

## **Gender Differences in Political and Civic Engagement among Young People**

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## Abstract

The explosion of interest in the political and civic engagement of young people has brought increasing attention to the question of gender differences in youth engagement. One reason is that the study of young people may provide particular leverage on a common explanation for gender differences observed among adults, specifically that greater rates of participation among men—when present—arise from their advantage in the cognitive and material resources that promote political activity and that access to politically relevant resources are more equally distributed among younger citizens so that there is more gender uniformity than gender difference among the young. This paper uses data from nationwide surveys of 18 to 24 year olds in 2006 and 2007 to examine the roots of gender differences in political activities and in community/nonprofit activities. After examining basic patterns of difference, it develops a multivariate model and applies it separately to young men and young women. The results of this analysis are then used as the point of departure for a preliminary analysis of the differential effects that male and female parents have on their children. Overall, we find evidence that having well-educated parents who are interested in politics affects women more than men. Talking to parents about politics seems to increase electoral engagement for young women more than for young men; but it also seems to increase community and nonprofit engagement for young men more than for young women.

## **Introduction**

The explosion of interest in the political and civic engagement of young people has brought increasing attention to the extent of gender differences in youth engagement. One reason is that the study of young people may provide particular leverage on a common explanation for gender differences that are observed among adults, specifically that greater rates of participation among men—when present—arise from their advantage in the cognitive and material resources that promote political activity. Among older American men, greater access to education and employment conferred a relative advantage in the cognitive skills, time, and financial resources that are associated with active political participation. In contrast, younger women and men have more equal access to education, and they are not yet fully established in family life and the labor force. We might therefore hypothesize that access to politically relevant resources are more equally distributed among younger citizens than is the case among older cohorts, and this “leveling” of resources relative to older citizens might yield more gender uniformity than gender difference among the young.

As we will see, the few studies that have focused on this question yield a negative, if nuanced, answer: even among young people, there are gender differences in political interest and knowledge as well as in some forms of political and community engagement. Of course, this suggests that whatever differences we observe in older cohorts have roots that antedate the distribution of cognitive and material resources among adults. Young men and women, who are approximately equal in such resources, still reveal different choices. We should emphasize, however, that both the presence and magnitude of these differences and the explanations for *why* they exist are questions that are far from fully explored. The number of multivariate studies of youth engagement is small, so that our confidence in the robustness of findings must remain

tentative. Gender differences may be present at quite a young age, but far more study is required before we can conclusively say what types of engagement produce the largest differences, let alone why.

In this paper, we deploy two national surveys of young people to provide additional evidence on two sets of *questions*.

*First*, are there significant gender differences in levels of political knowledge and in a variety of types of political and civic engagement? If present, how do these differences compare to those known to characterize the population at large? *Second*, we explore the correlates of knowledge and political and community engagement among young men and women. We investigate the variables that are commonly employed in studies of engagement more generally, but we pay particular attention to the influence of parental influences.

In the following section, we briefly review existing studies of gender difference in political and community engagement among the population at large and compare these findings to the (fewer) existing studies of gender difference in youth engagement. In a subsequent section, we describe two surveys designed to measure the political and community participation of young people, followed by a description of the magnitude of gender differences that emerge on the major dependent variables, which include two summary indices of political engagement and community/nonprofit engagement. This is followed by our efforts to assess, using regression models, whether young men and young women are differently influenced by parental and knowledge variables. We conclude with some thoughts about what the analysis says about gender differences, along with a brief discussion of limitations on this analysis and some suggestions for future research.

## **Evidence of Gender Difference among the Young and Old: A Review**

The signal work of Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) and related analysis by Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997) and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) have demonstrated that gender differences in political participation in the population at large are ubiquitous, if not always substantial. Among their more important findings are the fact that men score significantly higher on measures of interest in politics, knowledge of politics, consumption of news media, and feelings of political efficacy (2001, 102). Not surprisingly, therefore, men are more likely to engage in a number of overtly political activities: to make a campaign contribution, contact a public official, or affiliate with a political organization (2001, 65). Women, however, are more likely to affiliate with organizations dealing with senior citizens, youth affairs, and education (2001, 78). Controlling for education shows that education is a more important determinant of political activity than gender (the more educated of both genders are more active), but it is noteworthy that gender differences remain even when controlling for education (2001, 95).<sup>1</sup> In summary, although Burns, Schlozman, and Verba are at pains to emphasize the complicated nature of the paths to political participation, it is clear that gender is one of the more important contours that shape those paths.

The same can be said of Dow's sophisticated study of the sources of gender differences in levels of political knowledge (2009). Dow distinguishes between the impact of a personal characteristic (such as education) and the potentially different "return" that two people—let us say a man and a woman—derive from the same quantity of that characteristic. He finds that men and women do not derive the same amount of "benefit" for equal units of education, "with men receiving significantly larger returns to political knowledge than women" (117). Following

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<sup>1</sup> Welch (1977) argues that once "situational" (family and life characteristics) and "structural" (education, income, socio-economic status) differences between men and women are controlled, no gender difference in political participation remains.

Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (1997, 1070) and perhaps Kenski and Jamieson (2000), he suggests that men acquire more knowledge about politics because they want to: “women and men do appear to have different tastes for politics” (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) and related analysis by Verba, Burns, and Schlozman (1997) and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), 132). Nonetheless, Dow acknowledges that we do not know *why* this difference in taste exists (132). Moreover, as we discuss later, Dow does not relate differences in political knowledge to political behavior. Do men and women receive the same level of “benefit” in terms of political engagement from each unit of political knowledge, or does political knowledge affect political engagement differently for men and women?

