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Risk, Gender, and Public Engagement Gaps

Paul A. Djupe

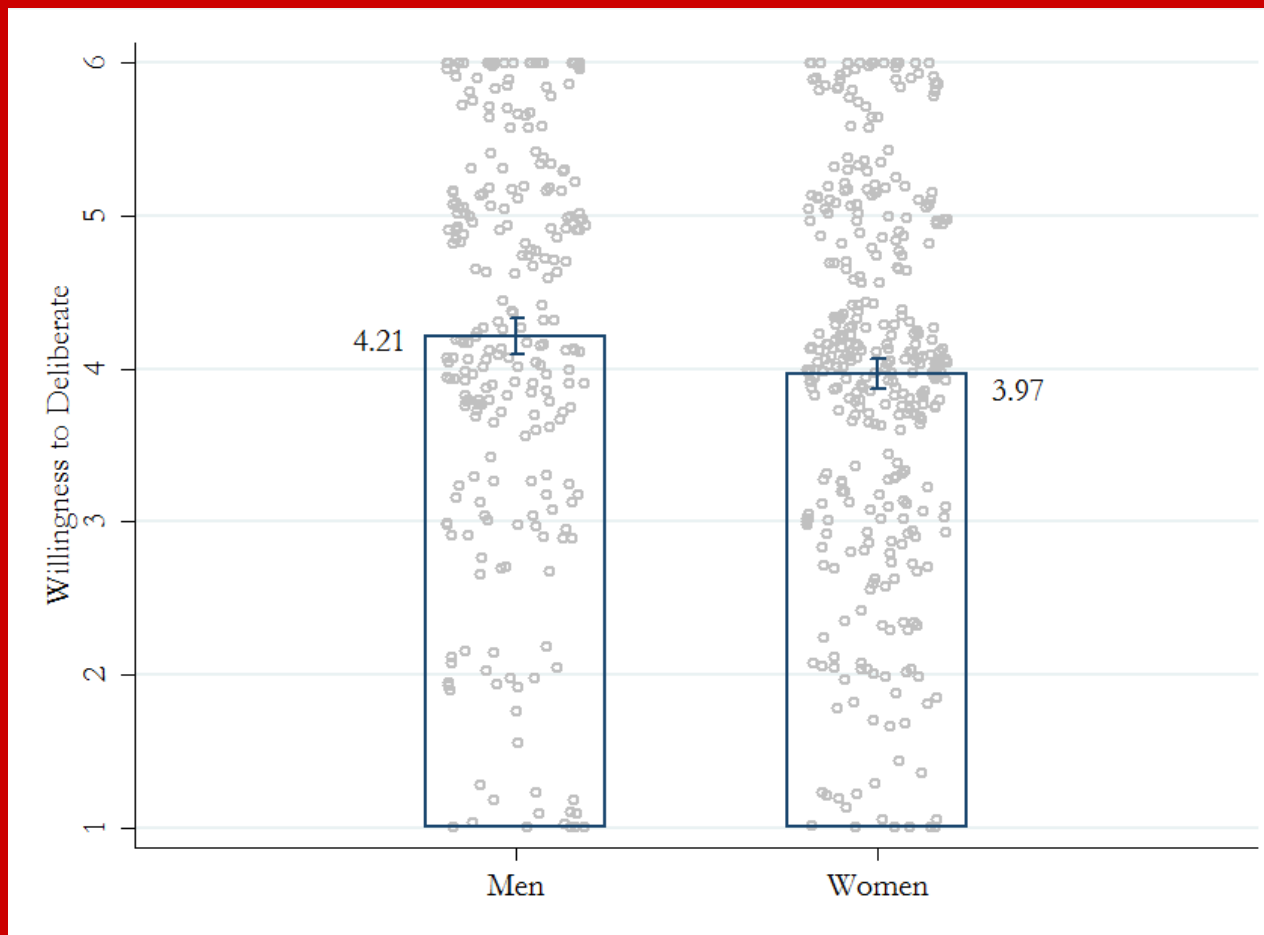
January 23, 2017

By Paul A. Djupe

[Part 1 in a forthcoming series]

While watching the crowds in Washington DC and around the world at the Women's March that dwarfed the thin inauguration crowd on Friday, it reminded me of a puzzle that my senior seminar and I found in the fall of 2015. We asked Denison students if they would be willing to deliberate about a campus policy issue that they cared about. We were surprised to learn that women indicated somewhat less willingness to participate (see Figure 1 – the difference amounts to 5 percent). Why?

