

The Gender Gap in Self-Perceived Understanding of Politics in Canada and the United States

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Despite the gains women have made since the advent of second-wave feminism, women remain less confident than men of their ability to understand politics. This gender gap has remained unchanged for decades, yet it has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention in recent years. This article uses data from the 2000 American and 2004 Canadian election studies to assess whether differences in women's and men's socioeconomic resources help to explain the gender gap. We also examine whether there are differences in the ways that socioeconomic resources affect women's and men's self-perceived ability to understand politics. We focus particular attention on the effects of parenthood on women's confidence in their understanding of politics. Finally, we consider the role of feminism and gender role conceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

First highlighted by Angus Campbell and his colleagues in *The American Voter* (1960), the gender gap in psychological involvement with politics remains an enigma (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001, 269). In this article, we focus on a neglected aspect of this gender gap, namely, women's lower level of confidence in their ability to understand politics. In Canada and the United States alike, this gap has remained more or less constant through the sweeping changes that have transformed many women's lives. Women have moved into the paid workforce in massive numbers in both countries: In 1976, 43% of American women over the age of 16 and 42% of Canadian women over the age of 15 were employed. By 2006, nearly 57% of American women and 58% of Canadian women were employed (Statistics Canada 2006; U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). Women's attainment of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees now exceeds men's in Canada by eight percentage points and in the United States by six percentage points for those ages 25 to 34 (Statistics Canada 2006; calculated from U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Yet in spite of all the advances that women have achieved in the public sphere since the advent of second-wave feminism, they remain more likely than men to think that politics is too complicated for them to understand. Counterintuitive as it is, this gap has received surprisingly little attention from scholars in recent years.¹

The "enduring conundrum" (Beckwith 1986, 161) of the gender gap in self-perceived ability to understand politics begs attention because it has implications for women's propensity not only to participate in politics but also to participate effectively. If women are deterred from following politics closely because they perceive it to be too complicated, they are going to find it harder to translate their needs and wants into the appropriate political choices, and the system may be less responsive as a consequence. Moreover, analyzing the sources of this gap may provide insight into why the profound structural and cultural changes that have affected women's lives over the past half century have not translated into greater political self-confidence.

1. Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) have provided the most extensive analysis of gender and political participation, but they only deal with "external efficacy," or "the respondent's perception of being able to have an impact on politics" (p. 105).

Our analysis begins with a model that focuses on some of the key resources that could explain variation in people's self-perceived ability to understand politics. First, we assess whether differences in men's and women's socioeconomic resources can account for the gender gap. Then we examine whether there are gender differences in the way that these resources work to enhance people's confidence in their capacity for understanding politics. We pay particular attention to the role of motherhood and assess the extent to which the presence of children in the home contributes to the gender gap. We end with a consideration of gender-role conceptions and the socializing effects of the feminist movement.

Our data are taken from the 2000 American National Election Study (ANES)² and the 2004 Canadian Election Study (CES) mail-back survey.³ A comparative study of Canada and the United States provides significant analytical leverage. First, the division of powers in the United States and the dense web of intergovernmental relationships in Canada mean that politics and government involve a comparable degree of complexity in both countries. Second, the women's movement emerged in both countries at about the same time in the mid-1960s and was the product of similar forces, such as increased access to higher education, radical student movements, and resistance to the constraining gender roles of the 1950s (Young 2000). However, the two countries differ when it comes to the provision of maternity leave and the availability of affordable day care. Accordingly, a comparative analysis of the gender gap in self-perceived political understanding can provide important insights into the constraining effects of parenting.

SOCIOECONOMIC RESOURCES

Our focus is on gender differences in responses to the statement that "Sometimes politics is too complicated for a person like me to

2. In 2004, the complexity question was demoted from the status of "core" to "inventory" and was not included in the 2004 ANES. See "The Report of the Planning Committee for the 2004 American National Election Studies to the ANES User Community and the ANES Board of Overseers," [ftp://ftp.electionstudies.org/ftp/nes/studypages/2004prepost/nes2004pc_report.pdf](http://ftp.electionstudies.org/ftp/nes/studypages/2004prepost/nes2004pc_report.pdf). Of the 1,807 eligible voters interviewed for the preelection wave of the 2000 ANES, 1,555 were reinterviewed after the election. The preelection survey response rate was 61%. Detailed information on the ANES can be found at <http://www.electionstudies.org>.

3. The response rate for the 2004 CES campaign survey was 53%. Of the 4,323 eligible voters surveyed during the campaign, 3,138 were reinterviewed after the election and 1,674 completed the mail-back questionnaire. York University's Institute for Social Research conducted the fieldwork. The data and questionnaires are available at: <http://ces-ec.mcgill.ca/ces.html>.

understand.”⁴ As Virginia Sapiro (1983, 99) notes, this item “captures very precisely traditional notions of women’s relationship to politics: politics is man’s business, women are simply not capable of understanding it.” Traditionally, it was considered to be a measure of “internal efficacy,” or “individuals’ self-perception that they are capable of understanding politics and competent enough to participate in political acts such as voting” (Miller, Miller, and Schneider 1980, 253). However, validity tests have indicated that it correlates poorly with other measures of internal efficacy (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991). What is interesting about these tests from our perspective is the conclusion that this item “primarily taps the ‘ability’ or ‘skills’ component of internal efficacy, whereas the remaining items are better able to capture the ‘interest’ component that sometimes develops in the absence of formal skills” (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990, 295). This makes the persistence of the gender gap all the more surprising: Why have women’s gains in terms of educational attainment and labor force participation not done more to enhance their confidence in their political skills?

Carol Christy (1985) was one of the first to highlight the disjuncture between the changes in women’s education and workforce participation and the continuing gap in women’s and men’s confidence in their ability to understand politics. Karen Beckwith’s (1986) extensive individual-level analysis confirmed that the gender gap persisted, regardless of education, social class, or occupational status.

