

Eliminated, Tolerated, and Celebrated: Gender Gaps in the United States

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Abstract

Gender gaps in contemporary political science have a connotation of being bad. The trend over the last fifty years has been to eliminate gender gaps. However, gender gaps do not always fit into one category in contemporary U.S. society.

Gender gaps in the United States can fit into three categories: eliminated, tolerated, and celebrated. They can be sorted using certain criteria. The criteria for eliminated, tolerated and celebrated can make a sorting mechanism that can be used by public policy decision makers to help their decision process when it comes to laws about gender gaps.

Further research and testing will be needed to see if the sorting mechanism works. The mechanism should make it easier for public policy decision makers and sort the gender gaps into the right category. Testing gender gaps that are more controversial might bring forth other criteria or problems that need to be fixed in this new paradigm for political science research that concentrates on gender gaps.

Introduction

A long time ago in Greece, there lived a man named Procrustes. Procrustes owned a house near the side of the road and always invited travelers into his house. He had an iron bed prepared for any traveler. Procrustes would lay the traveler on the bed. However, if the traveler was too tall for the bed, he would cut off the traveler's legs. If the traveler was too short, Procrustes would stretch the traveler to fit the bed, sometimes breaking bones and tearing tendons in the process. A lesson can be learned from Procrustes: not everything can fit into one category.

The same lesson can be applied to public policy when it comes to gender gaps. Catherine MacKinnon, in her book *Toward a Feminist Theory of State*, states:

The legal mandate of equal treatment...becomes a matter of treating likes alike and unlikes unlike, while the sexes are socially defined as such by their mutual unlikeness....Socially, one tells a woman from a man by their difference from each other, but a woman is legally recognized to be discriminated against on the basis of sex only when she can first be said to be the same as a man. (216)

MacKinnon's argument is discussing the fundamental problem of "equal treatment" and defining gender by their differences in the law. When trying to make decisions about public policy based on gender there is a problem in defining what would be "equal treatment" or "discrimination." The problems occur when defining "man" and "woman." If men and women are defined by their differences from each other, then the problem MacKinnon is discussing becomes apparent. The differences between men and women are there, but the similarities also make it hard to draw clear, general distinctions between men and women (Goldstein 129). Therefore, stating that men and women are different, and then stating that women are discriminated against because they are the same as men, is a paradox.

In this paper, “gender gap” means that a statistically significant difference can be seen between men and women’s participation. More specifically, this paper will be looking at observable, quantifiable inequalities in the numbers of men and women’s participation. A gender gap can be seen when a large number of men are participating in something and fewer women are participating in it as well, or vice versa. In addition, there are gender gaps when one gender is participating 100% and the other 0%.

The term “gender gap” has a connotation of being bad, something that needs to be eliminated. Over the past fifty years there has been literature and movements geared toward eliminating gender gaps.¹ However, gender gaps are not always bad. The term “gender gap” needs to move away from its current connotation, to a term that applies to the situation. Like the lesson from the Tale of Procrustes, not all gender gaps can fit into one category. Some gender gaps should be tolerated, some celebrated, and some should be eliminated.

Deciding where gender gaps should be placed in public policy has been a debate that has lasted for years (Bonnicksen 145-184). I have tried to start a new path in political science research that I think is lacking when it comes to gender gaps. Most of the research has talked about putting gender gaps on one side of the spectrum, either eliminated or celebrated. Practically no research talks about the gray area, tolerated. Furthermore, no research talks about putting gender gaps into all three categories. I think gender gaps fit into these three categories and that affects public policy decisions in new ways. In my research, I used one example of a gender gap that clearly fits into one of the three categories to help define the criteria for easy

¹ For the sake of less interruption in the flow of this paragraph, I have included the citations for this statement here: (United Nations, “Beijing Declaration;” Desai; Duley; United Nations, Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals; Giele; Levine; Mathews, Sex, Gender; Walter).

sorting. However, there are more examples that I did not have time to give the proper attention to in this paper. The criteria creates a sorting mechanism that can be used for further testing and research in political science. Furthermore, if this new paradigm proves to be true, it could help public policy decision makers when making decisions about gender gaps.

