

# Culture, Capital and the Political Economy Gender Gap: Evidence from Meghalaya's Matrilineal Tribes

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## Abstract

What explains the gender gap in political engagement and economic policy preferences? Many scholars point to material resources, while others credit cultural determinants. We identify and test an important link between these factors: cultural lineage norms that structure entitlements to resources. Studying the relationship between culture and resources is challenging in societies where both disadvantage women. We analyze a unique setting: northeast India, where matrilineal tribes live alongside patrilineal communities. Patriarchal cultures and political institutions are shared, but lineage norms are distinct: patrilineal groups distribute inherited wealth through men, while matrilineal tribes do so via women. We conduct survey and behavioral experiments with representative samples of both communities, alongside extensive qualitative research, and find that the gender gap reverses across patrilineal and matrilineal groups. Our results indicate that lineage norms—which determine who gets to make decisions about wealth and how—are key determinants of the political economy gender gap.

*Short title:* Culture, Capital and the Political Economy Gender Gap

*Keywords:* Gender and politics, redistribution preferences, political participation, culture, norms, matrilineal societies

Supplementary materials for this article is available in Appendix A in the online edition. Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (<http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop>). This study was conducted in compliance with relevant laws and was approved under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) by Yale University's Human Subjects Committee (IRB Protocol No. 1401013238), as well as under Category 2 by New York University Abu Dhabi's Institutional Review Board. Support for this research was provided by New York University Abu Dhabi and Yale University.

Around the world, women are significantly underrepresented in politics, from participation to elected positions (Teele 2018; Verba, Burns and Schlozman 1997). A gender gap is also evident in policy preferences, with women and men expressing systematically different priorities about how states should raise and invest resources (Clayton et al. 2019). Women are more likely than men to favor redistribution, social security, and insurance, for example, and less likely to be critical of taxation than men (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006). Because participation is a conduit for policy change, women’s programmatic preferences are less likely to translate into government action when their political engagement is limited (Sapiro 1981). Explaining why women and men’s participation and policy preferences diverge is thus crucial for remedying gender-related inequities (Robinson and Gottlieb 2019) and grasping fundamental dynamics of representation (Bhavnani 2009).

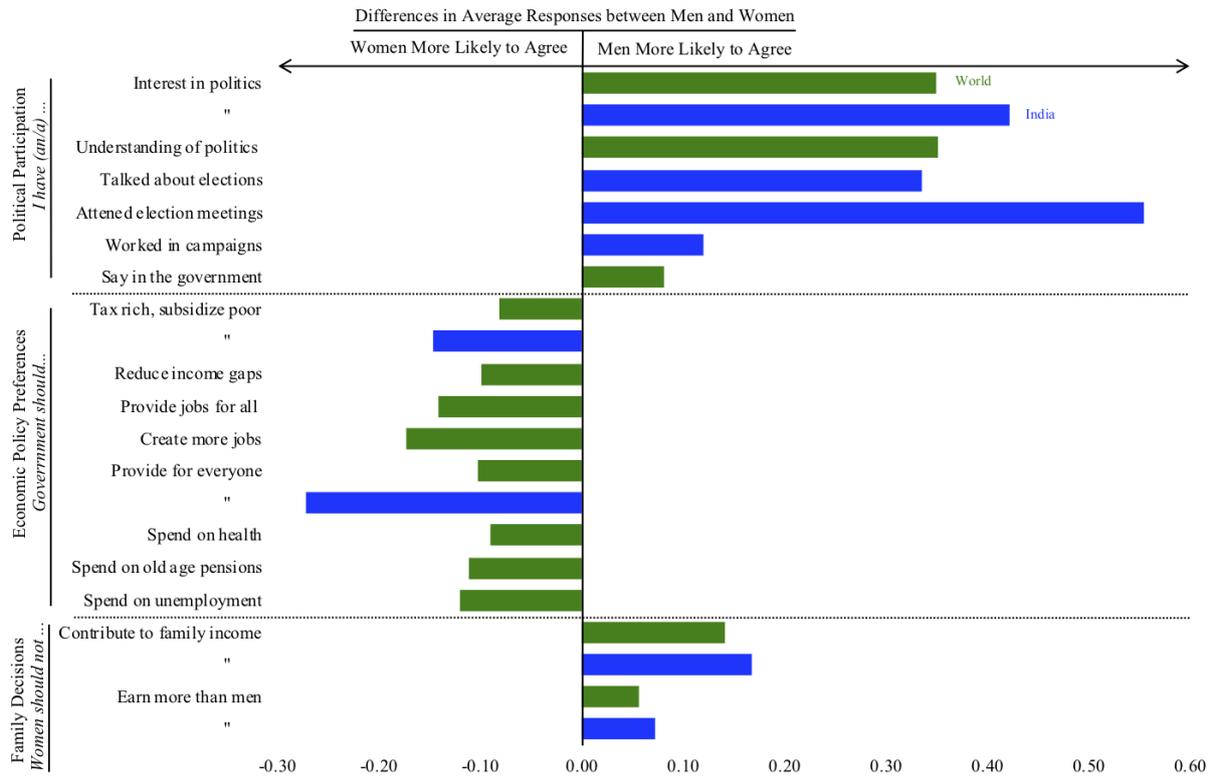
Figure 1 documents the gender gap in political participation and economic policy preferences in countries around the world, and in the world’s largest democracy, India.<sup>1</sup> We term this divergence in the political behavior and policy preferences of women and men the “political economy gender gap.” Our focus departs from classical tests of the gender gap in preferences, measured as voters’ broad ideological support for parties on a left-right spectrum (Lipset 1960; Inglehart and Norris 2000; Shorrocks 2018). Instead, we consider a distinct set of preferences about state intervention to redistribute wealth. This follows recent work documenting how women across developed and developing countries prefer the state to invest more in redistribution than men do (Bleck and Michelitch 2018; Gottlieb, Grossman and Robinson 2016; Folbre 2009).

