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Gender inequality and female political participation in Great Britain^{*}

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Abstract. This paper aims to study the rationale of women’ political participation in Great Britain. In particular, we focus on the impact of family orientations about gender inequalities as people’s attitudes can often predict behavior patterns; we also consider other factors related to gender issues, e.g. employment status, job satisfaction and household structure. Specifically, by using the British Household Panel Survey, we evaluate the impact of these determinants on the transition of women from a politically active life to the abandon of it. We use panel data methodology by considering both fixed and random effect models and discriminate among them by the Hausman test. We found evidence that gender inequality-oriented women have a higher probability to abandon an active support to a political party than others; while women who declare “neutrality” in gender equality opinions tends to become more likely to be not political engaged than gender equality-oriented women.

1. Introduction

Many scholars investigated the two-side relationships between the family, considered as a private institution, and the citizen participation to the political life. An important channel of this relationship and topic of study is the influence of parents’ ideals and habits among generations. Other studies have instead been directed to the opposite direction, such as the analysis of the impact of authoritarian regimes on the family structure and internal roles. Inside this debate, it has been recently developed a stream of studies that focus on the gender inequality and political participation.

The idea is that “inequalities” between men and women in the domestic arrangements could affect the female participation in political power and their ability in affecting the social choices. More in details, there are several studies regarding the possible effects of gender inequality in stressing the female participation to the political life. On the one hand, scholars of the family issues have provided large support to the fact that men and women

^{*} This analysis has been performed while the author was attending the European Doctoral School of Demography at Institut National d’Etudes Démographiques (INED), Paris.

are not equal in the family relationships, in their power, in their access to and control over vital *common* resources (as time or money) or in the household responsibilities (see, among others, Starrels, 1994; Vogler and Pahl, 1994). On the other hand, there are extensive empirical studies confirming that women are underrepresented in the political institutions, especially in the highest positions. Some researchers also sustain that women will be underrepresented until they will be unequal at home (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Christy, 1987).

Along the above lines, our aim is to investigate the impact of gender inequalities in the family context and other related socio-economic factors on women's political participation in Great Britain, by using the Panel data methodology and the British Household Panel Survey. In particular, we are interested in the determinants, mainly related to the family life that can cause a transition of women from participating in political life to abandoning this engagement. For these purposes, the Panel data methodology appears very useful since it allows us to follow an individual at several points across time: it is thus possible to consider at the different and combined impact of several factors on the observed pattern.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the indicators that measure the gender inequality orientations and attitudes inside the family. Section 3 focuses on our dataset and the methodology adopted. Section 4 presents our main results. Section 5 concludes.

2. Measuring gender inequality in the family

The measure of gender inequality in the family is not a trivial issue. The main factors that have been individuated by the literature as indicators of family gender equality into the family structure are of three kinds.

1. Resources: control over time.
2. Attitudes and psychological predispositions: beliefs about gender equality.
3. Civic skills: employment.

More in details, the researches that stress the relevance of resources point out a disproportional contribution of females to the household chores and the childcare as the

main reason that compromises women's ability to be active in politics (Okin, 1989). In other words, this theory stresses that the lack of available time, due to the gender inequality in domestic arrangements, keeps most women out of any of the processes of decision making (Phillips, 1991). These theories are based on the SES model of participation, by which people that are well endowed with social resources are more likely to be active in politics (Bennett and Bennett 1986).

Another fundamental role is associated with the potential effects on political activity of ideology, considered as the role played by beliefs about appropriate gender roles (Burns, Lehman Schlozman, Verba, 1997). Many scholars argued that these ideas influence both men and women social behaviors and that conservative ideas on the wife's role into the family context may depress the political participation of them (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Finally, such authors consider that those who are in the workforce can augment their participatory resources in several ways: they can earn money; they have opportunities to exercise participation-enhancing communications and organizational skills; in addition, if they are supervisors, they have a chance to develop leadership capacities (Burns, Lehman Schlozman, Verba, 1999).

We will further discuss these factors in the next section by focusing on our database.

3. The dataset and methodology

3.1 Our dataset and the women' support to political parties

In order to develop our analysis, we use the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), developed by the ERSC UK Longitudinal Studies Centre and the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex. The aim of this panel is investigating the social and economic changes and their consequences both at the individual and household level in Great Britain.

