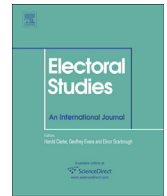




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The gender gap in same-gender voting: The role of context



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ABSTRACT

If parties nominate both male and female candidates, open-list PR electoral rules enable voters to engage in same-gender voting (i.e. select candidate of the same gender). In this regard, there is a gender gap in Finland, an otherwise highly egalitarian country: over time, men tend to support mostly male candidates, while women are roughly equally divided between male and female candidates. This study investigates whether voters' likelihood of selecting a candidate of the same gender is affected by contextual factors. Based on pooled cross-sectional data from five Finnish parliamentary elections between 1979 and 2011, it shows that gender differences in same-gender voting are substantially reduced when district magnitude and gender ratios among candidates and elected deputies are taken into account.

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1. Introduction

This study examines whether contextual factors influence voters' choices of same-gender candidates under the Finnish open-list proportional representation (PR) system. Open-list electoral systems with preferential voting are thought to strengthen democracy by providing voters with more options (Farrell and McAllister, 2006), and are especially attractive for studying voters' gender choices in real-life elections. Provided that parties nominate both men and women, voters in such systems can choose between male and female candidates, and thus directly influence the elected body's gender composition. In this article, we focus on one particular type of gender choices: *same-gender voting* (Holli and Wass, 2010; Plutzer and Zipp, 1996), which refers to male citizens' selection of male candidates and female citizens' support for female ones.

Knowledge of same-gender voting in PR systems is limited due to data unavailability¹ and the fact that most countries, which employ PR, use closed lists. These lists are, by default, not amenable to empirical studies on the subject. Seminal inquiries about gender effects on vote choices concern mainly majoritarian systems, e.g. the US (Brians, 2005; Dolan, 2004; Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Plutzer and Zipp, 1996; Paolino, 1995; Zipp and Plutzer, 1985). Much less attention, however, has been paid to PR systems with preferential voting. Under the Irish single transferable vote (STV) system (McElroy and Marsh, 2010), women are *not* more likely to support female candidates than men are. However, in some elections under open-list with party ranking (e.g. Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland and Slovakia), the interplay between candidate sex and preference vote proves significant (Kunowich, 2012; Millard et al., 2013).

We contribute to these debates by exploring whether contextual factors influence voters' choices of same-gender candidates in Finland. This country provides an excellent

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¹ The question whether a respondent voted for a male or female candidate is rarely included in national election studies.

case for studying same-gender voting as a phenomenon, for several reasons. Firstly, as all major Finnish parties nominate candidates of both sexes, voters are afforded the opportunity for same-gender voting without any cost to their partisan preferences. Secondly, Finland is the best example of a "completely open-list" PR system (Lijphart, 1999, pp. 148–149) with mandatory preferential voting (Marsh, 1985; Reynolds et al., 2005). The requirement to choose a single candidate thus includes a selection between candidates' gender. In stark contrast to other open-list systems, where parties rank candidates and, usually, the number of female names declines steadily from bottom towards top of the list (Millard et al., 2013), the Finnish alphabetically-ordered ballot provides voters with no cues regarding party preferences. Thirdly, the institutional context entails variation, given substantial differences across districts (shown to matter for women's election, Engstrom, 1987). This allows studying the phenomenon comparatively within a single country. Importantly, pioneer studies show that the propensity of same-gender voting varies dramatically across districts (Haavio-Mannila, 1970, 1979). Last but not least, the Finnish culture is rather homogeneous in that it lacks major societal cleavages (Nousiainen, 1998). Moreover, it is one of the most gender equal countries globally. Attitudes towards gender are highly egalitarian, with a high level of female labour market participation and education (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). In sum, this case permits studying same-gender voting in an environment where, contrary to previous studies on the subject, cultural and socio-economic obstacles to equal representation are minimised and the conditions for women's nomination and election are considered to be quite favourable compared to other countries (Rule, 1987, 491–492).

In the 2011 Finnish parliamentary elections, the proportion of men and women among elected deputies were 57.5% and 42.5%, respectively. However, this macro-level pattern masks substantial individual-level gender differences in terms of same-gender voting. While an overwhelming majority of men have voted for a same-gender candidate during the past forty years (Haavio-Mannila, 1970, 1979; Holli and Wass, 2010) women's votes, by contrast, have been divided roughly equally between male and female candidates. Notably, all major parliamentary parties have nominated female candidates in all electoral districts during this period, so voters have always had the chance to choose between male and female candidates. Regardless, there has been, and still is, a consistent and substantial gender gap in same-gender voting (i.e. a systematic difference between men's and women's selection of same-gender candidates), which is a different pattern of what one would see in the US.

We ask: what explains the gap in same-gender voting in Finland? Our answer to this question concentrates on the effects of contextual factors on same-gender voting. We argue that the specific context in which the voter makes his/her choice matters, and hypothesise that district magnitude, male-to-female ratios of candidates running in a district, male-to-female ratios of elected Members of Parliament (MPs) and political competition influence the size of the gender gap in same-gender voting. Our empirical

analysis relies on data from five Finnish parliamentary elections and shows that, with the exception of competition, the hypothesised contextual factors indeed reduce the gender gap in same-gender voting by increasing it among women and decreasing it among men.

This article contributes to electoral studies in many ways. Despite scientific evidence about how contextual factors increase or decrease the proportion of elected women (electoral outcome), knowledge of their effect on voters' behaviour and their gendered choices of candidates remains limited. It is precisely here that our study makes its main contribution. Whereas previous studies of the extent to which context influences voters' gender choices have mostly concentrated on situational, election-specific aspects (e.g. level of information available to voters or role played by gender-specific issues in electoral campaigns, Dolan, 2004), we analyse how macro-level structural conditions (district magnitude, supply of male and female candidates and effect of elected representatives) impact voter's choices of a candidate in terms of gender. Notably, this kind of endeavour becomes only possible when we move focus to a proportional system where numerous parties supply several candidates from both genders.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the concept of same-gender voting, discuss related works, and formulate hypotheses on the potential impact of contextual factors on same-gender voting, as well as on how they may relate to the gender gap observed in Finland. Then, we elaborate on our research design, where we also describe the Finnish system in more detail. We proceed with presenting our empirical results and conclude by discussing their implications for understanding voters' same-gender choices.

2. Same-gender voting

Analytically, variation in gender choices among men and women can produce four possible subsets of electoral behaviour. The phenomenon under study, *same-gender voting*,² concerns real-life situations, where men select male candidates and women select female ones from a pool of candidates that includes both sexes. The remaining two types of outcomes, namely men voting for women and women voting for men, are referred to as *cross-gender voting* (Holli and Wass, 2010).

Neither same-gender voting *per se*, nor the attempt to study it empirically implies any normative bias for or against such vote choices. To us, same-gender voting is not an ideal for which voters should strive for but an analytical tool for empirical research. Our point of departure is based on a neutral expectation, namely that in a context where neither gender bias on the voters' side nor structural obstacles on the supply-side existed, on aggregate, votes

² In earlier studies, the same phenomenon was termed "gender-based voting" (Holli and Wass, 2010; Plutzer and Zipp, 1996). The latter term is, however, easy to misinterpret as indicative of a voter's explicit willingness or his/her particular motivations for choosing a same-gender candidate. This is why we opted for a more neutral term here.

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