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## The gender gap and torture: Opposition to torture among men and women in the USA



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### ABSTRACT

The study of women in politics includes the analysis of both elite women and the masses in regard to their voting, political activity, and attitudes. Research shows that women hold different political attitudes. This gender gap is explained in relation to a number of attitudes, but few studies analyze whether the gender gap is still evident in an issue area that women might be torn in two hypothesized directions. The purpose of this study is to conduct an analysis of the gender gap in individual's attitudes toward the appropriateness of torture to prevent future terrorist attacks.

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### 1. Introduction

The study of attitudes toward public policies includes the differences between the way men and women support a particular policy or course of action. The difference between women and men since the 1980s in policy attitudes, partisanship, and voting behavior is commonly referred to as the gender gap (Conover, 1988; Kaufmann, 2006). The present research continues the previous research on the gender gap with a focus on the issue of torture. Attitudes toward torture have only recently been analyzed due to the fact that the US government has not, before the current "War on Terrorism", publicly condoned the use of torture as an interrogation method. Torture, as defined by the UN Convention Against Torture (CAT) is "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person" (Weston,

Falk, & D'Amato, 1990, p. 463). The UN CAT goes on to explain the treatment could be used to gain information or as punishment for an action by the individual. This analysis measures whether a gender gap exists in support of torture by specifically measuring individual's responses to "Do you FAVOR, OPPOSE, or NEITHER FAVOR NOR OPPOSE the US government torturing people, who are suspected of being terrorists, to try to get information?"

The issue of torture is an issue that has several hypothesized outcomes in regard to the gender gap. Only a few previous studies look at the female response to torture, with some mixed results depending on the type of torture (Haider-Markel & Vieux, 2008) and the national political context (Eichenberg, 2010). It is presumed women are less likely to support torture due to their socialized attitudes against violence (Lott, 1981; Valian, 1999) or due to women's feminist leanings that promote more egalitarian perspectives (Conover, 1988). Previous research on the gender gap and foreign policy focuses on issues quite different than terrorism, usually war or some sort of protracted military intervention (Eichenberg, 2003; Fite, Genest, &

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Wilcox, 1990; Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986; Wilcox, Hewitt & Allsop, 1996); however, the current terrorist threat to the United States is quite different than previous foreign policy threats.

The issue of torture is also seen as very different from other previous foreign policy issues, so there could be unexpected outcomes. The current threat of terrorist attacks is a more serious threat to the homes and children of Americans than the potential threat women experienced when Saddam Hussein was in power; or the perceived threats from other states with which the US has conflicts. The danger of terrorism women, and especially mothers, may feel could cause women to actually support the use of torture more than men do. As several authors suggest, the socialization of parenthood for mothers is different than men; the responsibilities and expectations are not equal for men and women in regard to their roles as parents (Lott, 1981; Ruddick, 1980). Torture, unlike other foreign policy conflict issues, presumably poses no threat to Americans in the minds of most American citizens.<sup>1</sup>

This paper analyzes the gender gap in attitudes toward torture between men and women using the 2008 American National Election Survey, with a particular focus on the interaction between women and parenthood. The analysis is based on the consistent gender gap found in previous studies, especially in regard to foreign policy issues. This paper goes beyond the previous research by showing that it may not be easy to predict the direction of the gender gap in regard to support for torture. In order to answer these questions, first there is a literature review of the gender gap in attitudes among men and women. The literature review leads to hypotheses, which are tested herein. The hypotheses are tested with data concerning women's individual attitudes toward the appropriateness of torture on suspected terrorist suspects. The data allows for a test of whether there is a gender gap in attitudes toward torture, and in what direction this gender gap occurs.

## 2. Gender gap

The gender gap is a recent phenomenon in the study of women in politics. The study of this difference between men's and women's political behavior is fairly contemporary and has shown that women are more likely to identify with the Democratic Party (Kaufmann & Petrocik, 1999; Norrander, 1997; Norrander, 1999) and hold liberal policy positions (Cook & Wilcox, 1991; Norrander & Wilcox, 2008). The gender gap between men and women regarding policy positions ranges from very small in some areas such as domestic policy to much larger in foreign policy attitudes (Kaufmann, 2006; Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986). Several different factors, some demographic and others due to socialization, are hypothesized to cause the gender gap.

There are several theories as to why there is a gender gap in the US and why this gender gap has only recently become evident. Some authors point to the growing workforce participation of women, increasing average education of women as well as women's decreasing marital rates, all of which increase the likelihood of a woman holding more liberal views (Norrander & Wilcox, 2008). Beyond these demographic causes, the differences in socialization between men and women is what many researchers identify as an additional cause of women holding more liberal ideological views and policy positions.

The socialization explanation for the gender gap focuses on the different ways men and women are socialized to understand their roles in politics and society. Socialization influences the expectations placed on women. A girl's beliefs about the appropriateness and usefulness of violence in her life will translate directly into her attitudes toward public policy. Lott (1981) discusses the role that socialization plays in forming women's behavior. She notes "[s]ocialization may be defined as the process of learning those behaviors that are appropriate for members of a particular group" (Lott, 1981, p. 6). The socialization process is the process by which all individuals learn what behavior is appropriate and what is not.

From a young age girls are treated differently than boys; they are trained to be less aggressive and less confrontational (Lott, 1981; Valian, 1999). While Lott (1981) notes aggression and violence is not particularly encouraged for boys, it is seen as simply natural. However, for girls it is seen as neither good nor natural; rather "[a]n aggressive girl will thus get a clear and unambiguous message: aggression is both wrong and decidedly unfeminine" (Lott, 1981, p. 49). Socialization against aggressive behavior is supported by survey research showing that women, at much higher rates than men, feel that violence in a host of situations is inappropriate (Smith, 1984), and are much less likely to engage in violent behavior (Pollock & Davis, 2005). These attitudes explain at least a part of this gender gap in policy beliefs. The process of socialization occurs through the individual behaviors of people surrounding the child, including parents, educators, and other children.

Arguably, the relationship of the mother to the child is one of the most important. Ruddick (1980) discusses the important role that "maternal thinking" plays in the lives of mothers. She explains how important the role of motherhood is in guiding a mother's thinking and behavior, she argues this role is quite different from the role of a father. Ruddick (1980, p. 348) notes "[m]aternal practice is governed by (at least) three interests in satisfying these demands for preservation, growth, and acceptability. a mother typically considers herself and is considered by others as responsible for the maintenance of the life of her child." Seemingly, this important relationship guides decision-making.

## 3. Torture and the gender gap

A current and somewhat significant shift in US foreign policy in recent years is the "War on Terror," a response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. This event has led to many previously unacceptable policies becoming

<sup>1</sup> International norms encouraging or accepting the use of torture possible has a long term negative impact on the state of human right in the world; however, most American will not think this far into the future and likely will believe the only individuals that suffer from this policy are foreign terrorists.

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