

# TRACING THE GENDER GAP IN POLITICAL INTEREST OVER THE LIFE SPAN: A PANEL ANALYSIS

Despite recent advances in gender equality in political representation and the availability of resources, this article shows that there is a persistent gender gap in declared political interest over the life cycle. Using evidence from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) we track the gender gap through the life span of citizens. At age 15 there is already a substantial gender gap of 20 percentage points in the probability of respondents reporting being politically interested, pointing to gendered socialization processes as the key explanation for such differences. In the following 10 years, as people develop into adults and unravel their political orientations, the extent of the gender gap continues to grow by about 10 additional percentage points. Following these formative years, attitudes crystallize and so does the gender gap, remaining at the same size (around 30 percentage points of difference between women and men) over the life course. These findings suggest that the development of gender roles during early childhood is a crucial phase in the source of the gender gap, deserving further attention from scholars.

**Key words:** *political interest, gender gap, transition to adulthood, socialization. panel estimation*

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Political Psychology: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12600>

## **Introduction**

Historically, politics has been a male-dominated sphere from which women have been largely excluded. Over the past 40 years, the degree of gender equality in political power and resources in industrialized democracies has increased. However, women still lag behind men when it comes to self-reported political interest (Fraile & Gomez. 2017; Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer. 2012; Tolleson Rinehart, 1992). This represents a clear disadvantage for women in their capacity to voice their political needs, wants and views, and to influence the political decision-making process. Gender differences in political interest are a key dimension of political under-representation both historically and currently, and therefore merit the attention of scholars.

Although recent efforts have attempted to disentangle the origins of political interest (Neundorf et. al, 2013; Prior, 2010), the persistent gender gap in this political attitude remains a conundrum in the public opinion literature. Traditional accounts have related gender differences with socialization processes and the development of the roles and attitudes linked to assumed gender identity (Burns et. al, 2001; Bussey & Bandura, 1999), which endorse a timid political role for women. However, these gender differences are also said to be particularly persistent when rooted in deeply entrenched gender roles and social norms such as those indicating who should be responsible for care and domestic chores. In spite of the aforementioned changes and more egalitarian views of society, women still tend to be more committed than men to family life, leaving them with less time available to dedicate to public matters than their male counterparts (Dotti Sani, 2014; Sayer, 2005). Finally, and due to the same gendered societal process, women, on average, tend to have less socioeconomic resources and develop different cognitive skills. These resources are necessary to understand and

become interested in politics, which, in turn, explains women's lower levels of political engagement compared to men (Burns et al., 2001; Tolleson Rinehart, 1992).

Our study seeks to contribute to the literature on the gender gap in political interest by way of a major improvement, namely the use of panel data (the British Household Panel Survey - BHPS -) to trace the gap between women and men. When do gender differences in declared political interest become evident? Are these differences constant or do they change over the life span? While the majority of prior studies (Fraile & Gomez, 2017; Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012; Quaranta & Dotti Sani, 2018) have tested the aforementioned accounts of the existence of the gender gap in political interest by way of cross sectional evidence, we engage in a dynamic analysis, tracing the declared political interest of men and women over almost two decades; something that, to the best of our knowledge, has been absent to date in the literature. If the static forces of socialization are promoting higher levels of political engagement for men than for women, we need to identify, first, relevant gender differences at an early age, and then, track those differences over time.

Our findings show that the gender gap in declared political interest appears quite early in the life of citizens (they are clearly present at 15 years old). The gap increases during the transition to adulthood, even after controlling for citizens' level of education. Moreover, we show that the increase in self-reported political interest associated with the first years of the transition to adulthood (largely illustrated by preceding studies) is of a higher magnitude for men than for women, which contributes to the amplification of existing gender differences. Finally, we also show that unexpectedly the association between citizens' education level and their own declared political interest is greater for men than for women, even amongst the most educated.

These findings suggest three main conclusions. First, given that differences are present at age 15, childhood may be a crucial phase that has been under-researched by scholarship, but it needs further attention. Children learn to anticipate and seek approval for their conduct, setting the grounds for what will become their political orientations (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The second conclusion is directly derived from the first and suggests that gendered socialization processes are rooted in the past and difficult to change. This holds true even in democracies where ‘gender-friendly policies’ have been promoted and implemented, and prominent female political figures (such as Margaret Thatcher, Theresa May, or Nicola Sturgeon amongst others) have received and continue to receive considerable attention from the mass media. Finally, our findings also indicate that education increases women’s awareness of men’s dominance in politics. This recognition might boost women’s impervious approach towards politics, a domain where they still feel unwelcomed. We discuss the implications of these findings for future research in the last section.

### **Sex Role Socialization and Political Engagement**

Previous scholars have documented the existence of a substantive gender gap in political interest both in Europe and across the world (Fraile & Gomez. 2017; Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer. 2012; Paxton & Hughes. 2014; Quaranta & Dotti Sani. 2018). These differences in the political realm have traditionally been attributed to gendered socialization processes. During this period, women are - often through subtle or indirect mechanisms - generally discouraged from involvement in political action, particularly when it is at the expense of their private life.

Gender and the social norms attached to it are learnt from early childhood through the main socialization agents: family, school, friends, and the mass media.

Scholars have shown that children learn and adopt gender roles from an early age (Martin & Ruble, 2004; McIntyre & Edwards, 2009). Furthermore, they are encouraged to embrace gender stereotype consistency, receiving disapproval and social penalties when their behavior crosses socially constructed gender boundaries (Bussey, 2011). The prescriptive nature of stereotypes about men and women leads to the development of interest in different topics by girls and boys to prove their own femininity or masculinity. For example, prior studies have demonstrated that boys and girls of 13 declare themselves already interested in different topics: while girls tend to prioritize social or environmental issues, boys give more importance to foreign policy and war (Fridkin & Kenney, 2007; Lynn et al, 2001).

Girls are encouraged to develop a sense of empathy and interconnectivity with other people (Gilligan, 1983), while boys focus on feelings of self-interest, independence and assertiveness (Ridgeway, 2011). As they grow older, these values and norms are reinforced through media and cultural products (Eagly et. al, 2004). This learning also pervades expectations regarding social roles in general, and in politics in particular (Jennings, 1983). Accordingly, men tend to be identified with leadership, autonomy and public roles, whereas women are socialized towards more passive, private and compassionate activities and positions (Alwin et. al, 1991). These implicit social norms are enduring and resistant to later stimulus, as shown in the studies of the gender gap in political ambition by Fox and Lawless (2014).

Another consequence of these gendered norms is that boys and girls grow up with different prejudices and expectations of the areas in which they are best skilled for (Bian et al., 2017). Recent research has shown that these differences also appear in the significance that politics has in men and women's lives. They differ in the conceptions about what politics is (Fitzgerald, 2013) and the topics or arenas that they find more

appealing (Campbell & Winters, 2008). While women tend to be less interested in politics in the abstract than men, they declare their interest in specific political issues such as, for example, civic rights, social policies, or local politics. (Coffé, 2013; Ferrín et. al, 2019b; Norris, 2000; Sánchez-Vitores, 2018). These alternative policy areas are considered to be more directly relevant to women than men because they deal with topics that come up in their daily routines (Burns et al., 2001; Campbell & Winters, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2013).

The socialization process in gender roles is not limited to the political dimension, but also to other realms of life such as the division of labor between men and women. It is true to say that the gender dynamics of employment have notably progressed during the last decades. For example, between 1980 and 2008, the gender gap in participation in the labor market decreased by 6 percent according to the World Bank (2012, p. 10). Households too have changed with the decline of the ‘breadwinner model’ (Ferguson, 2013). Nevertheless, the sexual division of labor endures. In fact, in Europe over 60 percent of working women are employed in female-dominated occupations (such as teaching, nursing, or childcare), while 60 percent of working men are employed in male-dominated occupations like engineering or construction (Roseberry & Roos, 2014. p. 16).

While gender egalitarian values receive more support amongst individuals with higher levels of education and income (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004), traditional divisions remain largely unchanged or even intensify when the first child is born. Socially, women are expected to favor engagement at home over their professional careers, while men do the opposite. In many contemporary societies, women are inherently located in the private sphere (Paxton & Hughes, 2014), since their responsibilities at home have traditionally been central to the definition of their

appropriate role. Consequently, the belief that family is the ‘special sphere’ of women and that they are innately better equipped to provide care for elders, raise children, and should be responsible for it, is still a widespread and dominant view, even among mothers (Bianchi et. al, 2006).

Recent evidence shows that all over the world, women remain largely responsible for care and housework. For example, data from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) shows that up to 38 percent of women provide care while only 24 percent of men do so. The figure is even more gender unbalanced for housework activities (78.7 percent of women versus 33.7 percent of men).<sup>1</sup> This pattern persists even among women with a full time job, and is often further accentuated after marriage and childbearing (Baxter et. al, 2015; Sayer, 2005; World Bank, 2012). As a consequence, the formation of a family (and especially parenthood) reinforces traditional gender roles and behavior (Baxter et. al, 2015; Bianchi et. al, 2006).

