Discussing with Dad and Enrolling with Mum: Exploring the Political Division of Labour in Families

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Abstract:
Since women in Western democracies were granted suffrage and the right to enter parliaments as elected representatives, they have made great progress in achieving political equality. Yet a ‘gender gap’ in political participation still exists. Further, elements of this gap have been found to operate both ways; that is, men and women have been found to participate differently in political life. This difference has been found to cut across generations with young men and women also participating differently. Explanations for the ‘gender gap’ have highlighted ‘the family’ as a site that may influence different participation levels and styles of males and females. Using data from the Youth Electoral Study, this paper explicates and explores one interesting facet of the ‘gender gap’. This relates to the ‘division of political labour’ within the family. YES found that both male and female youth participants tended to discuss politics with their fathers (and not their mothers), but that mothers tended to be the parent responsible for enrolling them to vote. This paper situates this finding within the ‘gender gap’ in participation more broadly and discusses some of its possible implications.
Introduction: The Gender and Age Political Participation Gaps

Since women in Western democracies were given the right to vote and to enter parliaments they have made great inroads in terms of participation in political life. Yet there is still a way to go. There have been few female national leaders, and none in Australia. In most Western democracies men still outnumber women in terms of representation. Indeed the 41st parliament of Australia has been described as ‘mostly male’ (Miskin and Lumb 2006).

Although the most significant ‘gender gap’ is the under-representation of women in institutional politics, the gap operates in both directions and in many contexts (Hooge and Stolle 2004, The Electoral Commission 2004). Where voting is voluntary there is evidence that a historical progression has occurred from men outnumbering women as voters to, in some Western democracies, women outnumbering men. Yet studies have also shown that women are less knowledgeable about politics than men and that they participate less in political discussions (The Electoral Commission 2004: 13). The Electoral Commission also found that fewer women than men participate in public associations such as community groups, unless these are associated with welfare or child-related causes (The Electoral Commission 2004: 45).

There is also evidence that the ‘gender gap’ exists for youth. Here, the issue is complicated by another participation gap; studies of participation have found that types and levels of participation are also predicated on age (Russell et al. 2002; IDEA 1999). Young people participate less in forms of participation such as joining political parties and voting, than older generations. In Australia, for example, whilst 95% of the eligible voting age population is enrolled to vote, this figure drops to around 80% for eligible Australians between eighteen and twenty-five².

The 1999 International Education Association’s Civics Education Study indicates, with respect to fourteen year-olds from the United States, that girls anticipated that as adults they would participate in a greater range of activities than boys, including voting, volunteering and aspects of peaceful protest. Boys, on the other hand, were more likely than girls to anticipate that they would join a political party, be a candidate for office and engage in violent protest (Hooge and Stolle 2004: 10).

The Australian Youth Electoral Study (YES) found some significant differences between their senior school participants. These included that female participants were
more amenable to enrolling and voting and participation in non-violent protest, whereas male participants were more confident with respect to their political knowledge and preparedness to vote, as well as more likely to participate in violent protest (Print, Saha and Edwards 2004; Saha, Print and Edwards 2005).

Clearly gendered trends exist. Females are more likely to vote and engage in some forms of non-violent protest than males, whereas males are more politically confident and knowledgeable, are more likely to want to participate in established organisations and political elites, as well as discuss politics and take part in non-normative or violent protest. Further, aspects of these gender differences appear to persist across generations.

A number of explanations have been advanced to explain this gender gap. Most of these rely on either resource-oriented explanations or socialisation theories of gender identity.

Most resource-based explanations borrow from feminist scholarship that traces women’s lack of participation in the public sphere *writ large* to women’s disproportionate responsibility for labour in the private sphere (Okin 1989; Phillips 1991). This, it is suggested, influences the time available for political participation. Differences in available time may affect: the type of participation that men and women choose (Vromen 2002); ability to join those associations that furnish skills necessary for participation (Norris 1997) as well as scope to be ‘mobilised’ to participate (Fox and Lawless 2004). The suggestion has also been made that access to time may affect abilities to discuss politics as well as consult media resources which may generate both knowledge and interest in politics (The Electoral Commission 2004).

