

Gender norms, social pressure, and the gender gap in turnout: evidence from Swiss elections (Alda Marchese and Felix Schönenberger)

Turnout gaps persist across social groups and thus limit effective political representation, despite the scope of universal suffrage. The gaps may arise from social barriers rooted in social norms and beliefs about who should and should not vote. This paper analyzes the role of gender norms and social pressure in shaping the gender gap in voter turnout in Switzerland. A difference-in-differences design exploits three sources of variation: results of the 1971 referendum on female suffrage to measure (male) local norms about whether women should vote, gender differences in turnout, and the staggered introduction of postal voting between 1978 and 2005, which reduced the observability of voting and the social pressure linked to it. Before postal voting, women in municipalities with more conservative norms voted significantly less, resulting in a wider gender turnout gap. This gap decreases by approximately 80% when voting becomes less observable, mainly due to higher turnout among women in conservative areas. These findings show that turnout gaps are not only due to preferences, but they are also influenced by social norms, and that reducing observability through institutional reforms can weaken social pressure, enhance representation, and strengthen universal suffrage.