

Ask me about maternity leave instead

An experiment on women and men's levels of political knowledge

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Questions about political knowledge advantage men by choosing topics that are more relevant to them than to women. Respondents are asked about institutional figures and procedures, which are not among women's top political priorities; indeed, even when questioned about a female politician, women provide fewer correct answers than men. In fact, women provide fewer answers altogether – they would rather say that they 'don't know' – and whether this tendency is reflecting sincere unawareness or lack of self-confidence remains unclear. This experiment was designed so as to test both women and men's levels of knowledge and propensity to answer before political questions that vary in content and DK protocol. The results suggest the presence of distinguished areas of political knowledge between women and men. They also show that using a DK-discouraging protocol is advantaging respondents of both genders uncover some hidden knowledge on their corresponding areas of expertise.

Introduction

The dimension of gender is seldom included in large-scale surveys that study political knowledge. Political quizzes usually look for knowledge about institutions, which are traditionally (and currently) male-dominated environments, and hence women do not provide as many correct answers as men on average. In fact, women feel so misplaced when questioned about politics that they often do not provide an answer at all. This results in a gender gap in favour of men because of both a knowledge and self-confidence advantage.

To date, the choice of topics in the questions of political knowledge remains rather limited, despite the florid and growing literature calling for a gender-sensitive renewal of methodology. We try to fill this gap by running an exploratory experiment where questions of political knowledge vary in content and presentation; respondents are offered a mix of traditional and unconventional political items and are randomly encouraged to provide a valid answer (via a DK-discouraging protocol).

We expect the change in content – taken first singly and then in interaction with the DK-discouraging treatment – to have a different effect on women and men's levels of knowledge and propensity to answer. Specifically, we predict women and men to perform better on knowledge questions that are respectively relevant to them, and this effect to be magnified when respondents are encouraged to answer. Differently, we do not anticipate treated women and men to perform any better on topics that are hostile areas of knowledge for them.

The results of this approach provide sufficient material to demonstrate that there is a segmentation of knowledge between women and men, and that the gender gap is a consequence of how we choose to measure political knowledge. In particular, they show that 1) topics about institutional politics are never female-relevant, not even when they ask the identity of a female politician; 2) women are more knowledgeable than men when their social experience is given political recognition; and 3) DK-discouraging protocols mostly emphasise knowledge divergences rather than levelling them.

1. Theoretical Framework

In large scale surveys, political knowledge is traditionally computed through items that test the citizen's familiarity with certain rules of the democratic system or with political leaders, parties and contemporary alignments (*see* Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993). Although overly used and seemingly 'neutral', questions that focus on institutional facts and figures have a strong bias in favour of men, as they concentrate on what men know best about politics (Dolan 2011). Indeed, because they are socialized towards a leadership role from a very young age, men are more likely to run for office (Fox and Lawless 2010; Preece and Stoddard 2015). Moreover, most political figures are men, and hence male citizens have more role models to look up to when taking an interest in electoral mechanisms (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). In this context, it is easy to see why institutional and electoral politics would appeal especially to them.

On the contrary, the explanation for which women fail to provide as many correct answers as men to political knowledge questions as traditionally designed, is aligned to the reasons for why they also participate in politics altogether to a lesser extent – they can't, they don't want to and nobody asked (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). Women cannot know as much as men because they do not have the time, skills, or money to get informed (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Sayer 2005); they don't want to answer, because of risk-aversion and a feeling of alienation from certain aspects of the political process (Ferrin, Fraile and García-Albacete 2017; Mondak and Anderson 2004); and finally, nobody is asking them what they know about politics (Ferrin, Fraile and García-Albacete 2018; Stolle and Gidengil 2010).

The attempts to make political knowledge questions more considerate of the dimension of gender have only been of modest entity and have produced mixed results. They have generally concentrated on asking about institutional politics with a twist on facts about women (Dolan 2001; Hooghe, Quintelier and Reeskens 2007); sometimes women know about the same as men, oftentimes they still know less, but the fact that men know more about institutional facts and figures is systematic. There are other topics that concern politics and that could serve as content to a political knowledge question – work/family life balance policies, childcare and welfare services are, for example, issues that are more relevant to women and closer to their experience of society. It is rare to find questions that look for awareness on public policies and services in large-scale surveys¹, but when these elements are present, knowledge appears to be more equally distributed, with women even coming across as the more knowledgeable (Stolle and Gidengil 2010).