And what of the political knowledge and behavior of young people specifically? Some scholars have speculated that gender differences could be less evident among younger cohorts of citizens, for two reasons: First, in their panel study of the high school class of 1965 (restudied in 1973), Niemi and Jennings (1981) hypothesized that any gender differences present in the earlier wave might attenuate over time as the women’s movement and the increasing norm of gender equality exerted their influence. Second, quite apart from gender norms, one might hypothesize that the variables often found to underlie gender differences in political engagement should be less important for the young. Of course, higher education is a strong correlate of political participation, and access to higher education today is more gender equal than at any time in the nation’s history (Jenkins 2005). Moreover, differences in material resources such as time and money (and the employment that affects both) are presumably more homogeneously distributed among the younger generation, who are less likely to be married and employed. In summary, for reasons of both social change (increasing norms of gender equality) and material circumstance, one might expect gender differences among younger cohorts to be more muted than among their

elders.

While accepting these possibilities, Jenkins in 2005 expressed some ambivalence:

“Although it may seem reasonable to expect that egalitarian trends in the education and socialization of today’s youth should mitigate the importance of gender on citizen engagement, it is nonetheless a bit premature to assume the effects of sexism, stereotypes, and patriarchy have been vanquished.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, Jenkins suggests an explanation for the differing “taste for politics” that may characterize women and men of all ages:

Politics is about power, authority, and the allocation of scarce resources. It is often rife with conflict and there are often clearly understood “winners” and “losers.” Dialogue and consensus are clearly not the norm when cable and TV news present information about the political process. The screaming matches of political commentary shows simply serve to reinforce the stereotype of politics being about dominance and control. Rather than plunging into the “who gets what world of politics,” young women—we are told—are more likely to spend their time focusing on more immediate, personal, and consensual concerns (Jenkins 2005, 3).

As it turns out, Jenkins’ skepticism was well-placed, as most studies of youth political participation have demonstrated that gender differences are present among the young, although—as is true of all age cohorts—they vary in magnitude. The findings of the Jennings and Niemi panel study are instructive: between 1965 and 1973, the gap between young men and women *increased* rather than decreased on measures of political interest and involvement (interest in public affairs and consumption of news media), political efficacy and knowledge, as well as actual political participation. After considerable analysis, Jennings and Niemi trace this result to the impact of motherhood; young women who had children after high school graduation were significantly lower on all measures of knowledge, efficacy, and participation (1981, 298), a

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<sup>2</sup> Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001, 94-95) had themselves expressed doubt that the passage of time might yield a reduction of gender differences: “This pattern...showing that the gender gap has not changed appreciably over the past quarter century, suggests that gender parity in political participation is not simply a matter of time and patience. Waiting for recent, post-feminist generations to come of age will not automatically close the gap in political activity.”

finding that is true of adult women as well (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001, 96-97). Jennings and Niemi conclude that to the extent that young mothers adopt “traditional” gender roles, the effect is likely to be the reinforcement of gender differences in political participation, regardless of changing social norms: “Since changes in traditional family roles are typically brought about rather slowly, we foresee declining but still existing sex differences for at least the next generation” (1981, 298).

Other studies confirm that there are moderate to strong gender differences at a very young age. Three sets of findings can be identified. First, several studies show that a gender difference in political knowledge exists from an early age. For example, Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman found that gender strongly conditioned the acquisition of political knowledge and the consumption of news media among a sample of high school students in 1996 (2000, 57). Jenkins found a similar pattern in the 2002 National Citizen Engagement study: “Across a variety of surveys that include questions designed to gauge a respondent’s political knowledge, young women consistently turn up among the least knowledgeable” (2005, 8).

Second, there are modest gender differences in most forms of conventional political participation and somewhat greater differences with respect to community service or voluntary commitments. Modest—sometimes weak—differences characterize conventional political acts, such as contacting officials, or contributing money or time to campaigns, although the differences that do exist show young men to be slightly more active (Jenkins 2005, 4-6; Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE] 2002). In contrast, young women are significantly more likely to engage in service and community activities and to volunteer for nonpolitical (or nonprofit) groups (Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman 2000; Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, and Sheblanova 2002; CIRCLE 2002; Jenkins 2005, 4). The gender difference

in civic engagement remains at all levels of education, although the levels are higher for the better educated of both genders (Jenkins 2005, 6).

The third pattern in previous research is the consistent finding that *parental influence* is a very strong predictor of both traditional political engagement and community engagement. The meaning of “parental influence” can vary widely in different studies, but in general it includes measures of involvement in all facets of home life (including discussion of school issues), as well as specific measures of the extent to which parents discuss politics with their children. Whatever the measure, however, there is a consistently strong correlation. For example, Smith (1999) finds that generalized parental involvement is a significant correlate of “civic virtue”—the extent of volunteer and other types of community involvement. Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, and Keeter (2003) report that the political interest of young adults is significantly higher in households in which the parents discussed politics or volunteered themselves. In addition, they find that volunteering, voting, and other expressions of political expression are higher. Essentially the same findings are reported in the CIRCLE study (2002).