The varying amounts of time that men and women allocate to care and household work constitutes one factor that lowers women’s interest and engagement in politics compared to men’s: women simply have less time available to be involved in and informed about politics (Verba et. al, 1997).

A final consequence of the aforementioned gendered socialization process relates to the resources (both material and cognitive) needed to be interested in and understand politics. On the one hand, although political knowledge is a relevant resource associated with both self-reported political interest and political engagement, women seem to need higher levels of knowledge to feel sufficiently confident to participate (Ondercin & Jones-White, 2011). On the other hand, despite a notable increase in women’s level of educational attainment in recent decades, women still have fewer opportunities to take

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index>

on full time jobs. And, when they do, they often struggle to balance personal and professional responsibilities, because they face the burden of a double working day (Phillips, 1991).

Working women tend to prioritize their roles and identities as mothers to those as workers (Baxter et. al, 2015; Katz-Wise et. al, 2010), even at the expense of their careers. In contrast, following the birth of a child, men lessen their dedication to household work and increase the hours in the workplace to maximize economic rewards (Bianchi et. al, 2006; Burns et. al, 2001). Scholars have shown that marriage and especially parenthood is detrimental to European women's social networking and political knowledge and engagement, but not that of men (Ferrin et al. 2019a; García-Albacete, 2014; Quaranta & Dotti Sani, 2018). As a result, women are less likely than men to benefit from the economic and cognitive resources provided by the working environment, which enhance political learning and engagement (Burns et. al, 2001).

A last strand of literature links the gender differences in the taste for politics to the wide disparity in the representation of men and women among visible political elites. The lesser presence of prominent female politicians contributes to transmit the implicit message that 'politics is not for them'. In short, politics has historically been and remains identified as a "*male affair*" because it is men who rule (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Empirical evidence shows that men and women's perceptions about how they fit into the political sphere are intrinsically different, with women showing lower self-perceptions of their abilities (Gidengil et. al, 2008). However, a previous study using a survey experiment shows that providing participants positive feedback about their performance on a test of political knowledge substantially increases women's declared interest in the political realm so that the gender gap vanishes (Preece, 2016). The



conclusion of this study is that, to close the gender gap, women need to change the way they perceive themselves in their engagement with politics.

In sum, enduring gender differences in self-reported political interest appear to be the consequence of deeply entrenched gender roles and social norms dictating what is appropriate or typical for women and men to do, and what is expected from them both in the private and public spheres (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In terms of political engagement, this translates into male dominance in the political arena being transmitted and reproduced across generations.

This discussion leads to two hypotheses related both to socialization and life-cycle processes, which are best tested using panel data. The first hypothesis suggests the existence of relevant differences in the likelihood of women and men declaring themselves interested in politics from a very young age, because of gendered socialization processes (H1). The second hypothesis suggests that the size of the gender gap gradually increases over the life span, due to the accumulation of additional disadvantages for women compared to men during the transition to adulthood (H2). In the next section we introduce the case under study and the data used to test these two hypotheses.

## **Method**

### *Data and Case Study*

Household panels have been largely underexploited by political scientists given the predominance of sociological information they contain; with notable exceptions, such as Prior (2010) or Voorpostel and Coffe (2012). However, there is a limited number of available panel surveys containing information about respondents' interest in politics over their life span; to the best of our knowledge: Germany. Switzerland, the

Netherlands, the UK and the US. Out of these five surveys, the BHPS covers one of the longest periods of time (almost two decades).

The UK can be considered an “average case” within the Western European context with respect to the topic under analysis: the evolution of the gender gap across the life span. Regarding aggregate levels of declared political interest. Prior (2010) traced the evolution of this political orientation through the life cycle with panel data from Germany, Switzerland, and the UK. His findings show equivalent patterns in all countries studied.

The first wave of the European Social Survey provides evidence in favor of this characterization of the UK as an average case<sup>2</sup>. Figure 1 shows the size of the gender gap in the average levels of declared political interest in 15 Western European countries. All countries show statistically significant (different from zero) gender differences; even in Finland and Sweden, where differences are of a small size. Figure 1 shows that the UK presents a substantive gender gap, of around 0.3, which is similar in magnitude to other countries.<sup>3</sup> This implies about eight per cent of the total variation in political interest (that goes from 1 to 4).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

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<sup>2</sup> We provide evidence from the first wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) because it was fielded between September 2002 and February 2003, exactly in the middle of the period covered by the BHPS. The last two waves of ESS-seven and eight- confirm the same finding (see also the evidence provided in Fraile & Gómez, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Table A 1 in the Appendix shows the average declared levels of political interest for women and men across countries.

The comparative study by Fraile and Gomez (2017) about the gender gap in declared political interest in Europe shows that the size of this gap is smaller in countries that present the highest levels of gender equality. They measure gender equality using the Gender Equality Index (GEI), a comprehensive assessment of gender equality on a variety of social and political dimensions. Scores range from 1 for absolute gender inequality to 100 for full gender equality. The GEI index assessment in 2017 shows that the British score is somewhat higher than the European average: the average Euro-28 score is 66.2 against UK's 71.5 (see: <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index>). In short, compared to other European democracies, the country under analysis is relatively well positioned regarding support for gender equality.

Turning to the evidence used here, the BHPS offers one of the longest panel studies available, fielded between 1991 and 2009.<sup>4</sup> The sample includes some 5.500 households and about 10.300 respondents, who were followed over time. The Survey covers a representative sample of the UK, tracked over a period of almost 20 years (Freed Taylor et. al, 2010. pp. A2-2). The first wave interviewed some 8.200 respondents, which became the core BHPS sample. However, given that this is a household survey it has added respondents over time to comprehensively track the life changes of the sample members. For instance, if one of the original respondents divorced or re-married, the new partner became a member of the sample for as long as the couple remained together.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2009, the study was stopped and substituted by the study Understanding Society. This new study has included a fresh sample and a revision of the sampling criteria amongst other novelties. For further details see the Understanding Society User Guide (<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage>)

### *Variables and Estimations*

To trace the gender differences in self-reported political interest over time we employ the usual question included in conventional surveys: “How interested would you say you are in politics? Would you say you are [the interviewer is asked to read the response categories out loud] (1) very interested, (2) fairly interested, (3) not very interested or (4) not at all interested?” Unfortunately, the survey does not offer an alternative question. We acknowledge that it is too general, and therefore compromises accuracy in what is being measured. Respondents typically recall national and partisan politics as being the object of interest, even though there are many other modes and arenas for political engagement. Moreover, these political arenas are usually male-dominated and less attractive to women (Ferrin et. al, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2013; Stolle & Gidengil, 2010). In fact, and as previously mentioned, there is evidence showing that, compared to men, women are interested in different dimensions of politics (Campbell & Winters, 2008; Coffé, 2013; Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Sánchez-Vitores, 2018), particularly those appealing to specific questions more directly linked to their daily exercise of citizenship (Norris, 2000).

Research on the gender gap in political knowledge has also shown that traditional survey items underrepresent women’s knowledge due to the type of knowledge and reasoning on which they focus (Ferrin et. al, 2018; Stolle & Gidengil, 2010) and also because of the fact that women and men tend to respond differently to these kinds of survey items because men are more prone to guess what they think is the correct answer than women (Lizotte & Sidman, 2009). In contrast, we have explored the propensity to

provide a non-response to the question we are using here (self- reported political interest) and have found no relevant gender differences.<sup>5</sup>

Given that the variable only includes four response categories, they have been dichotomized to maximize statistical efficiency in the panel estimations. The variable used takes value zero for those responding ‘not at all’ or ‘not very interested’ in politics. and one for those declaring themselves to be ‘fairly interested’ and ‘very interested’ in politics.

To confirm the robustness of our results we have estimated two additional equations. First, a replication of the same estimations with the original four-category variable using a linear model (GLS estimations, see table A2 in the online appendix: figures A1 for age and A2 for education). Second, there is a break in the dataset of four years during which the political interest question was not administered (between 1997 and 2000; both years included). The panel estimation controls for this hole. However, we replicated the estimation for the series of waves before and after the break. This divided the observations into two subsamples: 1991-1996 and 2001-2008. Results are reported in table A3 and figures A3 for age and A4 for education in the online appendix, and they are also consistent with the findings reported here.

Our argument implies that the political attitude of interest develops differently over the life span of men and women. To test this empirically with a dynamic approach,

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<sup>5</sup> All missing values from our sample that are not included in the analysis presented here [that is, those who declined to answer (0.02% of total respondents) or replied that they did not know their own levels of political interest (0.01%) plus those who did not provide an answer to the face to face interview because they were not at home] represent only 4% of the total sample (of all the male respondents 5%, compared to only 3% of all female respondents, are classified as missing- gender differences are not statistically different from zero).

our main variables are age and gender. The former accounts for the respondents' age at each wave of the survey. The latter is a dichotomous variable where 1 stands for women and 0 for men.