Figure 1: Gender Gap in the Willingness to Deliberate Among Denison Students



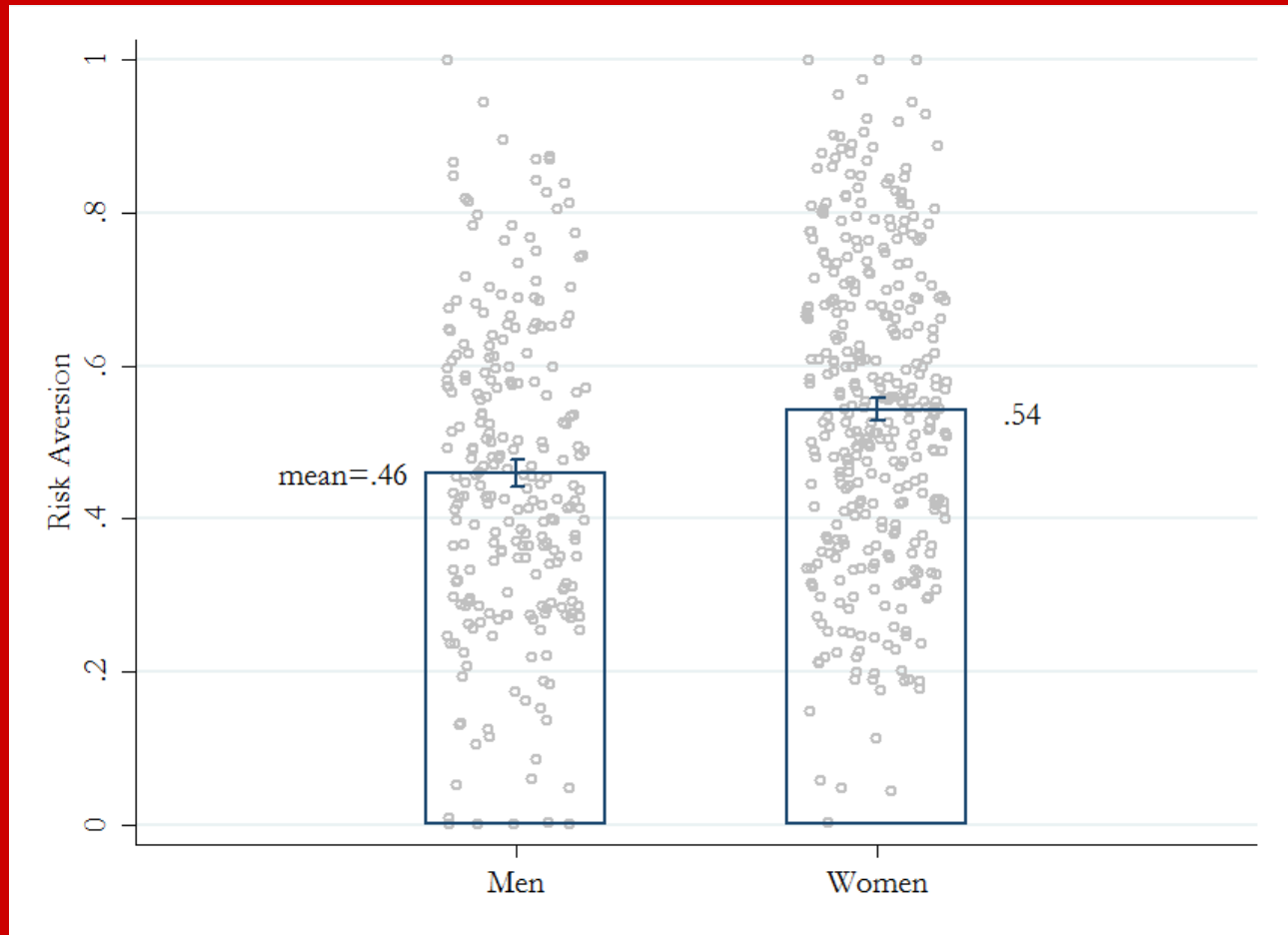
Saturday's marches aside (3+ million estimated across the country), researchers (including this one) have consistently found a small, but statistically significant gap in the political activity levels of men and women – women engage in less, on average.(see [note 1](#)) Most of that gap has been chalked up to a difference in resources. Women once had less education and continue to earn less money compared to men, both of which help inform, motivate, and enable political activity.

