



Women's political participation and gender gaps of education in China: 1950–1990

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ABSTRACT

Does women's political participation have long-lasting impacts on gender equality? Using female membership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a measure for women's political participation and relying on data provided by Chinese county chronicles, we show that female political participation in 1950 had a long-term and positive impact on gender equality of education in 1990. Relying on individual-level data provided by the 1990 census, we construct a panel dataset comprising of people of different age cohorts in individual counties and find that contemporary women's political participation significantly narrows the gender gap by raising girls' probability of enrollment and completion of school relative to those of boys. The positive effects remain when we use the time of "liberation", i.e., the time when the CCP got control of a county, to construct an instrument for the female party membership in 1950 and future periods. These effects also remain significant when the period of Cultural Revolution is studied. Finally, we test two channels, the policy channel and the perception channel, by which these effects were possibly exerted. For the policy channel, public spending on education is studied; and for the perception channel, parents' aspiration and investment for daughters' education are studied. The paper finds supporting evidence for the perception channel, but not for the policy channel.

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1. Introduction

Does women's participation in politics have long-lasting impacts on gender equality? A growing number of studies have tried to provide answers to this question. Several countries have adopted leadership reservation programs to raise women's status (Beaman, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2012); answering this question thus possesses strong policy implications. This paper provides a study using historical data from Chinese counties.

As women's preferences appear to be systematically different from men's, some researchers focus on how female political identities affect government policies that have gender implications. Thomas (1991) shows that in U.S. states with the highest percentages of female representatives, more priority bills dealing with issues of women, children, and families are introduced and passed. Miller (2008) also shows that the enfranchisement of women in the United States directly resulted in greater local public health spending and reduces child mortality. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) find that in India political reservations for women lead to

more investment in infrastructure closely related to women's needs. Using data on close elections between men and women in India in the period 1967–2001, Clots-Figueras (2012) also finds that woman politicians raise the probability for children to attain elementary education. However, in the study of U.S. mayors from 1950 to 2005, Ferreira and Gyourko (2014) suggest that the gender of politicians has no impact on policy outcomes, and female politicians' policy choices are consistent with the median voter theorem. Ban and Rao (2008) also find that female leaders do not perform differently from male leaders when they test the finding of Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) in southern Indian states with low levels of gender disparity. Clots-Figueras (2011) shows that whether female politicians perform more "women-friendly" in Indian states depends on their social positions.

Female participation in politics may also influence their social welfare by changing societal perceptions of women. Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, and Topalova (2009) find that in India the exposure of female leaders affects public opinions and attitudes toward women. Beaman et al. (2012) report that female leadership, acting as a positive role model for younger generations, can raise the aspiration and educational outcome of adolescent girls. Kalsi (2017) also finds that, in rural India, the underlying

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mechanism for the positive impact of female leadership on sex selection is a change in attitudes because of the exposure to female leaders.

However, do the positive results of female political participation still hold in authoritarian countries without general suffrage? In addition, is the social perception changed by women's political status long-lasting so that it could be passed over to future generations? Modern China under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) provides a perfect case to answer these two questions. China's long-lasting imperial history created a complete set of patriarchal institutions and male-centered values. Changes began to happen after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, and a thorough revolutionary transformation of women's role was accelerated when the CCP got power in 1949. Female participation in politics and the labor force was widely encouraged and, in some periods, even implemented as mandatory policies. The traditional Confucius ethics gave way to the values of "women can hold half the sky." At the same time, parents were more willing to invest in their daughters' education. According to our estimates from the 1990 census, the female-male ratio (FMR) of average schooling years rose from 0.21 in 1950 to 0.72 in 1990. This great transformation provides a perfect case to study the long-term effects of women's political participation. In this paper, we study how women's membership in the CCP contributed to narrow the gender gap in education from 1950 to 1990.

From the central Politburo Standing Committee, the most powerful decision-making body in China, to the village committee, the basic administrative unit in China, CCP controls the core power at every level of society. Through its grassroots organizations, tens of millions of people participate in political life by joining the party. Since its founding in 1921, the CCP has drawn women into the party, and this process has greatly accelerated since 1949. Together with other policies geared toward women liberation, CCP stirred up the enthusiasm of a substantial number of women to support its rule and to contribute to social production. In the Mao era, being a party member carried a substantial political and social status and, in many cases, implied better job prospects and material gains. Thus, joining the party was a significant indicator of a woman's political status.