These findings pose a fundamental challenge to explanations of gender differences in political engagement that focus on women’s lack of socioeconomic resources. This type of explanation has proved its worth in accounting for the gender gap in political activity. On the basis of their wide-ranging analysis, Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba (2001, 359–60) concluded that “[t]he emphasis upon socioeconomic resources turned out . . . to be well placed. Women are, on average, disadvantaged with respect to education, income, and occupational status, attributes long known to be associated with political activity. These deficits are important in accounting for the participation gap.”⁵ The implication is that once these gender disparities disappear, women and men will be equally active in politics. It is interesting,

4. The Canadian question uses slightly different wording: “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.”

5. Building on the work of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), their resource model goes well beyond socioeconomic resources to examine the role of civic skills that are acquired early in life in

however, that the same factors performed rather poorly when it came to explaining gender differences in political interest, political knowledge, and external political efficacy (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). Similarly, Lonna Rae Atkeson and Ronald Rapoport (2003) found that controlling for socioeconomic resources diminished, but did not eliminate, the gender gap in political attitude expression.

There are certainly reasons to expect socioeconomic resources to matter. Education has been hailed as the great equalizer, and enhanced access to education is credited with opening the doors of opportunity, wealth, and power for disadvantaged groups. Education fosters norms of civic duty and political engagement. Most importantly, for our purposes, it develops the cognitive and information-processing skills that are required to deal with the complexities of politics (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). It is perplexing that women remain less confident than men of their ability to understand politics, given the increase in their level of education. However, we have to bear in mind that not all women have shared equally in these advances. Women make up a disproportionate number of those living in poverty, and that number has been growing: Since the 1970s, female-headed households have accounted for an increasing proportion of those below the poverty line (Fukuda-Parr 1999). The feminization of poverty may mean that women living at the margins are too preoccupied with the daily struggle to put a meal on the table and find the rent money to have much energy to devote to keeping abreast of politics.

It is also surprising that increased participation in the workforce has apparently not been accompanied by a narrowing of the gender gap in self-perceived political understanding. Confinement to the domestic sphere has traditionally been seen as isolating women and limiting their opportunities to discuss politics (Kay et al. 1987). As full-time homemakers, they may be less aware of gender inequalities and thus less likely to develop a feminist consciousness or to question traditional gender roles (Manza and Brooks 1998; Welch 1977). Accordingly, we would expect entry into the paid workforce to enhance women's confidence in their ability to understand a traditionally male-dominated domain. If working outside the home for pay has failed to enhance women's confidence in their ability to understand politics, the explanation may lie in gendered patterns of employment. Gender

the family and at school and that are fostered in adulthood in nonpolitical institutional settings. We do not have the data that would be needed to test a full-blown resource model.

continues to negotiate, to some degree, the experiences that women have in the paid workforce. Women's underrepresentation in high-status occupations may limit their opportunities to gain a better understanding of politics and government.

The responsibility of raising children is another sex-specific reality that may affect women's self-perceived ability to understand politics. Sapiro (1983) first pointed to the inhibiting effect of motherhood on the perceived complexity of politics. Motherhood may well be more of a constraint now than it was 30 or 40 years ago. More women today are working a "double day," juggling their domestic responsibilities with full-time employment outside the home. The disproportionate amount of responsibility that many of them continue to bear due to caring for home and children may serve to limit the gains in political understanding that might otherwise have accrued from working outside the home. To their surprise, though, Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) found that having children at home did not significantly affect women's propensity to be politically active, and "[t]ry as we might, we could find no evidence that an absence of free time handicaps women as citizens" (p. 333). Indeed, mothers of school-age children were actually more apt to participate in politics if they held full-time jobs. Leisure time was simply not a significant factor in explaining political activity for women or men. It is interesting to note, though, that there is one important exception to this pattern: The amount of free time did have a significant effect on people's political knowledge (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). Acquiring political information requires a commitment of time and energy. Indeed, this is why many people are considered to be rationally ignorant about politics (Downs 1957). Developing confidence in one's ability to understand politics may require a similar commitment. To the extent that it does, the demands of parenting may help to explain why some women lack that confidence.

DATA AND METHODS

We use data from the 2000 American National Election Study and the 2004 Canadian Election Study mail-back survey to assess these explanations of the gender gap in self-perceived understanding of politics. In comparing Canada and the United States, we are analyzing the gender gap in self-perceived political understanding in settings that

are similar in many ways. The key similarities, for our purposes, relate to the emergence of the women's movement and the sweeping changes that have occurred in women's lives in both countries over the past 40 years. According to Lisa Young (2000, 7), "Situating the two movements within the broader universe of feminist movements in advanced industrialized countries, we find the two North American movements more similar to one another than to any other national movements."⁶ We also see women making similar gains in both countries. Between 1971 and 2001, the percentage of Canadian women 15 and older with a university degree increased by 12 points (Statistics Canada 2006). In the United States, the percentage of women age 25 and over with a college degree increased by almost 15 points over a similar 30-year span (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Both countries have also seen significant increases in women's labor force participation: The percentage of Canadian women age 15 and over in the paid workforce increased by 16 points between 1976 and 2004 (Statistics Canada 2006), while the percentage for American women age 16 and over increased by 15 points between 1970 and 2004 (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007).

At the same time, though, the two countries differ in potentially consequential ways. Canadian women who have worked for at least 600 hours in the previous 52 weeks are entitled to receive up to \$435 a week in maternity benefits for a maximum of 15 weeks. In addition, parental benefits are payable while they are caring for their newborn (or adopted) child, up to a maximum of a further 35 weeks. The parental benefits can be claimed by one parent or shared between the two partners but cannot exceed a combined maximum of 35 weeks. The benefits are funded through the federal Employment Insurance program to which both employers and employees contribute. In the United States, by contrast, only a handful of states provide maternity benefits (in the form of short-term disability benefits for 10 to 12 weeks), and while the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 requires employers with 50 or more employees to provide maternity/parental leave, it does not require that the leave be paid.

6. This is not to say that they are mirror images of each other. While liberal feminism has been dominant in both countries, there has been a strong strand of socialist feminism in Canada since the mid-1980s. There are also major organizational differences: In contrast to the membership-based National Organization for Women, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women in Canada is a coalition of member groups.