The puzzle is that at Denison men and women have (...wait for it...) the same amount of education, and it would be unlikely that their family income levels differ (they don't differ in the data we have). So, holding resources constant because of the sample, what could explain the gap in their willingness to deliberate with their peers?

One possible factor to consider is their reaction to risk. Being cautious about making life changes and finding it easy to take risks could lead to inhibitions in all sorts of social behaviors, such as healthy choices, criminal activity, sexual activity, and others. In fact, risk aversion is one of the leading explanations of why women are more religious than men in the sociology of religion literature. Risk aversion has also been found to inhibit political activity in several studies. The logic is that advocacy opens you up to possible social disagreement, conflict, and thus relational status changes (like [unfriending](#)). It is no wonder that people find those who share partisanship [more attractive](#).

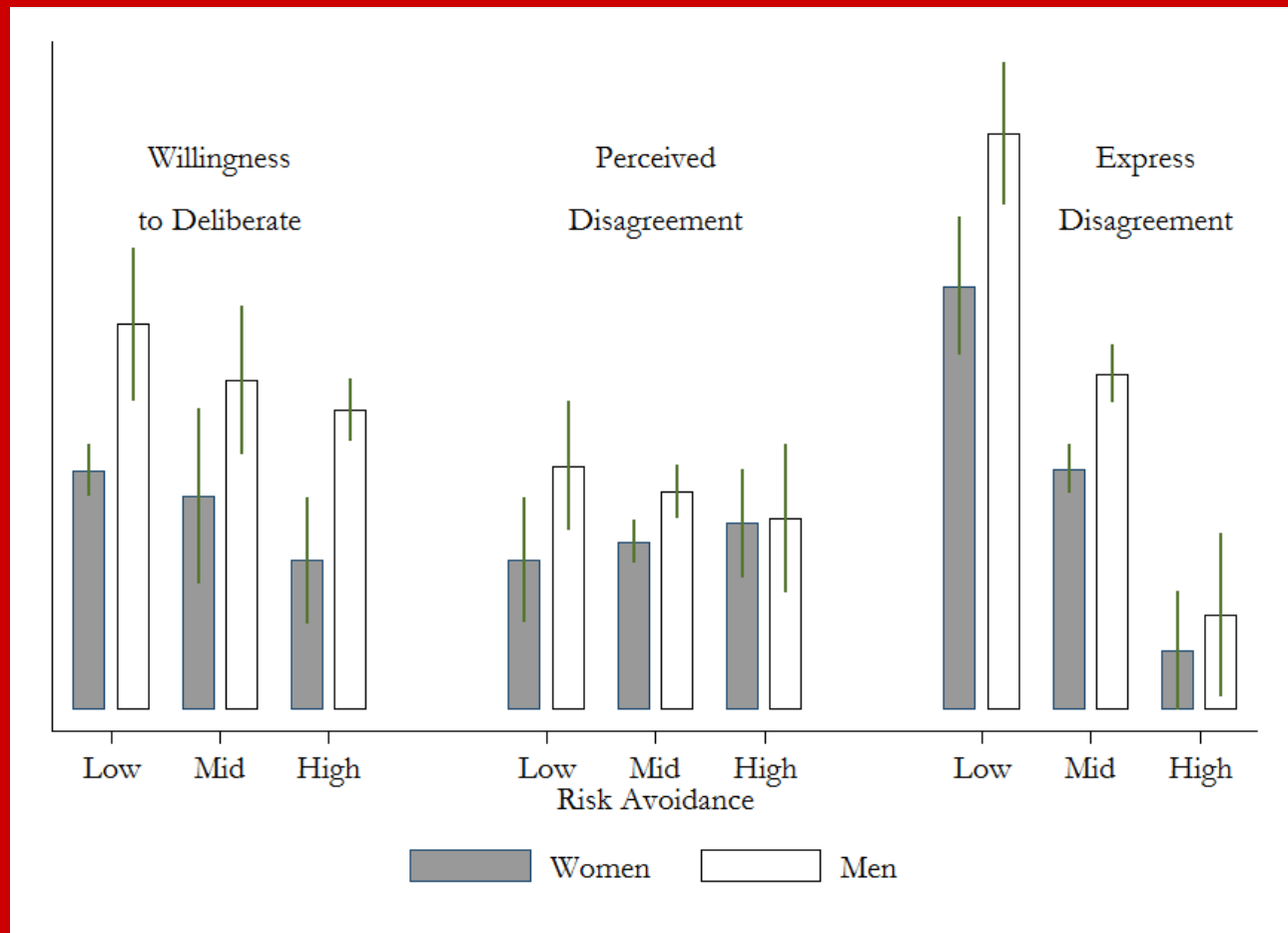
Could risk attitudes among men and women at Denison be a culprit in creating the deliberation gap? The “fizzy pop” graph (Figure 2) shows that women are significantly more risk averse than men (by about 10 percent), though of course there are both men and women across the full range.(see [note 2](#)) Is this linked to willingness to deliberate?