What explains the political economy gender gap? Most work emphasizes one of two factors. One side argues that patriarchal cultural norms dampen women’s political participation and promote their support for a larger, more caring welfare state (Franceschet, Piscopo and Thomas 2015). A second set of arguments focuses on material determinants.

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<sup>1</sup>Men are more likely to vote, express political interest, claim political knowledge, attend political meetings, and discuss elections. Women are more supportive of government policies to reduce income inequality, provide care for those in need, and subsidize the poor. Women typically prioritize taxation and intervention to ensure wellbeing, whereas men prefer a smaller, less redistributive welfare state.

Figure 1: Political Economy Gender Gap around the World



Note: Additional details presented in Online Appendix A1

Men’s greater stocks of wealth—in the form of assets, property, and income—yield more resources and incentives to invest in political participation, particularly to limit taxation and redistribution (Verba, Burns and Schlozman 1997; Iversen and Soskice 2001).

We argue, by contrast, that analyzing the gender gap by separating culture and resources, or studying culture as mainly driven by economic factors (Alesina, Giuliano and Nunn 2013), misses a central point. Cultural norms themselves influence which gender owns and manages wealth in societies. In particular, cultural prescriptions about kinship privilege different genders via lineage traditions—that is, whether group membership and ancestral wealth are transmitted through men, in patrilineal societies, or women, in matrilineal groups (Levi-Strauss 2008). We consider lineage a cultural norm because it characterizes a set of beliefs—of who “belongs” to a given society and what they are owed—based on rational, commonly known individual expectations about how others in a given society will act under various contingencies (Greif 1994, 915). Here, we focus on the impact of lineage on the likelihood that a particular gender will inherit and con-

trol wealth. Our contention is that the institutional ordering of wealth via female-based kinship—matriliny—enables gendered political cooperation that differs from widely observed behavior in patrilineal cultures.

We leverage local variation in gendered inheritance norms across neighboring matrilineal and patrilineal societies in the northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya. Matrilineal groups represent roughly 13% of the world’s population (Robinson and Gottlieb 2019, c.f. Murdock 1967). We study an “economic” variant of matriliney, present in Meghalaya’s Garo, Khasi, and Jaintiya tribes. Property passes directly from mother to daughter, and both genders participate in managing family wealth (Ryndem 2017). Living alongside the matrilineal groups in our study are communities with patrilineal norms regarding inheritance and economic decisionmaking. Property travels from father to son, and economic resources are owned and controlled exclusively by men. This setting allows us to examine the extent to which cultural norms about wealth distribution affect gender-specific political attitudes and behaviors, while holding constant many institutional features that may also influence the gender gap (Gneezy, Leonard and List 2009). In particular, both groups are subject to similar formal political institutions, as well as patriarchal traditions privileging men with positions of social authority in the public domain (Nongbri 2010).