Education

The first category is “eliminate.” The example for this section is education. Even though education is not a current gender gap, it use to be. As printing became less and less expensive, written information became available to people that could not have afforded to buy a book. In addition, libraries and free public education has allowed new generations of men and women to have access to books, newspapers, and other scholarly work. Both men and women now have the same opportunity to go to school and learn in order to give both men and women the opportunity of getting an education that can help them become better citizens. Education is a value. Education is something that makes individuals better human beings and benefits everyone. Education benefits everyone by making people better citizens, better companions, and creates people in the society that everyone can go to and learn new ideas.

In 1963, John F. Kennedy started the Commission on the Status of Women through an executive order. The Commission was started in order to make recommendations on encouraging women to make better and fuller contributions as citizens of the United States (Mead 9-16). The Report from the Commission on the Status of Women, in 1965, deals with and gives recommendations for the policy areas in the law that involve men and women’s equality (Mead 22-23). Both President Kennedy and the Commission recognized the importance of helping women become more active citizens. Women have a lot to say about the running of the United

States as long as they are informed of their rights as citizens and have the opportunities to pursue the information.

The Report from the Commission on the Status of Women states, “men and women are equally in need of continuing education” (Mead 26). Men and women need education outside of a High School diploma because of the increase in jobs that require college degrees. In turn, more information and knowledge can help men and women make better choices. Education helps citizens find ways to get involved not just through voting, but also through other activities such as campaigning. Having more and more citizens get an education means that less people will be making uninformed decisions when it comes to elections and public policy. When a policy is passed that does not help anyone but harms many, then that policy is a bad policy. With a population that gets more education, it is less likely that bad public policy will be passed. The informed citizens will be the ones advocating for policies that benefit most.

Choosing a career and having the opportunities to get an education are needed to make better citizens. People can be better citizens when they contribute to the community in any career they choose. The community will only benefit from having citizens that are the best at what they do. As Mill argues, individuals are better at knowing what their strengths and weaknesses are than is the government (18). Therefore, Mill states, as long as it is true that individuals know more about his or her abilities than the government, “we ought to act like we believe it, and not ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy...shall decide the person’s position through all life” (18). Some people can do a job better than others can. Education can give someone the tools that will open up opportunities for certain careers. However, learning something does not make that

person the best at what they can do. Natural talents and skill have a lot to do with becoming the best at something.

Mill states that there should be no fear in women doing something women cannot do because individuals will naturally pursue doing only those things that they can do (26). Mill states that competition and demand will weed out those people that cannot do something (26). A person will eventually become discouraged in pursuing something as a career if he or she realizes they do not have the talent needed to become the best. Supply and demand will show the person that they cannot make a living from that career. A person will have to find something that he or she has the natural talent to do.

Education also makes people better companions for one another. Plato argues in *The Republic* that men and women do not differ in their natures (Rep. V.453a-457e). Plato is arguing that men and women are only different in that women bear children and are physically weaker than men, but that the responsibilities and pursuits of men and women are the same. The argument is that men and women's aspirations are the same because their natures are not different (Plato Rep V.435c-456e). Plato argues that people are different from each other on the individual level and that "those women who have the same qualities are to be selected as the companions and colleges of men who have similar qualities" (Rep V.456b-457e). Plato is arguing that the differences are in the individuals, not a group. People with the same interests and pursuits will interact more with each other. Having a conversation with someone on a topic that he or she knows nothing about will not make as good of a conversation as one with someone that knows something about the topic. The more experience and interest that a person has with a certain topic will create opportunities for communication to move beyond the basics. For

example, one cannot have an in depth conversation on music if that person has never learned the basics of music theory or has experienced making music for themselves.

Plato further argues that since the differences between men and women are in reproduction and strength, that “this does not amount to a proof that a woman differs from a man in respect of the sort of education she should receive” (Rep V.454e). The education of men and women should be the same especially, states Plato, since women are the companions of men (Rep V.456d-457e). Women and men should be given the same education until people discover their natural gifts and what interests they have. Furthermore, if there should be a difference in education, it should be among subject areas and individual interests. Men and women as individuals should have the opportunity to decide what they will learn. Education should only be different depending on the talents and interests of an individual.

