The politics of anxiety: vulnerability and gender inequality in politics

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What interests us is how emotions such as fear and worry affect political life, and more specifically how anxiety may serve as explanation for gender differences – in attitudes and behavior – in politics. In doing this we draw from and integrate findings from at least three fields of research: research on gender and risk perceptions; research on gender differences in political life and how these can be related to structural inequalities in society; and research on the role of emotions in politics. This integrative approach opens up for theoretical developments in several ways: regarding anxiety as a causal mechanism in democratic developments, but also regarding sex/gender at the cross-road between 'real-world' inequalities and the social construction of feminity/masculinity.

Purpose and aims

Negative emotions such as fear, worry and anxiety may affect the everyday lives of women and men in many different ways. Worries may relate to the individual's personal situation – fear of violence and crime, unemployment or illness – or to society at large – fear of social unrest, poverty, terrorism, war, environmental degradation and pandemics. Numerous studies have shown that women, generally speaking, tend to be more anxious than men, and studies in risk psychology suggest that this anxiousness stems from feelings of being vulnerable (O'Connor & Bord, 1997). However, the link to the political sphere is still largely unexplored. Yet, feminist researchers have argued that women's anxiety, and specifically their fear of violence and crime, acts

as a form of social control, keeping women from achieving political and economic equality. Hollander (2001, 2002) suggests that vulnerability is deeply associated with gender and argues that it is the key mechanism that keeps women in subordinated positions, not only in the private sphere but also in public life (c.f. Wendt Höjer, 2002). The problem is that this hypothesis has not yet been conclusively tested in large scale survey research using representative samples. Is vulnerability a factor that contributes to gender inequality in political life?

The aim of this project is to explore to what extent and in which ways gender differences concerning anxiety have consequences for political equality between women and men. We pursue our investigation by conducting a large scale survey of the Swedish population, aimed at testing the association, but also at further exploring the mechanisms that provide the casual link between anxiety, gender and political attitudes/behavior.

Survey of the field

In previous research, explanations to gender differences in political attitudes/behavior typically focuses on structural inequalities in everyday life situations such as differences in education, responsibilities in the private sphere, and in labor market integration. Much attention is also devoted to gender differences regarding the "content" of politics; for example, it is a persistent pattern that women are concerned with social policy issues and issues of gender-equality when making political judgments. This is explained by women's

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position in society; for example, as the adult person most often responsible for combining working-life with family-life (Burns & Gallagher, 2010; Wängnerud, 2009).

There are, however, still gender differences in political life that cannot be accounted for by social position and structural factors. We suggest that an investigation of the role of anxiety may contribute to our understanding of how gender influences and structures political life. This is a new approach that also entails probing deeper into the role of emotions in politics. To be sure, political science research has often regarded politics as a purely cognitive and rational phenomenon. However, there is a burgeoning field of research that challenges this cognitive-rational approach and argues that emotions play a significant role in political life. The claim is that political attitudes and behavior are based on a combination of emotional and cognitive judgments, and not only on rational reasoning. In psychology the "risk-as-feelings" hypothesis (Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee & Welch, 2001) provides a similar argument: that risk perceptions are related to both emotional and cognitive assessments and that the two components are both directly linked to behavior (see Sundblad 2008 for an overview).

To specify the nature, extent and influence of emotions in politics is an important line of inquiry for social science research. Some of the most important studies in the field have been conducted by George E. Marcus and colleagues (Marcus 1991, 2000, 2002; Marcus & Mackuen 1993; Marcus, Neuman & Mackuen 2000; Neuman, Marcus, Grigler & Mackuen 2007). Marcus (2000) argues that, in political science, the research on emotions has been divided between, on the one hand, those who use emotion to explain how early experiences in life influence people's contemporary political judgments and, on the other hand, those who use emotions to explain how people respond to immediate contemporary circumstances around them. A key example in the first strand of research is the study

of party-identification. In the latter vein of research, studies have typically focused emotional reactions generated by "policy threats"; that is changes in political issues and positions that might threaten one's own ideological beliefs or position in society, or emotional reactions to features like "negative campaigning". Up to this point, the most consistent finding is that threats trigger anxiety, which then heightens the attention to current information, breaks people out of habitual behaviors and mindsets, and facilitates for learning. Negative emotions such as worry and fear may consequently have some positive effects when it comes to promoting democratic participation among citizens.

