

## WOMEN AND CITIZENSHIP. IS THERE A CIVIC `GENDER GAP` IN ROMANIA?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

An extensive body of research documents the differences in participation and political involvement between men and women in both old and new democracies. This paper advances an exploratory analysis of political participation in Romania, asking whether men and women approach differently their public engagement as citizens. In the case of Romania, survey data show that women are somewhat less participatory than men and that their involvement is notably lower in collective forms of actions. Also, women are less involved than men in political parties and have a lower interest in politics. However, women and men are very similar in how they assess the attributes of a good citizen and in how they evaluate the effectiveness of specific forms of political action.

**Key words:** political participation, gender, citizenship, Romania, women

### Introduction

The inquiry of gender differences in political activity became a habitual practice in political science. The gender gap in participation has been a recurrent theme in the field (see for example Burns 2007, Burns et al 1997, Norris 2002), with many studies on the matter revealing a lower participation of women compared to that of men (Inglehart & Norris 2003; Verba, Burns & Schlozman 1997). The seeming persistence of a gender gap in participation is often approached from the perspective of active citizenry, by considering the significance of citizens' involvement for the actual representation of their voices; in this sense, Verba, Burns & Schlozman (1997, 1053) rightfully point that: "those who are less active pay a price in terms of representation."

In this paper, I ask whether Romanian women and men participate differently in politics. Romanian society is characterized, according to Tufiş

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(2014) by insufficiently developed pre-requisites for citizen political participation. This unfavorable context is an interplay of 'low levels of tolerance to others and low levels of trust in other people', coupled with a closure of the political system, 'without many access points that could be used by people to transmit their demands to the political system.' (Tufiş 2014, 304) The focus of the paper is on ordinary citizens, therefore it leaves aside the issue (otherwise important) of gender bias in the representation in public offices (related for instance to the gender composition of the Parliament). I use data collected through World Values Survey and survey data of a national representative study, to ask whether Romanian women differ, in their political attitudes and participation, from Romanian men. In other words, the paper asks whether nowadays there is a political and civic gender gap, in a society often referred to as being permeated by a patriarchal political culture (Miroiu 2006, Vlase 2013).

### **The meaning(s) of political participation**

Political participation has been defined as the 'activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action - either directly by affecting the making of or the implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies.' (Verba, Scholzman & Brady 1995, 38) Van Deth (2001, 6) underlines the 'expansion of the modes of political participation', a development prompted by the 'disappearing borderline between political and non-political spheres of modern society', as well as by the growing amplitude of 'volunteering and social engagement.'

A common dichotomy in the literature on participation is that between conventional and unconventional forms of participation (Barnes & Kaase 1979; Uslaner 2004), a demarcation prompted by the diversification of the range of activities available for citizens to engage in. This separation is not always fully accepted, because gradually the "unconventional" seems to have developed into a normal occurrence of democratic participation (Stolle & Hooghe 2011). Nevertheless, it seems that, with time, the new forms of participation (examples of which are boycotting and signing petitions) succeeded to attract more women, thus lowering part of the gender gap: "Women are an obvious group that is mobilized through emerging forms of participation" (Stolle & Hooghe 2011, 129).

Acknowledging the variety of forms of political participation is useful not solely for conceptual clarity, but also in view of the different resources required by the different types of political engagement (Coffé and

Bolzendahl 2010). This may further help explain why some citizens are more active in certain participatory actions and less engaged in acts that presumably entail access to resources less accessible to them.

While the variety of participatory acts seems ever growing, it is clear that not all citizens participate with equal intensity or get involved in the same type of activities. Predictors of political participation and activism refer to individual demographic attributes, resource constraints that impact on peoples' likelihood for participation as well as to the attitudinal underpinnings of action.

In a first sense, age (Campbell 2006) and gender (Norris 2002) are commonly mentioned as influencing participation. Second, the emphasis on resources is pervasive in the literature. In this sense, education becomes the key attribute that defines an individual's social status and a variety of related means, such as "the access to political information" (Dalton 2008, 58). Along these lines, "[T]he central claim of the widely accepted socioeconomic model is that people with higher education, higher income, and higher status jobs are more active in politics [...] Moreover, since resources are unevenly distributed throughout societies, these factors help to explain differences in political participation related to gender, race/ethnicity, age and social class" (Norris 2002, 29). Third, attitudinal factors are important, and they include partisanship, a sense of political efficacy, people's "beliefs about the citizen's role and the nature of political action" (Dalton 2008, 58). To these, one can add social trust and interest in politics (Bernhagen & Marsh 2007).