We provide the first rigorous paired comparison of adjoining matrilineal and patrilineal communities to examine how differences in lineage norms predict variation in political participation and policy preferences. For our analysis, we conducted a large, face-to-face survey of representative samples of men and women in both matrilineal and patrilineal communities. An innovative series of survey and behavioral experiments probed respondents’ patterns of political participation and policy preferences about taxation, redistribution, and intrahousehold bargaining. We also collected extensive ethnographic data via field research to adjudicate the potential mechanisms that may drive our results.

We first test our hypothesis that political engagement should vary based on the private stock of resources a given gender is able to devote to this time-intensive behavior with social and material costs. We expect that men’s representational advantage in patrilineal cultures stems from their differential ownership of inherited property, congruent

with Schlozman, Burns and Verba (1994)'s findings in the US. In contrast, we expect that women's sustained, inter-generational entitlements to property inheritance in matrilineal societies give females a clear advantage in allocating personal resources to political engagement. We find that the gender gap in participation flips in matrilineal relative to patrilineal groups. Traditional wealth owners—patrilineal men and matrilineal women—are more politically engaged than culturally-excluded genders (patrilineal women and matrilineal men, respectively).

The reversal of gendered entitlements to resources in matrilineal societies is radical because it occurs within larger patriarchal systems where men hold social and political entitlements. As a result, lineage norms not only enable women's political engagement, but also alter incentives for gender-based coordination within families. Where men and women each hold some entitlements, there are incentives for genders to negotiate across household domains in order to realize their own priorities. This creates a private channel for individuals to accomplish personal goals, lowering the value they place on state action and leading economic policy preferences to converge across genders. By contrast, when men hold all entitlements, there are fewer incentives for intrahousehold coordination over allocating resources. This drives a wedge between women's (higher) and men's (lower) value for public action, leading preferences to bifurcate across genders. Using experiments embedded in our survey, we find that preferences regarding the size of the welfare state diverge in patrilineal cultures. Men—who exclusively own and manage wealth—are more likely to oppose costly redistribution. Women, excluded from wealth ownership and management, remain cost insensitive. In matrilineal cultures, however, where women and men jointly manage wealth, preferences converge and the gender gap closes.

We illuminate how one set of cultural norms relevant across the developed and developing world—lineage—structure attitudes and behavior through their influence on intrahousehold decisionmaking. This extends work on the importance of the private roots of political action (Brulé 2020; Khan 2017; Prillaman 2017; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006) by mapping how cultural mandates for distributing wealth affect the negotiation of power in the polity.

## Theory of Lineage Norms and the Gender Gap

The literature offers two main explanations for the political economy gender gap. A first set of theories argues that gendered cultural roles drive this divergence. Culture is manifest in norms about what constitutes appropriate behavior for individuals, with socially-enforced sanctions for non-compliance. In “classic patriarchy,” control over the relations of production—economic, social, and political—is held by the senior male in the private sphere of the household, and by states that reproduce similar gendered relations of dominance in public (Sapiro 1981; Kandiyoti 1988; Braunstein and Folbre 2001). Crucially, patriarchal behavioral prescriptions discourage women from advancing their preferences through political participation (Khan 2017; Bleck and Michelitch 2018). In addition, the assignment of domestic support roles to women in patriarchal cultures is often credited with explaining their relatively greater support for “nanny” (welfare) state policies (Lundberg and Pollak 1993; Inglehart and Norris 2000). Meanwhile, men’s patriarchal role as providers of financial security for the family undermines male support for state policies that restrict their personal agency over wealth.

A second set of theories attributes gendered patterns of political empowerment to differential access to capital. Because political participation is costly—requiring contributions of time and resources—gender-based differences in income, property, and wealth drive disparities in political engagement (Verba, Burns and Schlozman 1997). Intrahousehold “control over major financial decisions” also influences policy preferences (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 1997, 373). Gendered disparities in the ability to distribute household wealth help explain why men tend to be more sensitive to financial costs imposed by taxation, and are more willing to participate politically to preclude redistribution in both industrialized and developing countries (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006; Robinson and Gottlieb 2019). For excluded genders, limited access to material resources disrupts the link between taxation and the economic burden of the welfare state (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 1997). Financial exclusion also creates demand for public goods, which women historically leveraged to secure a “maternalist” welfare state (Skocpol 1992).

