

## Public Abstract

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Despite the growth in influence and representation of female participants in politics at the highest levels, research on a number of Western industrialized democracies uncovers persistent audience gender gaps in forms of political participation and political knowledge (Bystrom, 2004). Consequently, the term gender gap has received ample attention from academics (Banwart, 2007; Bennett & Bennett, 1989). Research has consistently indicated that males are better informed on and more interested in political issues than females (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000; Kenski, 2000). Through two distinct studies, this dissertation examined the political gender gap, and how political polarization helps us understand the gap. The first study was a secondary data analysis and the second study was an experiment. In the first study, I examined polarization and news use levels of women compared to men. This study tested polarization as a mechanism for women to become more politically knowledgeable and politically efficacious. As such, the first hypothesis predicted that women would be less polarized than men. Also, due to a cyclical relationship whereby polarization leads to news use and news use leads to greater polarization (Stroud, 2010), the second hypothesis predicted that polarization would mediate the relationship between gender and news use. Moreover, I expected news use to mediate the relationship between polarization and efficacy because people's polarized attitudes would cause them to seek political news. By learning such news, they would feel more competent in understanding civic activities, and they would have greater political knowledge and political efficacy. Therefore, the third hypothesis predicted that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less knowledgeable about politics. The fourth hypothesis predicted that gender would have an indirect effect on political efficacy through news use such that women would be less polarized, engage in less news use as a result, and therefore be less efficacious about politics. However, I found that men and women were equally polarized, and gathered equal amounts of news. Rather, I found men gained more in political knowledge over the course of the campaign. In the second study, I explored how partisan support via socially pressurized environments on social media websites influenced political polarization, political engagement, political efficacy, and political knowledge. For these reasons, I theorized a link between polarization and social media use. The first hypothesis for Study II predicted that social reinforcement of political identity on social media would directly increase affective polarization and indirectly increase political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization. Conversely, the second hypothesis for Study II predicted that challenges to political identity on social media would directly reduce affective polarization and indirectly decrease political information efficacy, intent to participate in politics, and political interest through affective polarization. Moreover, I asked whether gender differences would influence these polarization processes. Also, since women tend to have lower political efficacy and confidence than men (Mondak & Anderson, 2004), I suspected that affirming social media comments would strengthen women's political attitudes, thereby increasing their polarization levels. Therefore, the research question asked if gender would moderate the polarization process such that the effects of social reinforcement on polarization would be stronger for women than men and, thus, women would gain more in efficacy, intent to participate, and interest than men. However, I found that men were in fact more compelled to participate in politics upon encountering challenges to their political identities on social media. The chapters are as follows: Chapter One introduces the dissertation; Chapter Two overviews literature outlining the political gender gap, polarization, and several social media concerns; Chapter Three outlines the method; Chapter Four

describes the results of the first study; Chapter Five describes the results of the second study; and finally, Chapter Six provides a discussion on both studies.