Figure 2: Risk Aversion is Higher Among Denison Women



Yes. The most risk avoidant express 14 percent less willingness to deliberate than the least risk averse. In contrast, women are about 5 percent less willing than men are. Figure 3 shows this in the left grouping of bars – willingness declines with risk sensitivity. Before resting on that claim, we should make sure that the risk averse do not simply perceive the world differently; that is, they might be risk averse because they are surrounded by disagreement. The middle portion of the graph shows this is not the case – perceived disagreement at Denison is statistically equivalent between men and women and across risk levels. What risk aversion does is inhibit the willingness to express disagreement in a potential forum (shown in the right grouping of bars) — willingness to engage declines precipitously as risk aversion climbs. But, and this is important, there are still gender gaps in the willingness to express disagreement among those less risk averse.

Figure 3: How Risk Aversion (by Gender) Structures Willingness to Deliberate, the Perception of Disagreement on Campus, and the Willingness to Express Disagreement to Peers



This evidence tells us that risk aversion is an important consideration in whether men and women get involved in public life. Because women are more risk averse than men, we have good reason to look beyond resource differences to psychological dispositions to help us explain the small gender gap. However, the evidence presented in Figure 3 also shows us that risk is not everything and in fact differences between men and women often remain at most levels of risk. Therefore, our search is not over to explain gender gaps in political engagement.

So, what do we do with these results? Here is where the discussion can get quite contentious. Should we allow people to opt out of public life as their dispositions drive them? Should we target interventions to make public life less risky? Should we attempt to tamp down disagreement so that more people feel able to participate? My own preference would be to consider interventions that reduce risk and do not impinge on the diversity of arguments expressed in public meetings. Could routinized turn taking, inviting a friend, and more inclusive decision rules (unanimity vs majority) help achieve these aims?