On the other hand, a main criticism of Marcus and colleagues is that their studies do not take individual differences regarding efficacy into consideration. A growing strand of research focuses on the role of internal efficacy, claiming that people make different judgments of their capacity to execute the courses of actions required to deal with undesirable life events. Empirical studies suggest that efficacy and negative emotions interact to affect political outcomes, such as learning and participation. Anxiety among the highly efficacious seems to drive involvement, while anxiety among those with low internal efficacy is of little consequence. In a similar line of reasoning, other scholars have argued for the necessity to distinguish between anger and other negative emotions such as anxiety and fear. Anger seems to mobilize action, while the political consequences of fear and anxiety are potentially more variable. A hypothesis is that anxiety, when coupled with the belief that one is incapable of successful political action, may have a demobilizing effect that discourages involvement (Rudolph *et.al.*, 2000; Valentino *et. al.*, 2009).

There is, however, a surprising lack of gender studies in this growing field of research. In contrast, if we again turn to the field of risk analysis, we do find a few attempts of connecting risk perceptions, gender and political

involvement. O'Connor and Bord (1997) make the argument that differences in perceived vulnerability explain most gender gaps in risk perceptions. In a follow-up study O´Connor, Bord and Fisher (1999) demonstrate that women tend to support voluntary actions when it comes to mitigating risks in society – in this case environmental risks – while men tend to support political measures. Thus, there is support for the idea that men are more inclined to channel worries and anxieties into the political sphere. In a related vein, Slovic and colleagues (Slovic, 1999; Slovic *et.al.*, 2004) identify white males as a special subgroup who perceives risks in society as quite low. Slovic and colleagues also point out that the subgroup of white males is characterized by a high level of trust in institutions and suggest that women and non-white men (the context for their studies is the United States) see the world as more dangerous because in many ways they are more vulnerable, they benefit less from current institutions and policies, and generally speaking have less power and control over what happens in their communities and their personal life. It has even been suggested that "numbing" is a reasonable response to an oppressive situation (Mills & Kleinman, 1988). The other side of the same coin is the finding that internal efficacy is enhanced by successful participation in politics. There are important feedback loops that help explain political attitudes and behavior (Kumlin, 2004; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005).

In this context, it is clear that it is the anxiety that comes from the subjective feeling of being vulnerable to risks (which may or may not be anchored in objective conditions) that interests us. It is a well known fact, proven by substantial research, that there is a discrepancy between perceived and actual vulnerability (Hollander, 2001). Perceived vulnerability represents beliefs regarding one's own situation. Actual vulnerability represents the real risk of exposure to undesirable life events. The somewhat counter-intuitive finding is that when it comes to actual vulnerability most studies report that men, especially young men, are the group facing the greatest risks. At least this is true for most forms of violence and crime. It is only the "perceived vulnerability" that has the potential of influencing people's political attitudes and behavior. This stresses the need for further investigations of how perceptions of social risks that cause anxieties are created. There is a strand of feminist research arguing that vulnerability is nothing but a social construction of femininity; a construction however with the potential of being an obstacle for democratic developments (Kimmel, 2004). Anxieties relating to the subjective feeling of vulnerability are then, not the least, cultivated by the proliferation of media representations of women in subordinate positions and as victims of violence, crime, and war.

The role of the media is indeed an important factor that may contribute to explaining gender differences in both political attitudes and risk perceptions. The individual's attitudes and perceptions of social phenomena can – in fact – only originate from three sources: personal experiences (of events, situations, and institutions), interpersonal/social experiences (sharing other peoples experiences, through social interaction) and mediated experiences (media exposure). Here we know from previous research that news media exposure is positively associated with a range of indicators of political integration, such as trust, interest and activity (Norris, 2000). We also know from previous research that the media exposure of certain (mostly crime) social risks seem to increase anxiety (see Sandstig 2008, for an overview). The links between civic engagement, media exposure and risk perceptions are, however, largely unexplored. Nonetheless in one recent study, Miller (2007), it is demonstrated that anxiety mediates the impact of news exposure on political judgments. The finding is that when news exposure causes people to feel fearful about an issue, they will be likely to view this issue as nationally important.

Still, how anxiety and media exposure interact and affect political attitudes need to be more fully investigated.

In sum, the situation we have at hand is a true paradox. Following Marcus and colleagues, anxiety is supposed to increase political learning and attention. How come then, that the most anxious group – women – is less interested in, and knowledgeable about political matters? We see two potential strategies to answer the question: (i) the paradox may be dissolved if we take a closer look at subgroups and the interaction between sex/gender and other variables, or (ii) we need to develop the theoretical framework on negative emotions further in order to understand the casual links. This project aims at pursuing both strategies.