Surprisingly, there has been less scholarly attention to the potential impact of parental involvement and behavior on gender differences in the political behavior of offspring, although the single study to address the issue raises fascinating questions. In a multivariate analysis of the 2002 CIRCLE data, Jenkins reports that three measures of parental involvement are significant factors that increase the overall political activity of young women—but not young men. Specifically, the political activity of young women increases in response to the level of the mother’s education, the presence of a parent or guardian who volunteers, and by the existence of political discussions in the household. None of these variables influence the participation rates of young men. Jenkins summarizes: “Among all the precursors that demonstrate a significant

relationship to a summary index of participation...the sexes differ in the importance derived from things such as maternal education, having family political discussions, and growing up with a parent or guardian who volunteered. Young women get a boost from exposure to these kinds of experiences, whereas young men appear to benefit from other experiences” (2005, 11).

Two things are noteworthy about Jenkins’ findings on parental influence. First, it is not just that the sexes differ in their response to parental influences, but also that there is a great deal of diversity in their responsiveness to other variables generally considered to be important correlates of political engagement. For example, young women are significantly affected by their sense of “citizen duty,” but young men are not (2005, 11). Second, the findings suggest—but do not test—the interesting possibility that there may be some difference in the influence of mothers and fathers on the political engagement of their daughters and sons. We might ask, for example, if young women are more motivated by the political interest of the mother or father to participate in politics (and we might ask similar questions about sons).

Nonetheless, beyond the observations that parental influence is obviously important and that the predictors of the behavior of young men and women vary greatly, little can be said by way of generalizing about these differences. The number of multivariate studies of engagement among young people specifically is simply too small. We turn now to the task of reducing this gap in the evidence.

### **The Data: Two Surveys on Youth Engagement**

*The Survey Samples:* We rely on two separate survey data sets. These surveys, known as the *National Surveys of Political and Civic Engagement of Young People*, were conducted in the fall of 2006 and 2007 by Polimetrix under contract with the Jonathan Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Tufts University. These surveys targeted populations of people aged 18-24

years old, where each survey's sample of 1,000 is half full-time college students and half young people not enrolled full-time in college.<sup>3</sup> Post-survey weights were computed to allow analysis of the full samples without introducing biases due to over-sampling college students and under-sampling non-college young people.<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, analysis reported here employs these weights.

### **Education and Gender Differences in Political Knowledge**

Following Dow's analysis across all adult age groups, it is clear that some variables affect levels of political knowledge more for men than for women. Specifically, there are differences in the impact of educational achievement on men and women. If the same differential applies to young people, we should find differences between those young people who are full-time students and those who are not.

The concept of political knowledge has been measured many different ways, and is usually thought of as "... factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory." (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 10-11) Here we employ a different measure of political knowledge for the 2006 and the 2007 surveys. For 2006, we asked respondents to identify the name of the member of the House of Representatives for the district in which they lived.<sup>5</sup> Those respondents who correctly identified the name of their respective Representative presumably have more political knowledge than those who do not. For the 2007 survey, respondents were asked if they had heard of the news story about Congress' consideration of the state child health insurance program (SCHIP). For those who had not, we asked about any self-identified alternative public

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<sup>3</sup> Polimetrix conducts its surveys through its online Polling Point web panel. The sample is defined by matching randomly selected records of 18-24 year olds from the 2004 American Community Survey to Polling Point respondents by gender (male, female), race (White, Black, Hispanic, other), and age group (18-21, 22-24).

<sup>4</sup> The implications of web-based samples of young people has been explored in Niemi, Portney, and King (2008).

<sup>5</sup> College students were asked to identify the name of the member of the House both for their permanent residence and for where they attend college. Only the former is used here, since it applies to both college and non-college young people.

affairs news story. If respondents were aware of the SCHIP story, they were coded as having greater knowledge than if they only knew of an alternative story. And if they had heard of neither, they were coded as having no political knowledge.

Tables 1 and 2 show gender differences in political knowledge among young people. Regardless of the type of political knowledge, men exhibit greater knowledge than do women. Women were less able to correctly identify the name of their respective member of the U.S. House by a substantial and statistically significant margin, as shown in Table 1. They were also less likely to know about the SCHIP program, as shown in Table 2.<sup>6</sup> Based on these results, it seems clear that young women tend to have less political knowledge than young men. Of course, these findings might be different with alternatives measures of knowledge. But these overall findings are highly consistent with those reported for national adult samples across all age groups. The next question here is whether these differences might be due to differences in education, as argued by Dow (2009, 132).

Table 1: Gender Differences in Knowledge of U.S. House of Representatives Member, 2006

	Young Men	Young Women
Did not know the name of U.S. representative	42.4%	66.7%
Knew name of U.S. representative	57.6	33.3
Totals	100.0%	100.0%
N	486	511
Significance of Chi-squared	.000	

