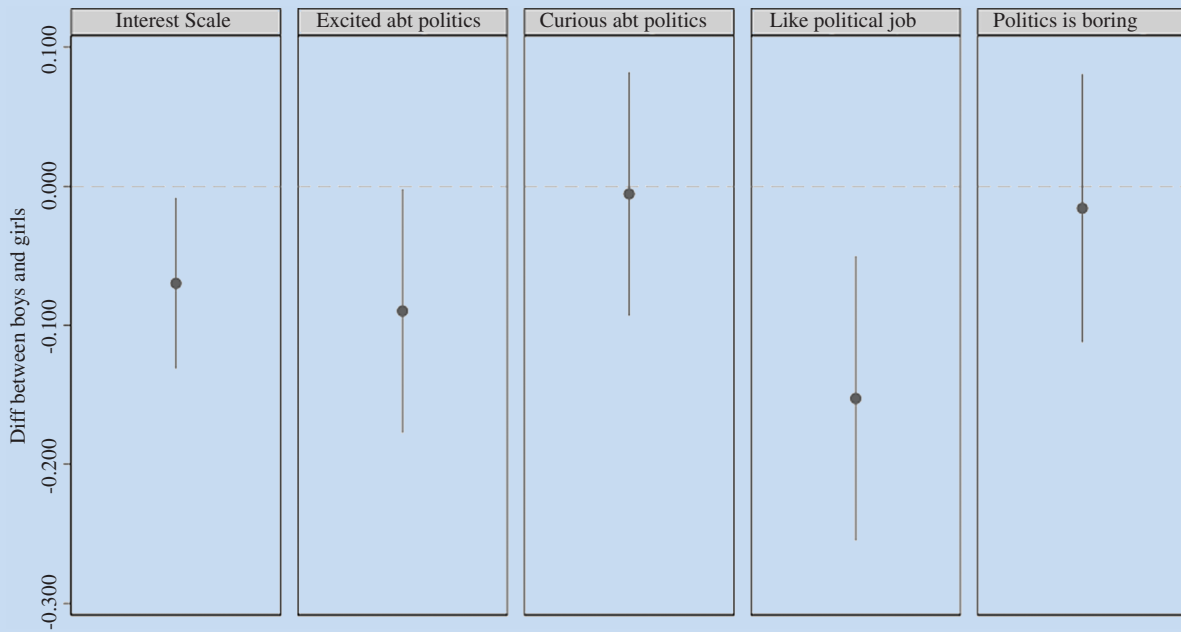
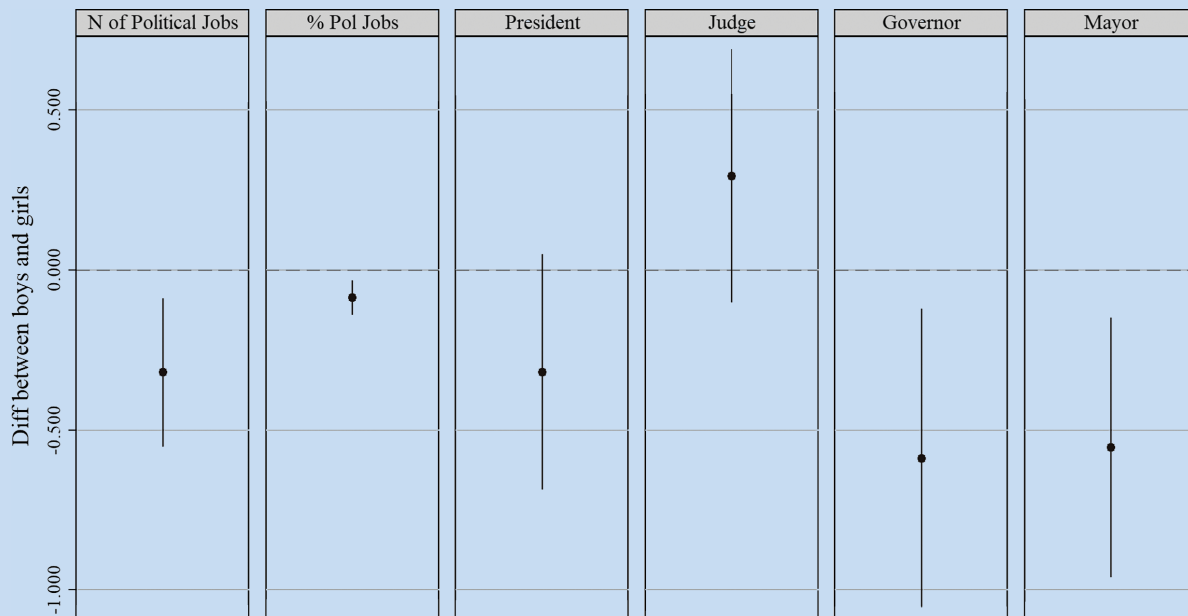