### **How women and men participate differently?**

Paxton et al (2007) observe that literature on political science discusses a multitude of dimensions along which men and women differ in terms of political attitudes and behavior. They include differences in "voting, campaigning, and leading, as well as gender differences in political knowledge, socialization and attitudes" (Paxton et al 2007, 264). What is more, the dissimilarities contoured by gender are believed to reflect also at the level of politically relevant attitudes. Thus "the gender gap in political knowledge and interest are well established. Across both developed and developing countries, men are consistently found to be more interested in politics and have more political knowledge than women" (Paxton et al 2007, 267). In a similar vein, Verba, Burns & Schlozman (1997, 1051) observe

that “compared to women, men are more knowledgeable about and more interested in politics and more likely to feel politically efficacious.”

In a study on British respondents, Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2003) operationalized civic activism as developing along three components: individualistic acts, contact actions and collective actions.<sup>2</sup> The involvement of men and women in the three categories of participation proved to be slightly different, with women more inclined to take part in individual acts and less likely to engage in collective acts. Nonetheless, overall (taking into account the number of political actions undertaken), women did not differ significantly from men in their activism.

The typology of participation types developed by Pattie et al has been used in further studies focused on the impact of gender for political engagement. For example, Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) use a categorization of political participation focused on ‘institutional participation’ (that includes voting and membership in political parties) and ‘political activism’ (where they build on the three categories earlier referred to: private actions, collective actions and contact actions). The authors found no differences between men and women in terms of voting, yet revealed that membership in political parties is more an attribute of men than of women. In addition, they found women to be overall less involved than men in ‘political activism’, with the notable exception of private types of participation, where women exceeded men in levels of participation.

Data collected by the 2002 European Social Survey revealed that British women were slightly less active than men (The Electoral Commission 2004, 22). However, in this study, women voted as much as men and were similar to men in their involvement in ‘cause-oriented activism’ (The Electoral Commission 2004, 22). Men, though, proved to be more involved in campaign politics and in voluntary associations. The same source reports a ‘positive gender gap’, revealed by the ESS 2002 data for several Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway), where women were overall more active than men (The Electoral Commission 2004, 22).

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<sup>2</sup> In this operationalization, *individualistic acts* include: donating money to organizations, boycotting products, buying products for ethical reasons, signing petitions, raising funds for organizations, voting in local government elections, wearing a campaign badge/sticker; *contact acts* include contacting: a public official/a politician/the media/an organization/a solicitor; *collective acts* include: participating in a public demonstration, attending a political meeting; participating in an illegal protest; forming a group of like-minded people. Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003, p. 449.

Schlozman et al (1995) approach the gender gap in participation in terms of specialization of participation. Accepting that participation can take many forms, the authors inquire the possibility that women and men “specialize in different forms of activity, derive different gratifications from taking part, and bring different policy concerns to their participation” (Schlozman et al 1995, 267). These expectations were grounded in an extensive literature drawing from feminist theory, historical studies and political science. The analysis of survey data revealed women to be more similar to men than different, in terms of participation. They found indeed women to participate slightly less than men, yet in terms of the ‘specialization’ of participation, the hypotheses grounded in the literature were largely disproved, data showing, for instance, that “women do not participate disproportionately in grassroots, organizational, local, ad-hoc political activities” (Schlozman et al 1995, 288).

In the case of ‘new democracies’, women had to learn step by step, alongside men, the practice of democratic participation. However, some authors argue that women were confronted with a comparative disadvantage because “[W]omen’s political participation has been discouraged, in large part by the problems they faced in the early transition years, specifically in the frequent discontinuation of social supports and the rise in unemployment among women.” (Rueschemeyer 2011, 113). On data from European Social Survey 2008, Coffé (2013) finds the gender gap in political participation to be larger in the Eastern European countries than in the Western democracies. However, the same author reveals that in both European regions the differences between men and women in terms of participation are smaller among young citizens. This finding can be read as a confirmation of the importance of socialization for political participation.