Apart from being less obscure, these topics might also be more appealing for women to answer. Indeed, question content is not the only factor that social research must pay attention to, but there seems to be a sort of 'gendered psyche' (*see* Fox and Lawless 2010:13) when faced with questions of political knowledge that have women respond "I don't know" when they might know, and men guess when they do not know the answer. These gendered patterns of behaviour conflate in knowledge estimates, so that women seem even less informed and men even more (Frazer and Macdonald 2003; Fortin-Rittberger 2016). Yet they might depend on the fact that traditional question content is biased to begin with but might change when gender-sensitive questions are set (*as seen in* Miller 2019).

¹ Take as an example the CSES, which provides longitudinal and cross-sectional data for political knowledge. The questions on political knowledge are mainly about institutional politics.

The experiment herein reported was designed in order to test to what extent the gender gap is an artifact of measurement. Starting from the claim that traditional methodology has a strong bias that favours what men know, we ask whether offering gender-sensitive question content will show a more equal distribution of the overall level of political knowledge between women and men. However, although we predict the levels of knowledge to be quantitatively closer, we expect to observe a qualitative segmentation of expertise between women and men on questions that are particularly female-relevant or male-relevant respectively. We also expect this divergence to become strongly marked when respondents are treated to a DK-discouraging protocol, hypothesising that the knowledge they hide is mainly due to self-confidence, and thus limited to topics that they have higher chances of knowing.

Following this reasoning the gender gap will be 1) in favour of women on female-relevant topics and in favour of men on male-relevant topics; 2) greater, when gendered content is paired with a DK-discouraging treatment; and 2) extinguished, when a mixture of female-relevant and male-relevant items is offered.

2. Methodology

About 200 students from the University of Milan were asked to voluntarily fill in an online questionnaire on political knowledge between the Spring of 2019 and that of 2020. Question content was selected by taking into consideration two dimensions – the topical and the gender-relevant – for a total of 4 questions. The topical dimension takes into consideration two areas of politics, i.e., institutional politics and public policy; two questions were asked for each topic, a ‘neutral’ knowledge question and a gender-relevant one. As literature points to institutional politics being the ultimate male-relevant field of expertise, and describes public policies as also female-relevant, we deliberately emphasised this divergence by offering a male-relevant question about institutions and a female-relevant question about public policies. The questions go as follows:

- Question 1 (institutional politics, male-relevant): What office does Roberto Fico hold? [President of the Chamber of Deputies].
- Question 2 (institutional politics, neutral): What office does Maria Elisabetta Alberti Casellati hold? [President of the Senate].
- Question 3 (public policy, female-relevant): How long does compulsory maternity leave lasts? [5 months].
- Question 4 (public policy, neutral): What is the amount of the ‘National Basic Income’ for singles with no children? [about 780€].

To test whether women and men’s propensity to answer varies according to the combination of content and DK protocol, the ‘don’t know’ answer was randomly discouraged². All questions were in open-ended format so as to dampen the effect of random guessing.

² Respondents in the treatment group were encouraged to answer by receiving the following prompt: “Thinking about what you have heard or read, how would you most likely answer the following questions?”. Instead, respondents in the control group were given a neutral introduction.

The first segment of the experiment concerns question content alone and was designed as a within-subject experiment – i.e., all respondents were administered the same selection of topics that concerned different dimensions of politics. The purpose of this initial part is to check whether content has a different effect on respondents because of their gender. Descriptive statistics will be used at this stage.

The second portion of the experiment is dedicated to observing whether women and men are affected by methodological choices only when faced with questions that are particularly male-relevant or female-relevant. To this end, the percentages of women and men answering correctly to all items were compared across the control and treatment groups by using two-sample t-tests.

3. Results

The results of the descriptive analyses are summarised in Table 1. As expected, the gender gap is large and significant in favour of men only when the questions are asking to identify a politician. Instead, women seem to know as much as men about the neutral policy-specific topic, and more than men when the policy is particularly relevant to them (as is maternity leave).