The BHPS was designed as a repeated-annual survey, starting from 1991. The initial sample (wave 1) is composed by 5.000 households and around 10.000 individuals aged 16 years and more and, since the beginning, a number of additional sub-samples have been added to the survey from 1991. People are re-interviewed in each wave, for a total of 17

waves until now. Even if the overall structure of the questionnaire is invariant over the different waves, some particular questions are not contained in each annual survey and, because of this, it is necessary to pay attention during the construction of the Panel dataset to use.

For our purposes, due to the absence of some relevant variables in such waves, we do not use all the observations of BHPS. In particular, we take alternate waves, which correspond to the odd years from 1995 to 2005. By doing this, our dataset becomes a two-year panel instead of an annual one. Moreover, since we are interested in how females' politic behaviors are affected by gender inequality in the family, our sample is composed only by women who are married or who live in a couple. Thus, the initial number of the sample in 1995 is 3.045 units (women), while in the last year of observation, 2005, it is 5.146.

As response variable we choose the support (no support) of a woman to a particular political party, since we are interested to focus on high levels of political participation represented by the affiliation to national parties instead of other types of civil engagements, important as well, but that are supposed to have less influence on the decision-making process in current societies. For example, we do not deal with the affiliation to volunteering or no-profit organizations that, in the British context, are often linked to the religious dimension and do not represent a reliable proxy of political engagement (The Electoral Commission UK, 2004).

In order to measure the women' political participation we thus use the following question "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?." By analyzing the transition to support a particular party, it come out that, from 1995 to 2005, the 30% of our sample ends this support, whereas the 22% of the sample begins doing it.

Our response variable assumes value 0 in case of supporting and 1 in case of absence of political participation. As covariates we adopted the time-varying variables related to the measure of the gender inequality in the family, which has been already introduced and that are further discussed in the next subsection.

3.2 Indicators of gender inequality in the family

3.2.1 Beliefs about gender equalities

In the questionnaire, there are three kinds of available variables, which can be used to measure the opinions about the role that wives and husbands is supposed to have in the family context¹ with respect to the gender inequality in the couple.

The three variables are derived by the following question “Do you personally agree or disagree with the following affirmations: 1) A woman and her family would be happier if she goes out to work; 2) Both the husband and wife should contribute to the household income; 3) Having a full-time job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person”.

By using these variables we construct a gender equality synthetic index. In the following table we report an example to better explaining its construction.

Table 1 – Gender opinions (%).

Woman and her family are happier if she goes out to work	
Strongly agree	1.8
Agree	16.9
Neither agree or disagree	50.9
Strongly disagree	27.8
Disagree	2.6
Total	100.0

Source: British Household Panel Survey.

For each of these three variables, we codify as 1 when the answer reports “gender inequality opinion”, 2 when it reports “gender equality opinion” and 3 when they are indifferent with the topic. Thus, in the example “Woman and family are happier if she works”, the categories “strongly disagree” or “disagree” were codified as 1, “agree” or “strongly agree” with 2 and “neither agree nor disagree” as 3. After doing it for the three variables considered, we construct the synthetic index, by assuming that the respondents are

¹ Henceforth we adopt the assumption that also who lives in a couple could be considered as “husband” or “wife”.

“gender inequality oriented” when they answer to at least two of the three questions in a “gender inequality manner” or when they show “gender inequality opinion” for one of them and are indifferent in the other two. Vice versa the same computation is done to capture the individuals who are “gender equality oriented.” At the same time, who is indifferent in all the three answers or reports an equal distribution in all of them (1=equality; 2=inequality; 3=indifferent) is categorized as “indifferent.”

3.2.2 Control over time: number of kids in the household

An important proxy of the control over time of women in the household is represented by the number of children. Labor economists demonstrate that family circumstances, such as the number of children, have a strong impact on decisions about the allocation of time at home and that they figure differently in decisions made by household’s members according to their gender (Blau and Ferber, 1992). Having more children implies less free time and, therefore, less potential time to dedicate to political activities. Thus, we assume that this variable could be considered as a proxy of lack of time and rise in domestic tasks.