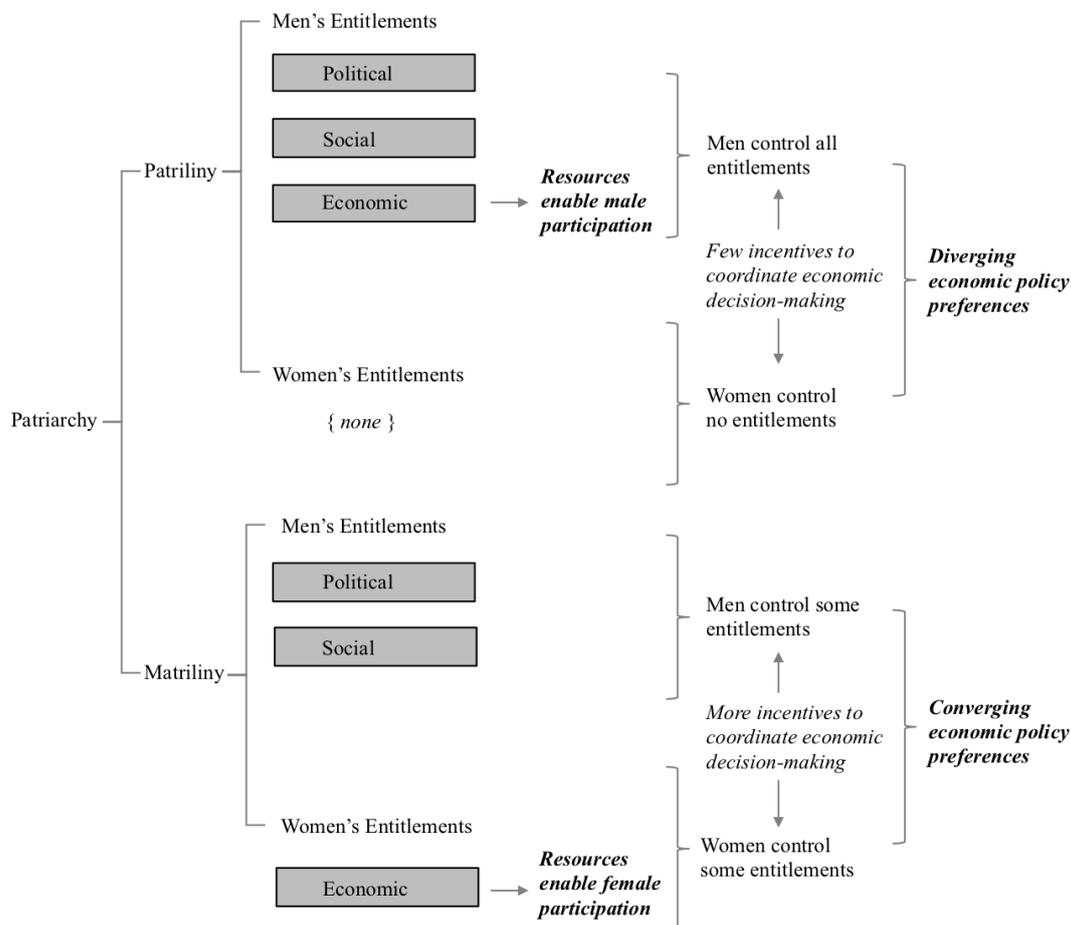
We posit that these prior approaches miss a critical point: culture and capital jointly shape the political economy gender gap. Cultural norms can bias representation by systematically tilting the scales of gender-based access to wealth. To build our argument, we apply a key insight from anthropology: lineage norms governing wealth ownership and control generate gender-specific economic advantages (Schneider and Gough 1962; Levi-Strauss 2008). Cultural prescriptions affect each gender’s ability to accumulate and deploy wealth across generations. If lineage norms create important resource inequalities across genders, and if these inequities influence political behavior and policy preferences, as we hypothesize, then cultural norms regarding the intergenerational transfer of wealth are important explanations for gendered disparities in representation.

It is typically quite difficult to observe variation in how culture structures wealth because most societies are patriarchies where norms concentrate political and social power in men’s hands and patrilineal structures privilege men as custodians of inter-generational wealth. Men accrue relatively more *social and political* advantages than women, and consistently benefit from greater *economic* opportunities to inherit wealth (Braunstein and Folbre 2001). However, we leverage a relevant disjuncture within patriarchy based on variation in gendered property rights. As feminist theorists explain, in “classic patriarchy,” social norms about the broader, institutional rules of the game governing human interaction are grounded in the patrilineal transfer of wealth and title within patrilocal families (Kandiyoti 1988; Braunstein and Folbre 2001). Yet, within patriarchal systems, economic variants of matriliney prescribe alternate norms dictating the intergenerational transmission of wealth from mothers to daughters (Schneider and Gough 1962). Social and political hierarchies remain consistent—senior males continue to be the relevant representatives of households in society and the state—but this rests on the “private” organization of property rights as matrilineal, transferred within matrilineal households.