Figure 2
Gender Differences in Interest in Political Jobs as Adult



of interest and excitement. These results are particularly apparent among white girls, who express lower levels of interest and less positive affect toward political jobs. Black girls, in comparison, are less excited about politics in comparison to all boys.

To examine whether gender gaps in political ambition exist among children, we asked a subsample (N=492) of students to “Check all the jobs you would like when you are older,” selecting from a list that included jobs such as business owner, teacher, doctor, and four political jobs: president, governor, judge, and mayor. We examined the individual political leaders, the total number of political jobs selected, and the share of jobs selected that were political. The results are shown in figure 2.

These efforts could transform our political world to a more inclusive space in which girls and women are descriptively and substantively represented in all aspects of the political process.

We again found gender differences, with girls (compared to boys) checking fewer political jobs overall and a lower share of political jobs from the total jobs selected. We found that girls do not select jobs such as mayor and governor, whereas judge—a job that could be seen as political or not—has a positive, insignificant coefficient for gender. Again, these results are stronger for white girls, who select fewer political jobs overall and are less likely to list president, governor, or mayor. Although black girls select fewer jobs overall, they do not select any one job at a lower rate.

DISCUSSION

Despite 100 years of white women’s voting rights and visible gains made by women with regard to participating in politics and holding elected office, women’s political engagement lags behind men. Our results show that this also is true among children: compared with boys, girls are less interested in politics generally and less interested in political careers specifically. These results may help explain the roots of myriad gender gaps between adult men and women.

Our findings indicate a pressing need to understand more about when and how children develop perceptions of politics generally, about how political socialization is gendered, and to what effect. Understanding the causes of early gender gaps will chart a course for further understanding of how to address childhood political gender gaps. Research demonstrates the importance of creating gender-equitable curricula (Cassese, Bos, and Schneider 2014) and women role models in politics (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006).

One hundred years ago, women’s suffrage brought a promise for women’s equality. That early promise is still unfulfilled. What is clear is that simply adding women to the political sphere a century ago by granting them suffrage rights did not result in fundamental changes to political institutions. It falls to adults to address socialization processes in order to engage girls more fully in politics.

These efforts could transform our political world to a more inclusive space in which girls and women are descriptively and substantively represented in all aspects of the political process.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520000293>. ■

NOTE

1. Black women, Latinas, Asian women, and Native American women were largely excluded from women’s suffrage (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Hancock 2007).