The benefits involved with giving men and women the opportunity to have an education will benefit everyone that is looking for human companions. Human companions can help fill a void that is missing in a person’s life. I think most people look for human companionship because they want to have those conversations where they can share their ideas. Having human companion benefits most individuals because most people will find ways to transcend through the relationship. Some examples would be marriage, living through the generations, and some sort of Maslow’s self-actualization.

Education further creates people in the society that others can turn to for wisdom. Slogans such as “listen to your elders,” and years of work makes a person “the foremost scholar in their field,” shows that people who have life experience and years of education are the people that have the authority in society. The President of the United States has to be Thirty-Five years

old to run for office and the Senate is known as the “cooler head” of the U.S. Congress. A general truth is that those who are older have more wisdom. Older people have gone through many years of school and have life experience. Having people with wisdom or extensive knowledge in their field benefits everyone in society because life lessons and new ideas can be formed from the ideas of these people.

Causes Harm to One or Both Genders

When a gender gap causes harm to one of the genders, then it should be eliminated. However, in the case of education, harm is caused to both genders because both genders lose many benefits provided by education. The number of people that become better citizens through education drastically reduce. The chance of finding a companion and many people that are wise in the society will reduce. The benefits will no longer be there because it will be hard for men and women to find transcendence through a companionship, the laws of the United States, and the knowledge of others.

Sports

In 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments was passed to prevent discrimination “in any educational program or activity receiving federally financial assistance” (Francis 307). Title IX was used to make athletic programs in high schools and colleges equal. Over the years, the numbers of women participating in sports has risen. In high school, the number of women participating in sports has gone from 294,015 in 1971 to 2,856,358 in 2002-2003 (Carpenter 168). At the college level, women’s participation in sport also increased. The number of participants in 1972 was 170,000 men and 30,000 women (Carpenter 171). The difference in 1972 was 140,000 persons. As of 2002, 209,000 men and 151,000 women participated in sports

(Carpenter 171). The difference in 2002 was only 58,000 compared to the 140,000 person difference in 1972.

Over time, the gap in how many women participate in sports has gotten smaller and there is a correlation between the regulations imposed by Title IX and the growing number of both men and women's participation in all levels of sport. The number of sports and teams for women has increased since the passing of Title IX of the Education Amendments. More women's Olympic teams and sports have been added, and the number of women's teams at the college level increased from 2.50% in 1972 to 8.32% in 2004 (Carpenter 8, 170, and 178-179). Furthermore, record participation by men at the high school level happened from 2002-2003 (Carpenter 168). However, this piece of legislation and its effects are still too new. Other reasons for the increase could be found, and deciding if and how the gap should be reduced needs more research and decisions.

Sports are said to provide "basic benefits" to both men and women (English 284-285). It is generally accepted that sports impart skills and character building (English 284-285; Carpenter 165-166). The passage of Title IX recognized the benefits and tried to provide them for everyone through opportunities to participate in sports. The passing of Title IX has opened the doors for women in sports at the high school and college level, as well as the benefits that can be gained from all levels of sport participation. The increase in women's participation in high school and college sports also opens up opportunities for women's professional sports.

Nonetheless, total equality could never happen in sports. The physical differences between men and women hinder total equality. The differences can be an advantage in one sport, but a disadvantage in another (English 286). Title IX of the Education Amendments addresses

this obstacle towards total equality by coming up with ways to gain the most equality. For example, making sure the number of male and female participants in sports equals the percentage of male and female enrollment at any college or university receiving funds from the government is one way to make the participation of men and women in sports equal (Francis 308-309).

However, there is a problem with separating sports into teams or divisions based on weight and sex. It is impossible to make teams and divisions for all differences in human characteristics (English 285). Stating that women can play on a men's sport team, but that men cannot cross over to a women's sport team would discriminate against the man that fits the weight of the women's team and not the man's team. Further research will need to be done in order to know which differences are permanent (English 285), but finding new ways to separate sports into groups with the same physical characteristics would create less problems when dealing with these inequalities. It is possible to separate people into groups with similar characteristics. Separating sports based on the differences that matter in that sport, instead of gender, will have as equal a feel as separating sports by gender.

