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Mothers' Silent Exit: Bereavement in Armenia after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War

This policy brief examines how wartime bereavement affected political participation in Armenia after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Using linked administrative voter-roll and casualty records and an original Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) survey of 1,676 parents, we show that losing a conscript son reduced turnout much more for mothers (28.7 percentage points) than for fathers (12.4 percentage points) in the 2021 election. The effect reflects bereavement rather than military service alone, and a within-household comparison shows mothers withdrew 10.6 percentage points more than fathers. Survey evidence points to emotional loss as the mechanism, especially among women, rather than logistical barriers or ordinary dissatisfaction. Post-war democracies should therefore treat bereaved women's abstention as a democratic inclusion problem and create credible, non-partisan, trauma-informed channels for voice.

Why the gender gap matters

Wars are often expected to reshape elections through blame and punishment. In Armenia, the conditions seemed ideal for retrospective accountability: defeat in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, territorial loss, and roughly 3,800 dead soldiers. Yet the incumbent government survived the 2021 snap parliamentary election, winning 54.0 percent of the vote after receiving 70.4 percent in 2018. A vote-share reading suggests that the public did not punish the government enough. Turnout evidence suggests a different interpretation: many with the strongest personal grievance left the electorate.

This brief focuses on the gender gap in that withdrawal. The central finding is not simply that bereaved parents voted less. It is that mothers withdrew much more than fathers, including within the same affected households. This matters because elections only show the choices of people who vote. Grief may instead lead some citizens to stay at home, so their dissatisfaction does not show up in election results. In Hirschman's (1970) terms, post-war grievance can become exit rather than voice.

Research on grief suggests that men and women may cope with the loss of a loved one in different ways. Some studies find that men are more likely to respond through practical action, while women are more likely to express grief emotionally (Glick et al., 1974; Martin & Doka, 2000; Martin & Wang, 2006; McDowell et al., 1988).

Research on elections also shows that men and women can differ in whether they vote and which parties they support (Abendschoen & Steinmetz, 2014; De Vaus & McAllister, 1989; Duverger, 1955;

Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Jelen et al., 1994; Morgan-Collins, 2023; Norris, 1996; Randall, 1987; Rokkan & Lipset, 1967; Skorge, 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015). However, we know much less about whether war-related loss changes men's and women's voting behavior in different ways, and what explains these differences.

Voting Records and Survey Evidence from War-Affected Parents

Our analysis in this policy brief uses two different sources of information. First, we linked official voting records from the 2017, 2018, and 2021 elections, covering about 2.5 million registered voters, with records on military casualties and their parents. This allows us to see whether people actually voted, rather than relying on what they later report in a survey. This is important because people often overreport voting in surveys (Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2012). We then compare parents whose sons died in the war with similar parents whose sons were of conscription age during the war and survived. We define the war cohort as men born on or before 30 June 2002, who were old enough to be called up in spring 2020 and were therefore already of service age when the war began on 27 September 2020. Men born after this cutoff generally reached conscription age only after the fighting ended.

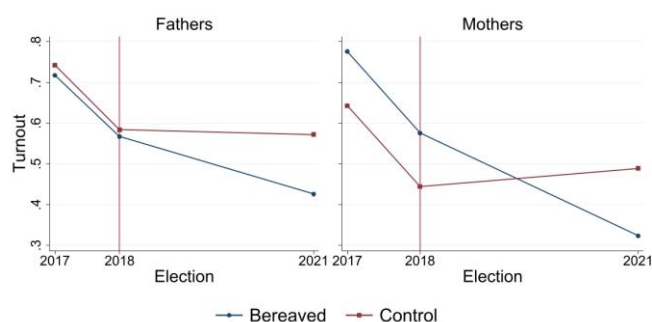
We focus on parents rather than wives or partners for two main reasons. First, most of the soldiers who died were very young, typically around ages 18–20, and many were therefore not married. Second, available records allow us to identify parents with relatively high accuracy. In particular, sons' surnames and recorded father names allow



for precise matching with fathers. Identifying wives or partners is more difficult with the information currently available and would require additional data collection.

Second, we collected an original Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) survey of 1,676 parents of war-cohort sons in April-May 2026. The survey records vote recall for 2018 and 2021, voting intentions for 2026, blame attribution for the defeat, reasons for not voting, and detailed information on the son's service type and wartime status. Because recall and stated voting can be biased, the survey is not used as a standalone causal estimate of turnout levels. Its purpose is to identify the mechanism behind the administrative result: whether lost incumbent support becomes opposition voting, non-voting, or broader political disaffection.

Figure 1. Turnout trajectories for bereaved and control fathers and mothers



Source: Authors' calculations using linked administrative records.

The results show a clear difference between fathers and mothers. Between 2018 and 2021, losing a son reduced fathers' turnout by 12.4 percentage points and mothers' turnout by 28.7 percentage points, as illustrated by Figure 1.

These first estimates come from separate analyses for fathers and mothers. This means that we

compare bereaved fathers with other fathers, and bereaved mothers with other mothers. We are not necessarily comparing the mother and father of the same soldier.

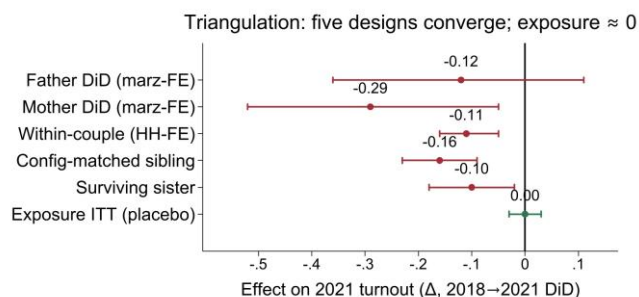
We therefore also look at true couples, meaning mothers and fathers who live in the same household. This allows us to compare parents who experienced the same loss and shared the same household environment. In this within-couple comparison, mothers were 10.6 percentage points less likely to vote than fathers after the loss of their son; see Figure 2. The similar patterns before the war, between 2017 and 2018, also suggest that bereaved and comparison families were not already moving in different directions before the war.