The two countries also differ when it comes to affordable child care. Parents in the United States incur, on average, 60% of the cost of child-care services, whereas Canadian parents outside Quebec incur slightly less than 50% (OECD Directorate for Education 2006). In the province of Quebec, parents have access to seven-dollar-a-day day care. The United States has one of the poorest records among countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development when it comes to providing affordable child care to low-income families (OECD Directorate for Education 2006). These differences may explain why employment rates for women with young children differ in the two countries. In 2004, only 57% of mothers with a child under the age of 3 years worked for pay in the United States, compared with 65% of their Canadian counterparts (Statistics Canada 2006; U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). The difference disappears once the youngest child enters grade school. If the demands of motherhood are a drag on women's political comprehension, this should be much more evident in the United States than in Canada.

For each country, we begin with a baseline model that only includes sex. In order to assess whether differences in women's and men's socioeconomic resources explain the gender gap, we add education, income, and employment-related variables to the model, along with controls for age cohort, race, marital status, and children in the home. If socioeconomic and employment-related differences are contributing to the gender gap in self-perceived ability to understand politics, the sex coefficients should shrink when these variables are included. However, a complete assessment of the role of socioeconomic resources requires that we also test whether there are gender differences in the way that these resources work to enhance people's confidence in their capacity for understanding politics (see Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). To do so, we estimate a model that interacts each of the variables with sex. This also enables us to test whether the presence of children in the home has sex-specific effects. Parenting is expected to have much more of a constraining effect on women, especially in the United States; having children may make little difference in men's confidence in their ability to understand politics.

The dependent variable is based on responses to the following agree/disagree items: "Sometimes politics is too complicated for a person like me to understand" (ANES) and "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" (CES). The response categories (see Appendix) have been

recoded 1 for those who disagreed with the statement and 0 for those who did not disagree (including those who neither agreed nor disagreed in the ANES and those who were unsure in the CES)⁷. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, all of the models are estimated using binary logistic regression.

With the exception of the number of children, the independent variables are dummy coded: sex (coded 1 for female), education (two dummy variables, one coded 1 for less than high school and the second coded 1 for university graduates), employment status (coded 1 for working for pay), occupational status (two dummy variables, one coded 1 for managerial and professional occupations and the second coded 1 for lower-status occupations), family income (two dummy variables, one coded 1 for low incomes and the second coded 1 for high incomes)⁸, marital status (coded 1 for legally married), age cohort (two dummy variables, one coded 1 for those born between 1943 and 1957 and the second coded 1 for those born between 1958 and 1986)⁹, and racial minority (coded 1 for minority).¹⁰ The number of children under 18 years of age at home is coded from 0 (no children) to 3 (three or more children).

FINDINGS

Figure 1 tracks the percentage of women and men who reject the statement that politics is sometimes too complicated for a person like themselves to understand. This item was first asked in the 1952 ANES, giving us a lengthy time series that ends in 2000 (when the item ceased to be

7. This coding was chosen in order to distinguish those who were confident of their abilities from those who were not. This coding also avoided a potential problem in using data from the 2000 ANES (see Bowers and Ensley 2003). The 2000 ANES employed a dual-mode design: Some respondents were interviewed face-to-face while others were interviewed over the telephone. Respondents interviewed by telephone were less likely to respond "neither agree nor disagree" than respondents interviewed in person. However, there was only a .12 point difference in the percentage who disagreed with the statement between the two modes. When we repeated all of the regression analyses with a control for mode, the results reported here were replicated.

8. Family income is the only available measure of income in the data sets. CES respondents whose annual household income was less than \$30,000 were coded as low income, while those whose household income was \$70,000 or more were considered high income. In the ANES, the corresponding cutoffs were less than \$35,000 and more than \$75,000.

9. These cohorts correspond to those who grew to adulthood during the eras of second- and third-wave feminism, respectively (see Baumgardner and Richard 2000; Faludi 1991; O'Neill 2003).

10. All CES respondents who indicated non-European ancestry were coded as belonging to a racial minority. To capture the distinctive experience of black Americans, two dummy variables were created for the ANES, one for black respondents and one for other nonwhite respondents.

