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Anything women can do men can do better: An experiment examining the effects of stereotype threat on political knowledge and efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Negative stereotypes have been shown to create cognitive burdens that decrease intellectual performance in a number of tasks such as math and standardized tests. Applying a multidisciplinary approach and an experimental research design, this paper examines the effect of stereotype threat on political knowledge and political efficacy. A sample of 226 undergraduate students completed an online survey on political knowledge and efficacy. Participants were randomly assigned to a stereotype threat condition or a non-threat condition. Contrary to what was hypothesized, stereotype threat does not explain the political knowledge gap between men and women; men score significantly higher than women in both conditions. However, preliminary evidence suggests the presence of stereotype lift in men's sense of political efficacy. Men's political efficacy demonstrates a moderate increase in the stereotype threat condition while women's sense of efficacy does not change ($d = .53$).

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1. Introduction

The gender gap in politics is an enigma that has puzzled political scientists for decades. The gender gap refers to significant and longstanding differences between men and women's political orientations and political behaviors (Gidengil, 2007). Gender gaps have been found for a wide range of aspects of political life such as vote choice (Inglehart & Norris, 2003), political interest (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), political ambition (Lawless & Fox, 2010), external political efficacy (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001), and voter turnout (Firebaugh & Chen, 1995). Overall, there is widespread and established evidence demonstrating that women tend to vote differently than

men, are less politically ambitious, less interested in politics, and have a lower sense of external political efficacy. While it is important to note that a number of these gender gaps have narrowed in recent decades, gender differences in political life persist nonetheless.

Perhaps the largest body of literature on the gender gap focuses on political knowledge. Often using data from national election studies, there has been a consistent and enduring finding that men exhibit higher levels of political knowledge than women (Gidengil, Giles, & Thomas, 2008; Kenski & Jamieson, 2000; Mondak & Anderson, 2004). More recently, research has also begun to examine the gender gap in the internal aspect of political efficacy. While external political efficacy research examines an individual's self-perceived ability to impact and influence politics, internal political efficacy research focuses on an individual's perceived ability to understand politics effectively.

The focus of this paper is on political knowledge and the latter type of efficacy. Since 1952 the American

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Election Study has asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: “Sometimes politics is too complicated for a person like me to understand.” Similarly, the Canadian Election Study has asked the following question since 1965: “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.” Examining these survey questions, a number of studies have found significant differences between men and women’s confidence in their ability to comprehend politics (Beckwith, 1986; Christy, 1985; Gidengil et al., 2008; Thomas, 2012). Like political knowledge, these studies find that women are more likely than men to believe that politics is too complicated for them to understand.

Beginning in the 1960s it was clear that men and women in most western democracies possessed different levels of confidence in their ability to understand politics. That is, women tended to have a considerably lower sense of internal political efficacy. In 1965, for instance, the vast majority of Canadian women, 80%, agreed with the statement that politics was too complicated for them to understand compared to 65% of men, a gender gap of 15 percentage points. The same 15-point gender gap was evident in the American electorate according to the 1952 election study (Gidengil et al., 2008). In addition to the gap in political efficacy, a similar gap in political knowledge was evident during this period according to the results of Canadian and American Election Studies.

Significant gender differences in political knowledge and political efficacy during this time, however, are hardly surprising. As Gidengil et al. (2008) and Thomas (2012) point out, during this time women lagged behind men in terms of representation in the national legislature, educational attainment, and participation in the paid workforce. A survey of western parliamentary democracies in 1965, for instance, found that women only constituted 8% of all members of parliament (Reynolds, 1999). Similarly, during this time women routinely accounted for less than half of university enrolment and an even smaller fraction of the paid workforce (Statistics Canada, 2011). Given the political and social climate of the time, it is not surprising that women had less knowledge about politics and less confidence in their abilities to understand politics.

Since the 1960s and 70s, however, women have made considerable gains, both socially and politically. By 2013, the number of women elected to national legislatures around the world rose to 22% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2013). While the number of women elected seems to have reached a plateau in recent years, considerable gains in the political arena have been made nonetheless. In a similar fashion, women now outnumber men in both university undergraduate enrolment and degree attainment (Statistics Canada, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Like education, women’s workforce participation has increased dramatically in recent decades (World Bank, 2013). In many cases, women’s labor participation has increased by 15 or more percent in the last 30 years (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2011).

In light of these rapid advancements, a corresponding change in women’s political knowledge and in their

confidence to understand politics seems a reasonable expectation. Despite being politically represented, highly educated, and full participants in the workforce, women are still much more likely than men to report that politics is too complicated for them to understand. In fact, by 2011 the gender gap in confidence remained as pronounced as it did in the 1960s. Data from the 2011 Canadian Election Study, for example (CES; Fournier, Cutler, Soroka, & Stolle, 2011) demonstrates that 36% of men compared to 56% of women agreed or strongly agreed that politics was too complicated for them, a gender gap of 20 percentage points. Likewise, despite these advancements women still score significantly lower than men on tests of political knowledge. When asked to identify the current Minister of Finance as part of the 2011 CES, for instance, women scored 11 percentage points lower than men.

What is problematic about these gender gaps is not only their persistence but also that the gaps cannot be explained by the distribution of socioeconomic resources in society. For example, differences in educational attainment, workforce participation, and annual income are unable to account for the gender gap (Gidengil et al., 2008). Thomas (2012) echoes this claim, noting that women are less confident in their own political abilities even when they are resource rich and men are resource poor. This is especially puzzling given that these socioeconomic resources have often accounted for the gender gap in other forms of political participation and political behavior, such as external political efficacy (Burns et al., 2001).

The lack of compelling answers in the literature raises the following question: what can account for the divergent levels of political knowledge and political efficacy between men and women if not socioeconomic resources such as education and income? One potential explanation that has been largely unexplored in the literature is that negative stereotypes about women’s political knowledge, and even negative stereotypes about the role of women in politics in general, may be responsible for low levels of political efficacy and poor political knowledge test performance among women.

In their seminal study, Steele and Aronson (1995) demonstrate that African-American college students perform significantly worse than their white counterparts on a standardized test when the task is framed as a “diagnosis of their intellectual ability.” When the test is framed as a “problem solving” task, however, African-American students perform just as well as their white classmates. When confronted with the possibility of confirming the stereotype of African-American intellectual inferiority in the first condition, these students suffer disruptive cognitive burdens that decrease their performance on the test. In the second condition, where the framing of the task removes the negative stereotype about intellectual ability, the performance reducing cognitive burdens are no longer present and African-American students perform just as well as white students. Steele and Aronson (1995) term this performance reducing anxiety stereotype threat.

At the core of the stereotype threat literature is a consistent finding that when an individual is reminded of a negative stereotype that relates to his or her social identity, that individual will tend to underperform in a way

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