

# Why Are Women Less Democratic Than Men? Evidence from Sub-Saharan African Countries

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**Summary.** — A substantial literature has examined the determinants of support for democracy and although existing work has found a gender gap in democratic attitudes, there have been no attempts to explain it. In this paper we try to understand why females are less supportive of democracy than males in a number of countries. Using data for 20 Sub-Saharan African countries, we test whether the gap is due to individual differences previously ignored or to country-wide characteristics. We find that controlling for individual characteristics does not offset the gender gap, but our results indicate that the gap is eroded by high levels of human development and political rights.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many nations across the world are democracies, others are not, and these differences have important implications for the welfare of their citizens both because of the value of democracy in itself but also because of the potential economic implications that greater democracy has.<sup>1</sup> The variety of political systems we observe raises the question of why some countries are democratic and others less so, and various candidate explanations have been proposed. Economists have pointed out that the average level of education and income are deep causes of a country's level of democracy and tested this hypothesis using cross-country data, while political scientists argue that democratic legitimacy<sup>2</sup> is the key determinant of the level of democracy.<sup>3</sup> The latter literature has focused on the role played by individual political attitudes, and maintains that the consolidation and stability of a democracy in a country is only possible if its citizens support the democratic regime.<sup>4</sup>

A recent literature has thus emerged that measures the degree of *support for democracy* and has found it to be strong in some countries but not in others. Explanations of these differences have focused extensively on testing Lipset's claim that education is a pre-condition for democracy, and household survey data indicates that more educated individuals are more likely to support democracy (see, for example, Bratton & Mattes (2005) and Evans & Rose (2007)). Amongst the many individual characteristics included, existing analyses control for gender and find that in developing countries women tend to exhibit less support for democracy than men. Surprisingly, this recurrent gender gap has received no attention in the literature. The aim of this paper is to establish whether, in developing countries, there exists a gender gap in attitudes towards democracy and to consider possible explanations.

There are reasons to believe that men and women have different political attitudes. Recently, a substantial body of work

has documented that the two sexes behave differently in politics, as they vote differently and do not implement the same policies.<sup>5</sup> It is then possible that the two sexes also have different preferences towards democracy. The evidence for Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that, on average, 74% of men believe that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government, while only 66% of women agree with this statement.<sup>6</sup> There are several potential explanations for this 8 point gap. First, it could simply reflect different attitudes towards democracy across genders that are embedded in the preferences of the two sexes. The gap could also be due to the omission of relevant individual characteristics, such as access to media, that are distributed differently across the two groups, or to differences in policy priorities across genders, with men being more interested in the process through which decisions are taken and women in the actual policy outcomes. Alternatively, the gap could be caused by the economic and institutional context of the country, in line with the modernization hypothesis of Inglehart (1997) which argues that a change in the economic and political environment reduces the differences in roles between males and females and increases women's interest in issues traditionally considered to be the domain of men, such as politics. Distinguishing between these explanations is important if we are to understand whether democratic support by women can be increased and if so through which mechanism.

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To conduct our analysis we use data from the Afrobarometer, a series of national surveys on the attitudes of citizens towards democracy, markets, civil society, and other aspects of development collected in African countries. Our variable of interest is support for democracy, a dummy that equals one if the individual attests that democracy is the best political regime and zero otherwise. We consider three sets of possible explanatory variables. The first is a wide set of socioeconomic characteristics which prove significant but have a minor effect on the coefficient on gender. In addition to the information on individual socioeconomic characteristics, the survey asks individuals what are the policy priorities that they think the government should tackle. We use this information to assess whether males and females have different priorities, but gender attitudes to the prioritization of government action has no impact on the gender gap in support for democracy.

The evidence hence indicates a gender gap in support for democracy, and the last question that we address is to what extent this gap is affected by the macroeconomic and institutional context. We thus examine the effect of three sets of country-wide characteristics: the human development indicator (*HDI*), different measures of political institutions, and gender gaps in various aspects of political and economic life. Although these variables prove insignificant for the population as whole, we find that higher levels of both the *HDI* and political institutions reduce the gender gap. Our results imply that in countries with sufficiently high levels of *HDI* and/or institutions there is no difference between men and women in the degree of democratic support, with the effect of gender being insignificant in between a quarter and half of the countries in our sample depending on the specification. This evidence supports the view that economic and institutional changes can change individuals' views on democracy.