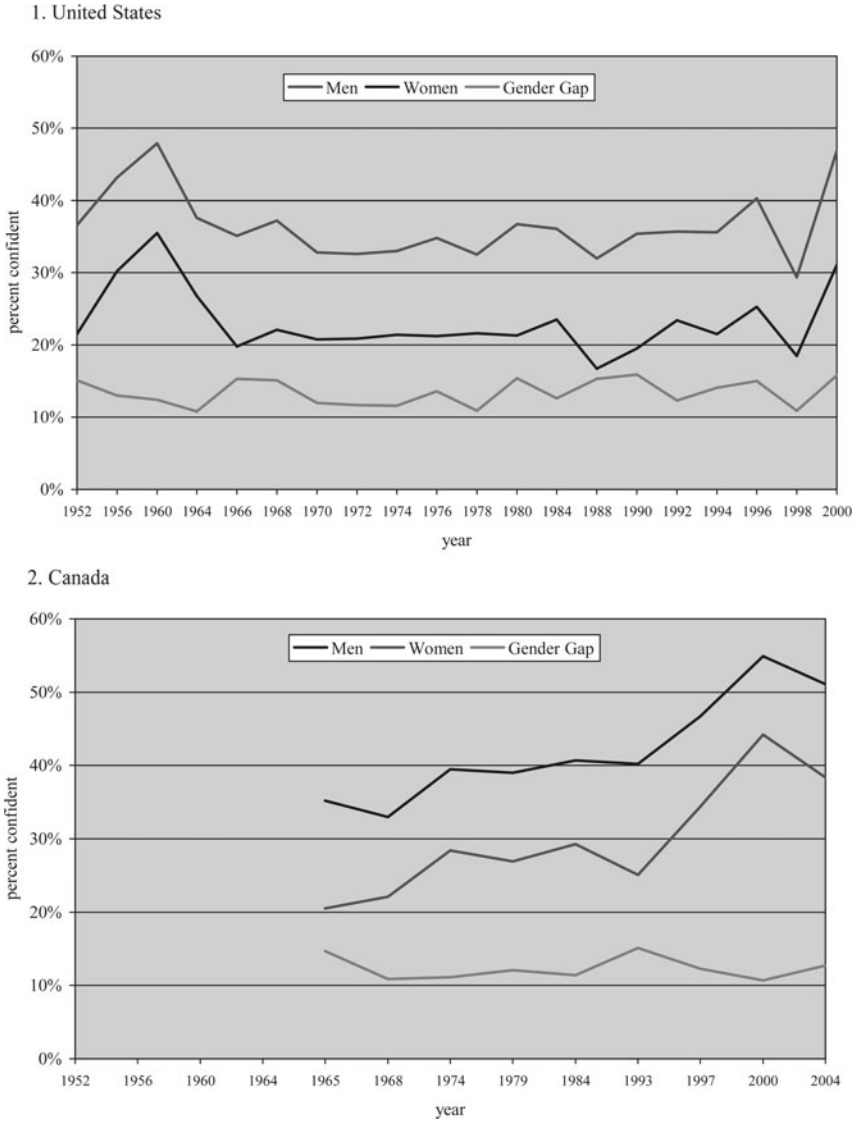


FIGURE 1. The gender gap in self-perceived political understanding. Percent confident is the percentage who reject the statement that politics is sometimes too complicated for a person like themselves to understand. (Source: *American National Election Studies, 1952 to 2000*, and *Canadian Election Studies, 1965 to 2004*.)

considered a “core” question). The item has been included in every CES (save for 1980 and 1988) since the first study was conducted in 1965.¹¹ The similarity in both the size and the persistence of the gender gaps in self-perceived understanding of politics in the United States and Canada is striking. This similarity is all the more striking in that the overall trends diverge: Canadians appear to have gained greater confidence in their ability to understand politics, whereas Americans show little net change.¹² In 1952, the gender gap in the United States was 15 percentage points; almost half a century later, the gap was 16 points. In the intervening years, the gap was never less than 11 points. In Canada, the gap was 15 points in 1965 and 13 points almost 40 years later and, again, the gap was never less than 11 points in all those years. Also striking in the case of the United States is the similarity to the equally persistent gender gap in expressing political attitudes (see Atkeson and Rapoport 2003).

The persistence of the gaps in the face of the profound changes in women’s lives during these same periods suggests that a socioeconomic resource model is not going to be very helpful in explaining why women feel less confident than men of their ability to comprehend politics. This does, indeed, prove to be the case (see Table 1). Simply focusing on differences in women’s and men’s socioeconomic resources does little, if anything, to explain the gender gap in self-perceived political understanding in either country. Adding such key resources as education, income, and labor force participation (along with suitable controls) to the regression model for the United States leaves the coefficient for sex virtually unchanged, as a comparison of the first two columns of Table 1 indicates. The same is true if we substitute measures of occupational status for labor force participation (column 3). In Canada, too, these variables do little to diminish the impact of sex.

Yet socioeconomic resources are clearly important to people’s self-perceived ability to understand politics. In both countries, education and income prove to be the critical resources in this regard. People with less than a high school education and/or a low income are significantly less likely to reject the notion that politics is too complicated for them to understand. Conversely, college graduates in the United States are much more likely to disagree with this statement, and so are college graduates

11. Note that there have been variations in question wording and response categories across time (see Appendix).

12. This enhanced sense of personal political competence in Canada may reflect the fact that this period marked the end of constitutional wrangling.

Table 1. The impact of socioeconomic resources and parenting on self-perceived ability to understand politics

	<i>United States</i>			<i>Canada</i>		
Female	-0.68 (0.13)***	-0.65 (0.14)***	-0.66 (0.14)***	-0.50 (0.12)***	-0.42 (0.12)***	-0.43 (0.12)***
Less than high school		-0.57 (0.32)*	-0.58 (0.32)*		-0.60 (0.22)***	-0.61 (0.22)***
College graduate		1.09 (0.15)***	1.06 (0.16)***		0.42 (0.14)***	0.33 (0.15)**
Low income		-0.37 (0.18)**	-0.37 (0.18)**		-0.42 (0.18)**	-0.43 (0.18)**
High income		0.23 (0.18)	0.22 (0.17)		0.61 (0.14)***	0.56 (0.14)***
Professional/managerial			0.06 (0.21)			0.15 (0.18)
Other occupation			-0.03 (0.20)			-0.19 (0.18)
Employed		0.06 (0.18)			-0.02 (0.16)	
Number of children		-0.20 (0.08)***	-0.21 (0.08)***		-0.05 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.08)
Married		-0.16 (0.16)	-0.15 (0.16)		-0.20 (0.14)	-0.20 (0.14)
2d wave cohort		0.13 (0.21)	0.21 (0.16)		-0.15 (0.19)	-0.14 (0.19)
3d wave cohort		0.27 (0.22)	0.32 (0.21)		-0.32 (0.21)	-0.31 (0.21)
Black		-0.22 (0.25)	-0.24 (0.25)			
[Other] racial minority		0.05 (0.26)	0.05 (0.26)		-0.23 (0.27)	-0.18 (0.27)
Constant	-0.41 (0.09)***	-0.66 (0.24)***	-0.64 (0.25)***	-0.00 (0.08)	-0.00 (0.21)	0.05 (0.22)
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²	0.03	0.18	0.18	0.02	0.11	0.11
Wald chi square	26.4	139.35	139.48	18.53	89.89	91.75
N	1,302	1,302	1,302	1,498	1,498	1,487

Note: Estimation is by logistic regression. The column entries are regression coefficients. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses.

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, *p < .10

and those with higher incomes in Canada. Surprisingly, though, employment-related variables do not have a significant effect in either country. This is the case whether we look simply at the effect of being employed or also take occupational status into account.

The key point is that none of these factors explains the gender gap: If women have less confidence than men in their ability to understand politics, it is not because they are poorer on average or because they have lower levels of educational attainment or occupational status or because they are less likely to be working for pay outside the home. This begs the question of whether women derive the same political benefits as their male counterparts from political resources like education and income and employment. It also begs the question of whether there are other factors that are working to offset the effects of the advances that women have made in higher education and the workplace.

We are particularly interested here in the impact of parenting. Do the demands of caring for children work to diminish women's confidence in their understanding of politics? If they do, we would expect this effect to be much more evident in the United States where maternity leave is typically much less generous and affordable day care is harder to find. It turns out that the number of children under the age of 18 living at home has a significant negative effect on parents' self-perceived ability to understand politics only in the United States (Table 1). However, we need to determine whether this effect is specific to women, as our argument implies.