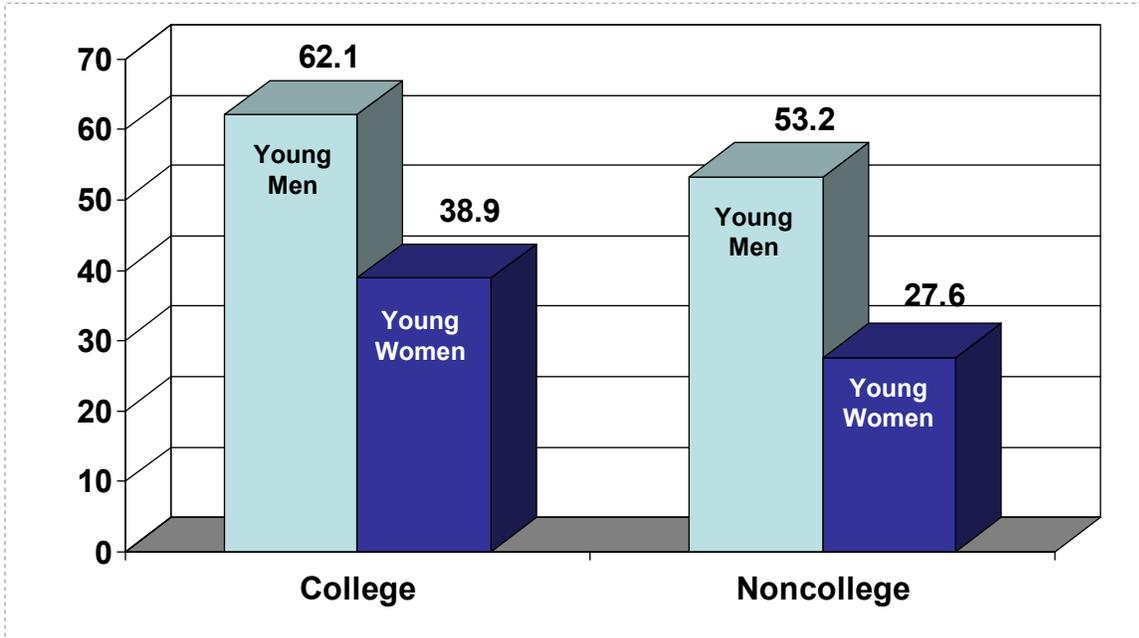
<sup>6</sup> Mondak and Anderson (2004) raise the issue of whether women are more likely than men to provide “don’t know” responses to knowledge questions. In our data, the frequency of “don’t know” responses, treated as missing values in Table 3 and 4, is only slightly higher for women than for men.

Table 2: Gender Differences in Knowledge of the SCHIP Program, 2007

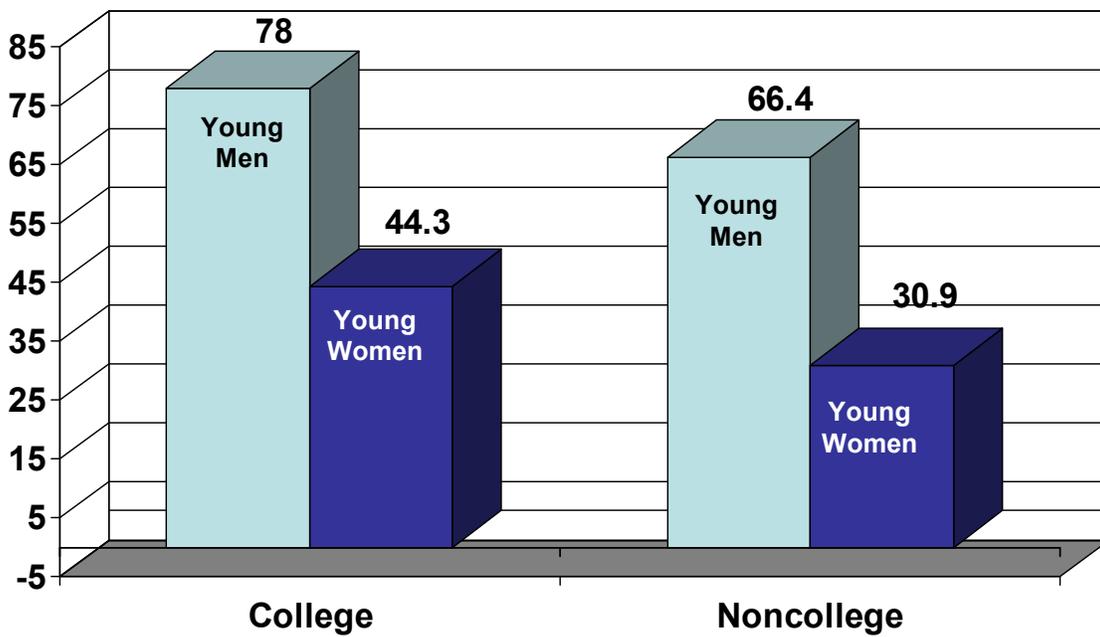
	Young Men	Young Women
Did not know of the SCHIP news story or an alternative story	16.0%	47.3%
Knew alternative news story only	13.6	17.7
Knew SCHIP story	70.4	35.0
Totals	100.0%	100.0%
n	506	474
Significance of Chi-squared	.000	

Figures 1 and 2 display gender differences in the percentage of people with knowledge by college status, distinguishing those young people who reported being enrolled in college full-time from those reporting not being enrolled in college full time. Here we can see clearly that college status likely plays a role in levels of knowledge, but major gender differences persist at each level of college status. In 2006, as shown in Figure 1, when the issue is knowledge of the name of the member of the U.S. House of Representatives, the gap between young non-college men and women is over 26%; the gap between college men and women is almost as large at a little over 23%. In 2007, as shown in Figure 2, when the issue is knowledge of the SCHIP program, the gap is even larger. The difference between young non-college men and women is over 35%; and the gap between young college men and women is over 33%. Clearly, college students have higher levels of political knowledge than non-college young people. But being enrolled in college perhaps reduces the gender gap only slightly.

**Figure 1: Gender differences in percent with knowledge of the U.S. House Representative, by college status, 2006**



**Figure 2: Gender differences in percent with knowledge of the SCHIP program by college status, 2007**



## **Gender Differences in Political and Civic Engagement**

We construct two dependent variables for our subsequent analysis of the correlates of political and civic engagement. The first is an additive index of the number of electoral-related activities each young person engaged in. The survey asked respondents whether they voted in 2006, contributed money to a candidate, political party, or any organization that supported candidates, signed a petition about a political or social issue either on paper or via email, and wore a button, put a sticker on my car, or placed a sign in front of my house in support of an issue or a candidate.” This index ranges in value from 0 for those respondents who did none of these activities to 4 for those who did all four.