The Home of Tolerated Gender Gaps

Tolerating a gender gap can fall into one of two places: the "home" or the "holding tank." A gender gap should go into the "home" section when the majority of current society does not see anything wrong with a gender gap. However, socialization can change the way individuals look at gender gaps. The problem occurs when society is faced with a close majority. At any moment, society's opinion on a gender gap can change when that gender gap is in the tolerated box. The majority could be wrong and that gender gap could be causing harm. Also, society's opinion can cause gender gaps to fall into a category that they ought not to go. Thus, these

problems need to be prevented by looking at more than just the majority opinion. The costs and the harm need to be addressed. Allowing the free movement and debate of a gender gap and society's opinion can help prevent the issues and costs from having a close majority.

The Holding Tank

Another place where gender gaps fit is in this section: "The Holding Tank." Sometimes there is not enough information on the gender gap or the gender gap has not been around long enough to decide if it will cause harm to the genders or not. The "Holding Tank" section is where sports fits. Further research and time is needed for the gender gaps that fall into this section. The gender gaps that go into the holding tank could later move into one of the other categories or it could end up being a permanent residence in the tolerated box.

Motherhood and Fatherhood

The second category is "celebrate." Motherhood and fatherhood is a participation gap, where women are mothers and men are fathers. One reason the gender gap is celebrated because both motherhood and fatherhood have their own celebration days. Mother's Day and Father's Day celebrates the individual honor of being a parent. Mother's Day celebrates bearing and raising children. In June, the same happens with Father's Day except contributions of the father are celebrated.

Many people have a problem with the idea of men bearing children. The main reason people have a problem with the idea is that men having children is "unnatural." The mere thought of men having children has become a joke. When a man acts like a woman, something is automatically assumed to be wrong with him. Sarcastic remarks such as, "I would like to see men do what we do," furthers divides the gap between men and women. Women are celebrated

as mothers not only because women are the only gender that can have children, but women are seen as the only gender that is equipped to deal with pregnancy and childbirth. The idea could be backed up by many reasons. One reason could be that women are able to deal with their emotions better than men. Others could be physical. Women do have different hormones than men and there is a possibility that women deal with pain and discomfort in a different way than men. Third, because women are built to have children, society sees the woman's ability to deal with pregnancy as something that is inherent.

The physical differences between man and women will not be changing anytime soon. Sometime in the future technology might change the way this gender gap is preserved, but for current technology, men and women have this difference. The physical reality that women can have children and men cannot is an example of a difference that does matter to society. The gender gap should be celebrated because the reality already excludes one gender from participating. The gender gaps that fit into this category should not need much in the form of public policies, but the decision makers will have to recognize these gaps so they will not make laws that could cause harm to the genders. If a law is made to increase participation of one gender because of an issue where the reality excludes one gender from participating, then the decision makers have created a policy that will not help the issue and could potentially cause people harm.

Summary of Conclusions

Taking the lessons from Procrustes and the decades of failed attempts to get gender gaps to fit into one category has resulted in three categories. I conclude that gender gaps in public policy should fit into three categories: eliminated, tolerated, and celebrated. When gender gaps

no longer reflect current society and causes harm to both genders, that gender gap should be eliminated. If a gender gap should be in the “home” section, then the gender gap might exist because it does not cause harm and reflects current society. Tolerated gender gaps can change in society or have not ripened to the point where an informed decision can be made on where that gender gap should go, causing it to go into the “holding tank” section. However, there needs to be caution because socialization of society can change the majority opinion of society.

Celebrated gender gaps are gender gaps that do not cause harm between the genders. Celebrated gender gaps cannot be eliminated because one gender is not physically capable of participating.

In conclusion, this paper is only the start of an interesting new path of research that has been neglected or not looked at in the current political science research on gender gaps. The goal is that the criteria for eliminated, tolerated, and celebrated will help people to make public policy decisions when gender gaps are involved. Further research and case studies will be needed to know if the criteria in this paper are the only criteria for these categories. In addition, further research will be needed to test the sorting mechanism to see if it works. However, even if the criteria in this paper does not work, a least political scientist can use this new paradigm to continue on the new path to find a better way for policy makers to make decisions on gender gap policies.

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