In order to determine whether there are sex-specific effects, we added multiplicative interaction terms to the models estimated in Table 1 (see Table 2). As Thomas Brambor, William Roberts Clark, and Matt Golder (2006; see also Braumoeller 2004) emphasize, with this type of interaction model, the focus is on the marginal effect of each independent variable for the relevant values of the conditioning variable and not just on the significance or insignificance of the coefficients themselves.¹³ If we want to compare the effects of, say, number of children for men and women, the coefficient for number of children gives us the marginal effect for men (that is, when female = 0) and the

13. Brambor, Clark, and Golder also argue persuasively that concerns about multicollinearity have been overstated: "Even if there really is high multicollinearity and this leads to large standard errors on the model parameters, it is important to remember that these standard errors are never in any sense 'too' large — they are always the 'correct' standard errors. High multicollinearity simply means that there is not enough information in the data to estimate the model parameters accurately and the standard errors rightfully reflect this" (2006, 70).

Table 2. Sex and the impact of socioeconomic resources and parenting on self-perceived ability to understand politics

	<i>United States</i>		<i>Canada</i>	
Female	-0.05 (0.45)	-0.20 (0.49)	-0.23 (0.40)	-0.26 (0.41)
Less than high school	-0.45 (0.42)	-0.48 (0.43)	-0.55 (0.29)*	-0.56 (0.30)*
College graduate	1.11 (0.21)***	1.09 (0.23)***	0.47 (0.21)**	0.38 (0.22)*
Low income	-0.24 (0.25)	-0.26 (0.25)	-0.43 (0.27)	-0.49 (0.27)*
High income	0.10 (0.24)	0.09 (0.24)	0.63 (0.20)**	0.56 (0.20)**
Professional/managerial		-0.32 (0.34)		0.15 (0.26)
Other occupation		-0.47 (0.32)		-0.14 (0.27)
Employed	-0.38 (0.28)	-0.38 (0.28)	0.01 (0.24)	
Number of children	-0.09 (0.11)	-0.08 (0.11)	0.04 (0.12)	0.06 (0.12)
Married	0.06 (0.22)	0.06 (0.22)	-0.17 (0.20)	-0.17 (0.20)
2d wave cohort	0.77 (0.31)**	0.73 (0.29)**	-0.20 (0.27)	-0.18 (0.27)
3d wave cohort	0.71 (0.31)**	0.66 (0.28)**	-0.33 (0.29)	-0.31 (0.29)
Black	-0.58 (0.34)*	-0.55 (0.34)*		
[Other] racial minority	0.05 (0.38)	0.06 (0.38)	-0.82 (0.38)**	-0.75 (0.38)*
Female*less than high school	-0.51 (0.68)	-0.47 (0.68)	-0.06 (0.47)	-0.08 (0.46)
Female*college graduate	-0.07 (0.30)	-0.07 (0.20)	-0.10 (0.29)	-0.09 (0.30)
Female*low Income	-0.32 (0.36)	-0.29 (0.37)	-0.02 (0.36)	0.06 (0.37)
Female*high Income	0.10 (0.24)	0.27 (0.24)	-0.02 (0.28)	0.04 (0.29)
Female*professional/managerial		0.60 (0.44)	-0.02 (0.36)	-0.02 (0.36)
Female*other occupation		0.75 (0.42)*	-0.13 (0.37)	-0.13 (0.37)
Female*employed	0.70 (0.37)*		-0.08 (0.32)	
Female*number of children	-0.25 (0.16)	-0.27 (0.16)*	-0.15 (0.16)	-0.17 (0.16)
Female*married	-0.34 (0.32)	-0.32 (0.32)	-0.07 (0.28)	-0.08 (0.28)
Female*2d wave cohort	-1.24 (0.43)**	-1.14 (0.41)**	0.04 (0.38)	0.04 (0.38)
Female*3d wave cohort	-0.71 (0.43)*	-0.58 (0.40)	-0.05 (0.42)	-0.05 (0.42)
Female*black	0.64 (0.49)	0.61 (0.49)		
Female* [other] racial minority	0.04 (0.52)	0.05 (0.52)	1.16 (0.52)**	1.10 (0.52)**

Marginal effects for women:				
Less than high school	-0.96 (0.54)*	-0.96 (0.53)*	-0.61 (0.35)*	-0.63 (0.35)*
College graduate	1.04 (0.21)***	1.02 (0.23)***	0.37 (0.20)*	0.29 (0.20)
Low income	-0.55 (0.26)**	-0.54 (0.25)**	-0.45 (0.24)*	-0.43 (0.25)*
High income	0.34 (0.25)	0.36 (0.25)	0.61 (0.20)***	0.59 (0.20)***
Professional/managerial		0.27 (0.28)		0.13 (0.24)
Other occupation		0.28 (0.27)		-0.27 (0.25)
Employed	0.32 (0.24)		-0.07 (0.22)	
Number of children	-0.34 (0.12)***	-0.35 (0.12)***	-0.11 (0.11)	-0.12 (0.11)
Married	-0.28 (0.23)	-0.26 (0.23)	-0.25 (0.19)	-0.24 (0.19)
2d wave cohort	-0.47 (0.30)	-0.42 (0.28)	-0.15 (0.27)	-0.14 (0.27)
3d wave cohort	0.00 (0.30)	0.08 (0.29)	-0.38 (0.30)	-0.36 (0.30)
Black	0.07 (0.35)	0.05 (0.36)		
[Other] racial minority	0.10 (0.35)	0.10 (0.35)	0.34 (0.35)	0.35 (0.36)
Constant	-0.94 (0.31)***	-0.83 (0.35)**	-0.08 (0.28)	-0.02 (0.29)
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²	0.20	0.20	0.12	0.12
Wald chi square	151.49	151.20	98.71	100.41
N	1,302	1,302	1,498	1,487