Our second dependent variable focuses on community and nonprofit engagement as alternatives to electoral engagement. If men and women have different “tastes for politics,” with women being less attracted to electoral politics and more attracted to community and nonprofit types of activities, then it is important to contrast gender differences in electoral and community-based activities. In order to measure the latter, we constructed an additive index that combines answers to questions concerning whether respondents attended a meeting of town or city council, school board, or neighborhood association, volunteered through a social or nonprofit organization, participated in community groups, participated in community service organizations, and helped to raise money for a charitable cause. This index ranges in value from 0 for those respondents who did none of these activities to 5 for those who did all five. As a simple additive index, none of the specific activities is privileged or weighted in any way.

Table 3 shows the bivariate relationship between the gender of the respondent and the electoral activity variable for both the 2006 and 2007 surveys; Table 4 shows the gender differences for the community/nonprofit activity variable.

Table 3: Number of Electoral Activities by Gender for Young People Aged 18-24

Number of electoral activities	2006		2007	
	Young Men	Young Women	Young Men	Young Women
None	6.4	10.8	17.9%	27.0%
One	24.3	28.1	24.4	31.5
Two	19.8	27.1	26.4	21.7
Three	25.7	18.8	22.6	17.9
Four	23.8	15.2	8.7	1.9
Totals %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	424	409	508	470
Chi-square significance	.000		.000	
Avg. No. of activities	2.36	1.99	1.80	1.36

Gender differences in electoral activities are quite prominent in Table 3. For both 2006 and 2007, young women participate at lower levels than do men. Although the overall levels of participation were higher in 2006, probably due to the 2006 mid-term elections, the difference between male and female participation persists for both years. What is clear from these results is that gender differences in electoral-related activities that are observable in large national population surveys, such as that conducted by Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, are also apparent in surveys of young people. With the focus here on 18 to 24 year olds, an age range when life cycle issues should exercise less influence over political engagement than for older people, gender differences are nonetheless evident.

Table 4, however, shows that gender differences in community and nonprofit based activities are less prominent. Women do tend to be less engaged in these kinds of activities than are men, but the differences are small and statistically insignificant. Consistent with much of the literature, then, whether there are gender differences seems to depend on what kind of activity is involved. Previous studies suggest that the gender differences tend to be reversed when community-based and nonprofit activities are involved. In the case of young people, we do not

see evidence of this in our analysis of community/nonprofit activity. Young men and young women exhibit very similar levels of engagement, but women definitely do not exhibit greater engagement. We say this with caution, however, because this index masks important differences between college students and non-students.

When we examine gender differences in specific kinds of community and nonprofit activities just among the college student subsample, we discover that women indeed are more engaged than men on some activities (Table 5). When it comes to participating in community-based groups, groups that are dedicated to community service, groups that raise money for charity, and volunteering to work in nonprofit organizations, clearly young college women are more engaged than young college men. Contrast this with non-college young people, where women are significantly less likely to be engaged in community-based groups than their male counterparts.

Table 4: Number of Community/Nonprofit Activities by Gender for Young People Aged 18-24

Number of community/ nonprofit activities	<u>2006</u>		<u>2007</u>	
	Young Men	Young Women	Young Men	Young Women
None	34.7%	38.0%	42.1%	46.2%
One	15.4	15.6	16.1	13.4
Two	12.0	11.9	11.7	10.5
Three	14.9	10.9	10.1	12.7
Four	12.9	15.6	11.3	11.8
Five	10.0	8.0	8.6	5.4
Totals %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	449	487	477	448
Chi-square significance	.317		.199	
Avg. No. of activities	1.85	1.75	1.58	1.47

Table 5: Gender differences in community/nonprofit activities among young people by

college status, 2007

Type of Community/ Nonprofit Activity		College		Non-college	
		Men	Women	Men	Women
Participated in community groups	Yes	50.2%	60.0%	41.0%	32.5%
	No	49.8	40.0	59.0	67.5
	n	239	255	244	249
	$\chi^2$ significance	.029		.052	
Participated in community service organizations	Yes	32.8%	43.5%	30.6%	23.2%
	No	67.2	56.5	69.4	76.8
	n	235	253	242	250
	$\chi^2$ significance	.015		.065	
Help raise money for charity	Yes	41.3%	51.6%	39.5%	35.0%
	No	58.7	48.4	60.5	65.0
	n	235	254	243	246
	$\chi^2$ significance	.023		.298	
Volunteered for nonprofit organization	Yes	34.9%	48.4%	29.5%	24.6%
	No	65.1	51.6	70.5	75.4
	n	235	254	237	240
	$\chi^2$ significance	.002		.223	

Given the lack of differences when we count the number of activities, this suggests that women do not necessarily do a higher number of activities; but for any particular kind of activity, they may be more likely than men to be engaged, especially among students. As will be discussed later, either women who go to college are already predisposed to be engaged in community and nonprofit activities, or they obtain greater returns than men from going to college.

### **Modeling Political and Civic Engagement**

The results presented above, as well as previous studies, perhaps most notably Dow's analysis, strongly argue for examination of whether men and women experience different "returns" from their experiences and practices related to political and community engagement. Moreover, the literature strongly indicates that young men and young women are affected differently by the political socialization of their parents. In order to investigate these kinds of questions, we apply a fairly simple multivariate model using the index of political activities and the index of

community/nonprofit activities as the dependent variables.