We obtain the main part of our data by digitizing the county chronicles of approximately 1200 counties. Data are also obtained from CCP's internal statistics, the 1990 census, geographic information system (GIS) sources that provide county-level geographical information, and 2010 wave of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS 2010). In particular, the county chronicles provide data for CCP membership and its composition in a county, as well as some of its social-economic characteristics that are important for our study.

Our key explanatory variable, female party membership (*FP*), is measured by the share of woman members in the CCP at the county level. For the outcome variable that measures gender inequality of education, we not only work with the FMR of average educational attainments at the county level, but also gender gaps in school enrollment and completion based on individual data.

To show the long-term effects of female political participation, we first run a cross-sectional regression of the gender educational gap in 1990 on *FP* in 1950 (*FP50*). The regression is conditional on the gender educational gap, and CCP membership in 1950, a set of time-invariant geographical variables, as well as some social-economic variables in 1990. *FP50* always has a positive effect on the FMR of educational attainment for various educational indicators in 1990.

This positive result, however, may be subject to the confounding problem of omitted variables that affect both *FP50* and the FMR in 1990. The son-preference culture, for example, might influence both female participation in politics and girls' educational

attainments, and might persist over time. However, we do not have good measures to account for it. In the study of women's enfranchisement, a regression discontinuity design in close electoral races between female and male politicians is often employed to control for unobserved confounders (Brollo, Nannicini, Perotti, & Tabellini, 2013; Clots-Figueras, 2012; Ferreira & Gyourko, 2014). In the studies about India, the political reservation program is used as an ideal natural experiment (for example, Beaman et al., 2009; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Pande, 2003). Our paper adopts an instrumental variable (IV) approach to provide a clean identification. The instrument we use for *FP50* is the announced time of "liberation" of each county, i.e., the time when the CCP took power from the Nationalists (Kuomintang) in the county. On the one hand, *FP50* (and also the CCP membership in the whole population in 1950, *CCP50* hereafter) was higher in counties that were liberated earlier, due to a longer period of the CCP's control. On the other hand, "liberation" of most counties was a direct result of the CCP's military victory over the Kuomintang, and its route of success was irrelevant to the factors that could influence the gender educational gap, such as the regional culture and social attitudes toward women. The time of "liberation", therefore, can be treated as exogenous to the educational gender gap in future years.

Although part of the long-term effect of *FP50* can be attributed to its transforming role on social norms over the years, rising *FP* after 1950 probably played a larger role. To explore that possibility, we take advantage of the individual information provided by the 1-percent sample of the 1990 census and study the impact of contemporary *FP* on the gender gaps in school enrollment and completion. The data allow us to construct a panel of age cohorts in different counties. We find that contemporary *FP* generally plays a stronger role than *FP50* in reducing the gender gaps. We also construct an instrument for contemporary *FP* based on the time of "liberation" to deal with the possibility that there may be some county-specific and time-varying unobserved factors co-moving with both contemporary *FP* and children's educational attainments. The instrumented *FP* still has significantly positive effects on girls' educational attainments relative to boys'. Furthermore, we study the Cultural Revolution period alone because this was the period when primary education spread the fastest in China and unobserved political motivations might determine its speed. We add county-specific linear time trends to control for county-level unobserved political motivations and find that our panel results are invariant.

We test two channels, the policy channel and the perception channel, by which female political participation may work to improve the gender educational equality. For the policy channel, we investigate whether a higher *FP* increases public spending on education. We find that *FP* does not produce a significant estimate of this effect. To test the perception channel, we match the sample of CFPS 2010 and our sample and use the individual data of CFPS 2010 to study whether parents value more and thus invest more in their daughters' education if their own adolescence was exposed to a higher level of *FP*. We find a positive answer to that question, which lends support to the perception channel. The result also suggests that female political participation possesses a long-lasting effect to lift women's status, which could also be transmitted over generations.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we present a succinct description of the CCP's role in transforming the Chinese society, improving gender educational equality, and altering female political participation in the study period. We also provide evidence for the link between *FP50* and the time of "liberation". In Section 3, we introduce the data sources and the construction of variables used in our descriptive and econometric analyses. We present the empirical results concerning the legacy of *FP50* in section 4. In Section 5, we conduct panel regressions

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