2011

Gender, Education and Civic Engagement

Amalia Pallares
University of Illinois at Chicago

Kenneth Fujimoto

Vanessa Guridy

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo

Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol14/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsullivan@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.
Gender, Education and Civic Engagement

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol14/iss1/11
One of our most significant findings shows that, when accounting for age, citizenship, nativity and primary language, the effect of gender on political engagement depends on education levels. That is, among respondents without a high school degree, women are less politically engaged than men. When the respondents have a high school degree, however, women tend to be more politically engaged than men. For respondents with more than a high school degree, there is no difference between women and men in terms of political engagement. (See FIGURE 1)

While this finding is consistent with studies that find a positive relationship between civic engagement and education what is distinctive in Pilsen is how education has a different relationship for each gender. For women, there is an increase from no high school to having a high school education with respect to civic engagement, whereas men do not display this increase between these two education levels. However, once they have a high school degree and beyond, women and men display a similar increase in civic engagement.

This association warrants further exploration, since we cannot fully ascertain the direction of the relationship. That is, the high school educational experience may be promoting more civic engagement of women, or women who are more civically engaged may be the ones most likely to complete a high school degree. For instance, if a high school education is what leads women in Pilsen to become more civically engaged, then completing high school could be the main factor likely to increase the civic engagement of women with no high school degree. But if those who are civically engaged are in fact more likely to seek out education, then getting women in Pilsen with no high school degree to become more civically engaged might in turn make them want to seek out an education.

In terms of our knowledge of Latinos and civic engagement, this is a novel finding because most studies of Latinos and civic engagement, with few exceptions, like Jesuit et al 2000, do not look at these specific interactions and therefore assume that the rate of increase in civic engagement is similar across gender lines (Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Hritzuk and Park 2000; Kelsner 2003)). In order to understand what might help explain this gender difference we can point to three themes on research on civic engagement: the impact of education level on civic engagement, the role of education as an institution of socialization, and gender differences in electoral participation among Latin@s.

Education levels are generally positively correlated with civic engagement for all populations, that is the more educated people are, the more likely they are to be civically engaged. This has also been found among studies that sample the Latino population specifically (Jenkins 2005; Arvizu and Garcia 1996; Bass and Casper 2009; Highton and Burris 2002; Jackson 2003; Jesuit et al 2000; Pew Hispanic Center/ Kaiser Family Foundation. 2004). Moreover, it has long been established that lower levels of education seem to have the significant effect of reproducing inequities between men and women. Looking at a sample of the general US population, Welch (1977) found that it is only among the less educated that women clearly participate less than males.

However, education may have an impact not only because it increases people’s level of knowledge and skills, but because educational institutions may be playing a key role in socializing students in ways that make them more likely to be civically engaged. In a study of Latinas and civic participation, Montoya, Hardy Fonta and Sonia Garcia (2000) find that their levels of civic
participation are tied to predictors that include financial status, civic skills, and involvement in associations, particularly schools. 

While involvement in schools has been a focus to explain civic engagement among Latina mothers, schools may also be playing a gendered socialization role in their students, socializing young women into civic participation more effectively than young men. In other words, whatever is happening at schools to socialize youth into civic participation in Pilsen appears to be working better for young women than it is for young men. In fact, as Table 1 indicates, if men do not acquire a college education, they will remain at the flat rates they had upon completing high school and hence have lower engagement rates than women.

A third related theme is whether this pattern of civic participation can be linked to an existing body of knowledge about Latinos and electoral participation. In other words, is this gender gap among Latinos with lower-levels of education related to a gender gap in voting as well? In terms of voting, it has been found that since 1980 women of all populations have consistently and proportionately voted more often than men in elections (Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) 2009). Further, among Latinos the number of female voters has exceeded the number of male voters in the last five presidential elections (FIGURE 2), a pattern that is similar to that of other minority populations (FIGURE 3), as well as whites (FIGURE 4). Likewise, in the case of Pilsen, roughly the number of voters are the same for men and women at each level of education.

Hence, we cannot draw a connection between differences in civic and electoral participation between men and women since most electoral studies alone do not find a significant gender gap between men and women.

In sum, our findings confirm Simon Rosenthal’s (1998) claim that in order to understand women’s likelihood to become civically engaged we need to move away from a focus on gender alone to a focus on the organizational context that provides leadership positions for women. But we don’t know yet what role the organizational context is playing. That is, does a particular organizational context in schools cause or instill civic engagement values or desires, or is it that those who already have civic engagement desires seek out specific types of organizational contexts? Whatever the direction of causality, our study suggests that civic engagement opportunities may be presented at a fairly young age in high school settings and that a failure to complete high school may have detrimental effects for women, not only because completion allows them to continue to college but makes them far more likely to become civically engaged in the future.

REFERENCES


Center for American Women and Politics. 2009. “Gender Differences in Voter Turnout”, Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). Eagleton Institute of Politics. New Brunswick, NJ:


Contact AMALIA PALLARES: amalia@uic.edu