Project description

Anxiety is the theoretical core concept for this study and the focus of the investigation is anxiety that is related to various forms of risks in society. Our theoretical point of departure is that anxiety comes from perceived vulnerability caused by the individuals' personal or indirect experience of undesirable life events. This anxiety may in turn influence political attitudes and behavior in various ways. The focus on the concepts of anxiety/vulnerability is useful because it allows for studies that are wider in scope than investigating fear and worries resulting from specific policy threats or other situations triggered by immediate contemporary circumstances. We are aiming at developing a framework for studies that go beyond the "political effects of being affected" by certain critical events. Obviously, anxieties may come from other sources than direct exposure to negative situations. Indeed, people might be influenced by the mere threat of being exposed to risks. Worries may also stem from the human capacity feeling empathy with others that may be affected. There may consequently also be other targets for an individual's worries than the self; people

may be concerned about the welfare of their children or worry about future generations when considering long-term risks, such as climate change and nuclear hazards. Empathy, seen as the capacity to react emotionally to the situation of others (cf. Sautter, 2007), are also an area were significant gender differences can be recognized (women being more empathic than men, but results do depend on how empathy is measured, see Eisenberg & Strayer 1990).

The model chosen as a point of departure for empirical investigation is, schematically, as follows:

1. Structural position in society, primary gender but also intersectional influences relating to class, ethnicity and age, affecting →

2. Personal or indirect (through interpersonal communication or media exposure) experiences of undesirable life events, affecting →

3. Perceived vulnerability in different areas causing anxiety, affecting →

4. Political attitudes and behavior, i.e. factors related to involvement and engagement.

However, a key aim of the project is to explore and test the causal mechanisms that relate anxiety to political attitudes and behaviors, which means exploring a wide range of factors, as well as leaving it open for investigation of the casual link that may prove to run in a different direction than suggested in the model.

I. The first step of the analysis is to explore the gender gap when it comes to how men and women experience anxiety in relation to specific risks in society. This initial step is performed to examine the type and scope of the gender differences. Previous research highlighting anxiety as a form of social control has to a large extent focused on gender differences in fear and anxiety related to violence and crime. We are interested in investigating anxiety also in other areas, such as the risk of unemployment or the risk of serious illness. The main question concerns how pervasive

the gender differences are; do they apply to most spheres of everyday life or just a few? Related to the question of scope is whether gender differences in anxiety are mostly visible in judgments about one's own situation or as evident in judgments about society at large. In this first step we will compare women and men across different risks, and across judgments about one's own life situation versus the situation in society. The idea is to explore whether women "always and everywhere" are more anxious than men.

II. The second step is focused on exploring the causes of anxiety. Here we want to capture the dynamic process where different factors come into play. Personal experiences of undesirable life events (to be the victim of violence and crime, to actually be unemployed or in financial difficulty), interpersonal experiences (such as having friends and relatives experiencing difficult situations) and mediated experiences (exposure to various forms of media reporting on these issues) are important to investigate here.

III. The novelty of this study is, however, to explore the link to the political sphere, which is the third step of the study. Since there are few previous studies in the area, it is reasonable to explore the link in several ways. We will use a variety of indicators on political involvement and engagement as dependent variables; e.g. voting, membership in political parties, political interest, but also membership and activity in other politically oriented civic organizations than parties.

After having investigated the basic associations we will proceed to explore factors that may influence the relationship as moderating or intervening variables. Thus, we develop the understanding of the causal mechanisms but also the understanding of the sex/gender category.

As indicated by previous research, individual efficacies influence the ways and extent to which men and women "channel" their anxiety into the political sphere. To begin, a series of variables that serve as indicators of efficacy will be explored in detail, starting with subjectively perceived self-confidence, and then moving on to the role of education and employment status. It might be the case that anxiety has an effect on citizens that are less self-confident, less educated, have weaker ties to the employment sector, and hence are less integrated in public life, but not on other citizens. A major finding in research on gender and stress (Shih & Eberhart, 2010; Zlomke & Hahn, 2010) is that women experience higher levels of stress than men, but that cognitive strategies play an important role in dealing with the problem. The ability to put problems into perspective and blame others, instead of oneself, lowers the level of stress. Arguably, higher education and integration into public life, enables for cognitive strategies of this kind (see also McLeod & Kessler, 1990).

The individuals' expectations and trust in political actors and institutions, may furthermore influence the effects of anxiety. The first factor to be tested is to what extent individuals indeed have expectations on the political institutions to actually solve particular problems that are the cause of concern/worries. The belief that politics should and could solve individual and social problems is highly ideological, and the individuals' ideological outlooks (left-right dimension) are also included in the analysis. Furthermore, the relationship to the level of trust in the political institutions will be explored. Here, a set of indicators of trust in the democratic system, but also in key actors and institutions such as political parties and the parliament, will be utilized. Finally, we will investigate the role of social trust as an intermediate variable. It is well known that fear of violence and crime lowers the levels of trust, while social trust is positively associated with many indicators of political integration (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; Uslaner, 2002).