Explanations highlighting socialisation theories, unlike resource-oriented explanations that usually take adults as their subject, focus on the *development* of gendered attitudes and approaches to participation. Thus, they frequently focus on young people. Their aim is to understand how males and females gain characteristics, skills and attitudes that may make some forms of participation, but not others, desirable. One locus of socialisation explored is the family (Fox and Lawless 2003; Stacey and Price 1981). In explaining the ‘gender gap’ it is argued that young girls are socialised,
partly within the family, for roles within the private sphere and boys for roles within the public sphere, including the domain of institutional politics.

It is likely that the causes of the ‘gender gap’ are multi-faceted and complex and not reducible to any single factor. Indeed most studies take a multi-causal approach. Of significance, however, is that despite the diversity of explanations for the ‘gender gap’, most approaches reference ‘the family’ in some way. Clearly the family plays an important role and is deserving of further analysis.

**Aim: YES and the Division of Political labour in the Family**

This paper is based on research conducted as part of the Youth Electoral Study. The main objective of YES is to discover why it is that, as noted earlier, many young people in Australia are reluctant to enrol and vote. YES also examines other forms of democratic and political participation, with a view towards gathering a broad perspective on how young Australians do, and do not, participate politically.

This paper has a modest aim. It explicates and explores one interesting facet of the ‘gender gap’ revealed by research as part of the Youth Electoral Study (into the ‘age gap’). This relates to the ‘division of political labour’ within the family. Briefly, in exploring the ways that politics and voting were discussed in the family we discovered that whereas fathers were more likely than mothers to be named as sources of political discussion and information, that mothers were named as the parent responsible for facilitating the registration of young people on the electoral roll. This facet of ‘the family’ has not been discussed in other research either in respect to the ‘gender gap’ or the ‘age gap’.

Although we cannot identify a causal relationship between this aspect of the gendered division of political labour and aspects of the broader gender gap in participation we can situate this element within the gender gap more broadly, highlight it as a factor requiring further research, and speculate that elements of this gendered division of labour may have some impact on the developing consciousnesses of young men and women regarding political participation. Certainly our research can reinforce the necessity to highlight families in studies of the ‘gender gap’.

**Methodology: Enabling Youth Voices**

Although YES employs a mixed methodology with multiple groups of young people this paper is based on our qualitative research with school students. This research was
conducted with 476 students in 55 schools in sixteen Commonwealth Electoral Divisions across Australia. Participating schools included ones in the public, independent and Catholic systems. The YES research team interviewed students first in 2003 when they were in Year Eleven and then in 2004 when they were in Year Twelve.

Of importance in YES was allowing participants a free voice with which to discuss their attitudes and opinions about enrolling, voting and other forms of participation. This involved navigating the hurdle of the power differential between older researchers possessive of the ‘power of knowledge’ about politics and younger participants who were being asked for what were quite frequently nascent opinions. To this end we adopted a focus-group approach based on the methodology outlined by Kruger (1988). This method had the added advantage that it also allowed for ‘texture’, that is for a multiplicity of views, to be discussed within groups.

Interviews were semi-focused, audio-taped and with groups consisting of between five and eight students. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and they were also told that the interview was not a test, but simply a forum in which everyone’s honest opinion and input was welcomed and valued. The format followed required researchers to ask a question of the group that was then discussed amongst participants.

Post interview, all tapes were analysed using an analysis sheet that incorporated the major themes of the interview questions. In performing content analysis care was taken to include both majority and dissenting viewpoints within groups. Sometimes we found consensus, but we also encountered much diversity of opinion. In reporting research findings care has been taken to reflect this texture. All students, schools and divisions have been given unique pseudonyms. Where quotes from participants have been used they are verbatim, but may have been edited slightly to preserve anonymity and to improve readability.

Participants were asked a range of questions in both years of research. Some of these related to their families. We were interested to explore what young people learned about politics and about voting within their families. To this end we asked about who participants discussed politics and voting with in their families and what they thought
they might have learnt within the family environment. We also explored the impact of families on enrolling to vote behaviour.

