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Gender Gap in Voting: Evidence from Actual Ballots

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Monika Köppl–Turyna

Abstract

– This short article looks at the development of an electoral gender gap over time, using, for the first time, actual ballot data collected in the Austrian state of Vienna. Vienna recorded female and male ballots separately in the years from 1954 to 1991. Firstly, using this unique design, we conclude that the traditional gender gap (males more left-leaning) existed up to 1969 and then changed into the modern gender gap (females more left-leaning), from that date. These results confirm the considerable literature based on survey data. Secondly, we can confirm surveybased findings that male voters support more extreme positions than female voters. Thirdly, and contrary to expectations, we do not observe large systematic differences in turnout.

Keywords

– electoral gender gap, ballots, Vienna, turnover

Gender Gap in Voting: Evidence from Actual Ballots

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Abstract

This short article looks at the development of an electoral gender gap over time, using, for the first time, actual ballot data collected in the Austrian state of Vienna. Vienna recorded female and male ballots separately in the years from 1954 to 1991. Firstly, using this unique design, we conclude that the traditional gender gap (males more left-leaning) existed up to 1969 and then changed into the modern gender gap (females more left-leaning), from that date. These results confirm the considerable literature based on survey data. Secondly, we can confirm survey-based findings that male voters support more extreme positions than female voters. Thirdly, and contrary to expectations, we do not observe large systematic differences in turnout.

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JEL Classification: D72

1. Introduction

That women vote differently is a well-researched phenomenon. Most literature points to two phases of "electoral gender gap" in Western democracies, in recent decades. During the 1950s and 1960s, females tended to vote more conservatively than males (Rokkan et al., 1967; Duverger, 1955; Randall, 1987) - known as the "traditional gender gap". This was predominantly explained by women's more pronounced religiosity and their lower labor-market participation. However, in recent decades the situation has become less clear. Giger (2009) provides an overview of the literature and concludes that it shows an inconsistent picture: some studies conclude that the gender gap has faded away (De Vaus and McAllister, 1989; Jelen et al., 1994), while other studies (Listhaug, 1985; Rusciano, 1992; Togeby, 1994; Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2004) indicate that women have moved to the left - the modern gender gap. Box-Steffensmeier et al. (2004) reports, that for the case of the US the gap has grown larger over time. Others have found no clear trends at all (Norris, 1996; Oskarson, 1995; Walker, 1994). Reasons for the electoral gap are manifold and well researched (see, e.g., Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014) and include individual, social and macro-level factors.

All the cited works are based on survey data, driven by the obvious fact that, in most democracies, the actual ballots are collected anonymously. However, survey data do not necessarily

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reflect actual voting behavior. Equally well researched are the methodological issues in survey design, which make surveys only imperfect predictors of actual voting behavior. In particular, the response validity for political preferences and turnout is a major problem (see, e.g., Karp and Brockington, 2005), since survey respondents do not express socially undesirable opinions. For instance, a voter might be unwilling to report extreme voting preferences (typically more frequently supported by males, as reported e.g. by Givens (2004)), in which case the electoral gender gap would be underestimated.

In this letter, we present evidence of the development of the electoral gender gap using a unique data set of actual ballots. For reasons briefly described in the next section, the Austrian state of Vienna reported the actual voting behavior of males and females separately between the years 1954 and 1991, which conveniently coincides with major changes in the electoral choices of women. Moreover, starting from the 1950s, we were able to look at the electoral outcomes during the time before the large-scale repeated surveys such as the European Values Study were initiated, as well as changes over time that are not otherwise available over such a long time span. Using these unique data, we will look at whether the results regarding the electoral gender gap and related topics found in the survey-based literature can be confirmed by the actual ballots.

2. Institutional and Political Background

Universal male suffrage in Austria was introduced in 1907, within the so-called Beck's reform. All males above the age of 24 (passive suffrage above 30) who had held Austrian citizenship for longer than three years and who had been living in Austria for at least a year, were eligible. However, municipal suffrage was introduced only later, e.g., only in the year 1918 for the Viennese City Council. Female suffrage was introduced in 1918, except for prostitutes, who were not allowed to vote until 1923. With the beginning of female suffrage, different-colored ballots were used for males and females, as the governing bodies wanted to "observe" the voting behavior of females. Interestingly, the latter idea came from the Social Democratic Party, which, despite supporting female suffrage, was obviously worried about its consequences (Bader-Zaar, 2002). This procedure was subsequently used at the national level for elections up to 1930. At the local level, different ballots were still used after World War II, for instance in Vienna for elections to the municipal council between 1954 and 1991 (except in 1983, when the election was combined with the national-level election).

Both major parties, i.e., the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, feared the consequences of female franchise. In the opinion of conservatives, women were radicals at heart and

would align themselves with the Social Democrats. According to the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party, women stood under whip of the clergy and would therefore favor the Christian Socialists (Bader-Zaar, 1996). This fear was the reason for the introduction of electoral "control" of female ballots, up to the middle and end of the 20th century, allowing us to consider our research question.