### **Why women and men participate differently?**

Lister (2007) approaches the issue of women participation from the point of view of inclusive citizenship and brings into discussion principles developed within the feminist theories of citizenship.

Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) locate several types of explanations developed in the literature to clarify why women participate politically less than men. According to their account, a first type of explanation focuses on women’s lower resources for participation, resulting from comparatively more precarious access to socio-economic resources. A second stance emphasizes

the differences in political socialization that contribute to women's comparatively more modest appetite for political engagement. Socialization is important because it helps shape and engrain different expectations about one's public roles in the community.<sup>3</sup> Along these lines, Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) find in the literature assumptions that relate women to orientations towards the private realm, in contrast with men, who are more likely to partake in public actions and tend to enjoy more autonomy. Verba, Burns & Schlozman (1997, 1052) refer to an additional explanation postulated by the literature, related to "a more general set of predispositions that differentiate women and men, in particular, men's greater aggressiveness and taste for conflict."

When the discussion is about women entering politics, common factors that hinder their involvement include "domestic responsibilities" and "prevailing cultural attitudes regarding the role of women in society" (OSCE/ODIHR 2016, 32).

In sum, the literature suggests that an interplay of socialization effects (that may also reflect the dominant societal imagery on the role of women) and a problematic access to resources may explain why women are less involved in politics than men or why they choose different paths of participation than those selected by men.

### **The Romanian illustration**

In the following, I turn the discussion towards Romania, one of the "new" democracies of Europe, a society described as generally lacking a culture of participation (Tufiş 2014). I ask whether in this case women participate less than men in the public life and also whether their participation is (irrespective of amplitude) qualitatively different than that of men. For that, I use data collected by World Values Survey (waves 5 and 6) and later in the analysis data from a national representative survey conducted in 2012.

I start with two issues that are important through their ability to act as predictors for political participation: interest in politics and the perceived importance of politics.

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<sup>3</sup> On the importance of early political socialization for the gender differences of political behavior see also Hooghe, M. and Stolle, D. 2004. 'Good girls go to the polling booth, bad boys go everywhere: gender differences in anticipated political participation among American fourteen years old', *Women and Politics* 26, pp. 1-23.

**Table 1.** Interest in politics among Romanian men and women

Interest in politics by gender	2005			2012		
	All	M	W	All	M	W
Very interested	4.6	6.2	3.2	8.6	11.3	6
Somewhat interested	26.9	35.5	19.8	28.2	33.3	23.6
Not very interested	34.3	34.0	34.5	32	28.9	34.9
Not at all interested	32.9	23.6	40.7	30.8	26	35.3
No answer	1	0.7	1.2	0.2	0.4	-
Don t know	0.3	-	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.2

Data from World Values Survey, Wave 5 (2005-2009) - for Romania data is from 2005; and Wave 6 (2010-2014) - for Romania data is from 2012, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

From 2005 to 2012, Romanians' declared interest for politics increased slightly, yet what remained a clear tendency is the discrepancy between the percentages of men and women who say they are very and somewhat interested in politics. A similar development can be observed regarding the perceived importance of politics, another issue that places women at a perceivable distance from men (see table below).

**Table 2.** Importance of politics for Romanian men and women

Importance of politics by gender	2005			2012		
	All	M	W	All	M	W
Very important	4.1	4.3	3.8	5.7	6.7	4.7
Rather important	17.3	23.5	12.2	17	20.2	14.1
Not very important	39.6	40.4	38.9	38	38.8	37.2
Not at all important	36.3	29.2	42.2	38.1	33.3	42.5
No answer	1.7	1.9	1.7	0.5	0.6	0.5
Don t know	1	0.7	1.2	0.7	0.4	1

Data from World Values Survey, Wave 5 (2005-2009) - for Romania data is from 2005; and Wave 6 (2010-2014) - for Romania data is from 2012, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

In terms of specific political actions, it can be observed that for all types of activities included in the WVS battery of questions, men surpass women in terms of participation. Women are also more inclined than men to reject the future involvement in actions ('would never do'), particularly when it comes about joining boycotts or taking part in any other kind of protest. Among the forms of action included in the survey, having signed petitions recorded the highest percentage of women offering affirmative answers (9.4%).