**The Independent variables:** The foundation of the multivariate model examines a number of factors that should exert influence over the frequency of political and community activities. As discussed earlier, parental influences are central. Here, we focus on three characteristics of parents and their connection to young adults.<sup>7</sup> First, we create a variable measuring the education level of respondents' parents, simply indicating whether either parent is a college graduate. Our expectation is that parents who are college graduates will be more attuned to politics and to community and nonprofit activities than those who are not, and to the extent that this is true, their children will also be inclined to be attuned to politics and community. Of course, such a relationship might exist just as a matter of social class differences, although when we introduce an household income variable (not presented here), the results of parental education are not affected. Second, we develop a measure of how interested parents/guardians are in politics with three categories: neither parent/guardian is interested in politics; only one parent is interested in politics; or both parents are interested in politics. Our expectation is that when both parents are interested in politics, respondents will be more engaged than when only one or when neither parent is interested in politics. Third, we measure the frequency with which respondents discuss politics with their parents. Here we use a dichotomous variable that simply measures whether the respondent discusses politics "at least several times a week." Our expectation is that respondents who discuss politics with their parents at least several times a week will be more engaged in politics and the community than respondents who discuss politics less or not at all.

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<sup>7</sup> Our approach to measuring characteristics of parents is as follows: we asked each young person to identify a "first parent or guardian," and then to identify the gender, education level, and interest in politics (2007 only) of that parent. We then asked the respondent to identify the "second parent or guardian," with subsequent gender, education level and interest questions. We did this in order to ensure that we included information about any same-sex parents. In the 2007 survey, 31 respondents report two same-sex parents. In the 2006 survey, 37 respondents reported two same-sex parents.

We also include variables measuring access to political knowledge and information, based on the likelihood that knowledge leads to engagement. Traditionally, access to political information has focused on frequency of reading a newspaper, and we include such a variable here. This variable measures how frequently respondents read a newspaper—never, several times a month, several times a week, or daily. Recently, even though there continues to be a strong relationship between reading the newspaper and levels of political knowledge (Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006), the idea of reading the newspaper, especially for young people, has fallen out of favor (Wattenberg 2008, ch. 1). Indeed, some have argued that young people do not read the newspaper, and instead rely on different forms of “new media” as sources for their political information. For this reason, we include a measure of the number of days in a typical week respondents log onto Facebook, from 0 to 7. Our expectation is that both reading the newspaper and logging onto Facebook will exert positive influences on political and community engagement, although some have argued that new media represent but poor substitutes for reading the newspaper.

In order to measure political knowledge more directly, we include the knowledge variables discussed earlier—knowledge of the name of the member of U.S. House of Representatives for the area where the respondent lives full-time (for 2006), and knowledge of the news story about the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP – for 2007). Also included is a single measure of internal efficacy—political efficacy for the model with political activities as the dependent variable, and community efficacy for the model with community/nonprofit activities as the dependent variable.<sup>8</sup> Finally, we include a dichotomous variable measuring whether or not

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<sup>8</sup> Internal political efficacy is measured with a five-point Likert scale by responses to the statement “I am confident, through political activities, I can make a difference.” Internal community efficacy is measured with a five-point Likert scale by responses to the statement “I am confident, through community service, I can make a difference in my community.”

the respondent was married at the time of the survey.

**Separate Models for Young Men and Women?** The regression analyses in Table 6 and 7 apply the same general model in separate equations for men and women. Separate equations are best suited to making inferences about the relationship between gender and participation in that they allow for independent variables to differentially influence women and men. That is, our purpose here is not to determine the role of gender controlling for other variables, or the role of other independent variables controlling for gender. Burns, Schlozman and Verba acknowledge that a single regression equation with a gender variable may be appropriate in many cases, but this “procedure is predicated on the supposition that the social processes under examination operate in the same way for women and men....This assumption may not be warranted. Our common-sense understandings—and theorizing about gender—suggest that women and men often have different experiences within social institutions.”(Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001, 49). Rather, our purpose is to inquire as to whether the underlying model might be different for young men and young women. A secondary purpose is to determine whether the model that explains political activities also explains community activities.

Table 6 presents the OLS regression results from the 2007 survey. The equation on the left uses the index of political activities as the dependent variable, and the equation on the right uses the index of community/nonprofit activities. We have highlighted the coefficients where men and women differ, i.e. where men show a statistically significant result and women do not, or vice versa. For political activities, the model explains a little under a quarter of the variation for men, and a little over a quarter for women. Several variables show about the same effect for men and women, including political knowledge, internal efficacy, and using Facebook. What is worth noting is that the parental influence variables are consistently significant for women, but not for

men. In other words, young women appear to be much more heavily influenced by their parents than are young men. Additionally, reading the newspaper is not nearly as important for women as it is for men. When young women read the newspaper on a regular basis, it does not elevate their political engagement. When young men read the newspaper it does. Interestingly, being married increases the political engagement of young men and has no effect on that of young women.

The patterns for community and nonprofit activities are not so clear-cut. Parental influences are not particularly consistent. Talking to parents about politics seems to influence the frequency of community activities for young men but not for young women. Parents' education levels influence men and women about equally strongly. And parents' political interest has no effect on either young men or women. For young women and not for young men, reading a newspaper improves community engagement and being married reduces community engagement.