3. Empirical Investigation

3.1. Data

The data encompass the electoral behavior of males and females in 23 districts of Vienna in the years 1954, 1959, 1964, 1969, 1973, 1978, 1987 and 1991, summing up 184 data points over eight periods. These data have been collected by the author from the official protocols of the electoral commission of the state of Vienna (*"Magistratsabteilung 62, Wahlen und Rechtsangelgenheiten"*). In each period we can observe the turnout as well as the votes for the following parties:

- SPÖ - the Social Democratic Party of Austria,
- ÖVP - Austrian People's Party (Christian Democrats)
- KPÖ - Communist Party of Austria
- FPÖ - Freedom Party of Austria (formerly a national liberal party and as from the 1980s, a right-wing populist party)
- Grüne - the Green Party (starting in 1987)

4. Results

First, we look at the descriptive statistics for each election in the sample. Table 1 presents averages of male and female support for each party across the districts.

Some patterns emerge. In the first three elections, votes for the Social Democratic Party were more or less equal for the two genders. The difference in favor of left-wing parties stemmed from higher male support for the KPÖ. On the other hand, consistently with traditional explanations of the gap linked to religiosity, females showed higher support for the Christian Democrats throughout the whole period. Male support for conservatives in the second half of the analyzed period comes predominantly from their ballot for the Freedom Party of Austria. In fact, FPÖ had always had higher support among males, and the difference increased towards the end of the analyzed period - consistently with the "radical right gender gap" (Givens, 2004) and growing salience of

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Males					
	SPÖ	ÖVP	KPÖ	FPÖ	GRÜN
1954	50.60	32.64	9.50	7.24	.
1959	51.76	30.84	6.24	11.17	.
1964	50.66	34.12	6.25	7.80	.
1969	51.96	27.53	3.23	9.95	.
1973	54.33	31.42	3.02	10.38	.
1978	50.18	37.20	2.26	9.16	.
1987	47.43	31.19	2.19	12.64	5.56
1991	40.24	18.35	0.71	27.15	11.56
Total	49.64	30.41	4.17	11.94	8.56
Females					
	SPÖ	ÖVP	KPÖ	FPÖ	GRÜN
1954	50.23	37.62	6.75	5.38	.
1959	51.84	37.44	3.94	6.79	.
1964	52.52	38.72	3.48	4.69	.
1969	54.19	33.16	2.14	6.60	.
1973	57.32	33.84	1.49	6.96	.
1978	54.38	38.30	1.16	5.41	.
1987	52.43	33.00	1.22	8.11	4.45
1991	47.06	22.39	0.47	18.49	9.39
Total	52.49	34.31	2.58	7.80	6.92

the immigration issue for the FPÖ starting with the rise of Jörg Haider to power in 1986. Perhaps surprisingly, the Greens have higher support among males, but since there were only two observed periods, one should draw conclusions carefully.

Our main result concerns the actual electoral gap. Figure 1 shows the differences in the voting behavior of females and males over time, summarized over the whole state. In each case, we classify the SPÖ, KPÖ and Grüne parties as left-wing, and the remaining ÖVP and FPÖ parties as right-wing. A positive number means that support among males is higher.

As can be seen from Figure 1, until the election of 1969, males were more supportive of the left-wing parties than females. The difference was actually highest for the first observation in 1954, at almost four percentage points. Starting from the election in 1973, the pattern changed: females started voting for left-wing parties more than males. The discrepancy constantly increased over time and reached more than four percentage points in 1991.

Instead of looking at the whole state, we can also use the disaggregated information for each district and calculate confidence intervals for the gap prediction. The predictions for the left-wing parties are presented in Table 2.

The predictions show a difference of about 3.11 percentage points in favor of male support for left-wing parties in 1954, with a prediction that is strongly significantly different from zero. In