**Table 3.** Political actions among Romanian men and women

Engagement in forms of political actions by gender	Signed petition		Joined a boycott		Peaceful demonstration		Joined strikes		Any other act of protest	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
Have done	11.5	9.4	3.2	1.7	12.9	5.9	7.3	6.1	3.6	2.3
Might do	32.9	25.8	22	10.8	41.9	37.8	33.3	24.6	29.5	19.3
Would never do	52.6	59.7	70.3	82.1	43.2	53.5	57.5	65.9	62	71.8
NA	0.9	0.5	0.8	0.5	1	0.4	1	0.7	1.5	0.6
DK	2.1	4.5	3.8	4.9	1	2.4	0.8	2.8	3.4	6.1

Data from World Values Survey Wave 6 (2010-2014); Romanian data is from 2012, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

Women are modestly present as partakers in specific political actions; however, activity in the public realm can also be reflected in the various organizational memberships. Below are the percentages of men and women who are non-members or active/inactive members in different types of organizations. Women clearly surpass men in their membership to churches or religious organizations. They are less involved in political parties than men, but tend to be slightly more active in educational organizations.

**Table 4.** Membership (active and inactive) in different types of organization, by gender.

Membership in associations by gender	Church/religious		Sport or recreational		Art/music/Education		Labor union		Political Party		Environment	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
Not a member	82.9	77.9	87.5	92.6	92.9	91.7	90.4	91.8	89.4	93.6	94.6	96.4
Inactive member	8.8	8.4	4.5	4	2.9	3.4	4.5	3.3	5.5	3.7	3.1	2.4
Active member	7.8	13.3	7.4	2.9	3.7	4.5	4.4	4.4	3.9	2	1.9	0.8
.....continued below												
Membership in associations by gender	Professional		Humanitarian / charity		Consumer		Self-help /mutual aid		Other			
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W		
Not a member	93.3	95.3	94.7	95.9	95.9	97.3	95	95.1	95.6	96.8		
Inactive member	3.1	2.6	3	2.1	2.4	1.9	1.7	2.3	2	2.1		
Active member	2.8	1.7	1.9	1.6	1.2	0.3	2.9	2.1	2	0.7		

Data from World Values Survey Wave 6 (2010-2014); Romanian data is from 2012, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

The difference up to 100% is represented by non-answers and "don't know" answers.

All things considered, one cannot overlook the general picture revealed by the numbers: overwhelming percentages of Romanian citizens are not members in associations and half or more say they would never engage in either of the political actions they have been asked about. Therefore, the fact that women tend to participate less and have to a less extent associational memberships needs to be read against this background of general low civic and political engagement.

The next analysis uses data from 2012, from a national survey, with 1100 adult respondents.<sup>4</sup> The benefit of this data is that the survey included several batteries of questions that examined the weight attached by

<sup>4</sup> Data collected in 2012 in a research by Centrul de Resurse pentru Participare Publica (CeRe) and Centrul pentru Studiul Democratiei, Babes Bolyai University (CSD).

respondents to a number of attributes of ‘the good citizen.’ In addition, it also examined the perceived effectiveness of several forms of political participation.

In terms of discussing politics, 53 % of male respondents said they discuss politics often or sometimes, whereas the percentage of women who offered these answers was 41. Women and men are distrustful of people in similar extents (about 80% of both men and women said they have no trust, very little or little trust in people they meet for the first time). Data shows that 80.2% of men are not members in any association. The percentage of women non-members was 81.5. About 90% of both men and women said they have not taken part in volunteering in the past year.

**Table 5.** Membership in associations, by gender

<b>Members in...</b>	<b>Men %</b>	<b>Women %</b>
Sport association	6.3	1.7
Church/ religious association	3.2	5.1
Environment association	2.2	1.3
Animal rights organization	0.8	1.5
Organization of veterans/pensioners	2.4	1.7
Charity organization	2.8	1.7
Cultural association	1.8	1.7
Professional association	1.8	1.2
Political party	4.2	2
Labor union	6.1	6.6
Other organization	0.8	1.7

Against a generally low level of membership in associations, data shows women to be more prone to join religious organizations and less inclined to be members of political parties. Except the sport organizations, clearly favored by men, the differences in membership are rather small, in one or another direction.

