

Gender and political participation

This paper presents the findings of a research study, funded by The Electoral Commission, looking at the extent and nature of men and women's political participation in the UK and examining the existence of any political activism 'gap' by gender.

The research was conducted by Pippa Norris of Harvard University, and by Joni Lovenduski and Rosie Campbell of Birkbeck College, University of London. The suggestions here are those of the authors and not of The Electoral Commission.

The activism gap

The level of men and women's activism in the UK differs according to the type of political activity. There is no gender gap in voter turnout at national, regional or local elections and women are more likely to be involved in cause-orientated activities such as signing a petition or boycotting products.

Women are less likely than men to participate in campaign-orientated activities, such as contacting a politician and donating money to, working for, or being a member of, a political party. Women are also less likely than men to join voluntary organisations.

Overall, a statistically significant activism gap exists in the UK. If European countries are ranked, the UK is located within the top third of nations, suggesting that although some progress has been made, there is further scope for eliminating disparities.

Turnout

Before 1979 fewer women than men voted in most UK elections. Since then the voting gap at general, regional and local elections has lessened and may have reversed. In 1997 a reported 80.1% of women voted compared with 76.9% of men. However, the gap in 2001 was statistically insignificant.

Despite the reduction in the overall voting gap between men and women, reported turnout in 2001 suggests that ethnic minority women were significantly less likely to vote than their male counterparts. Also, while in 1997 there was no voting gap by gender in Asian populations, turnout among black women was 8% less than among black men.

Pilot schemes so far suggest that men and women's turnout is affected in different ways by the introduction of new methods of voting. Women's reported turnout in all-postal pilot areas in May 2003 was 13% higher than men's (compared to 8% overall), whereas in electronic pilot areas it was 5% less. In areas where both methods were piloted, women's reported turnout was 24% higher than men's.

Other forms of political participation

Women are equally or more likely to participate in cause-oriented activities such as signing petitions and boycotting products. Yet in relation to other activities, such as participating in demonstrations or protesting illegally, there are no gender differences.

Men are significantly more active than women in campaign politics across all activities such as party

membership, party donations and contacting politicians. Men are also generally more involved in civic-orientated activities such as belonging to voluntary associations, hobby, consumer or professional groups, and sports or social clubs.

Explaining the activism gap

Access to social and economic resources impacts upon levels of political participation. Those in paid employment are more likely to be active although the direct effect of the total hours worked per week is unrelated to activism.

The activism gap is smaller among better off households and graduates, and larger among those with the lowest levels of education. Married men are more likely to participate than married women and there is a significant gap among those with children, closing when children do not live at home.

Although age impacts on men and women's activism, men remain consistently more active across all age groups. Also, while there is no activism gap between ethnic minority men and other men, ethnic minority women proved less active than other women.

Women have a weaker sense of their own ability to make a political difference than men and are less interested in politics. Men are also more likely to agree that politics is important and to trust a range of political institutions.

Women are less likely to be a member of a political party and other voluntary associations, and this may influence patterns of men and women's participation more generally.

The presence of women as representatives increases women's activism. In seats where a woman MP was elected in 2001 women's turnout was 4% higher than men's. Women were also less interested in the election campaign and less likely to say they would volunteer to work for a candidate or party in seats with a male MP. Women were far more likely to agree that 'government benefits people like me' in constituencies with a female MP (49% compared to 38%). Where a man represented the seat, this gap reversed.

Implications

More women representatives may encourage participation among women more generally. Strategies to increase the number of women being selected and standing for election may therefore be necessary to address this issue. Successful measures adopted by some political parties have included equal opportunity strategies and positive action.

In the UK and elsewhere initiatives have also been taken to encourage women as activists and as members of political parties and other organisations. Successful examples include: training, internships, mentoring, women-targeted membership

drives and financial incentives to encourage organisational innovation.

Measures by political parties to modernise the culture and practices of their organisations may also assist the inclusion of more women as members and activists. Women's support networks, groups and offices may help overcome the perceived 'male dominated' nature of politics. Attention could also be paid to the timing and location of meetings, and the provision of child-care.

Women are more interested in local rather than national politics, so local campaigns may motivate women to become more politically involved generally. The use of innovative communication formats could also be effective.

Making voting more accessible – for example through the expansion of all-postal voting, the provision of more conveniently located polling stations and the simplification of the registration process – could also boost participation, particularly among women.

Further information

The full report is available from: www.electoralcommission.org.uk or in hard copy from The Electoral Commission's offices.

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