Finally, we control for the level of education of the respondents. This is measured through an ordinal variable with four categories: (i) basic (which constitutes the reference category for the estimations), (ii) advanced secondary and basic vocational training, (iii) advanced vocational training, and (iv) university. Education constitutes one of the main antecedents of citizens' declared interest in politics (Burns et. al, 2001; Van Deth & Elff, 2004). In addition, we control for the fact that during the time period under study (1991-2009), on average, older women still presented lower levels of educational attainment than men. Our sample shows that amongst those born in the 1910s, almost 7 percent of the men went to university, while less than 2 percent of women did. Amongst those born in the 1940s, the percentage increases to 11 percent for men and almost 8 percent for women. Finally, for those born in the 1970s the trend has turned, showing that more women (19 percent) than men (17 percent) went to university.

Given the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable we have used binomial logit panel regression. This estimation technique considers that observations are dependent on one another because they come from the same individual across time. Thus, producing a robust estimate of the error terms. We have followed a two-step strategy in our analysis. First, we have estimated a binomial panel logit with random effects, given the static character of our main independent variable: gender, which is constant across waves. However, to take full advantage of the dynamic character of the evidence analyzed here, we have also estimated a binomial panel logit with fixed effects for men and women separately to account for the intra-individual (within person)

variation over time. This second strategy has the main inconvenience of dropping a relevant number of observations, and therefore loses statistical efficiency in our estimations. Fixed-effect estimators only consider those observations where there is variation in the value of declared political interest. This implies that only individuals who have become interested or have lost interest at least once in the time span are included in the analysis. Those who never changed, and according to Prior (2010) these represent the majority, are dropped from the analyses. Given that fixed effects cannot account for a time-invariant variable, such as gender, we estimate one equation for women, and another for men.

### **Findings**

Our estimations seek to identify when the gender gap appears, and the extent to which the size of this gap changes through the life cycle. To put it in question form: is the gender gap in self-reported political interest the product of the transmission of gendered expectations about the role of men and women in society? Or does it appear later in the lives of citizens after adult roles are assumed, when women favor caring, while men focus on providing?

The results of our first set of random-effect panel estimations are summarized in table 1. Equation 1 provides the baseline including gender, age, and education. Equation 2 adds an interaction term of gender and age to properly test the extent to which the size of the gender gap increases because the association of age and self-reported political interest is positive but of a lower magnitude for women than for men. Finally, Equation 3 specifies an interaction term of gender and education. This is to control for the magnitude of the association between education and political interest being the same for both women and men across the life span.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 1 shows a sizeable gender gap in declared political interest in favor of men (see the negative coefficient corresponding to the variable ‘being a woman’, that is statistically different from zero). Additionally, it suggests that the size of the positive association of age and political interest is slightly diverse for men and women (see the coefficient corresponding to the interaction term of female and age in the second equation). Finally, equation 3 shows that the positive association of education and political interest is of a lower magnitude for women than for men.

We further summarize our findings with a graphic representation of the results. Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of declaring interest in politics for men and women over a life time. These estimates are calculated based on the second equation reported in Table 1.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 2 provides evidence of the existence of a substantial gender gap in political interest from age 15 (the first estimation point corresponds to those aged 15), a time at which, despite their indirect exposure to the adult world and gender stereotypes, adolescent girls are already declaring that they are less interested in politics than their male counterparts. The difference is in the order of 20 percentage points for their probability of being politically interested. This evidence provides support for the socialization hypothesis (H1). If differences emerge this early, it might be due to the way in which socialization occurs.



This evidence is insufficient to reveal the exact mechanisms through which gendered socialization processes lead to different political orientations between girls and boys. Most previous studies have focused on adolescence as a period critical to the formation of identities and attitudes. Our results suggest that further attention needs to be paid to the childhood period. Ideally, researchers should track the political interest of small children and the context in which they grow up. The literature on gender identity development suggests that even from a very young age, children are aware of social approval when they display gender congruent attitudes and disapproval for ‘cross-gender conduct’ (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Toys can offer an example of this, as boys who attempt to play with dolls and girls who play football are often pointed out as not behaving according to their identities and roles. However, examples and data on political attitudes at this age are rare. The sole exception, to the best of our knowledge, are the studies of Van Deth et. al (2011), and Abendschön & Tausendpfund (2017). They show that small children, at the age of entering primary school (6/7 years old), have already developed coherent and enduring political orientations.

One way to test the extent to which gender differences in declared interests for politics come from socialization could be by considering an additional piece of information from the panel survey: respondents’ attitudes toward traditional gender roles in society. The extent of the gender gap would be expected to significantly decrease (and even close) when these attitudes are included in the estimation. Unfortunately, this information is only available in less than half of the 13 waves we are using in the estimations summarized in Table 1. Still we have replicated our binomial panel logit estimations with gender, age and education to include respondents’ views about traditional gender roles in society (see Table A4 in the online appendix for a

summary of the results).<sup>6</sup> Although the number of observations decreases to a high extent and the efficiency of the estimations is limited, we find that far from closing, the gender gap remains (see the coefficient corresponding to female that is still statistically different from zero in Table A4). We recognize that it is not possible to discard that the gap does not close after considering respondents' attitudes toward traditional gender roles in society because we have used only information coming from six waves or because this type of survey item elicits a socially desirable response. Unfortunately, with the evidence used here we had no other way to test this possibility.

Regarding the evolution of declared interest in politics across the life cycle, Figure 2 illustrates that there is a similar trend for both men and women. During the early years, the likelihood of declaring an interest in politics tends to increase until the second half of a person's twenties. The literature identifies these years as a formative period in which many 'firsts' occur, during progress into adulthood (Dinas, 2013; García-Albacete, 2014). During these years, citizens commonly search for their first job, leave the parental home, attend university, move in with a partner and/or vote for the first time. Young people are, at this time, crystallizing the attitudes that will remain more or less stable for the rest of their lives. Specifically, figure 2 shows that the trend stabilizes following the late twenties and remains unchanged over the following decades, as prior studies have shown (Neundorf et. al, 2013; Prior, 2010).

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<sup>6</sup> More specifically, waves 1, 3, 5, 13, 15 and 17 of the BHP include three questions regarding respondents' opinion about gender roles in society. Respondents are faced with these three statements and they have to express their degree of agreement with them: (i) "Family suffers if mother works full time"; (ii) "Pre-school child suffers if mother works full time"; and (iii) "Husband should earn, wife stay at home".

Regarding the size of the gender gap, Figure 2 shows that at age 15, the gender gap in the probability of being interested in politics is about 20 percentage points. By the time the gendered roles of adulthood are acquired, the gender differences increase by up to 30 percentage points. After this period of growth, the size of the gender gap stabilizes at its largest difference and remains so in the following decades. From that moment onwards, and compared to men, women remain some 30 percentage points less likely to report being interested in politics. While gendered socialization processes might be at the heart of the existence of a gender gap in self-reported political interest at the age of 15 (as H1 suggests), additional disadvantages appear to accumulate for women during the process of reaching early adulthood, increasing the size of the aforementioned gender differences regarding declared political interest (as H2 states) by a further 10 percentage points.

So far, we have theorized that social norms driving early socialization and the transition to adulthood do not socialize men and women to be equally interested in politics, leading women to have lower levels of confidence in their abilities and capacities to voice their demands. However, there is an additional explanation that could be at play, namely the association between declared political awareness and education. Figure 3 illustrates this latter possibility.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 3 shows that, on average, the chances of declaring an interest in politics increase with the level of education. Prior studies have shown that more educated citizens feel better equipped to declaring an interest in the political realm (Burns et. al. 2001; Van Deth & Elff, 2004; Verba et. al, 1997). However, figure 3 shows that this

association is of a different size for men and women. On average men with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to declare themselves politically interested than women with similar achievements. Men with basic education have about a 32 percentage point likelihood of declaring themselves interested, while women in the same situation have only about a 13 percentage point probability. Turning to those with the highest educational attainment, having attended university, men score about 83 percentage points, while women score some 46 percentage points. This implies a considerable gender gap (of around 37 percentage points), especially for those who are highly educated.

These results suggest that the potential increase in political interest that education fosters is different for men and women. In line with existing research (Ondercin & Jones-White, 2011; Preece, 2016), women appear to need more resources than men to feel adequately equipped to understand politics and be interested by it. There are two potential explanations for these findings. On the one hand, perhaps young men and women build their interests differently, and men benefit from the skills gained at school to a greater extent than women (Dow, 2009). An alternative explanation suggests that education helps women to be more conscious about the extent of male dominance in the political realm. This awareness might contribute to enhancing women's unreceptive attitude towards politics, a space where they still feel unwelcomed.