3.2.3 Civic skills: Job status

As we said before, we use as covariate the job status (employment/not employed), since we expect that workplace experience can augment women’ participatory resources and lead them to be more gender conscious, i.e. more likely to perceive that women have joint concerns and to consider the government relevant to those concerns (Burns, Lehman Schlozman, Verba, 1999).

As control variable we also consider the satisfaction of women at work, which could be intended as a proxy of the achieved level of job, in the meaning that job satisfaction could probably means high standards of life and skilled level achieved, with augmented abilities of leadership.

3.3 Our methodology

We adopt panel data regression models, by testing whether fixed or random estimators are better for our purposes.

Panel data methodology is mainly based on the fact that we cannot assume that the observations are independently distributed across time, thus unobserved factors may influence a given outcome in each considered wave.

Formally we have to consider a model of the following kind (Woolridge, 2006):

$$y_{it} = \beta_0 + \delta_0 d2_t + \beta_1 x_{it} + c_i + u_{it}, \quad t = 1, 2$$

where $d2_t$ is a dummy variable (0 if time = 1 and 1 if time = 2), index i indicates the cross-sectional unit and t the time period. In order to have a consistent estimator of the effect β_1 , the unobserved effect c_i , representing a variable which captures all unobserved time constant factors that affect y_{it} , has to be uncorrelated with x_{it} , as well as u_{it} . Despite of this, c_i is the most difficult component to deal with (since it represents what is unobserved) and thus, starting from these difficulties, several specific methods have been created to analyze panel data. In this analysis, we discuss and try to apply two kinds of these methods for estimating unobserved effects panel data models: the fixed effect and the random effect estimations. In both of them, we assume that u_{it} is uncorrelated with x_{it} . The main difference between the two is that while in the fixed effect estimation the unobserved effect c_i is supposed to be correlated with the explanatory variable, in the random effect estimation there are reasonable motives to assume that the unobserved effect is instead independent of x_{it} . Moreover, in the fixed effect method, it is possible to remove the unobserved effect through the application of a data transformation that allows us to estimate the correct value of the coefficient β_1 . The consequence of the adoption of a fixed-effect estimator is that no time-constant model can be introduced in the regression model.

Summarizing the issue of the choice of a fixed or a random effect estimator, although the fixed effects allow arbitrary correlation between c_i and x_{it} and, thus, it seems more convincing for estimating *ceteris paribus* effects, it is possible to choose the best model for any analysis by testing both of them with some statistical tests (Woolridge, 2006). In our analysis, we thus compare the performance of random and fixed effect estimator by using the Hausman test, which measures the correlation between c_i and x_{it} in the two cases and, so, allows us to choose: random effect estimation in the null

hypothesis H_0 ; fixed effect estimation in the no-null hypothesis H_a . In both of these two cases, estimations are consistent and efficient.

4. Our results

In this paragraph, we summarize our main results achieved by applying random effect and fixed effect estimations to study the effects of gender inequality on the transition probability for married women to depress their political participation, by ending their support to a political party.

We implement a logit regression using as dependant variable the event of ending the political support and as covariates the following dummy variables:

- *gender inequality oriented* and *indifferent* (reference category: *gender equality oriented*);
- *one kid, two kids, three or more kids* (reference category: *childless*);
- *employed* (reference category: *unemployed*);
- *not job satisfied* and *not satisfied/dissatisfied* (reference category: *job satisfied*)

The following tables present the results of the logit regression by using the random effect (table 2) and fixed effect estimations (table 3).²

Table 2 – Transition to abandon the support to a political party (random effect estimation).

Covariates	Coefficients	
Gender opinions (ref. Gender equality oriented)		
Gender inequality oriented	0.24	***
Gender neutrality oriented	0.27	***
Number of kids (ref. Childless)		
One child	0.50	***
Two children	0.69	***
Three children or more	0.92	***
Employment status (ref. Employed)		
Not employed/Inactive	0.00	n.s
Job satisfaction (ref. Satisfied)		
Not satisfied	0.64	***
Not satisfied/dissatisfied	0.58	***
_Cons	-0.43	***
<i>/Insig2u</i>	1.63	0.04
<i>Sigma_u</i>	2.26	0.04
<i>Rho</i>	0.61	0.01

Legend: *** p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

² Since we do not introduce time-constant variables, it is not necessary dropping out any variable in the fixed-effect estimation.

