POLITUICS, POLARIZATION, AND POSTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
THE GENDER GAP AND THE NORMATIVE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL PRESSURE

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ABSTRACT

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). 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 tested polarization as a mechanism for women to become more politically knowledgeable and politically efficacious. I found that while women and men were equally polarized, men gained more 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. 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. I did not find support for this hypothesis. However, I found that after men encountered criticism on social media, they experienced greater intentions to participate in politics. Implications for future studies regarding the gender gap and political polarization are offered.