We have also estimated a binomial panel logit with fixed effects for men and women separately to account for the intra-individual (within person) variability across time in the most rigorous way. Findings from this second estimation are summarized in Table 2.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Here we analyze the change in the value of self-reported political interest (from 0 to 1 or vice versa) as a function of both education and age and for men and for women separately. Two main findings emerge from Table 2. First, on average, as individuals grow older, the probability of changing from declaring interest to not declaring political interest <sup>7</sup> decreases (as shown by the negative coefficient of age) and increases with their education level (as suggested by the positive coefficient corresponding to the categories of education). <sup>8</sup> Again, the second finding emerging is that the size of these associations appears to be different for men and women. The negative association of age and the probability of becoming politically interested is of a slightly higher magnitude for women than for men. Women's likelihood of declaring interest is not only lower, but it also decreases at a higher rate than men's, as respondents grow older. On the other hand, regarding education, the magnitude of the effect is greater for men than for women, as the coefficients in table 2 suggest.

To illustrate these results, figures 4 and 5 plot the predicted probabilities of becoming interested in politics by age and education respectively, according to the estimations reported in table 2. Both figures show how likely it is for respondents to become politically interested over age (figure 4) and across levels of education (figure 5), that is, of changing from 0 to 1 in the value of the dependent variable.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

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<sup>7</sup> From this point on (and to avoid the use of such long sentences) we will refer to this change as “becoming politically interested”.

<sup>8</sup> Coefficients are calculated relative to the lowest level of educational attainment, those with basic education.

As shown by Prior (2010), declared political interest is relatively stable over a life span. From age 16 to the late 20s, respondents seem to experience minor rises and falls, corresponding to the formative years theory mentioned above. From the late 20s onwards, those who are not already interested, will very rarely change their mind. As figure 4 shows, the likelihood of becoming interested in politics clearly decreases as respondents advance in their life course.

In correspondence with what figure 2 showed using the random effects estimations, the starting point for women is lower than for men at age 16. Note that the first age point considered is one year later than in the random effect estimations because fixed effects look at changes in the dependent variable, thus, requiring an initial time point that serves as a baseline for change to occur. At age 16 women are already less likely than men to become interested in politics: 42 percentage points for women versus 48 for men. This represents a total of six percentage points of difference. Moreover, the negative association between age and the likelihood of becoming interested in politics over the life cycle is slightly greater for women than for men. While women present (on average) a very small likelihood of becoming interested in politics at the age of 55 (10 percentage points), men present a higher probability (of 21 percentage points). This involves a substantial gender difference: 11 percentage points. These additional findings validate those from the random effects estimation, and put early childhood in the spotlight, as a crucial phase for the development of the gender gap in political attitudes and orientations.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 5 shows the predicted probability of becoming politically interested for men and women across their level of education. The figure shows very clearly that those attending university are the most likely to become interested, both amongst men (51 percentage points) and women (33 percentage points). Taking the opposite extreme, those with the lowest levels of education have the lowest probability of becoming interested; 17 percentage points for men and eight for women.

Consistent with figure 3, figure 5 shows that the size of the gender gap increases with education. Gender differences amongst the least educated are nine percentage points, while they reach 18 percentage points for the most educated. This finding suggests that (on average) educational attainment does not appear to provide the same set of skills to trigger men and women's declared political interest equally or alternatively, that education brings higher levels of consciousness among women about the degree of male dominance in the political sphere. And that this is something that discourages women's political interest.

To recapitulate, our two different estimations (random and fixed effects) reveal the same story about the evolution of the gender gap in self-reported political interest over the life span. And this gap is closely linked to the development of the attitude itself. During early socialization, marked by the family and school, individuals start developing their political interest, but, compared to young men, young women are less likely to declare themselves politically interested. Indeed, by that age most of the gender gap has already been developed. In the following years, during the transition to adulthood, gender differences continue to grow until the latter half of the 20s. At this point, simultaneous to the crystallization of attitudes, the gender gap stabilizes at its largest magnitude for the following decades. We further discuss these findings and their

implications for the study of the gender gap in declared political interest in the last section.

### **Concluding remarks**

In recent decades, considerable effort has been put into making politics less of a “men’s game” and more of a game for all. The representation of women’s voices has become a core element in the search for equality in Western democracies. Despite the efforts made, women still appear to be less interested in politics. This lack of motivation vis-à-vis the political realm translates into women running less for office (Lawless & Fox, 2010) and participating in activities at the margins of politics, like activism or being part of a school board (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004). So long as the gender gap remains, equality will be hindered.

Using dynamic evidence from the BHPS, we contribute to the literature on the gender gap in political interest by showing that when individuals are building who they will be as adults, at age 15, young men are, on average, 20 percentage points more likely than young women to declare themselves politically interested. We argue that if such considerable differences between young boys and girls appear at such an early stage, the way in which they are being socialized may be driving them. However, we recognize that this evidence is unable to identify the precise mechanism that produces a gendered socialization process during childhood, and thus, such a critical gender gap. Is it the family of origin, the school where the children go to, their friends, or the media to which they are exposed? It is very likely that all these sources of gender inequalities work in concert to prompt and nourish young men’s political interest, but not young women’s (Fox & Lawless, 2014). In fact, previous studies suggest that gender differences in political awareness are already evident from the very early childhood -



six/seven years old (Van Deth et. al, 2011) pointing to the relevance of the family of origin in the transmission of preconceived ideas about what to expect from adult women and men both in public and family life.

Our findings also fall in line with what the scarce literature has found regarding other political orientations. For instance, research focusing on cross sectional evidence of adolescents between 13 and 15 in Europe and in the US point to the existence of gender differences in political knowledge at that early age (see for instance Ferrin et. al, 2015; Wolak & McDevitt, 2011). Research on political ambition also concludes that young women (college students) are less exposed to environments that would push them to consider running for office later in life, and more likely to perceive as discouraging a competitive electoral environment (Fox & Lawless, 2014). The forces of socialization seem to create a subtle but powerful hindrance to women's engagement in the political arena. As the life cycle advances, women become more experienced, but the political system will not benefit from it because their estrangement from politics consolidates with the crystallization of the gap in self-declared political interest.

We recognize that the survey question used in the present study has some caveats. It has enabled scholars to compare levels of interest and involvement in 'politics' as an abstract concept. To date, however, studies investigating how 'politics' is interpreted by the average citizen are rare (exceptions are Campbell and Winters, 2008; Ferrín et. al, 2019b; Fitzgerald, 2013). Thus, we acknowledge that (at least part of) the gender differences in declared political interest shown here may be driven by the way in which this concept is measured in the BHPS. Nonetheless, the extent of the gender gap documented here is so large that even discounting a potential part of it due to measurement error, there might be something that is intrinsically related to what has

been called the “gendered psyche” (Lawless & Fox, 2010) that prevent many women from getting involved and interested in the political realm from adolescence.

These conclusions suggest that further work is needed in order to deepen policies promoting gender equality; even in the most gender-balanced democracies. To date, policies have focused on tackling situational sources of inequality: such as providing childcare, supporting shared parental leave, or adopting quotas, amongst others. Our evidence shows that the bulk of the gender gap originates earlier in life, during socialization. Resources need to be invested in the difficult task of influencing traditional gendered family values and finding the ways in which the exposure to gender inequality boosts women’s engagement rather than hinders it. Families are still dominant in the transmission to children of gender norms. These gender stereotypes are further encouraged by media and cultural products; even toy marketing (Roseberry & Roos, 2014). Acknowledging this, institutions need to combine efforts with schools and families to reduce gender stereotypes.

We have argued here that the case under study, the UK, can be considered an average European country regarding gender differences in political interest; however future research should replicate the analyses provided here to assess the external validity of these results in countries with different welfare regulations. An obvious comparison would be with countries presenting the highest levels of gender equality such as the Scandinavian countries. The gathering and analysis of panel-structured data from different contexts would also provide an interesting avenue for additional insights that might help us unpacking the early childhood socialization and how it differently shapes men and women expectations and ideas about the political world as well as understanding which policies can further reduce the gender gap in political interest.