Table 3 – Transition to abandon the support to a political party (fixed effect estimation).

Covariates	Coefficients	
Gender opinions (ref. Gender equality oriented)		
Gender inequality oriented	0.20	***
Gender neutrality oriented	0.16	**
Number of kids (ref. Childless)		
One child	-0.02	n.s
Two children	0.11	n.s
Three children or more	0.11	n.s
Employment status (ref. Employed)		
Not employed/Inactive	-0.20	**
Job satisfaction (ref. Satisfied)		
Not satisfied	0.44	***
Not satisfied/dissatisfied	0.36	***

Legend: *** p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

By looking at the signs of the estimated coefficients, the results are quite similar on the qualitative point of view and confirm our expectations about the correlations. However, the significance of covariates changes by adopting different methods: in the random effect estimation, the employment status is statistically insignificant, whereas, in the fixed estimation model, the same occurs concerning the number of children in the household.

As mentioned above, to test the consistency and efficiency of these estimations, we computed the Hausman test, which is reported in the following table.

Table 4 – Transition to abandon the support to a political party. Hausman test.

Covariates	Coefficients		(b-B) Difference	sqrt
	(b) Fixed	(B) Random		
Gender opinions (ref. Gender equality oriented)				
Gender inequality oriented	0.20	0.24	-0.04	0.03
Gender neutrality oriented	0.16	0.27	-0.11	0.03
Number of kids (ref. Childless)				
One child	-0.02	0.50	-0.52	0.05
Two children	0.11	0.69	-0.58	0.07
Three children or more	0.11	0.92	-0.81	0.10
Employment status (ref. Employed)				
Not employed/Inactive	-0.20	0.01	-0.21	0.04
Job satisfaction (ref. Satisfied)				
Not satisfied	0.44	0.64	-0.20	0.03
Not satisfied/dissatisfied	0.36	0.58	-0.22	0.05
chi2		184.23		
Prob>chi2		0.000		

By considering the value of χ^2 , we can reject the null hypothesis and adopt the fixed effect model estimations, which are both consistent and efficient under this hypothesis.

As said, the results of the fixed effect estimations are nearly what we expected. The impact of gender opinions seems to depress the women's political activity; in fact, we observe that gender inequality-oriented women have a higher risk to end their support to a political party than other ones. At the same time, also women who declare "neutrality" in gender equality opinions tend to become more likely to be not political engaged than women who are gender equality oriented.

Regarding the possible positive effect of the employed status and job satisfaction on women political support, it also seems to be confirmed. Employed women have a higher risk of remaining politically involved than the unemployed ones; people who are completely satisfied and people who do not report any particular satisfactions or dissatisfactions in her job position are more likely politically oriented, by reporting respectively higher transition probabilities with respect to the reference group.

By considering the household structure, we find no significant effects of this variable on women civil engagement. For every considered category the estimations are statistically insignificant. A possible interpretation of this result could be related to the fact that the observed transition of having one or more children is very low over time for all categories. Therefore, in the fixed effect model, this variable could be considered as nearly constant and, thus, insignificant.

4. Conclusions

This paper aimed to investigate the impact of gender inequalities in the family and of other related socio-economic factors on women's political participation in Great Britain. By using the British Household Panel Survey, we were interested in determining the main factors that cause the transition of women to stop their political activity. We use panel data methodology by considering both fixed and random effect model and discriminate among them by the Hausman test. Our main results are the followings.

Gender inequality-oriented women have a higher probability to end their support to a political party than other women. Women who declare "neutrality" in gender equality

opinions tends to become more likely to be not political engaged than women who are gender equality-oriented. The employed status and job satisfaction have a positive effect on women political support and employed women have a higher probability of remaining politically involved than the unemployed ones. By considering the household structure, we find no significant effects of household structure on women civil engagement; however this result may be explained by the sample structure.

We can conclude by indicating a possible interesting generalization of our approach. By considering also the determinants of the men political participation could be possible to have interesting comparative information that can be used to better understand the phenomenon and to design better policy oriented to support an active participation of women in the political life.

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