

Pregnancy and Politics

On the Gender Gap in Political Knowledge, Attitudes, and Participation

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Göteborg Studies in Politics 182

2024

Avhandlingen baseras på följande delstudier:

Naurin, E., Stolle, D., & Markstedt, E. (2023). The effect of pregnancy on engagement with politics. Toward a model of the political consequences of the earliest stages of parenthood. *American Political Science Review*, 117(1), 311--317.

Markstedt, E., Naurin, E., & Olander, P. (2024a). *Parents' political knowledge during pregnancy and after childbirth*. Unpublished manuscript.

Markstedt, E. (2024b). *How pregnancy and childbirth shape views of the state and welfare state policies*. Unpublished manuscript.

Markstedt, E. (2024c). *Women in the media environment and the gender gap in political knowledge*. Unpublished manuscript.

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i statsvetenskap som med tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs universitet framlägges till offentlig granskning fredagen den 12 april 2024, kl. 13.15 i Dragonen, Sprängkullsgatan 19, Göteborg.



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Markstedt, Elias. 2024. *Pregnancy and Politics – On the Gender Gap in Political Knowledge, Attitudes, and Participation*. Göteborg Studies in Politics 182, edited by Johannes Lindvall, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 711, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden. ISBN 978-91-8069-635-7, ISSN 0346-5942

Abstract

Pregnancy and early parenthood are significant life milestones. They also affect women and men differently. The biological marvel of pregnancy and birth and the changing social roles that come with parenthood can trigger a reevaluation of personal and social values and political priorities among mothers and fathers and lead to new reflections.

I ask how the time around pregnancy influences political knowledge, attitudes, and participation and whether the experiences of mothers and fathers can explain political differences between women and men. There is a lot of research on the political consequences of parenthood, but pregnancy is less well-understood. Furthermore, causal inference is uncommon in this area of research. I make two main contributions. I integrate pregnancy into the study of how parenthood affects politics, and I provide more robust inferences based on original longitudinal data in a research area that largely relies on data with single time points.

There are four research papers in the dissertation. Three of the papers study the Swedish case. They reveal that overall, pregnancy and early parenthood have a surprisingly limited impact on a broad range of political outcomes at the individual level. Political demobilization is more likely than mobilization, but these changes usually dissipate one to two years post-partum. However, a closer examination of specific topics reveals that parents undergo a learning process and shift their attitudes concerning welfare-state policy and issues that are directly relevant for parents. Mothers and fathers are often similarly affected. Pregnancy and early parenthood cannot, therefore, explain the persistent gender gaps in political knowledge, attitudes, and participation. In the fourth paper, I extend the scope of the analysis beyond parenthood and study the effects of women politicians' media visibility—an alternative explanation for gender gaps in political knowledge. I find that an increased visibility of women does not significantly close the gender knowledge gap in the 49 countries under study. It suggests that if there is a role-model effect of women politicians on political knowledge, it is not a direct function of how often women are seen in the media.

In conclusion, although the effects of pregnancy and early parenthood appear to be limited, their significance should not be underestimated in relation to other events in people's lives, especially since prevailing expectations are rooted in decades of cross-sectional research that likely overestimates the effects of many different types of events. My findings underscore the critical importance of longitudinal research for furthering our understanding of the many ways in which life experiences such as pregnancy and parenthood influence democratic citizenship.

Key Words: parenthood, gender gaps, political knowledge, political behavior, longitudinal studies