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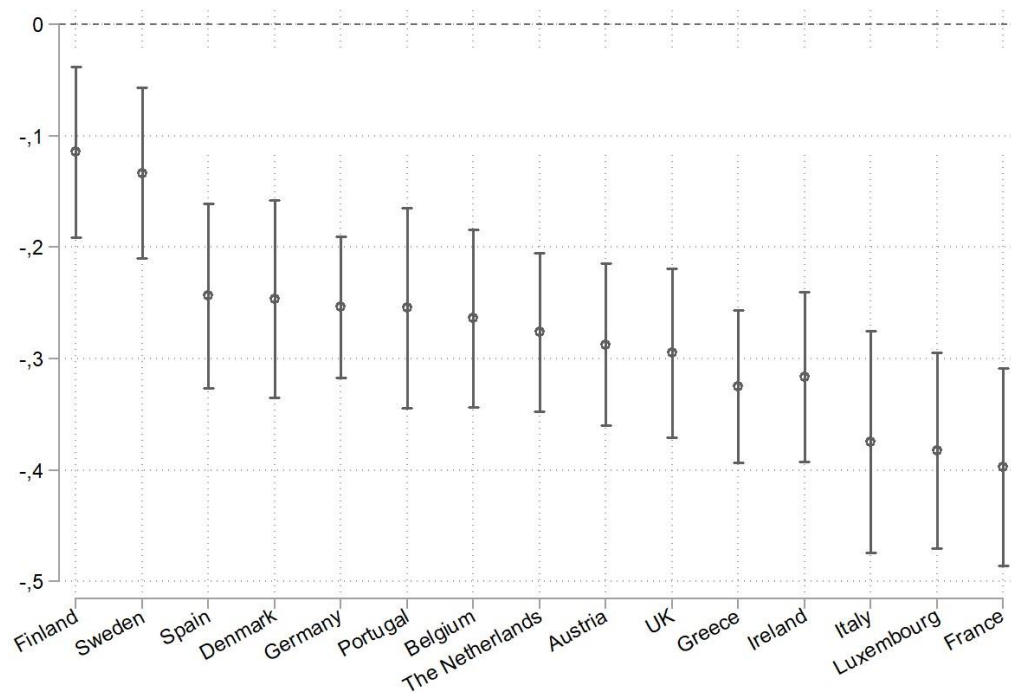
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## FIGURES

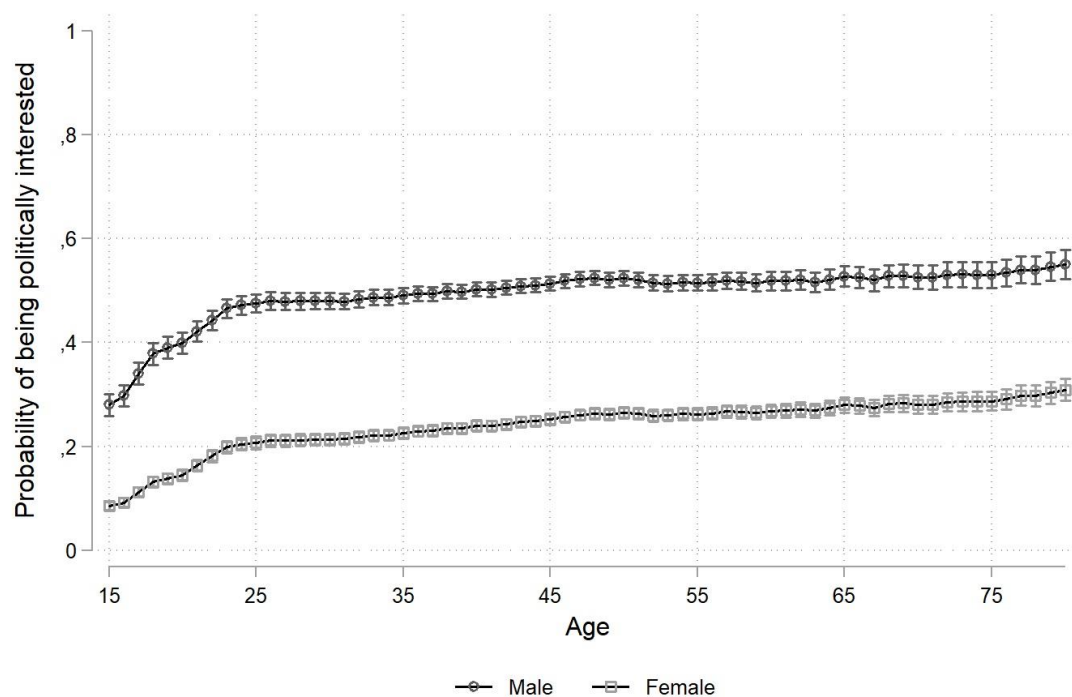
Figure 1. The size of the gender gap on average levels of declared political interest 2002. EU-15 countries



*Note:* The graph shows the differences between men and women on average levels of declared political interest with confidence intervals around each estimation point of 95%. Spikes overlapping the reference line at value = 0 indicate that differences are not statistically significant. The political interest variable takes values 1 ("not interested") to 4 ("very interested"). The scores for men and women can be found in table A1 in the annex.

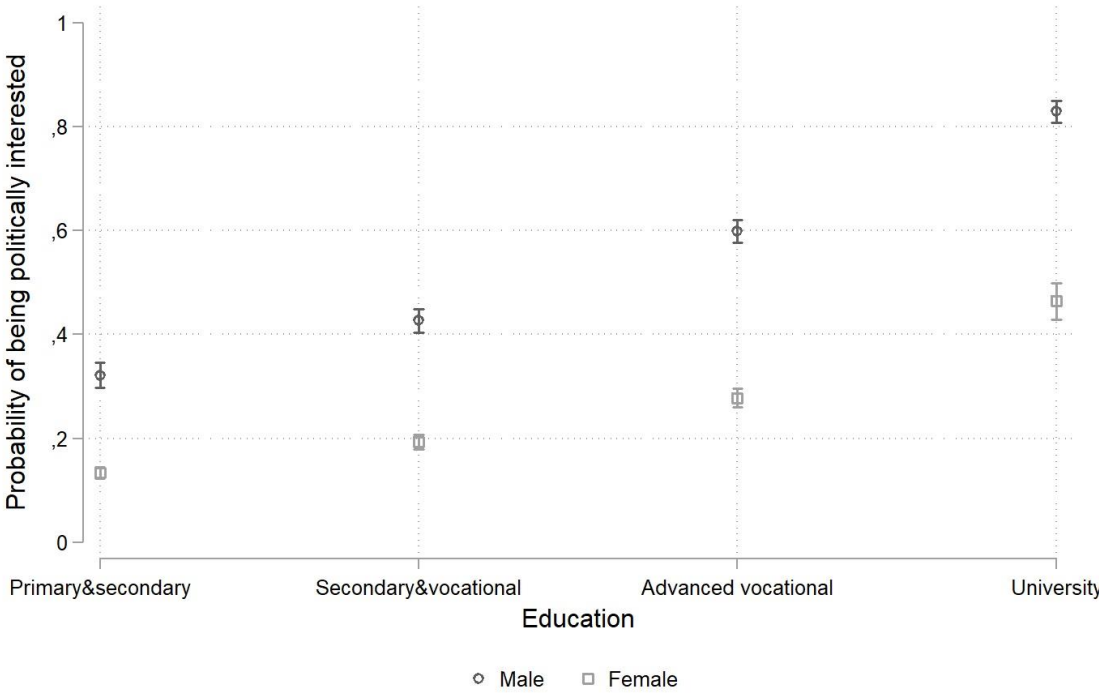
*Source:* European Social Survey, wave 1 (2002).

Figure 2. Predicted probability of men and women declaring themselves interested in politics for men and women by age 1991-2008



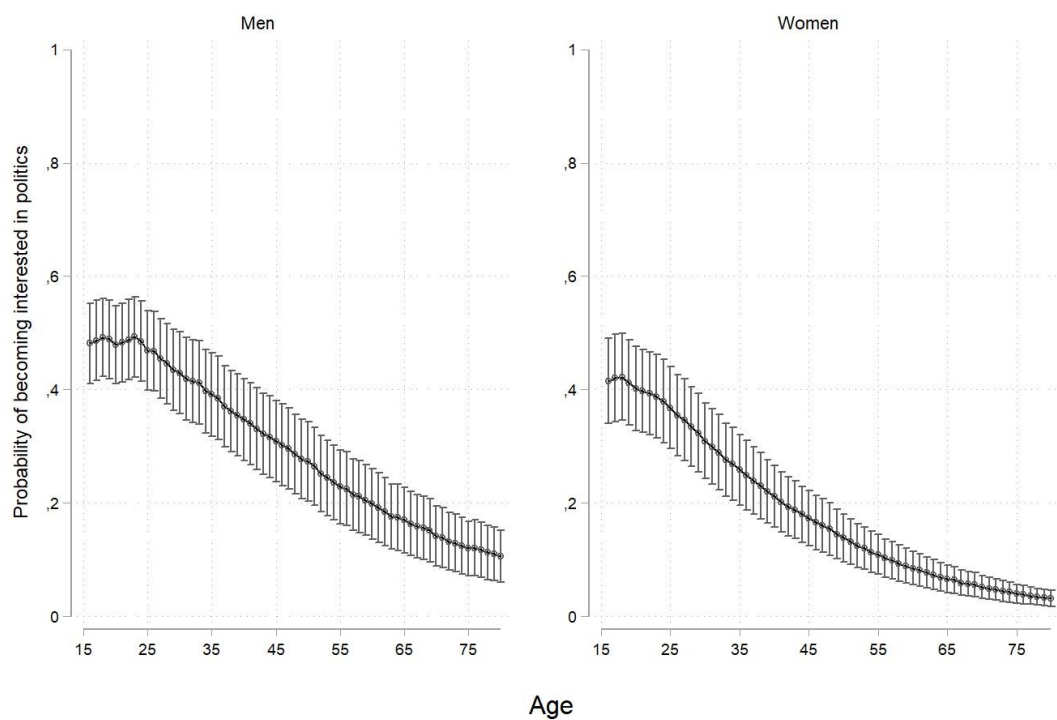
*Note:* Estimations based on Equation 2 in Table 1. *Source:* Own elaboration based on the BHPS Data.