Similar, but certainly not identical, patterns are borne out in Table 7 for the 2006 survey. For one thing, the model applied to men from the 2006 survey is much less robust, explaining only 12% of the variation in the number of political activities. Of the three "parent variables," only "talking to parents about politics" influences young women more than men. On the other hand, the effect of parents' level of education is a stronger influence on political activity for men than for women. For community activities, only two variables appear to influence men and women differently—parents' education levels and levels of political knowledge influence women more than men.

Table 6: Regression Models for Electoral and Community/Nonprofit Activities for Young Men and Young Women, for 2007 Survey of Young People

Independent Variable	Electoral Activities (0-4)				Community/Nonprofit Activities (0-5)			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	b	significance	b	significance	b	significance	b	significance
College student	+0.049	.68	+0.001	.99	<b>-.141</b>	<b>.44</b>	<b>+0.437</b>	<b>.02</b>
Talk to parents about politics	<b>+0.216</b>	<b>.06</b>	<b>+0.667</b>	<b>.00</b>	<b>+0.616</b>	<b>.00</b>	<b>-.141</b>	<b>.44</b>
Parents' education	<b>+0.172</b>	<b>.11</b>	<b>+0.409</b>	<b>.00</b>	+0.396	.02	+0.548	.00
Parents' political interest	<b>-.098</b>	<b>.21</b>	<b>+0.156</b>	<b>.04</b>	+0.007	.96	-0.119	.32
Know news story	+0.209	.00	+0.200	.00	+0.151	.18	+0.083	.33
Read newspaper	<b>+0.120</b>	<b>.03</b>	<b>+0.069</b>	<b>.17</b>	<b>+0.147</b>	<b>.07</b>	<b>+0.307</b>	<b>.00</b>
Efficacy	+0.349	.00	+0.127	.01	+0.436	.00	+0.544	.00
Facebook Use	+0.062	.00	+0.035	.04	<b>+0.110</b>	<b>.00</b>	<b>+0.049</b>	<b>.08</b>
Currently Married	<b>+0.375</b>	<b>.01</b>	<b>+0.017</b>	<b>.88</b>	<b>+0.362</b>	<b>.10</b>	<b>-.518</b>	<b>.00</b>
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.23		.27		.18		.26	
N	465		420		430		405	

Table 7: Regression Models for Electoral and Community/Nonprofit Activities for Young Men and Young Women, for 2006 Survey of Young People

Independent variable	Electoral Activities (0-4)				Community Activities (0-5)			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	b	significance	b	significance	b	significance	b	significance
College student	-.112	.36	+.123	.30	+.663	.00	+.939	.00
Talk to parents about politics	<b>+.406</b>	<b>.13</b>	<b>+.517</b>	<b>.00</b>	+.306	.07	+.234	.18
Parents' education	<b>+.293</b>	<b>.02</b>	<b>-.053</b>	<b>.65</b>	<b>+.287</b>	<b>.08</b>	<b>+.308</b>	<b>.04</b>
Parents' political interest*	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----
Know House member's name	+.438	.00	+.673	.00	<b>+.272</b>	<b>.08</b>	<b>+.566</b>	<b>.00</b>
Read newspaper	<b>+.102</b>	<b>.08</b>	<b>+.278</b>	<b>.00</b>	+.269	.00	+.191	.01
Efficacy	+.238	.00	+.181	.01	+.634	.00	+.632	.00
Facebook Use**	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----
Currently Married	+.313	.13	+.027	.85	-.096	.70	+.041	.82
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.12		.26		.22		.27	
N	399		375		415		449	

\* Not asked in the 2006 survey

\*\* Omitted from analysis because of small n

## **Parental Gender and the Transmission of Political Interest**

The results in the previous section raise the obvious question of whether it is the level of political interest of male or female parents that most—or perhaps equally—influence the political engagement of their sons and daughters. Our analysis (Table 6) relied on what might be called the total level of parental political interest—the variable “parents’ political interest” measures households (as it were) in which *both parents* were interested in politics.

To investigate the separate impact of male and female parents requires analysis of some complexity, so we report only our initial, preliminary results here. Nonetheless, the results have clear importance as a guide to future research, and the hypotheses that we address are of central importance to the gender politics literature generally. The dominant hypothesis might very well be that male parents dominate the political environment of their children. After all, as the literature reviewed above has consistently shown, men are more interested and knowledgeable about politics. Confirming this fact, the young people in our 2007 sample report that 26% of their male parents were “very interested” in politics, versus 15% of their female parents. It would not be surprising if this imbalance in political interest were to translate into a stronger impact of male parents on the political engagement of the offspring. Yet there is also reason to hypothesize that the impact of female parents should be stronger. Most importantly, we know that female parents spend more time with children (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001, 180-187), although the amount of time spent by male parents has increased over the last several decades (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson, 2004). To the extent that time spent with children increases the opportunities to discuss politics and perhaps even political engagement, the opportunities are obviously greater for female parents. In addition, studies have found that young people as often or more often are like their mothers (Jennings and Niemi, 1976, 165-168;

Niemi, Ross, and Alexander 1978, 511; Peterson, Smirles, and Wentworth 1997, 1211).

As Table 8 shows, it is the latter hypothesis that receives support in our initial analysis of the 2007 sample. The table reports only the coefficients for parental interest in politics for three equations predicting electoral activities. The equations are otherwise identical to the electoral activity equations on the left side of Table 6. The only difference is that we tested for the impact of the male parent’s interest in politics and the female parent’s interest in politics. The specific measures were dichotomous variables indicating whether the male and female parents were “very interested” in politics, as reported by their offspring.