The dataset to be used in the analysis is already prepared and available. The data at hand is a survey from the well-established SOM (Society Opinion Media) institute at the University of Gothenburg. For the 2010

survey, we constructed a number of questions that measure the degree of anxiety among citizens when it comes to undesirable life events (such as the risk of being unemployed, becoming seriously ill, being a victim of crime, but also the risk of experiencing financial difficulties – lacking money when confronted with unexpected expenses). There are also questions measuring the level of anxiety when it comes to developments in society at large. Respondents were asked to indicate their personal anxiety in relation to general social problems/risks such as economic crises, mass-unemployment, organized crime, environmental risks, global epidemics, and some other areas. Moreover, we ask for evaluations about how the news media reports on these topics and additionally for evaluations regarding the responsibility of politicians to solve the problems. A series of variables measuring political attitudes and beliefs, political activity and participation, political and social trust, as well as socio-economic status and position are also included in the dataset.

Significance

Studies on the effects of vulnerability on political attitudes/behavior are rare, and our study clearly has the potential to provide a significant contribution to this new field of research. More importantly however, the study of the role of anxiety and vulnerability may contribute to the general understanding of how men and women behave in political life. The data allows for sophisticated analyses, as we can introduce a series of intermediate variables in the analysis, such as self-confidence, social trust (trust in other people) and exposure to different forms of media. A comprehensive set of variables concerning socioeconomic status will also allow for a wide-ranging and potentially innovative analysis of intersectionality (the mutually constitutive relationship among social identities, see Shields 2008), which is a central tenet in modern feminist thinking which so far has mainly been used

in qualitative research. Here, we have an opportunity to appropriately measure intersectionality as interaction effects of various categories of social stratification: gender, age, ethnicity, and social class. The data-set also includes a measurement of self-perceived "feminity" versus "masculinity" which have the potential to enrich our understanding of sex/gender as a socially constructed category. There are also possibilities to initiate comparative research in the field. Round 4 of ESS, the European Social Survey from 2008/09, facilitates for cross-country comparisons on some of the associations explored in the Swedish study. However, key results from the Swedish study will guide this research.

Most studies in the area have been conducted in the U.S. In their seminal book, *Stealth Democracy*, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) show that U.S. citizens clearly ask for an invisible government; a government that keeps out of everyday life except when the country is faced by an immediate crisis. Then people expect the state (politics) to be highly visible, capable and ready to act. Their work stresses the importance of studying crises and critical events when understanding citizens' perceptions of politics, and the importance of investigating citizens' personal worries and anxieties when explaining differences in political perceptions. However, it also highlights the need for studies of other countries with different welfare regimes and political cultures, and where people have more far-reaching expectations of the state (and politics). Our research has the potential of being interesting to a wide range of scholars in many countries since the field is dominated by studies in the U.S. context.

Sweden, as a country, is used as a strategic case since gender equality politics, at least in an international perspective, has come a long way here (Wängnerud, 2009). At the same time, there are still gender differences when it comes to involvement or engagement in the political sphere. Since the mid 1970's women in Sweden participate in elections

to the same extent than men (Oskarson & Wängnerud, 1995; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008), but data obtained from the Swedish National Election Studies Program also shows persistent gender differences when it comes to aspects like political knowledge and political interest (women are less knowledgeable and interested than men) and that the gender gap has remained rather constant during the past 25-30 years. This gender gap remains while the level of education has sky-rocketed among Swedish women and the visibility of women in the public sphere, including the representation of women in politics, has increased in so many ways.

The comparatively extensive and 'women-friendly' welfare state in Sweden (and other Scandinavian countries), makes Sweden a particularly relevant case for exploring and testing relationships. It might be the case that in the Swedish/Scandinavian context the political sphere – and specifically the welfare state – has served as a vehicle for women's room to maneuver, thus leveling out the effects of vulnerability (Hernes, 1987; Bergqvist *et al.*, 2000). Thus, Sweden can be perceived as a critical case in the sense that if there is a gendered pattern linking anxiety to political attitudes and behavior in this country, it should be present in other democracies as well. However, in a second step, we perform cross-country comparative research testing the generalizability of some of the results across various institutional settings as well as different welfare-state regimes.

Preliminary findings

So far, our preliminary findings from the above mentioned SOM-dataset confirm that women in Sweden, generally speaking, are more anxious than men. The biggest gender gaps appear in judgments of the risk of becoming seriously ill and being a victim of crime. Our preliminary analyses indicate that there may be a difference between what can be labeled "events-induced anxiety" versus "static anxiety" in society. The risk of being unemployed is an example that fits into the first category. For this indicator, our data shows that judgments follow an expected route e.g., with young people – the group most likely to be hit by policy changes or other immediate events, like the closure of a work place – expose highest levels of anxiety. The risks of becoming seriously ill or being a victim of crime are examples in the second, static, category. For these indicators there are no similar expected or "rational" patterns explaining the levels of anxiety. Our preliminary finding is that the paradox presented earlier in this text is not dissolved when the analysis is extended to include different subgroups, but needs to be handled at the theoretical level.

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