Figure 3. Predicted probability of men and women declaring themselves interested in politics by educational attainment.1991-2008



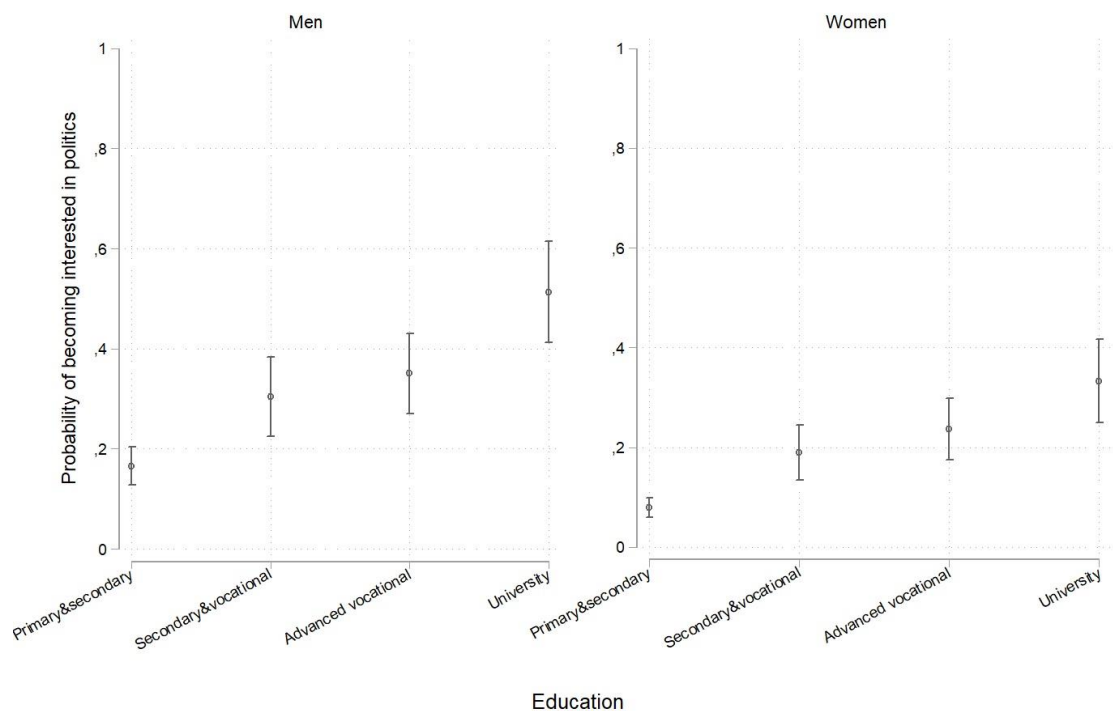
*Note:* Estimations based on Equation 3 in Table 1. *Source:* Own elaboration based on the BHPS Data

Figure 4. Predicted probability of men and women changing from declaring not being politically interested to declaring being interested by age and gender. 1991-2008



*Note:* Estimations based on Table 2 for each sex. *Source:* Own elaboration based on the BHPS Data.

Figure 5. Predicted probability of men and women changing from declaring not being politically interested to declaring being interested by education and gender. 1991-2008



*Note:* Estimations based on Table 2 for each gender. *Source:* Own elaboration based on the BHPS Data.

## TABLES

Table 1. Gender gap in declared political interest: binomial logit panel regression (random effects).

	Equation 1	Equation 2	Equation 3
Education (ref. cat.: Basic)			
Advanced secondary & basic vocational training	0.755*** (0.052)	0.762*** (0.052)	0.765*** (0.075)
Advanced vocational training	1.373*** (0.051)	1.382*** (0.051)	1.499*** (0.073)
University	2.406*** (0.066)	2.416*** (0.066)	2.728*** (0.096)
Being a woman	-1.302*** (0.043)	-1.533*** (0.095)	-1.155*** (0.077)
Age	0.023*** (0.001)	0.020*** (0.001)	0.023*** (0.001)
Woman * Age		0.005** (0.002)	
Education * Gender			
Advanced secondary & basic vocational training # Woman			-0.019 (0.101)
Advanced vocational training # Woman			-0.247* (0.099)
University # Woman			-0.605*** (0.131)
Constant	-1.969*** (0.069)	-1.853*** (0.081)	-2.036*** (0.076)
Insig2u	2.145*** (0.019)	2.143*** (0.019)	2.146*** (0.019)
sigma u	2.92	2.92	2.92
Rho	0.72	0.72	0.72
Observations	144399	144399	144399
Groups	27958	27958	27958

*Note:* Standard errors in parentheses. Empty cells are not reported

\* p<0.05. \*\* p<0.01. \*\*\* p<0.001

*Source:* Data from the BHPS.

Table 2. Gender gap in declared political interest: binomial logit panel regression (fixed effects) for men and women separately.

	Men	Women
Age	-0.026*** (0.003)	-0.039*** (0.002)
Education (ref. cat.: Basic)		
Advanced secondary & basic vocational training	0.516*** (0.160)	0.362** (0.162)
Advanced vocational training	0.724*** (0.156)	0.578*** (0.163)
University	1.340*** (0.192)	0.874*** (0.186)
Observations	40.838	46.395
Number of pid	4.852	5.268

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Empty cells are not reported

\* p<0.05. \*\* p<0.01. \*\*\* p<0.001

Source: Data from the BHPS.

## Online Appendix

Table A1. Average declared levels of political interest in Euro-15 countries. 2002.

	Men	Women	Gender gap (=women-men)
Finland	2.48	2.37	-0.11*
Sweden	2.67	2.54	-0.13*
Spain	2	1.76	-0.24*
Denmark	2.84	2.6	-0.25*
Germany	2.91	2.65	-0.25*
Portugal	2.28	2.03	-0.25*
Belgium	2.44	2.18	-0.26*
The Netherlands	2.87	2.6	-0.28*
Austria	2.81	2.52	-0.29*
UK	2.61	2.32	-0.29*
Greece	2.25	1.93	-0.32*
Ireland	2.5	2.18	-0.32*
Italy	2.33	1.95	-0.38*
Luxembourg	2.53	2.15	-0.38*
France	2.51	2.11	-0.40*

Note: The table shows the average level of declared political interest for men and women, and the size of differences between them. The asterisks show that the differences are statistically significant. The political interest variable takes values 1 ("not interested") to 4 ("very interested").

Source: European Social Survey, wave 1 (2002).

Table A2. Gender gap in declared political interest: Generalized least squares panel regression with random effects

	Baseline	Age*gender	Education*gender
Education (ref. cat.: Basic)			
Advanced secondary & basic vocational training	0.149*** (0.010)	0.149*** (0.010)	0.161*** (0.015)
Advanced vocational training	0.288*** (0.010)	0.288*** (0.010)	0.325*** (0.015)
University	0.508*** (0.013)	0.508*** (0.013)	0.602*** (0.019)
Being a woman	-0.275*** (0.008)	-0.278*** (0.019)	-0.228*** (0.015)
Age	0.005** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)	0.005*** (0.000)
Woman * Age		0.000 (0.000)	
Woman * Education			
Advanced secondary & basic vocational training * Woman			-0.022 (0.020)
Advanced vocational training * Woman			-0.069*** (0.019)
University * Woman			-0.175*** (0.026)
Constant	1.974*** (0.014)	1.975*** (0.016)	1.950*** (0.015)
sigma u	0.668	0.668	0.665
sigma e	0.533	0.533	0.534
Rho	0.611	0.611	0.608
Overall R-squared	0.11	0.11	0.11
Observations	172.238	172.238	144.399
Number of pid	28.346	28.346	27.958

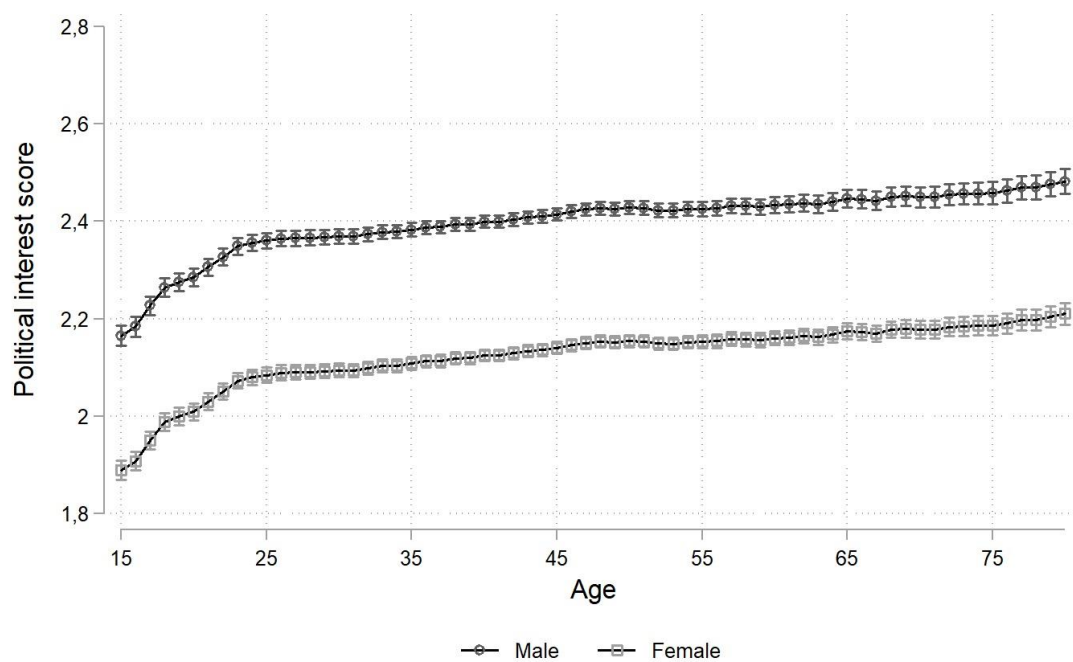
Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Empty cells are not reported

\* p<0.05. \*\* p<0.01. \*\*\* p<0.001

Source: Data from the BHPS.