Asked whether in the past year they have engaged in any of the political actions included in the list (see Table 6), 36.8% of men and 42.6% of women said they did not take part in any. In terms of amplitude of participation, men have a mean of 1.7 actions in which they took part, whereas for women the mean is 1.3. Below there is a detailed description of the actions

in which respondents say they have engaged in the year prior to the survey.

**Table 6.** Involvement in political actions, by gender

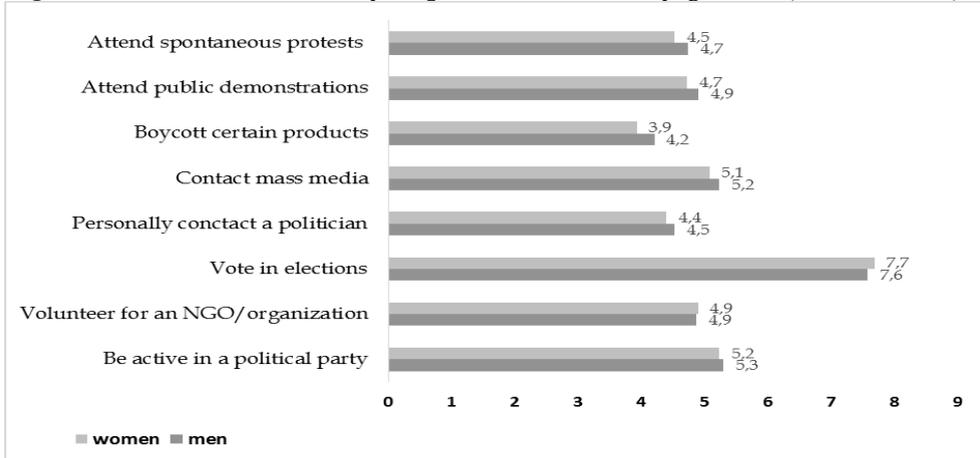
<b>In the past 12 months...</b>	<b>Men %</b>	<b>Women %</b>
Contacted an MP	3	1,9
Contacted an NGO	4,4	4,7
Contacted a public clerk	25,8	17,9
Involved in a political party	7,1	4,1
Involved in a trade union	6,3	4,4
Worked in an NGO	3,4	4,1
Worn electoral symbols/badges	6,5	3,4
Signed petition	8,1	7,4
Attended public demonstration	10,3	4,4
Attended a strike	4,8	4,6
Boycotted certain products	7,4	5,8
Intentionally bought certain products	5,6	6,4
Donated money	43,9	43,7
Contacted media/appeared in media	4	3
Contacted courts	11,2	7,3
Took part in spontaneous protests	8,8	3,2
Took part in public meetings	10,6	3,9
Other activities	2,6	1,3
Abstained from voting	8,7	7,5

The results show that men surpass women for most forms of political participation. Women seem to be more reserved than men with respect to actions that require direct contact with officials and they are less prone to take part in collective contentious actions such as demonstrations or spontaneous protests. Also, women's attendance of public meetings is notably below that of their male counterparts. Involvement in political parties is another area that attracted more men than women.

However, if we look at how citizens assess the efficiency of specific political actions, we can see that men and women assign very similar weights to these acts of involvement. In this more abstract assessment, women no longer differ much from men in how efficient they think protests and public demonstrations can be for influencing public decisions, nor in how

they score the involvement in political parties. Voting is for both men and women the action that seems to be most efficient in influencing the outcomes of policy.