Despite the strong bias towards institutional figures, offering respondents even just a small variety of political questions narrows the overall gender gap to a non-significant difference. In fact, the gap is still in favour of men (it amounts to a 9.8 percentage-points difference), but not significantly so.

Table 1. Percentages of correct answers given by men and women on each topic. The magnitude and the statistical significance of the gender gap are displayed. When the ‘Gap’ is negative, it is in favour of women. N 199.

	% correct		Gap (M-W)	pvalue
	Men	Women		
<i>Institutions:</i>				
Pres. Deputies	76.2	47.8	28.4	0.000
Pres. Senate	68.3	44.1	24.1	0.002
<i>Policies:</i>				
Income	25.4	21.3	4.1	0.523
Maternity	23.8	41.2	-17.4	0.017
Average	48.4	38.6	9.8	0.168

The effects of pairing content with the DK-discouraging treatment are displayed in Table 2. As expected, the DK-discouraging treatment appears to have helped both men and women uncover some hidden knowledge in specific and diverging areas of expertise.

As regards the two questions focusing on political figures, the gender gap in favour of men grows significantly with treatment and is more than twice the size of that in control when the question is especially male-relevant. Instead, treatment has no effect on men when questions focus on public policies.

On the contrary, women perform better on all questions when encouraged to answer, but their knowledge gains in institutional politics cannot equate those of men. Instead, their performance in treatment significantly *reverses* the gender gap in the case of the ‘neutral’ policy question (although it awards women a negligible lead), and significantly increases their knowledge advantage on the one policy-question that is especially ‘female-relevant’.

Table 2. Percentages of men (M) and women (W) answering correctly to each question in control and in treatment respectively. Gender ‘Knowledge Gaps’ (M-W) are displayed for control (M-W)^c and treatment (M-W)^t; when positive, they are in favour of men, when negative, they are in favour of women. In the last column (DIFF), positive numbers represent an increase in the magnitude of the gender gap with treatment and negative numbers represent a decrease in the magnitude of the gender gap with treatment.

	% correct answers				Knowledge Gaps (M-W)		DIFF
	Control (N=99)		Treatment (N=100)		(M-W) ^c	(M-W) ^t	
	M	W	M	W			$ gap^t - gap^c $
Pres. Deputies	62.0	45.7	88.2	50.0	16.3	38.2***	21.9***
Pres. Senate	55.2	38.6	79.4	50.0	16.6	29.4**	12.8***
Income	27.6	17.1	23.5	25.7	10.5	-2.2	-8.3***
Maternity	24.1	40.0	23.5	42.4	-15.9	-18.9	3.0*

* p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001

4. Discussion and Conclusions

By offering alternatives to traditional question content, the overall gender gap is reduced, although this is not due to a convergence of knowledge, rather to a segmentation of political expertise that is hereby accounted for. Specifically, men’s knowledge advantage is only evident when facing questions requesting identification of a political figure, whereas women have equal or higher chances of knowing about policy-specific information.

This divergence is only significant when respondents receive a DK-discouraging treatment – it helps men more than women uncover some hidden knowledge on questions about institutional politics but helps women more than men on policy items.

The gender gap in favour of men is large – and significant with treatment – but is limited to questions about institutional politics. For these items, men’s knowledge advantage is so significant and large that it does not really make any difference if the question concerns a male or a female politician. Indeed, men are still more able than women to identify the President of the Senate, who is a woman. This finding raises some questions regarding the strategy of accounting for gender in the study of political knowledge questions by only limiting the effort to asking about women in institutions. Indeed, this is a very mild attempt, and despite the female reference, institutional politics is not, in any case, more familiar to women on average.

Instead, if we wish to measure what women know about politics as well, we should offer respondents questions about public policies, while if we wished to measure what they knew in particular, we could focus on policy issues that are relevant to women in the same way that maternity leave is. This, however, would be biasing methodology in the opposite way. In order to have a fairer measurement of knowledge, we encourage future research to either mix male and female-relevant content, drop the male-biased items or include the female-biased items alongside.

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