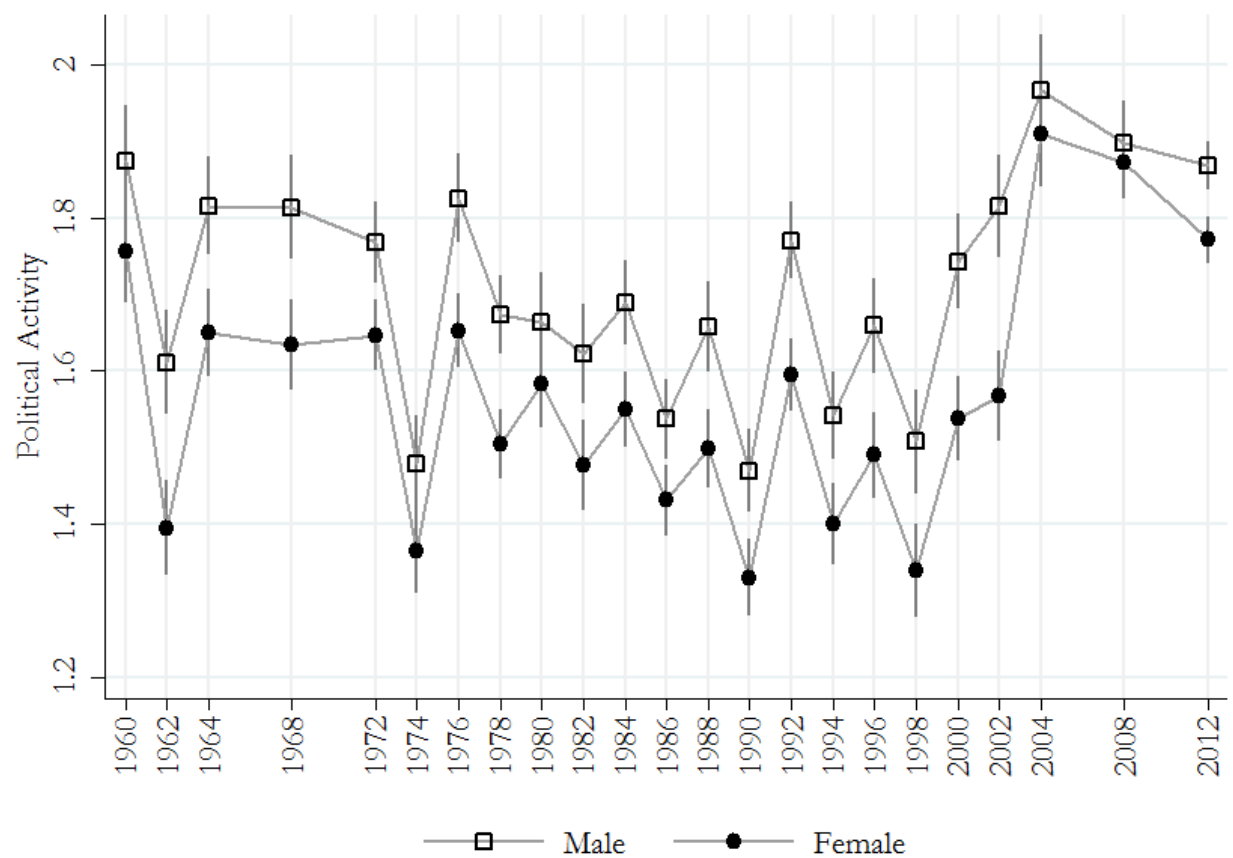
Lastly, how can we square this discussion of the gender gap and risk with the enormous outpouring of dissent this weekend? For one we shouldn't confuse population statistics with raw numbers – 3+ million is a huge number but a very small percentage of the population. There are clearly large numbers of people with low levels of risk aversion, but another important reason that these sorts of events happen is that people attend in groups. I have several friend groups who roadtripped to DC and it was clear that social support (and carpooling) is crucial. Hearing scattered stories of how this is a friend's first march conveyed powerful object lessons in exactly how diverse groups are brought into public life.

Paul Djupe is a local cyclist who happens to have taught political science at Denison since the Harry Potter series was published. You can learn more about his work at pauldjupe.com.

Notes

The featured photo was borrowed from Brene Brown — you can read more about her and her work [here](#).

1. Here's a look at the political activity gap from 1960 to 2012 using the American National Election Study. The gaps are small, but persistent.



2. In a 2016 national sample using the same measures, women are also significantly more risk averse than men but only by about half as much as in the Denison sample.