Our paper is related to two strands of literature. First, it contributes to a substantial body of work addressing the determinants of support for democracy in developing countries using survey data. This literature has largely focused on establishing the importance of education for promoting democracy; see, for example, Mattes and Bratton (2001) and Bratton and Mattes (2005) on Sub-Saharan Africa, and Shafiq (2010) on Lebanon, Jordan and Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> Evans and Rose (2007) emphasize the differential impact of various stages of education for political attitudes. Their work on Malawi, as well as that of Mattes and Mughogho (2009) on all the Afrobarometer countries, indicates that primary schooling is sufficient for the endorsement of democracy and rejection of non-democratic regimes, with higher levels of education having a limited impact.<sup>8</sup> Survey data has also been used to examine the “democratic paradox of Islam”, i.e., the fact that democracy is popular yet rare in Muslim-majority countries; see Rowley and Smith (2009). Maseland and van Hoorn (2011) maintain that the positive attitudes towards democracy of citizens in Muslim countries should not be explained by religion but rather by decreasing marginal utility. The scarcity of democracy—which tends to be a feature of Muslim-majority countries—implies that residents in those countries value it more than those from countries where the supply of democracy is larger.

In all of the above analyses—with the exception of Shafiq (2010)—a significant coefficient on gender indicates that women are less supportive of democracy than men, yet the reasons for this gap have not been examined. Closely related to our work is Coffe and Bolzendahl (2011) who examine gender gaps in political participation in Sub-Saharan Africa. As is the case in Western countries (e.g., Burns (2007)) there is a substantial difference in the degree of political participation of men and women. However, Coffe and Bolzendahl show that

the individual socioeconomic characteristics that have been found to be important in explaining this gap in Western countries do not reduce significantly the gap in Sub-Saharan Africa. They postulate that institutions are important and find a negative correlation between a country's gender gap in participation and the quality of its political institutions. These results indicate that the institutional framework could be an important determinant of differences across genders in support for democracy too. Our approach differs from that of Coffe and Bolzendahl (2011) methodologically since we include institutions in the individual regressions rather than looking at cross-country correlations with average gender gaps. This allows us to examine the magnitude of the effect of institutions as compared to that of individual characteristics.<sup>9</sup>

Our work is also related to the influential literature on the differences between men and women in political preferences and behavior, which we discuss in detail in the next section. Our paper differs from this literature in two aspects. First, existing work has focused on the effect of differences in policy preferences across genders either on voting or on government expenditure. We examine what explains the gender gap in support for democracy, a question so far not addressed by the literature. Second, existing work has used data for either Western countries or India, all of which are established democracies. In contrast, we focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, a region in which democracy is a relatively new concept. There is, to the best of our knowledge, no previous analysis of the political attitudes of women in this part of the world.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We start with a discussion of the relationship between gender and politics that reviews the existing literature and postulates our hypotheses about the gender gap in political participation. Section 3 describes the data, while Section 4 sets up the empirical model. In Section 5 we present the central analysis of the paper, while the last section concludes.

## 2. POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND GENDER

### (a) *Related literature*

It is well established that men and women vote differently, with women tending to support more left-wing parties; see Langer (1996). Over the past decade and following the seminal work of Lott and Kenny (1999) and Aidt and Dallal (2008), economists have started to examine the causes of differences in political attitudes of men and women and their impact on economic policy. Three reasons have been put forward as explanations of gender differences in preferences for parties and policies: women's greater risk aversion and the consequent desire for insurance; women's lower incomes or expected incomes, for example following a prospective divorce, leading to support for redistribution; and a preference for social expenditures such as basic infrastructure (e.g., water supplies), health and education that impact the production of household goods, including children, on which women tend to specialize. The evidence indicates that the effect of women's entry into the political arena, either as voters or as policy-makers, has been substantial. Lott and Kenny (1999) use cross-sectional data for US states over the period during 1870–1940 to examine the impact of female suffrage on the size of public expenditure and, in particular, on social spending. Their results indicate that women's vote resulted in both larger government and increased social spending, a result also found in Western European countries where government spending moved away from “guns” and into “butter”; see Aidt and Dallal (2008).

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