**Discussing with Dad and Enrolling with Mum: The Division of Political Labour in the Family**

Noted in the first report released from YES, ‘the family’ was most important source of information about voting in elections (Print, Saha and Edwards 2004). Preliminary to discussing political labour in families, however, it is important to note that participants’ families reflected the diversity of types characteristic within Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003). Our participants also came from a variety of backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic status and geographical location. In this context the gendered division of labour we observed was significant because it cut across these differences. When asked with whom they discussed politics, many participants replied, ‘my family’. Many also elaborated on the family members they discussed politics with, in most cases identifying parents as discussants. Some participants also named individuals. Here there was a marked tendency for fathers to be mentioned and for mothers not to be mentioned as discussants of politics. At issue here is not the gender of the young person, both male and female participants indicating they discussed politics, but the gender of the discussant. Below, some examples illustrate the variety of ways that politics was reported as being discussed in family settings. These have been selected from our research and are emblematic of a larger selection of examples. Examples selected illustrate a variety of contexts. Sometimes participants reported discussing particular aspects of politics and seeking information. Others referred to more general discussions. But, as noted, despite this diversity, most specified that discussions took place with fathers.

- Raj from The Lakes High School had discussed voting with his father when his father explained what ‘donkey voting’ was. Jacque, from the same school, mentioned her father’s enthusiasm for politics saying that this had influenced her.

- Hanie and Ana from Mayfield Secondary College said they ‘talk to their fathers about political issues’.

- A female student at Port James High School discussed politics with her father, with things that she wanted explaining on the television news being the main catalyst.

- At Antony’s Catholic College two students reported talking to their fathers about political issues. Cole described her father as ‘ranting’ about political topics, but Harriet said ‘I have lots of discussions with my Dad, he’s pretty
open to my opinions’.

At Central Districts High School Sean also reported that he particularly discussed politics with his Mother.

Sean’s neutral report that he discussed politics with his mother was a minority position. Where mothers were mentioned as discussants it was often the case that participants explained their choice of parent by specifying that their father was not available, or that they drew attention to the inadequacy of discussions with their mothers. Mothers were considered as not knowing much, or, in fact, in one case being the seeker, rather than giver, of political information.

At Marino High School Kelvin said he discussed politics with his Mum. He added that his father was not eligible to vote because he was not a citizen.

At St Anthony’s Catholic College two participants had tried to talk to their mothers. Elly said this was difficult because ‘I seem to know more about the issues than she does’ and Cole said ‘My mum was asking me the other day about all the parties, what they stand for and which way she should vote’.

Above, Kelvin names his mother as a discussant, saying that his father was ineligible to vote and thus that he was not an adequate discussant. Elly reports knowing more than her mother and Cole describes his mother as asking him how she should vote.

Sometimes extended family members were also mentioned. Here a gender dimension was also prevalent, with grandfathers and brothers being more likely to be mentioned than grandmothers and sisters. Below, some examples from YES illustrate discussion with extended family members. Sergi’s interest in discussing politics with male family members, who, by their role in the public sphere, in his eyes, makes them particularly knowledgeable, is of particular interest.

At Mayfield Secondary College a participant identified her grandfather as a particular family member with whom she discussed politics.

At Mercy College one participant mentioned she discussed politics with an older brother.

Sergi from Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic College had a father and a brother who were lawyers. He discussed political issues with them because he thought that their profession meant they had some particularly interesting things to say.

Yet mothers did have a role to play in political labour within families. We also asked participants about motivations to enrol to vote. It is important to note here that it is, of course, a statutory requirement in Australia to enrol to vote from the age of eighteen.
Here we found that few had initiated enrolment themselves, most had waited for the opportunity to present itself. Often opportunity was created through degrees of parental motivation. Whereas participants reported both mothers and fathers performing this role there was a marked tendency for mothers to be named as the parent who made sure that the obligation to enrol to vote was fulfilled. The following examples from our research indicate some responses to the question of who had motivated participants to enrol to vote.