Figure 1: The electoral gender gap over time

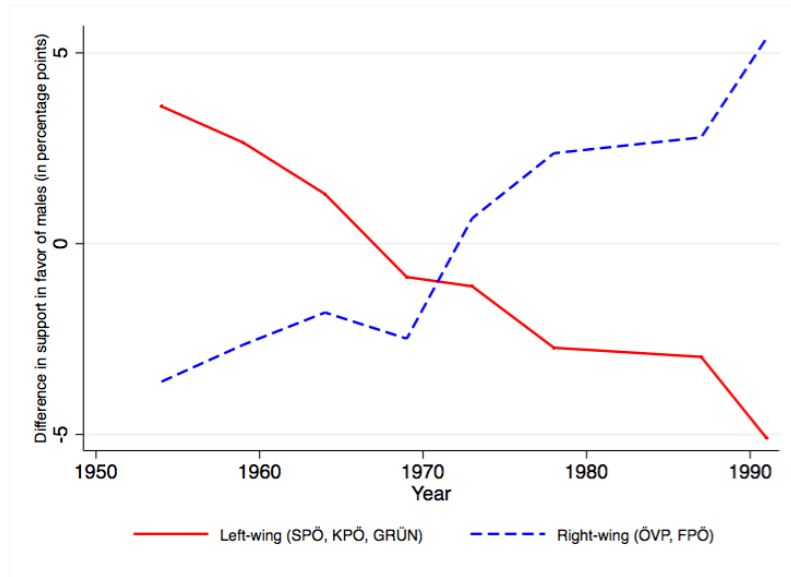


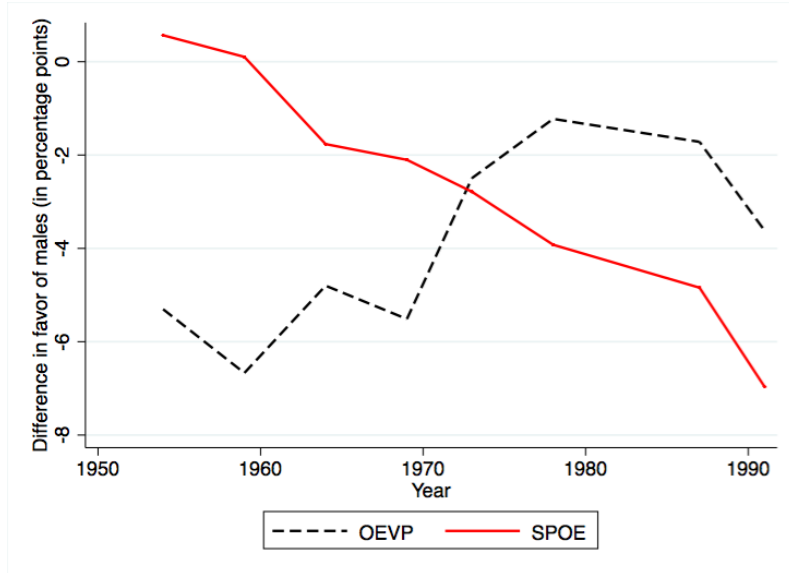
Table 2: The electoral gap (left-wing parties) over time –confidence intervals

Year	Mean	95% Interval
1954	3.11	2.78 3.42
1959	2.21	1.94 2.49
1964	0.92	0.66 1.17
1969	-1.14	-1.51 -0.77
1973	-1.46	-1.76 -1.16
1978	-3.10	-3.44 -2.76
1987	-2.91	-3.60 -2.22
1991	-4.41	-5.53 -3.28

1991, the mean was at 4.41 percentage points in favor of female support for the left-wing parties.

For the two main political parties - the SPÖ and the ÖVP - the patterns are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The electoral gender gap for the two main political parties over time



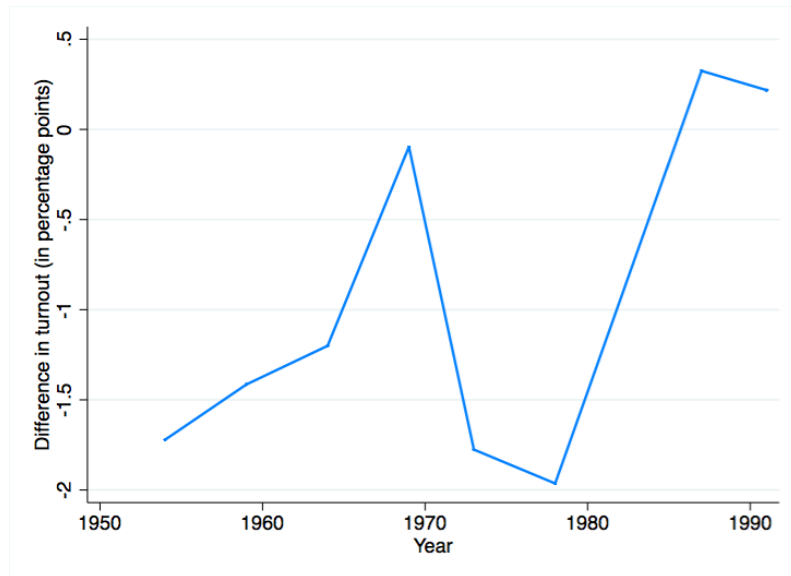
A similar pattern can be observed if we consider only the two main parties. In this case however, even for the first observation in the time series, females were more likely than males to vote for each of the two major parties. In other words, as observed above, the other two parties, i.e., FPÖ and KPÖ, have, over time, always collected more votes from males, which is consistent with general findings based on survey data that male voters tend to support more extreme positions.

On the other hand, and contrary to expectations from the literature, the differences in turnout rates are not very large. Figure 3 shows the electoral gap in turnout over time. The highest difference of almost two percentage points was observed in 1979, and since then it has decreased to virtually zero.

5. Conclusions

We conclude, using unique actual voting data from the Austrian state of Vienna, that the traditional electoral gender gap (males more left-leaning than females) existed until 1969 and was then replaced by a modern gender gap (females more left-leaning than males). These results confirm the considerable literature based on survey data. Moreover, we were able to look at other researched phenomena concerning differences in electoral choices of males and females. We confirm

Figure 3: The electoral gender gap in turnout over time



that male voters tend to support more extreme positions. On the other hand, we find only a very small difference in turnout between males and females.

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