Note: Estimation is by logistic regression. The column entries are regression coefficients. The marginal effects for women show the effects of socioeconomic resources and parenting when female takes the value of one. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, $p < .10$

female*number of children term indicates whether the effect is significantly different for women, but it does not tell us whether the marginal effect of having children is statistically significant for women. It is quite possible for the interaction term to be significant in the absence of a significant marginal effect and vice versa. Accordingly, a proper assessment requires that we calculate the marginal effects for women (that is, when female = 1), along with the corresponding standard errors. These are presented in the lower portion of Table 2 under “marginal effects.”¹⁴

It is clear that the dampening effect of parenting in the United States is sex-specific. Having children under the age of 18 living at home does not affect men’s self-perceived ability to understand politics. For women, on the other hand, the number of children has a significant negative effect: Other things being equal, the probability that an American woman will reject the notion that politics is too complicated to understand is 12 points lower if she has two children at home under the age of 18, compared with a woman who has none.¹⁵ In this respect, little seems to have changed for American women over a quarter century: Sapiro (1983) found that women who were more tied to the private sphere by the demands of motherhood felt less confident than other women of their ability to understand politics. While parenting clearly has a constraining effect when it comes to American women’s perception that they can understand politics, Canadian women are not similarly constrained: The marginal effect falls far below conventional levels of statistical significance.¹⁶

The second key finding relates to the resource model. We find no evidence of gender differences in the way that socioeconomic resources work to enhance confidence in people’s ability to understand politics. The effects of a college education are essentially the same for women and men in both Canada and the United States. The same is true of affluence in Canada (a high income is not a significant factor for women or men in the United States). It is a *lack* of resources that has differential effects, at least in the United States. Having less than a high

14. The marginal effect for women is the marginal effect for men plus the interaction effect. For example, the marginal effect of less than a high school education for women is -0.45 plus -0.51 equals -0.96 . See Brambor, Clark, and Golder (2006, 73–77) for an explanation of the need to present the marginal effects for all constitutive terms.

15. These probabilities were estimated using Scott Long and Jeremy Freese’s (2006) *SPost* Module in Stata.

16. The same pattern holds for both Canada and the United States if a dummy variable (children/no children) is substituted for number of children.

school education or having a low income does not significantly reduce men's confidence in their ability to understand politics; the effects are only significant for women. This is not to imply that having a college education closes the gap between women and men. In the United States, the probability that a female college graduate will reject the suggestion that politics is too complicated to understand is fully 19 points lower than it is for a male college graduate. In Canada, the gap is 14 points. In both countries, the gaps are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Finally, the results for race and age cohorts deserve to be highlighted. Controls were included for racial background because race has been linked to a diminished sense of political self-efficacy (Woodly 2006). We might have expected the effects of belonging to a racial minority to be even more consequential for women, given that minority women are doubly marginalized in politics as both women and minorities. However, it turns out that the effects are confined to men in both Canada and the United States.¹⁷ The implication is clear: The gender gap in self-perceived ability to understand politics would be wider still if it were not for the negative effects of being a black man in the United States or a minority man in Canada.

The results for age cohorts are also surprising. The shared experience of growing to adulthood since the advent of second-wave feminism could be expected to boost women's political self-confidence. However, age cohort does not have a significant effect for women in either country. Indeed, women in the United States who came of age under the influence of second-wave feminism are, if anything, less likely than older women to feel that they can understand politics (the effect approaches statistical significance $p = .11$). This is in striking contrast to their male counterparts.

Two of our findings warrant further examination. First, we need to determine whether the sex-specific effect of children in the United States is a reflection of the double day. If it is, the effect of having children under 18 living at home should be greater for women who are in the paid workforce. In order to determine whether this is, in fact, the case, we estimated separate models for women that include multiplicative interaction terms for number of children and employment-related variables.¹⁸ The results are shown in Table 3, along

17. Black is not a separate category in Canada because Canadians of African descent comprise too small a proportion of the population for meaningful analysis.

18. An alternative strategy would have been to add three-way interaction terms to the models estimated in Table 2. However, there are too few men who have children at home under the age of 18 and who are not employed to estimate such models reliably.

Table 3. The impact of parenting and employment on women's self-perceived ability to understand politics

	United States		Canada	
Less than high school	-0.96 (0.53)*	-0.94 (0.53)*	-0.60 (0.35)*	-0.63 (0.35)*
College graduate	1.04 (0.21)***	1.03 (0.23)***	0.38 (0.20)*	0.30 (0.20)
Low income	-0.59 (0.26)**	-0.57 (0.26)**	-0.44 (0.24)*	-0.43 (0.25)*
High income	0.36 (0.26)	0.39 (0.26)	0.61 (0.20)***	0.59 (0.21)***
Employed	0.02 (0.29)		0.01 (0.26)	
Professional/managerial		0.12 (0.32)		0.18 (0.29)
Other occupation		-0.16 (0.32)		-0.12 (0.32)
Number of children	-0.69 (0.25)**	-0.74 (0.26)**	-0.04 (0.16)	-0.04 (0.16)
Married	-0.27 (0.22)	-0.25 (0.23)	-0.24 (0.19)	-0.24 (0.20)
2d wave cohort	-0.34 (0.30)	-0.30 (0.28)	-0.20 (0.29)	-0.19 (0.29)
3d wave cohort	0.17 (0.31)	0.23 (0.30)	-0.43 (0.31)	-0.42 (0.31)
Black	0.04 (0.35)	0.04 (0.35)		
[Other] racial minority	0.08 (0.35)	0.05 (0.36)	0.34 (0.35)	0.36 (0.36)
Employed*children	0.47 (0.26)*		-0.10 (0.20)	
Professional/managerial*children		0.26 (0.30)		-0.08 (0.22)
Other occupation*children		0.68 (0.29)**		-0.22 (0.25)
Marginal effects:				
Employed	-0.22 (0.13)*		-0.14 (0.13)	
Professional/managerial		-0.48 (0.18)***		-0.11 (0.16)
Other occupation		-0.06 (0.17)		-0.26 (0.21)
Constant	-0.89 (0.32)***	-0.92 (0.35)***	-0.32 (0.29)	-0.29 (0.29)
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²	0.19	0.19	0.08	0.12
Wald chi square	78.00	82.20	37.52	41.69
N	709	707	808	803

Note: Estimation is by logistic regression. The column entries are regression coefficients. The marginal effects show the effects of having children when the occupational variables take the value of one. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses.