**Figure 1.** Perceived efficiency of political actions, by gender (mean scores)<sup>5</sup>

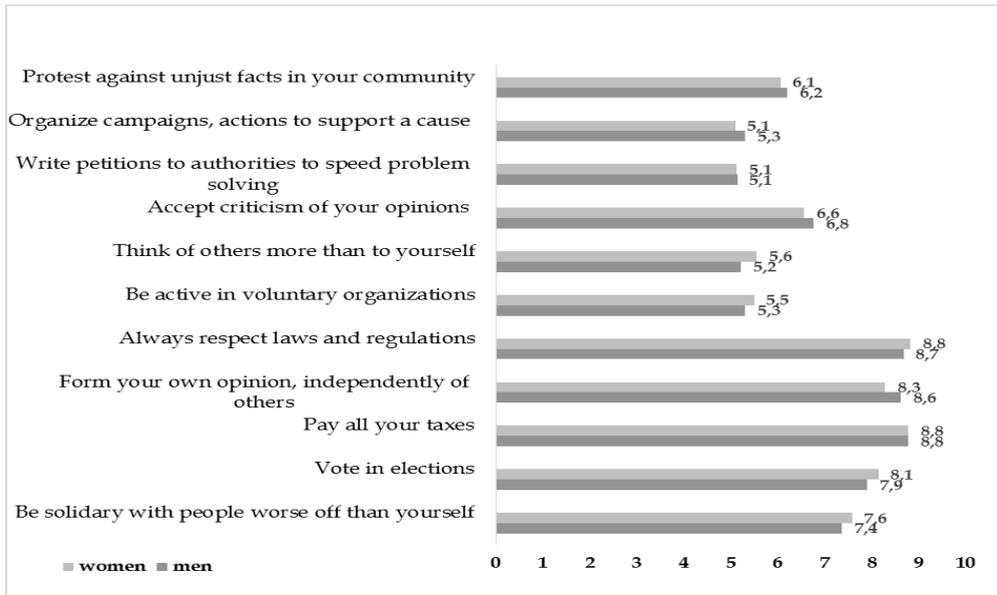


The similarity between men and women in their normative assessments is revealed also in the way they understand the attributes of a good citizen.

**Figure 2.** Importance of attributes of a good citizen (mean scores), by gender<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The efficiency could be assessed on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means ‘not efficient at all’, and 10 means ‘very efficient’. The figure shows the mean scores.

<sup>6</sup> The importance given to the attributes from the list could be assessed on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “not at all important” and 10 means “very important.”



The picture above reveals that men and women are strongly like-minded at the level of citizenship norms. They are in agreement on the importance of law-abiding issues, on voting and on acting in solidarity with others. At the level of actual participation, the results come close to findings from other studies that show women to orient less towards collective actions and favor more private forms of political participation (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2003). Yet, as shown above, whatever differences emerge in terms of action are largely absent at normative level.

## Discussion

This paper offered a preliminary discussion on the political participation of men and women in Romania, in response to a widespread debate on the existence of a gender gap in participation. In that view, the paper mainly focused on the 'how' and less on the 'why' question, by describing several trends in civic and political involvement with respect to gender.

It has been underlined from the outset that generally and irrespective of gender, Romanians do not excel in political participation or in associational membership, a fact confirmed by recent data. In terms of gender differences, data shows that women are less interested in politics than men, and tend to assign less importance to politics. Women are slightly less participatory than men, and, in accordance with the existent literature, they are less inclined to take part in contentious collective forms of participation

(such as demonstrations or protests). Regarding membership in associations, women and men seem to have an overall similar level of associational affiliation, even though the preferences for specific organizations are somewhat different. More women than men join religious organizations and the membership in political parties is, among women, more modest than among men.

Nevertheless, women and men are strikingly similar in their views on the meanings of good citizenship. Data shows that, regardless of gender, Romanian citizens strongly value the importance of respecting the laws, the observance of fiscal obligations, having autonomous opinions on matters, and voting in elections. Women are also very similar to men in how they assess the efficiency of specific forms of political action. Women are as inclined as men to appreciate the effectiveness of voting, of being members in political parties, of engaging in protests and demonstrations. Therefore, at this level of abstract assessment of citizenship norms and efficiency of forms of engagement, one cannot speak of a gender gap among Romanian citizens.

The question why equal weights attached to political actions normatively do not translate in equal rates of actual participation remains unanswered. It is possible that women perceive a number of barriers that hinder their actual involvement in actions that they otherwise assess as potentially effective in influencing public outcomes. These mechanisms, however, are difficult to capture through survey data, which is why, for a better understanding of women's motivations to participate or not to participate, a qualitative study would add more valuable insights.

In addition, it is useful to acknowledge that comparing men and women in the aggregate tells only one side of a wider story. Within the large category of women citizens, there is great diversity and it would be hasty to assume that all women think and act politically the same way. Attributes like age, education and income may have an impact on how women approach politics normatively and at the level of action.

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