REFERENCES

- Brah, Avtar, and Ann Phoenix. 2004. “Ain’t I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 5:75–86.
- Brinkman, Britney G. 2016. “Promoting Adolescent Girls’ Civic Engagement and Activism.” In *The Political Psychology of Women in U.S. Politics*, ed. Angela L. Bos and Monica C. Schneider, 34–50. New York: Routledge.
- Burns, Nancy, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba. 2001. *The Private Roots of Public Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Campbell, David E., and Christina Wolbrecht. 2006. “See Jane Run: Women Politicians as Role Models for Adolescents.” *Journal of Politics* 68 (2): 233–47.
- Campbell, David E., and Christina Wolbrecht. 2019. “The Resistance as Role Model: Disillusionment and Protest among American Adolescents after 2016.” *Political Behavior, OnlineFirst*. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09537-w>.
- Cassese, Erin C., Angela L. Bos, and Monica C. Schneider. 2014. “Whose American Government? A Quantitative Analysis of Gender and Authorship in American Politics Texts.” *Journal of Political Science Education* 10 (3): 253–72.
- Coffé, Hilde, and Catherine Bolzendahl. 2010. “Same Game, Different Rules? Gender Differences in Political Participation.” *Sex Roles* 62 (5): 318–33.
- Crowder-Meyer, Melody. 2018. “Baker, Bus Driver, Babysitter, Candidate? Revealing the Gendered Development of Political Ambition among Ordinary Americans.” *Political Behavior, OnlineFirst*. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-9498-9>.
- Diekmann, Amanda B., and Alice H. Eagly. 2000. “Stereotypes as Dynamic Constructs: Women and Men of the Past, Present, and Future.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26 (10): 1171–88.
- Diekmann, Amanda B., and Sarah K. Murnen. 2004. “Learning to Be Little Women and Little Men: The Inequitable Gender Equality of Nonsexist Children’s Literature.” *Sex Roles* 50 (5–6): 373–85.
- Dietrich, Bryce J., Matthew Hayes, and Diana Z. O’Brien. 2019. “Pitch Perfect: Vocal Pitch and the Emotional Intensity of Congressional Speech.” *American Political Science Review* 113 (4): 941–62.
- Eagly, Alice H., and Wendy Wood. 2012. “Social Role Theory.” In *Handbook of Theories in Social Psychology*, ed. Paul van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, and E. T. Higgins, 458–76. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Farris, Emily M., and Mirya R. Holman. 2014. “Social Capital and Solving the Puzzle of Black Women’s Political Participation.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 3 (2): 331–49.
- Freeman, Jo. 2002. *A Room at a Time: How Women Entered Party Politics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hancock, Ange-Marie. 2007. “Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm.” *Politics & Gender* 3 (2): 248–54.

- Holman, Mirya R. 2017. "Women in Local Government: What We Know and Where We Go from Here." *State and Local Government Review* 49 (4): 285–96.
- Jennings, M. Kent. 1983. "Gender Roles and Inequalities in Political Participation: Results from an Eight-Nation Study." *Political Research Quarterly* 36 (3): 364–85.
- Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard L. Fox. 2013. *Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans' Political Ambition*. Washington, DC: American University.
- Lay, J. Celeste, Mirya R. Holman, Angela L. Bos, Jill S. Greenlee, Zoe M. Oxley, and Allison Buffett. 2019. "TIME for Kids to Learn Gender Stereotypes: Analysis of Gender and Political Leadership in a Common Social Studies Resource for Children." *Politics & Gender*. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000540>.
- Letendre, Joan. 2007. "'Sugar and Spice but Not Always Nice': Gender Socialization and Its Impact on Development and Maintenance of Aggression in Adolescent Girls." *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 24 (4): 353–68.
- McConnaughey, Corrine M. 2013. *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ondercin, Heather L. 2018. "The Evolution of Women's (and Men's) Partisan Attachments." In *100 Years of the Nineteenth Amendment: An Appraisal of Women's Political Activism*, ed. Holly J. McCammon and Lee Ann Banaszak, 46–68. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Osborn, Tracy. 2014. "Women State Legislators and Representation: The Role of Political Parties and Institutions." *State and Local Government Review* 46 (2): 146–55.
- Oxley, Zoe M., Mirya R. Holman, Jill S. Greenlee, Angela L. Bos, and J. Celeste Lay. 2020. "Children's Views of the American Presidency." *Public Opinion Quarterly*.
- Preece, Jessica Robinson. 2016. "Mind the Gender Gap: An Experiment on the Influence of Self-Efficacy on Political Interest." *Politics & Gender* 12 (1): 198–217.
- Rice, Stuart A., and Malcolm M. Willey. 1924. "American Women's Ineffective Use of the Vote." *Current History* 20 (4): 641–47.
- Schneider, Monica C., and Angela L. Bos. 2019. "The Application of Social-Role Theory to the Study of Gender in Politics." *Political Psychology* 40 (S1): 173–213.
- Schneider, Monica C., Mirya R. Holman, Amanda B. Diekmann, and Thomas McAndrew. 2016. "Power, Conflict, and Community: How Gendered Views of Political Power Influence Women's Political Ambition." *Political Psychology* 37 (4): 515–31.
- Silva, Andrea, and Carrie Skulley. 2019. "Always Running: Candidate Emergence among Women of Color over Time." *Political Research Quarterly* 72 (2): 342–59.
- Teele, Dawn Langan. 2018. "How the West Was Won: Competition, Mobilization, and Women's Enfranchisement in the United States." *Journal of Politics* 80 (2): 442–61.
- Wolbrecht, Christina. 2000. *The Politics of Women's Rights: Parties, Positions, and Change*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.