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, *p < .10

with the marginal effects of the number of children at home for women who are employed.

The results are surprising. The effects of having children at home are actually greatest for women in the United States who are *not* working for pay outside the home. These full-time homemakers are significantly less likely to feel that they can understand politics. Employment outside the home clearly helps to counter the negative effects of raising children: The impact of children is significantly smaller for women in the paid workforce than it is for their stay-at-home counterparts. In fact, if we classify women according to occupational status, the marginal effect of children is almost zero for women in lower-status occupations; it is only women in professional and managerial occupations who are significantly disadvantaged by having children at home. We cannot determine from the data at hand whether this is because children represent a drain on the time or on the mental energy that might otherwise be available for following politics. Clearly, though, raising children compromises their self-perceived ability to understand politics. If there is a double-day effect in the United States, it is confined to women in professional and managerial positions. There is no evidence of any effect in Canada.

Professional and managerial women should be the most likely to have transcended traditional sex-role socialization. The same should be true of women who have come of age since the emergence of the second-wave feminist movement. Yet, as we saw in Table 2, age cohorts do not have the anticipated effects. Clearly, we need to take a closer look, especially in light of Susan Carroll's (1988) argument that women require psychological independence from traditional sex-role socialization in order to be autonomous political actors. Accordingly, we added measures of gender role conceptions¹⁹ and attitudes about feminism²⁰ to the

19. In the United States, gender-role conceptions were measured using the question "Do you feel strongly or not strongly that men and women should have equal roles?" Respondents who strongly agreed were considered to be adhering to a modern conception and were coded 1, while respondents who did not agree strongly with the statement, or who were not sure, were coded 0. For the sake of consistency, Canadian respondents were considered to adhere to modern gender roles if they strongly disagreed with the statement that "society would be better off if more women stayed at home with their children."

20. The Canadian feminism scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.58) combines responses to three questions: "How do you feel about feminists? Use any number from zero to 100. Zero means you really dislike the group and 100 means you really like the group"; "The feminist movement just tries to get equal treatment for women, or puts men down"; and "The feminist movement encourages women to be independent and speak up for themselves or to be selfish and think only of themselves." Responses were coded into a series of dichotomous variables that reflected pro-feminist positions. The U.S. feminism scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.66) comprises three questions: "How do you feel about feminists on a scale of 0 to 100? Zero means you really dislike the group and 100 means you really

models estimated in Table 3. Since employment-related variables do not have significant effects in Canada, we estimate a single model for Canadian women. In both countries, it turns out that women who strongly reject traditional conceptions of gender roles are also significantly more likely to reject the notion that politics is too complicated to understand (see Table 4). The probability of feeling confident of their ability to understand politics is 9 points lower in the United States and 7 points lower in Canada for women who adhere to a traditional view of gender roles. However, positive attitudes toward feminism do not have a significant effect on women's confidence in their ability to understand politics in either country.

Early exposure to politics is clearly a more important factor. This is evident when we add a measure of the frequency with which politics was discussed at home during the women's childhood.²¹ This measure is only available for Canada. As the final column of Table 4 shows, the more frequently politics was discussed, the more likely Canadian women are to be confident of their ability to understand politics. Jeremy Mayer and Heather Schmidt (2004; see also Rosenthal, Rosenthal, and Jones 2001) argue that gender is the largest influence on the political engagement of children in junior high school because political socialization teaches boys to be more interested in politics while teaching girls to be more passive.²² Boys feel politics belong to them, whereas girls are more likely to see politics as something that boys ought to be more interested in. Our results suggest that early political exposure in the home may help to counteract the effects of female socialization. The probability that a Canadian woman will reject the notion that politics is too complicated to understand is fully 28 points higher if her family often discussed politics when she was growing up, compared with a woman whose family never did, and the gender gap shrinks from 18 points to eight points.

like the group"; "How do you feel about the women's movement on a scale of 0 to 100?"; and "Would you say they have too much influence, just about the right amount of influence, or too little influence?"

21. The measure is based on responses to the following question: "When you were growing up, did your family talk about politics often, sometimes, hardly ever or never?" The responses were recoded to run from 0 (never) to 1 (often).

22. However, a study of anticipated political participation among 14-year-olds in the United States found that the girls mentioned more activities that they might take part in than did the boys, perhaps because the list included a number of social movement-oriented activities, such as volunteering and collecting money (Hooghe and Stolle 2004). Across 20 established democracies, Finland was the only other country where adolescent girls envisioned themselves as being more politically active as adults than did the boys (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007).

Table 4. The impact of beliefs about gender roles and feminism on women's self-perceived ability to understand politics

	<i>United States</i>		<i>Canada</i>	
Less than high school	-0.82 (0.53)	-0.81 (0.52)	-0.67 (0.37)*	-0.58 (0.38)
College graduate	1.13 (0.22)***	1.10 (0.24)***	0.38 (0.20)*	0.29 (0.21)
Low income	-0.67 (0.26)**	-0.66 (0.27)**	-0.42 (0.25)*	-0.38 (0.25)
High income	0.36 (0.26)	0.41 (0.26)	0.63 (0.21)**	0.66 (0.21)**
Employed	0.04 (0.29)		-0.08 (0.22)	-0.08 (0.22)
Professional/managerial		0.11 (0.32)		
Other occupation		-0.17 (0.32)		
Number of children	-0.62 (0.23)**	-0.68 (0.24)**	-0.04 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.11)
Married	-0.33 (0.23)	-0.31 (0.24)	-0.25 (0.20)	-0.28 (0.20)
2d wave cohort	-0.45 (0.31)	-0.40 (0.98)	-0.21 (0.28)	-0.07 (0.29)
3d wave cohort	0.03 (0.32)	0.11 (0.30)	-0.51 (0.31)*	-0.32 (0.31)
Black	0.01 (0.38)	-0.01 (0.38)		
[Other] racial minority	-0.02 (0.37)	-0.05 (0.37)	0.32 (0.35)	0.29 (0.35)
Employed*children	0.41 (0.25)*			
Professional/managerial*children		0.24 (0.28)		
Other occupation*children		0.60 (0.28)**		
Gender roles	0.52 (0.25)**	0.55 (0.25)**	0.30 (0.18)*	0.26 (0.18)
Attitudes toward feminism	-0.34 (0.30)	-0.36 (0.31)	0.18 (0.27)	0.06 (0.27)
Political discussion as a child				1.30 (0.28)**
Constant	-0.98 (0.39)**	-0.92 (0.35)**	-0.54 (0.35)	-0.46 (0.35)
Nagelkerke pseudo R ²	0.21	0.21	0.10	0.14
Wald chi square	91.17	94.29	44.50	63.55
N	677	675	790	787

Note: Estimation is by logistic regression. The column entries are regression coefficients. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses.