Table 8: Comparison of Regression Coefficients for Total Parent Interest in Politics to the Interest of Male and Female Parents, 2007

Parental variable	Young Men		Young Women	
	b	Significance	b	Significance
Either parent “very” interested in politics (from Table 6)	-.098	.210	.156	.040
Male parent “very” interested	-.073	.530	.086	.460
Female parent “very” interested	-.230	.100	.292	.030
Other variables specified in the equations producing these coefficients are identical to those reported in Table 6.				

Table 8 makes it clear that parental influence on electoral activities can be traced to female parents, and additionally that the influence exists for daughters only. The political interest of male parents is an insignificant influence on either sons or daughters, despite the fact that their overall level of political interest is higher. Female parents, in contrast, exert an influence on daughters. For young women, however, there is a strong, positive influence of female parents.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> There is no similar pattern in equations for community/nonprofit activity.

Stated in the operational language of our measures, young women engage in a significantly higher number of electoral activities when their female parents are very interested in politics, but the same is not true for their male parents.

*Why* this is the case is something that our data cannot tell us, as we have no measures of the content of political conversations among parents and offspring. We can eliminate the hypothesis that it is the amount of time that female parents spend with children, for if this were the deciding factor, the influence should be manifest for male offspring as well as female offspring. The fact that the influence is manifest between female parents and daughters suggest several avenues for additional research. The first is the obvious possibility that female parents represent role models—and perhaps even teachers—for their daughters. It may even be that young women “connect” politically with female parents in much the same way that women generally seem to be mobilized politically when female candidates are present in the electoral process. For example, Burns, Schlozman and Verba find that political interest and other measures of cognitive involvement with politics was much higher among women in states in which women were candidates or elected officials, but there is no similar effect for men. They conclude: “In short, the more it looks as if politics is not simply a man’s game, the more psychologically involved with politics women are” (2001, 347). And Campbell and Wolbrecht (2006) found strong evidence that among female high school seniors, having viable female candidates for political office yields much greater expectations of political involvement. In effect, just as women generally are mobilized by the example of women in the electoral and political process, our findings suggest that their involvement is increased by the political interest of their female parents. Secondly, we know that women have distinct policy preferences (Crowder-Meyer 2007), and it may be that the greater receptivity of daughters to their female parents is rooted in shared

policy interests and preferences.

For the moment, these hypotheses must remain speculative, and it is hardly an exhaustive list. Nonetheless, they suggest avenues for further analysis of existing data and for better measurement strategies in future data collection. Specifically, to further pursue the differential impact of parental gender, better measures of the *content* of political discussions in the household are needed. What do parents and children talk about? Is the content of these conversations different for daughters and sons and their parents of both genders? Second, we need to further explore the differing conceptions of young men and women of the nature of politics. Finally, although most research on youth political engagement has understandably focused on the fact of participating itself, clearly we need better knowledge of the policies that young people and their parents seek to influence through politics. In many ways, then, the finding that there are gendered parenting effects in youth political engagement returns us to many of the enduring questions of the political socialization literature (Jennings and Niemi 1981; Beck and Jennings 1982; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers 2009).

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Consistent with much of the literature on gender differences in political behavior and civic engagement across age groups, we find that among young people aged 18-24 men tend to possess more political knowledge than women by a fairly wide margin. This gap in knowledge exists regardless of whether the issue is knowledge of one's House member, or of a salient public policy debate. And having political knowledge plays a relatively similar role in influencing electoral activity for both men and women. When young people, like older generations, possess knowledge, they are considerably more likely to be engaged in electoral politics. Of course, one of the central reasons why women are less engaged in electoral politics is that they do not have,

and perhaps choose not to obtain, political knowledge. There is a tendency for men to be more engaged in electoral activities, such as voting, contributing money to candidates for political office, and campaigning for specific candidates. In terms of the number of electoral activities, young men outpace young women. And there is a tendency for women to be more engaged than men in specific kinds of community and nonprofit organizations. But we also find that the story is far more complex than that. For example, much of the tendency for women to be more engaged than men in community activities rests on differences among full-time college students, where women participate much more than men.

Perhaps the most important findings reported here emerge from the effort to assess a multivariate explanatory model separately for young men and young women. Here we find that some variables, such as political knowledge, reading a newspaper, using Facebook, and internal efficacy, seem to affect men and women about the same. But for other variables, there are clear gender differences in effects. Most notable among these are variables that measure parental influences. We certainly see evidence that having well educated parents who are interested in politics affects women more than men. Talking to parents about politics seems to increase electoral engagement for young women more than for young men; but it also seems to increase community and nonprofit engagement for young men more than for young women.

The differential effects of the parental education, interest, and communication variables certainly raises a wide array of questions about parent-child socialization, especially questions about the potential gendered nature of that socialization. A recent study by Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) using a four-wave panel strongly confirms the importance of parental transmission of values about electoral engagement. Our effort to distinguish the effects of male and female parents on their children suggests that female parents exert much greater influence

over female children. Yet much work needs to be done to examine the character of this transmission as it affects male and female children differently, and as it affects the propensity to be engaged in community and nonprofit activities as well as electoral activities. More broadly, the results presented here raise the possibility that indeed to understand political and civic engagement of young people requires modeling the process separately for men and women. While our analysis applied the same underlying model, it is also possible that the models themselves need to be differently specified. Until significant attention is focused on these issues, our understanding of gender differences may well remain incomplete.

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