At Frenchtown High School one student, who was 17, had enrolled to vote because “Mum had the enrolment form” and indeed had filled out this form for the student concerned.

Participants at Scholl High School reported that their parents would get the forms for them in order that they could enrol to vote.

Jacob from Johnson Catholic College explained that when the family moved house his mother had collected enrolment forms for the whole family. She had filled out the form for him and merely required that he sign it.

At Northcott Secondary College a student had enrolled because her father reminded her to do so.

At Beachside College a student said that he had been motivated to enrol and vote because his mother had filled out the form and asked that he sign it.

A student at Calderwood College said his mother had “forced” him to sign the form.

Tia from Wickham College remembered her sister being told to enrol to vote when she was 18, “because of the fines”.

Illustrated above is a perceived maternal preoccupation with compliance and making sure that participants fulfilled their legal obligations. A participant from Northcott Secondary College expresses a minority view. Her father had told her to enrol. But in most cases the instrumental parent was the mother. In some cases mothers were reported as stopping short at simply ‘telling’ participants to enrol. In other cases they had obtained forms for participants, and some had filled the form out, merely requiring that participants sign.

Of further interest is that most participants also noted that no political information or advice about voting procedures was imparted at the time of enrolment. This is a bigger issue and cannot be broached here. But the enrolment process, facilitated mostly by mothers, was one of compliance only.
Summary, Discussion and Conclusion

The gendered division of political labour described above is significant because it has not previously been reported or explored. The main aim of this paper was to explicate this finding and to ‘name’ it as one aspect of the ‘gender gap’ in participation. Put this way our major finding is that it tends to be fathers’ work to discuss politics with their children, and mothers’ work to ensure and facilitate the obligation of enrolling to vote. This finding raises some interesting issues. The most significant of these is the effect that this gendered division may have on the emerging political consciousnesses of young males and females in terms of their identity as political subjects and actors.

It is possible, also, to situate YES’ findings in the context of the ‘gender gap’ in participation more broadly. Aspects of the ‘gender gap’ included women discussing politics less frequently than men and women knowing less about aspects of politics than men. With respect to their families, participants in YES tended to support this element of the ‘gender gap’. YES thus suggests that the gender gap operates within families and is perceived by young people in families. More research is required to understand some intriguing aspects of this gendered division of political labour. These include; who initiates political discussions (parents or young people) and why fathers are chosen (or self-select) as discussants rather than mothers.

One final issue that arises from YES is that of why it is that male and female participants reported discussing politics, (with male family members) as youth, but adult women, as mothers, did not discuss politics with their children. Here, the question is, why is it that young women appear interested in politics, keen to discuss political topics and gather information, but adult women (who are mothers) tend not to discuss politics with their children, and, (are reported by their children), as lacking knowledge about politics. There are multiple possible answers to this question that could emerge from both resource-oriented and socialisation approach theories of the gender gap in political participation that are beyond the scope of this paper.

In closing, ‘the family’ underscores most explanations of the gender gap in political participation. YES research suggests that it is deserving of this central role and that more research needs to be conducted in order to explore some of the questions we have raised.
Footnotes

1  This paper is based on research conducted as part of the Youth Electoral Study (YES). YES is principally funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) with Industry Partner funding and in-kind contributions from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). Acknowledgement is due to our Partner Investigator, Brien Hallet. In addition, our research staff, Susan Bassett, Mia Christensen, Susan Gilbert, Jen Hayward, Sarah Howe, Kris McKraken, Jacqueline Mikulsky, Kate O’Connor, Kate O’Malley, Tony Smith and Kerri Weeks contributed to data collection and/or analysis for this paper. Views and opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent those of the AEC.

2  These data were obtained from the Australian Electoral Commission and are the best that current methods of modelling of enrolment data can provide. Figures quoted, however, are approximate only and may be subject to future revision.

References


Saha, L., M. Print and K. Edwards (2005) *Youth Electoral Study: Youth, Political Engagement and Voting* URL:
