

# How does gender influence women's voting behavior? An analysis of feminist policies.

**Adela Casado Pérez**

IE University, Madrid, Spain

Bachelor in Law and International Relations

E-mail: [acasado.ieu2022@student.ie.edu](mailto:acasado.ieu2022@student.ie.edu)

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## Abstract

By definition, feminism is “the set of beliefs and ideas that belong to the broad social and political movement to achieve greater equality for women,” but on more simple terms, we can consider feminism to be the radical idea that men and women are equal. The history of inequality is long, while feminism as an influential movement can only be considered to be recent. De Tocqueville pressed upon the tendency of Americans to give a legal cast to political and social controversies, and this is confirmed with issues regarding feminism. Although feminism does not belong to law alone, it has been significant “as a domain to be reformed and as an instrument of reform.” This idea of its use as an instrument of reform, which we see is becoming more popular, with the subject being included widely in political agendas, reflects the pivotal role which feminism plays when drafting policies. Examining the impact that gender has in shaping the way in which people vote in western democracies, and the way in which this is affected by feminist policies will add to this contemporary belligerency.

Keywords: Feminism, Voting Behaviour, Feminist policies, Turnout, Political affiliation, Gender.

## I. The History of Feminism

History has largely ignored women, and the role that they have played. Nonetheless, in the last decades a revived study and research on women's role in history has challenged the traditional writing of history. The growth and influence of feminism might appear to be only recent, but we must not fail to acknowledge that feminism has its roots in the earliest eras of human civilisation. Plato already wrote in the Republic that women possess “natural capacities”<sup>1</sup> equal to men. Feminism is usually divided into

three waves<sup>2</sup>, the first one dealing with suffrage and property rights, the second one focusing on equality and anti-discrimination, and the third one being a backlash to the previous waves, namely feminism in a postmodern era.

The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848<sup>3</sup> must be considered to be a milestone for feminism and can be considered to be the start of the first wave of feminism. Abolitionists like

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<sup>1</sup> Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980)

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<sup>2</sup> Chrisler, Joan C., and Maureen C. McHugh. *Waves of feminist psychology in the United States: Politics and perspectives*. (New York: Springer, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> Alison M. Parker. “The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848: A Pivotal Moment in nineteenth-century America”. *Reviews in American History*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, (2008).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott declared “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal.”<sup>4</sup>. This was very controversial but with it, feminists started demanding radical ideas such as, the right to vote, or the right of ownership. Women’s suffrage had only started at the time, but would come to dominate much of feminism for several decades.

The 19th century can be considered to be the century of women, and thus the century of feminism as expressed by Delacroix in *Liberty leading the People*<sup>5</sup>. As the fiction of the people was slowly constructed after the French revolution, women began to play a very significant role in society. The institution of the family greatly suffered from urbanization. Children were no longer considered as economic assets and consequently birth rate dramatically decreased. This demographic transition can be seen as the turning point for the beginning of women. The moral degradation that industrialisation brought with it particularly affected men, thus also enhancing the role women would come to play. Overall, the 19th century was important as it was the century of liberalism, and it must not be forgotten that feminism at the end of the day is a child of liberalism.

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<sup>4</sup> Mott, Lucretia. “A Declaration for the Rights of Women.” National Archives and Records Administration, 2019. <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2019/07/08/a-declaration-for-the-rights-of-women/>.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People, 1830, Musée du Louvre, Paris*.

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century finally came with women’s right to vote<sup>6</sup>. New Zealand was the first sovereign state to give women the right to vote in 1893. The UK granted women over 30 the right to vote in 1918. The 19th Amendment in the United States which meant that suffrage was conferred to women was passed in 1920, with the Great War proving their weight in society. This was the most important right which was secured by feminists in the early 20th century, and it meant that they could move on to achieve other rights, during the second wave of feminism.

Following the Great Depression after the crash in Wall Street in 1929, women began to enter the workplace in greater numbers. This was also a very important event for the development of feminism because, as Virginia Woolf argued, the most significant thing to achieve complete equality and independence is “a room of one’s own”<sup>7</sup>. When economic independence and education are granted, the rest follows. The Second World War meant that western societies were forced to include women in the workplace at a greater scale, and in fields that had been reserved for men. This pushed the civil rights movement forward, in which women fought for greater participation, and the new idea of equal pay. All this work was eventually reflected with the Equal Pay Act in 1963.

This second wave of feminism was seen as that of the liberation of women. It was during the long 19th century

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<sup>6</sup> Ellen DuBois, *Woman suffrage and women’s rights*. (New York: New York University Press, 1998)

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A room of Ones Own*. (San Diego etc.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957.)

that feminism became pivotal, although some cultural obstacles remained. In 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment was passed by Congress in the United States<sup>8</sup>, although it was never ratified by enough states to become law. In 1973 the landmark case of *Roe v. Wade* took place. A ruling that would guarantee women's right to have an abortion, illustrating how things changed during the 19th and early 20th century. And in a different measure, we still continue to fight for some of the prominent issues which feminists of this second wave fought for.

The third wave of feminism is that of feminism in a post-modern era, with questions arising of who benefits from feminism. Critics have stated that the feminist movement has been largely limited to white, straight educated women, failing to address the concerns of minorities. This was shown with the campaign which became especially prominent in 2017 known as the #MeToo marches, in which women advocated for full rights for women worldwide.

We can also argue that currently there has been a backlash to these ideas in the western world, with many critics questioning whether feminism has been taken too far. The way in which the movement has been used by politicians in order to fulfill their agenda has not helped, and although there are still many things left for feminism to fight for, its opposition is gaining strength. And so, it makes us question the way in which policies are being implemented.

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<sup>8</sup> Sarah A.Soule and Brayden G.King, "The Stages of the Policy Process and the Equal Rights Amendment, 1972-1982," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no.6(2006).

### ***What are feminist policies?***

We can consider feminist policies to be those which aim to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women. These may therefore include Gender Equality laws, for instance. An example of one of these laws would be the Equal Pay Act in the United States which prohibits sex-based wage discrimination between men and women who perform substantially equal work<sup>9</sup>. Parental leave policies may also be included in this realm. In relation to this economic sphere, policies that aim to reduce the gender pay gap, promote women's participation in the workforce, or address the disproportionate impact of poverty on women can also be considered to be feminist. Some countries have implemented parental leave policies that encourage both parents to take time off after the birth or adoption of a child, promoting gender equality by not assuming that women will be the primary caregivers. Many countries also have laws and policies aimed at preventing and responding to violence against women. These can include laws that criminalize domestic violence, policies that provide support and resources for survivors, and educational programs aimed at preventing violence. Policies that aim to increase women's representation in politics and other areas of public life can also be considered as feminist, such as quotas for women in government or on corporate boards.

Nonetheless these feminist policies can also be issued within most policy areas. Policies that promote equal access

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<sup>9</sup> White House, "Fact sheet: National Strategy on gender Equity and Equality," *The White House* (October 22, 2021)

to education for both genders can also be feminist. Policies that address gender biases in educational materials and teaching practices. Similarly, feminist healthcare policies include those that ensure women have access to reproductive healthcare services, or policies that address gender disparities in medical research and healthcare delivery.

A recent phenomenon shows that feminist policies not only belong to domestic law but they can also be implemented in various foreign policy areas such as diplomacy, defense and security cooperation, aid, trade, climate security, and even immigration.<sup>10</sup> In 2014, Sweden became the first country to adopt a feminist foreign policy, and they have proved to be leading by example, as more than a dozen countries have followed. The idea behind these policies is to implement a unifying political framework for the differences in policies and strategies which are implemented worldwide. It also means that the public, civil society, or the media is more capable of holding governments accountable to their commitments to advance gender equality.<sup>11</sup>

This idea of feminist foreign policies is still new and there is no unanimous agreement on how they should be developed. However, some of the pioneer nations in this matter have elaborated handbooks to specify the goals and means of feminist foreign policy. Some have gone as far as to setting advisory bodies to guide governments on the

implementation of these policies. As the UN notes “in its most ambitious expression, this movement should aspire to transform the practice of foreign policy to the greater benefit of women and girls everywhere.”<sup>12</sup>

The inclusion of feminism in political agendas may arguably have also led to its exploitation as a mean to be more appealing and thus popular. It has been recently argued that it is becoming a tool to promote certain political agendas, becoming a powerful tool for exclusion and domination. Feminism is arguably turning out to be more of a political movement, rather than a social one as it has been historically. Many in Spain for example consider feminism to be something associated with left wing parties, and their voters. This has generated resentment and discontent amongst many, women and men, who consider themselves to be leaning towards the right of the political spectrum. What’s more, such a conception also limits the scope that the movement can have as it excludes a very large part of the population from it. Left-wing parties, contrastingly, seem to be very comfortable with this idea of feminism and its direct link to the left, highly promoted in electoral campaigns, and proclaimed even in feminist marches. The left has made the banner of feminism for decades.

It must be acknowledged however, that the main advances in terms of feminist policy making have been under the rule of left-wing parties. Taking Spain as an example on this matter we can cite the 1985 abortion law, modified by the

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<sup>10</sup> United Nations, “Feminist Foreign Policies: An Introduction,” *UN Women* (2022)

<sup>11</sup> United Nations, “Feminist Foreign Policies”, 1.

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations, “Feminist Foreign Policies”, 1.

2010 deadline law<sup>13</sup> (both opposed by conservatives), or the gender violence law of 2004, one of the flagship projects of Zapatero's first legislature.<sup>14</sup> In this context, it is not surprising that the left exploits, and is benefited by, a public discussion and an electoral campaign focused on feminism. Nonetheless the morality behind this approach must be questioned. Feminist policies are undeniably positive but what about the rhetoric that comes with them?

## 2. How does gender affect Voting Behavior

### **Turnout**

Gender is usually considered to be a significant factor affecting voting behavior, shown especially with the lower turnout of women overall, and their greater support to the left in recent decades. Nonetheless, its significance as a factor, in relation to other elements such as age, geography, or social class, is decreasing.

The lower turnout can be explained by the fact that women may feel underrepresented by the current state of politics, still dominated by men, amongst other factors. Generally speaking, it is fair to say that women are underrepresented in political offices, and this underrepresentation increases in the more senior positions.

This of course may reflect an issue with the construction of legislation and policies, which portrays the role which policy plays in this matter. Although there are variations across different countries worldwide, gender inequality in political positions can be seen in every region, even in those countries which are in the higher stages of the demographic transition model. This persistent underrepresentation in political institutions may explain lower levels of engagement with the political system amongst this sector of the population.

Furthermore, lower turnouts can also be associated to a lower political interest<sup>15</sup>. Pattie, Seyd, and Whitely (2004) carried out a face-to-face survey among British respondents which shows that men tend to be more likely to be "very interested" in politics than women. The different levels of political interest have been presented as an explanation for gender differences in political engagement. This, however, must lead to a reflection on why this lack of interest or engagement. Does the existence of policies which try to breach the gaps of inequalities lead to higher engagement?

Nonetheless this trend which shows that women tend to have a lower turnout than men does have anomalies, reflected with the turnout of American Presidential election since 1980, where the "proportion of eligible female adults who voted has exceeded the proportion of

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<sup>13</sup> Alicia Latorre Cañizares, "El Aborto En España 1985-2010. Análisis Crítico de Los Datos Oficiales, Contexto Sociopolítico y Metalenguaje," *Thesis, Doxa Comunicación. Revista Interdisciplinaria De Estudios de Comunicación y Ciencias Sociales*, (2022).

<sup>14</sup> Lohitzune Zuloaga Lojo, "La Violencia De Género En La Agenda Mediática: El Caso De La Ley Integral De Violencia De Género (Lo 1/2004)" *SSRN*, (May 30, 2015).

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<sup>15</sup> Hilde Coffé, and Ignacio Lago. "Explaining Gender Differences in Turnout Using Panel Data Across Elections." *Wiley-Blackwell*, (December 23, 2019).

eligible male adults who voted”<sup>16</sup>. Maybe more than an anomaly it might reflect a change in the trend, in which the gender gap in turnout rates is decreasing, and could potentially be associated with the implementation of policies which tend to extinguish inequalities. However, it still seems difficult to consider this a fact, as we cannot really associate the change with a significant increase in the representation of women in politics, portrayed with the fact that there has still not been any female president of the United States, and only Hillary Clinton has presented a real opportunity to achieve this goal since 1980. Although it might be associated with other factors, such as a decrease in gender norms that discourage civic participation, or an increased interest in political matters due to greater involvement in the economy, or political life.

This therefore also conveys that differences in turnout are not only a result of poor policies legislating representation but also of other factors. Lower rates of participation in politics on the part of the female population can be associated with reduced access to education, although we can find this to be a problem specially in underdeveloped areas. Regulating areas such as education, arguably also falls under the competence of policies enacted by legislators. This idea is portrayed and supported by the article “Does women’s knowledge of voting rights affect their voting behavior in village elections? Evidence from a

randomized controlled trial in China.”<sup>17</sup> The article states that “only 60 percent of women actually vote, compared to nearly 90 percent of men.” The author makes a link between this disparity and others related to “education, literacy rates or traditional gender norms that might discourage civic participation.”<sup>18</sup> The study assesses how through the implementation of policies which encourage education on voting rights and responsibilities the turnout rate for the female population changed dramatically, reflecting the significance of a reduced access to education in leading to lower turnout rates for females. The article concludes that “Women’s actual voting participation increased by 10 to 15 percentage points in villages where women received voter training, but less than 3 percentage points in villages where they did not.”

The gender gap in turnout is furthermore shown to vary according to the specific context and background to an election. It has been suggested by several scholars that there is a “greater interest among women in local issues compared with men, whereas men show greater levels of political interest compared with women when national and international issues are considered”<sup>19</sup>. This can be shown by comparing differences between, state, federal, and international elections, such as EU elections. This

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<sup>16</sup> Center for American Women and Politics, (CAWP). “Gender Differences in Voter Turnout.” *Center for American Women and Politics*, 2022.

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<sup>17</sup> Xiaopeng Pang, Junxia Zeng, and Scott Rozelle, “Does Women’s Knowledge of Voting Rights Affect Their Voting Behaviour in Village Elections? Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in China.” *The China Quarterly* 213 (2013)

<sup>18</sup> Pang, Zeng and Rozelle, “Does Women’s Knowledge of Voting Rights Affect their Voting Behaviour in Village Elections?”, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Hilde and Lago, “Explaining Gender Differences in Turnout”

difference may also lead to question how differences between local and national policies trigger this divergence.

### **Political Affiliation**

Most of the literature tends to conclude that in recent times women have been voting more to the left than men, although this was not the case some decades ago. Arguably, this mostly has to do with attitudes towards the different policies proposed. Theories such as a “modern gender gap” have emerged,<sup>20</sup> which theorize about the greater number of left-wing female voters in comparison to a couple of decades ago. Several social scientists like Longchamp and Shorrocks argue that the greater support for progressive social policy, environmental policy and gender-related issues must be associated with disinterest in religious matters in Western Europe. Religious conservative values have been declining while “social liberalism has been gaining ground.”<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless other viable explanations include; change in marital status or labor market integration in western democracies, in comparison to a few decades ago. This theory has been proved right with electoral results in a series of different countries, where women have consistently voted more to the left than men since the 1980s.

Some years ago, there was a more pronounced gender gap in electoral results. During the postwar era “women’s

conservatism” was commonly noted as a persistent and well-established phenomenon, as explored by Norris<sup>22</sup>. Dealignment with this trend started to be evident in the 1980s, a pattern of realignment then became evident in some countries such as the US, and thus the Gender gap continued to be significant, although the pattern of partisanship was reversed. However, some scholars such as Shorrocks<sup>23</sup> or Skelley<sup>24</sup> have commented on how the gender gap has shrunken in recent years, thus increasing the insignificance of gender as a factor influencing voting behavior. This has been shown with the results of the 2020 presidential election in the US where 55% of women supported Biden compared with 48% of men, showing only a gender gap of 7% points<sup>25</sup>.

Nonetheless in the UK the gender gap increased again in 2019<sup>26</sup>, which diminishes the credibility of this argument, and shows inconsistencies with it, on an international level. However, although there are some anomalies like this one, it is true that to a lesser or greater extent gender gaps have decreased in the recent elections in many western

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<sup>20</sup> Claude Longchamp, “Why Women Vote More to the Left than Men.” *SWI swissinfo.ch*, (May 9, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Longchamp, “Why Women Vote More to the Left than Men.”

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<sup>22</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, “The Developmental Theory of the Gender Gap: Women’s and Men’s Voting Behavior in Global Perspective,” *International Political Science Review* 21, no. 4 (2000)

<sup>23</sup> Rosalind Shorrocks. “In What Ways Does Gender Matter for Voting Behaviour in GE2017?” *British Politics and Policy at LSE*, (2017).

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Skelley, “Why The Gender Gap May Have Shrunk In The 2020 Election,” *FiveThirtyEight*, accessed October, 2023, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-the-gender-gap-may-have-shrunk-in-the-2020-election/>.

<sup>25</sup> Skelley, “Why The Gender Gap May Have Shrunk In The 2020 Election.”

<sup>26</sup> Rosalind Shorrocks, “Gender Gaps in the 2019 General Election.” *UK in a Changing Europe* 8 (2021).

democracies, reflecting the idea of gender dealignment again. Is this a result of the implementation of more policies that push for greater equality?

### Case Studies

Empirical evidence from three specific western democracies supports previous theoretical analysis and shows how overall turnout tends to be lower for females, and how they tend to vote more to the left. This in turn reflects the significance of gender as a factor affecting voting behavior.

#### Germany

Germany as a western democracy can serve to exemplify and support the previous arguments and theoretical analysis.

To analyze Germany’s turnout the focus will be the 2013 state, 2013 federal, and 2014 European elections in Bavaria, Germany, so that the differences between the national, local and international levels of elections can also be analyzed. The Christian Social Union was the most supported in all three of them, reaching almost 50 percent in the 2013 federal elections. Bavaria uses a mixed-member proportional representational system for the election of the members of parliament. The percentage of women in the Bavarian Parliament is similar to that of the Federal Parliament.<sup>27</sup>

Turnout percentage of female and male populations across the elections:<sup>28</sup>

	Overall	State Election	Federal Election	European Election
Men	65	73	81	40
Women	59	62	73	42

Table 1: MEDW, Bavaria Panel, 2013-2014

This data reveals an overall difference in turnout in Bavaria, reflecting how women are less likely to vote than men, even in a developed European nation, where female representation is much higher than in many other places worldwide. This data also shows that both women and men tend to vote more in federal elections, showing how the issue of an election impacts voting behavior of both genders. This may imply that the greater the interest that the population has on a specific election, the more likely they are to vote, which may also help explain the gender gap in turnout.

The factor of female underrepresentation in the country can also explain this outcome. In 2021 the number of female parliamentarians in the German Bundestag (German Parliament) was only 31.4% (Gesley, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Hilde and Lago, “Explaining Gender Differences in Turnout”,

<sup>28</sup> Hilde and Lago, “Explaining Gender Differences in Turnout”,



### Switzerland and the USA

Furthermore, to support the argument previously mentioned, which showed that women were more likely to vote for left wing parties than right wing parties, we can also use the case of a high income and developed country as is Switzerland. “This was evident in the 2015 House of Representatives elections when women voted for candidates from the left-wing Social Democrats and the Greens more often than men”<sup>29</sup>. Meanwhile candidates of the right-wing Swiss People’s Party and the center-right radical party were more often elected by men.

The same argument can be backed up by results from presidential elections in the US, where women have “voted notably more Democratic than men in every presidential race since 1980”<sup>30</sup>. However, as mentioned above, the US is a good example of gender dealignment following this voting pattern, as the gender gap is decreasing significantly, reflected in the 2020 election results, where there was only a 7% gender gap difference, compared to the 13% in the previous election.

### **3. Is there a real correlation between feminist policies and female voting behavior?**

#### ***Turnout***

Overall, it is fair to conclude that the most significant finding, with which most scholars agree, is that turnout is

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<sup>29</sup> Claude Longchamp, “Why Women Vote More to the Left than Men.” *SWI swissinfo.ch*, (May 9, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Skelley, “Why The Gender Gap May Have Shrunk In The 2020 Election.”

lower for women. This raises serious concerns about the political representation of women in our current societies. The fact that such a large sector of the population feels underrepresented and does not engage as much in the political system arguably weakens the legitimacy of current governments, thus potentially also endangering democracy.

#### ***Political Affiliation***

Regarding political alignment the conclusion is that gender’s significance as a factor influencing voting behavior is decreasing, as, although it can still be concluded that more women vote for the left in western democracies, the gap is decreasing and the correlation is becoming weaker. Due to this, if we compare gender’s significance as a factor affecting voting behavior to other factors, such as age, geography, or social class, it can be concluded that it is not as significant. Decreasing gender gaps, in western democracies especially, may show indices of gender dealignment in voting patterns. Contrastingly, age voting dynamics for example are still both well known and visible.

The fact that this research is western orientated makes the conclusions and implications limited, considering that if results were taken from other nations in different stages of development, perhaps the results would have been significantly different.

#### ***Conclusion***

Taking this into account then can it be said that there is a real correlation between feminist policies and female voting behavior?

Feminist policies have been presented as a relatively new phenomenon, which aims to integrate gender equality into various aspects of international relations. Its inclusion in political agendas has increased, but has also become a contentious tool, with accusations of being exploited for political gain. Gender differences in political interest and engagement persist, with women often showing lower levels of political interest compared to men, even if the implementation of policies promoting education on voting rights has been shown to positively impact female voter turnout. It is also true that the gender gap in political affiliation has decreased in some western democracies, indicating potential gender dealignment in voting patterns.

The analysis suggests that while feminist policies address gender inequalities, their direct correlation with female voting behavior is complex. Turnout differences and political affiliation are influenced by a combination of factors, including representation, education, and changing societal norms. Nonetheless, the decreasing gender gap in recent elections may indicate a shift in voting patterns, possibly influenced by evolving feminist policies. Feminist policies can undoubtedly influence many aspects, including education, and change societal norms, which they have done, and it is thus fair to attribute part of the success of the change in voting patterns to the work of these policies.

#### **4. Recommendations**

Addressing the gender gap in political participation and voting behavior involves implementing effective policies that promote gender equality and encourage women's engagement in the political process. Thus my main recommendation in order to make policies more efficient in decreasing the gender gap would be to issue those which promote a more gender-inclusive education. If educational policies that challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in curricula are pursued, then it is likely that children will embed those ideas in their day to day, which will later be reflected in their voting behavior. Furthermore I would encourage programs that teach civic education and political participation to both girls and boys, fostering an early understanding of democratic processes.

Moreover, I believe that policies which increase representation are key in reducing the gender gap. Affirmative action policies may be needed to ensure increased representation of women in political offices, while parties should be encouraged by policy to actively recruit and support female candidates, especially in leadership positions. For this to work we must also introduce policies that address socio-economic barriers preventing women from entering politics, such as lack of financial resources or access to networks. This goes in line with providing financial support, mentoring programs, and training initiatives for aspiring female politicians.

As analyzed, feminist policies do have somewhat of an influence in decreasing this gender gap and thus I would push for policies that foster an inclusive political culture. These include those supporting work-life balance, such as flexible working hours and parental leave, to alleviate challenges faced by women in balancing family and responsibilities with political engagement.

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