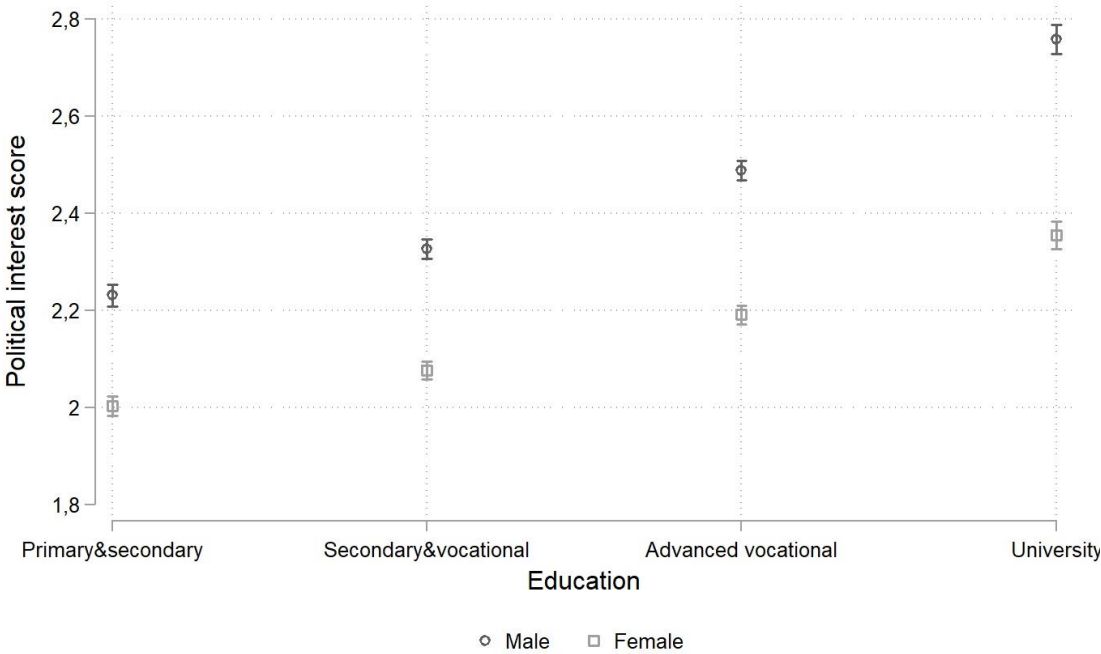


Figure A1. Predicted probability of men and women declaring themselves interested in politics for men and women by age. 1991-2008



*Note:* Estimations based on Equation with interaction term between age and gender in Table A1.  
*Source:* Own elaboration based on the BHPS Data.

Figure A2. Predicted probability of men and women declaring themselves interested in politics by educational attainment. 1991-2008



*Note:* Estimations based on Equation with interaction term between age and gender in Table A1.  
*Source:* Own elaboration based on the BHPS Data.

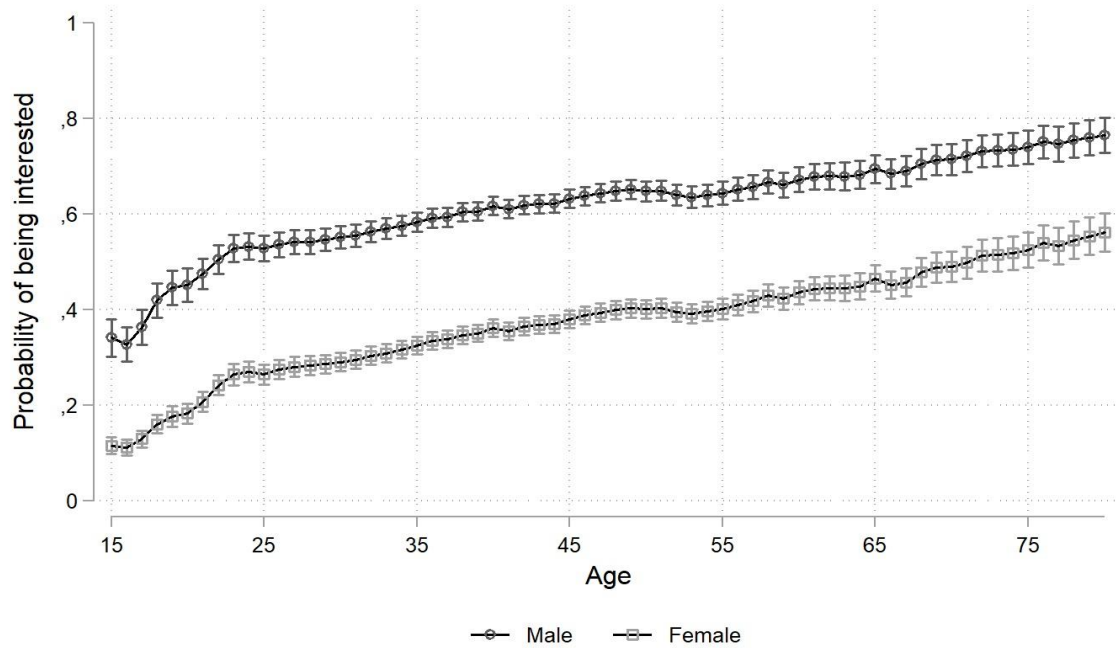
Table A3. Gender gap in declared political interest: logit panel regression with random effects. Sub-samples for 1991-1996 and 2001-2008.

	1991-1996			2001-2008		
	Baseline	Age*gender	Education*gender	Baseline	Age*gender	Education*gender
Education (ref. cat.: Basic)						
Advanced secondary & basic vocational training	1.220*** (0.082)	1.230*** (0.082)	1.050*** (0.118)	1.143*** (0.069)	1.158*** (0.069)	1.145*** (0.100)
Advanced vocational training	1.694*** (0.081)	1.703*** (0.081)	1.686*** (0.114)	2.154*** (0.071)	2.175*** (0.071)	2.264*** (0.100)
University	3.255*** (0.121)	3.264*** (0.121)	3.094*** (0.165)	3.596*** (0.088)	3.622*** (0.089)	3.821*** (0.127)
Being a woman	-1.241*** (0.067)	-1.490*** (0.163)	-1.366*** (0.114)	-1.463*** (0.052)	-2.046*** (0.129)	-1.342*** (0.101)
Age	0.043*** (0.002)	0.039*** (0.003)	0.043*** (0.002)	0.050*** (0.001)	0.044*** (0.002)	0.050*** (0.001)
Women * Age		0.006 (0.003)			0.013*** (0.003)	
Education * Gender						
Advanced secondary & basic vocational training * Women			0.317* (0.157)			-0.003 (0.133)
Advanced vocational training * Women			0.006 (0.155)			-0.214 (0.133)
University * Women			0.324 (0.235)			-0.421* (0.169)
Constant	-2.474*** (0.116)	-2.348*** (0.138)	-2.412*** (0.124)	-3.988*** (0.099)	-3.697*** (0.115)	-4.041*** (0.109)
Insig2u	2.292*** (0.029)	2.290*** (0.029)	2.291*** (0.029)	2.298*** (0.023)	2.294*** (0.023)	2.298*** (0.023)
sigma u	3.145	3.143	3.143	3.191	3.186	3.155
Rho	0.750	0.750	0.75	0.756	0.755	0.75
Observations	54819	54819	54819	89580	89580	89580
Number of groups	12963	12963	12963	22.692	22.692	22303