Several additional results help explain the gender gap. First, the decline in turnout seems to come from losing a son, rather than simply from having a son who was old enough to serve during the war. Parents whose sons were of conscription age during the war but survived did not vote less than parents whose sons reached conscription age only after the ceasefire. Since we do not observe actual conscription, we cannot identify exactly which sons were called up to serve. Second, most bereaved parents did not disappear from the voter register. About 99 percent of the effect is intensive: bereaved parents remain registered but do not vote. Third, the effect is not limited to parents. Sisters in bereaved families also became less likely to vote after the war, even though they were not themselves at risk of conscription; see Figure 2.

Our findings also add to what we already know about how war affects political behavior. Earlier



Figure 2. Estimated effects on post-war turnout



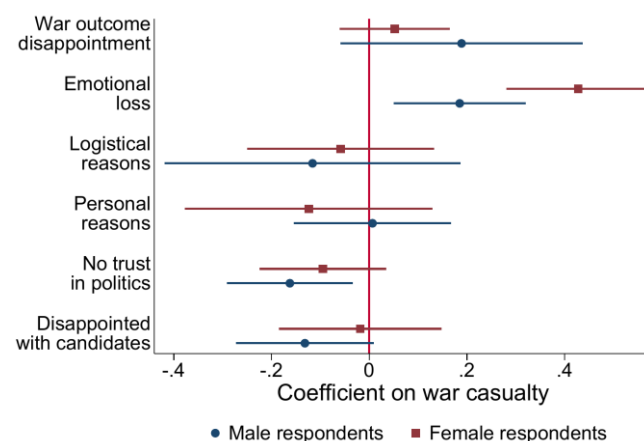
Source: Authors' calculations using linked administrative records. The figure shows the estimated change in the probability of voting after the war for different groups. The vertical axis reports the effect in percentage points. Negative values indicate lower turnout after the war. Points show the estimated effects, and vertical lines show 95% confidence intervals.

studies show that wartime casualties can change how people vote, how they view governments, and how they take part in politics (Gartner & Segura, 1998; Grossman et al., 2015; Karol & Miguel, 2007; Koch, 2011; Kriner & Shen, 2010). Other research finds that experiencing conflict can sometimes make people more politically active (Acemoglu et al., 2022; Bellows & Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009; Gilligan et al., 2014; Voors et al., 2012). Our results show an important difference: while war may encourage participation among some people, the personal loss of a child can instead lead bereaved family members to withdraw from voting. This also differs from earlier research showing that political participation can spread within families (Bhatti et al., 2017; Dahlggaard, 2018; Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2012; Golder & Golder, 2016; Nickerson, 2008). In our case, the family effect works in the opposite direction: withdrawal from voting appears to spread within the household.

Mechanism: emotional loss, not ordinary dissatisfaction

The survey evidence we collected helps explain why mothers withdraw more. The mechanism graph (Figure 3) shows coefficients for several self-reported reasons for not voting. War casualty exposure is especially strongly associated with female respondents citing emotional loss as compared to males ($p=0.001$). By contrast, logistical barriers, personal reasons, distrust in politics, and disappointment with candidates do not show the same clear female-specific increase.

Figure 3. Mechanism evidence from the original survey



Source: Authors' original CATI survey, April–May 2026.

This distinction matters for policy. If abstention were mainly logistical, transportation and registration assistance would be enough. If abstention were mainly candidate disappointment, party-system reform would be the central issue. But if abstention is driven by emotional loss, then democratic inclusion after war also requires trauma-informed, gender-sensitive institutions. The point is not to pressure bereaved mothers to vote. It is to make sure the state does not misread withdrawal as consent.



Policy recommendations

These findings have implications for institutions responsible for democratic participation and support for war-affected families. Election authorities, public institutions, and civil-society organizations should ensure that political withdrawal among bereaved citizens does not become invisible. The objective is not to mobilize grief for electoral purposes, but to provide credible and non-partisan opportunities for bereaved families to remain heard in public life.

- 1. Monitor gendered turnout after conflict.** Election authorities, observers, and researchers should look beyond aggregate vote shares and report turnout patterns by gender and affectedness where data protection allows.
- 2. Build trauma-informed civic outreach.** Non-partisan information campaigns should avoid blaming abstainers and instead lower psychological and administrative barriers to participation, especially for bereaved mothers.
- 3. Create non-electoral channels for voice.** Public hearings, local consultation forums, and memorial-policy processes can give bereaved families ways to be heard between elections, reducing the burden on a single election day.
- 4. Use turnout gaps as an early-warning indicator.** Election authorities and researchers should monitor whether turnout falls disproportionately among war-affected women after conflict. Persistent gaps can identify groups whose political preferences may be becoming underrepresented and can help target further research, consultation, and non-partisan civic outreach.

Conclusion

The gender gap after war is not only about which parties men and women support. It is also about whether they vote at all. In Armenia, losing a son reduced turnout for both fathers and mothers, but the decline was much larger among mothers. The evidence suggests that this was mainly a response to bereavement itself, rather than simply having a son of military age, and that emotional loss played an important role.

This has an important policy implication. Election results do not tell the full story if people who are most affected by war stop voting. When bereaved mothers withdraw from elections, their views become less visible in the political process. Post-war policies should therefore pay attention to these differences in participation, keep support for bereaved families separate from party politics, and create trusted, non-partisan ways for affected families to make their concerns heard.

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