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, *p < .10

An interesting question to pursue would be whether having a mother who was politically engaged matters more. Psychologists have emphasized the importance of vicariousness as a source of self-efficacy (Bandura 1977): If an individual sees others performing difficult or challenging tasks successfully, that individual may be more inclined to believe that he or she could also perform the tasks successfully. Indeed, Atkeson and Rapoport's (2003) work on political attitude expression suggests that a young girl's mother may be a particularly salient role model.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is quite clear that a simple socioeconomic resource model cannot explain why women are more likely than men to think that politics is too complicated for them to understand. Differences in women's and men's education, income, and participation in the workforce are of little use in accounting for the gap, and the socioeconomic resources that are critical for developing confidence in one's ability to understand politics work similarly for women and men, with one notable exception. Women in the United States are handicapped by low incomes and the lack of a high school diploma, but their male counterparts are not. A college education diminishes the perceived complexity of politics for women and men alike. However, the fact remains that a college-educated woman is not as confident of her ability to understand politics as is a college-educated man.

As predicted, the responsibility of raising children can compromise women's sense that they can understand politics, but it has no effect on men. Moreover, as predicted, American and Canadian women differ in this respect; indeed, the sex-specific effects of child raising are confined to the United States. However, it is not the women working the double day who are the most affected by having children at home (unless they are employed in a professional or managerial capacity) but their stay-at-home counterparts. The United States is one of only a handful of countries in the world that does not publicly fund maternity leave (APESMA Professional Women's Network 2001). If a lack of paid maternity leave and/or affordable day care is keeping some American women out of the paid workforce, this may help to explain the differential impact of children on American and Canadian women.

The impact of children on professional and managerial women's self-perceived ability to understand politics is particularly perturbing. Higher-status occupations typically enjoy more networking power because they enhance people's networking opportunities (Erickson 2004). Their work brings them into contact with a wide range of people; off the job, their occupational prestige makes them more attractive as network members, and their involvement in voluntary associations makes them better known. As a result, people with higher-status jobs are greatly overrepresented in social networks. This is particularly true of women in high-status occupations because the occupations in which they are typically found tend to be people oriented (Erickson 2004). Their greater networking power means that they have the potential both to inform and to influence other women. Contact with such women can be consequential politically, especially for women who might otherwise lack the requisite autonomy (see Gidengil, Erickson and Harell 2007; Carroll 1988). To the extent that professional and managerial women themselves find politics to be too complicated to understand, that potential may not be realized.

Perhaps the most puzzling and perturbing findings to emerge from our study relate to the impact of the feminist movement. The fact that younger women are no more confident than older women of their ability to understand politics suggests that exposure to second- and third-wave feminism has done little to counter the effects of traditional female political socialization. This is even true of women who have a very positive opinion of the feminist movement: They are just as likely to accept the notion that politics is too complicated to understand. This is not, of course, to overlook the huge role that the feminist movement has played in women's advances over the past four decades, but the lack of a more direct effect on women's self-perceived ability to understand politics is nonetheless striking (cf. Beckwith 1986).

Clearly, we need to understand why the feminist movement has not been successful in encouraging more women to shake the perception that politics is beyond their ken. It may be that the movement has simply failed to show women the relevance of politics to their daily lives. As Kristin Goss and Theda Skocpol (2006, 324) have demonstrated, "over the past two generations, roughly since the 1960s, women's organizations have gradually retreated from the traditional claim that women have a distinct voice on a broad swath of mainstream social policy issues. This has happened even as the gender gap on those particular issues has persisted, and in some cases widened." Moreover, the feminist

movement's priorities have changed. According to Young (2000, 6), "feminist activism in North American political parties was initially motivated by a desire to further a policy agenda, but over time policy has faded in importance while the drive to promote women [within party elites] has gained momentum." The promotion of viable female candidacies may help women to overcome socialized gender stereotypes and feel more confident of their own political abilities²³ (Atkeson 2003; see also Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2006), but working to promote changes in public policy might well do more to underline the importance of politics to the well-being of women and their families.

The notion of a distinct voice brings us to the bottom-line question: Why should we care about the gender gap in self-perceived ability to understand politics? So long as women perceive politics to be too complicated for them to understand, their ability to give effective voice to their needs and wants will be compromised. Accordingly, it is incumbent on scholars to take up the challenge of developing a more complete understanding of why this gender gap persists.

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23. The key word may be "viable." In Canada, three women have served as leaders of national parties, and one of them became, albeit briefly, Canada's first female prime minister. However, two of the women suffered devastating defeats and the third could not lead her party out of the electoral wilderness, which may be why the gender gap failed to narrow during their tenure.

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APPENDIX: QUESTION WORDING

United States – ANES

From 1952 to 2000, the ANES asked respondents, "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on." However, the response categories were changed in 1988 from "agree," "disagree," and "don't know" to "agree strongly," "agree somewhat," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree somewhat," and "disagree strongly." Note that the question was not asked in 2004.

Canada – CES

From 1965 to 1968, the CES asked, “Sometimes government and politics seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.” The response options were “agree,” “disagree,” and “don’t know.” From 1974 to 1997, respondents could respond “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” “strongly disagree,” or “don’t know.” In 2000 and 2004, the response categories were “strongly agree,” “agree,” “unsure,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” Two small changes in question wording should also be noted. In 1984, the question wording was changed to “Sometimes, federal politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.” The 1993 CES reverted to the original wording. From 1997 onward, the wording was modified slightly to “Sometimes politics and government can seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.”