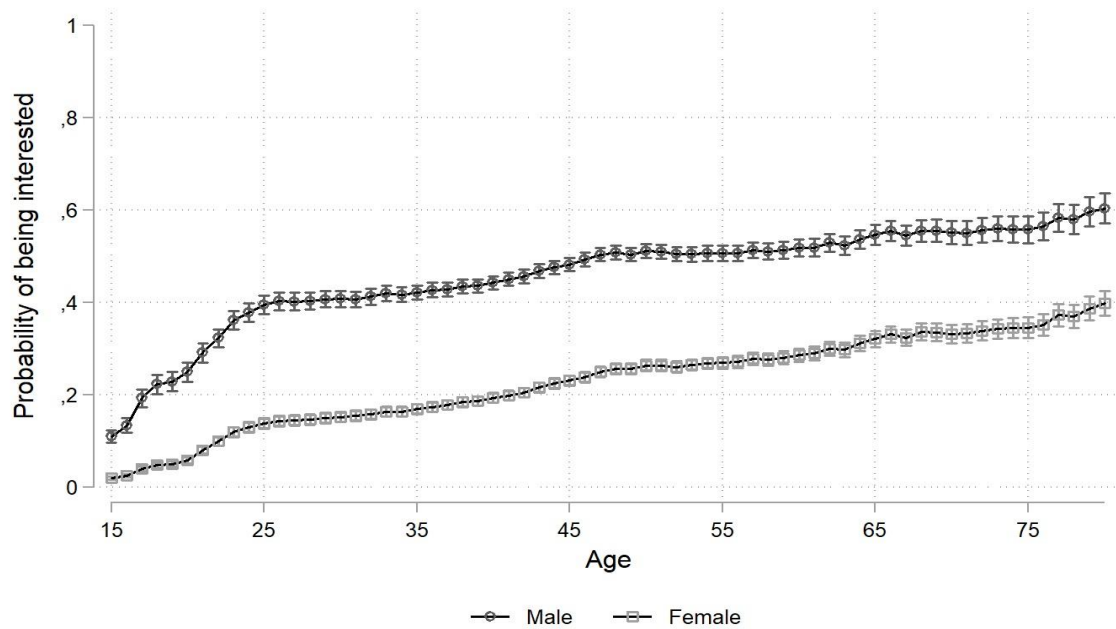
Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Empty cells are not reported. \* p<0.05. \*\* p<0.01. \*\*\* p<0.001

Source: Data from the BHPS.

Figure A3. Predicted probability of men and women declaring themselves interested in politics by age 1991-1996



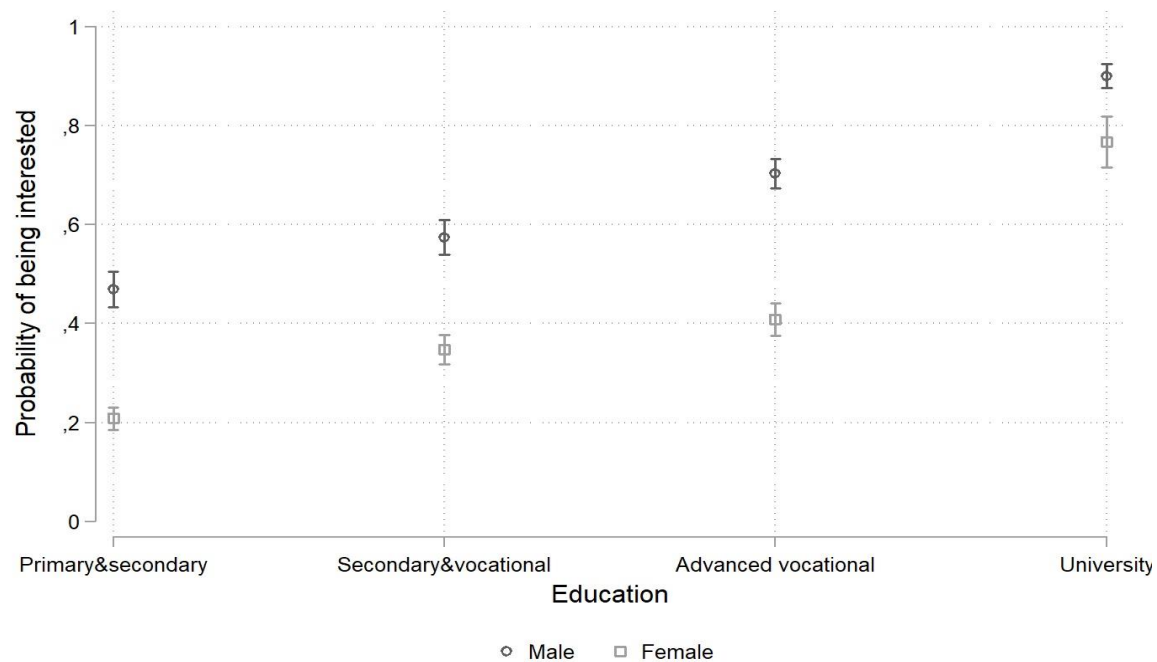
2001-2008



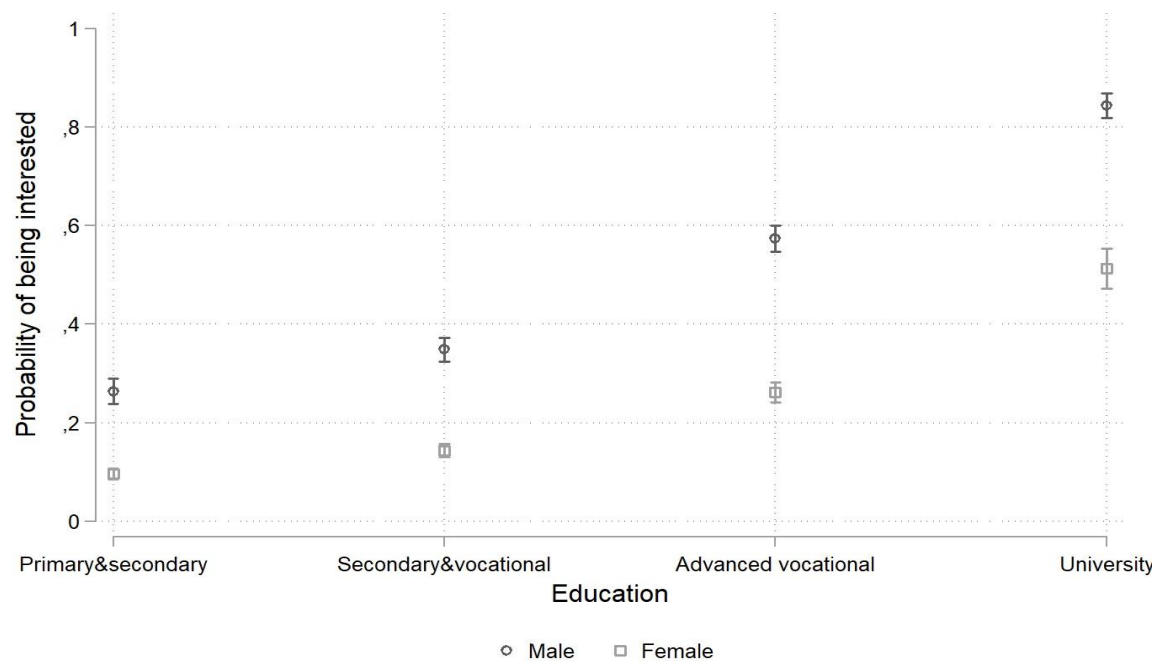
*Note:* Estimations based on Equation with interaction term between age and gender in Table A2.

*Source:* Own elaboration based on the BHPS Data.

Figure A4. Predicted probability of men and women declaring themselves interested in politics by educational attainment. 1991-1996



2001-2008



*Note:* Estimations based on Equation with interaction term between age and gender in Table A2.

*Source:* Own elaboration based on the BHPS Data

Table A4. Gender gap in political interest: logit panel regression with random effects, controlling for agreement with traditional values.

	Equation 1	Equation 2
	Family suffers if mother works full-time	Husband should earn, wife stay at home
Being a woman	-1,603*** (0,128)	-1,625*** (0,128)
Age	0,0295*** (0,00212)	0,0308*** (0,00212)
Being a woman * Age	0,00254 (0,00289)	0,00273 (0,00289)
Position regarding statement (ref. cat.: neither, nor)		
disagree	0,128*** (0,0363)	0,250*** (0,0352)
agree	0,174*** (0,0373)	0,172*** (0,0475)
Education (ref. cat.: Basic)		
Secondary & basic vocational training	0,803*** (0,0667)	0,798*** (0,0668)
Advanced vocational training	1,609*** (0,0664)	1,598*** (0,0667)
University	2,763*** (0,0829)	2,749*** (0,0834)
Constant	-2,489*** (0,109)	-2,594*** (0,110)
Insig2u	2,391***	2,389***
Constant	(0,0249)	(0,0249)
sigma e	3,305	3,302
Rho	0,769	0,768
Observations	87016	87008
Number of groups	23782	23784

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Empty cells are not reported. \* p<0.05. \*\* p<0.01. \*\*\* p<0.001

Source: Data from the BHPS.