Figure 2 illustrates our theory regarding the importance of culturally-sanctioned inequities in resources for structuring the political economy gender gap. Within patriarchal systems, patriliney accords men control over political, social, *and* economic entitlements. Matriliney bifurcates entitlements across genders, with men retaining positions of political

and social control and women holding authority over economic resources. We expect to observe the gender gap shift across patrilineal and matrilineal cultures in two ways.

Figure 2: Cultural Resource Entitlements, Participation, & Political Economy Preferences



First, norms governing inheritance should differentially enable the gender that traditionally owns resources (patrilineal men and matrilineal women) to participate in grassroots politics. Following Burns, Schlozman and Verba (1997), we consider political participation broadly, as behavior intended to influence government action. Participation is a costly individual investment in altering slow-moving political institutions, making it more likely among those who can afford to be patient and wait for investments to mature, i.e., those possessing larger and more secure stocks of culturally-determined resources.

We see several implications of how resources may alter political behavior. Members of groups with cultural entitlements to wealth should be more able and willing than those without such entitlements to engage in core political activities like voting. Greater stocks of resources may also affect political attitudes involving trust and accountability.

In Levi and Stoker (2000, 476)’s words, political trust “involves an individual making herself vulnerable to another individual, group, or institution that has the capacity to do her harm or to betray her.” Those with greater financial resources that can be deployed as means of self-protection should be better poised to undertake the risks necessary to build trust in local legislators and political parties and demand accountability from representatives. As matrilineal and patrilineal groups present mirror images of gendered entitlements to resources, we expect to see a reversal in gender-based patterns of political engagement and willingness to bear participation’s costs across these groups.<sup>2</sup>

Second, differences in the gendered distribution of resource entitlements alter incentives for coordinating financial decisionmaking in the household. This affects whether economic policy preferences converge or diverge across genders. In patrilineal cultures, men can direct their authority over all (political, social, and economic) entitlements toward achieving their individual goals via private channels without depending on government support. Thus, men’s value for state action to redistribute resources diminishes *as the cost of public intervention rises*. Women’s exclusion from all entitlements limits incentives for men to coordinate economic decisionmaking with women in the household. This means that women lack private channels by which to achieve goals, and accordingly place a high value on state intervention to obtain resources, *independent of its cost*. The gender-imbalanced allocation of entitlements in patrilineal societies creates divergent values for public action that drive a wedge between men and women’s policy preferences.

By contrast, in matrilineal cultures, while men maintain political and social entitlements, it is women who hold wealth entitlements. This creates substantial incentives for men and women to coordinate intrahousehold decisionmaking across domains, creating a private channel for *all family members* to negotiate over, demand, and access resources—from household goods to education opportunities. By balancing entitlements across genders, matriliney incentivizes intrahousehold coordination over the deployment of resources and influence for both genders. We posit that this private channel presents

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<sup>2</sup>In contrast, since men control political entitlements in both patrilineal and matrilineal groups, *formal* positions of power such as political office are predicted to remain a male domain across cultures.

an important alternative to relying on resources via public redistribution, making both men and women in matrilineal societies sensitive to the pecuniary burden of the welfare state and therefore more reluctant to support public action *as its cost rises*.

## Matrilineal Context and Study Setting

A growing literature examines the consequences of matriliney for individual and group behavior in distributive politics. Robinson and Gottlieb (2019, 23) define “matrilinearity as a long-term program that consistently infuses women with greater access to resources.” To specify a broader framework for how lineage institutions differentially affect political economy outcomes, we map variation in the contemporary distribution of resources to matrilineal women. The Akan of Ghana typify the low end of the spectrum: the mother’s line determines descent but men primarily own property (traveling from a mother’s brother to her son) and marital households are organized around men’s prior home (La Ferrara and Milazzo 2017). The Mosuo of Yunan, China are at the high end. Women exclusively inherit land, households center around mothers (matrilocal-to-natolocal), and “walking marriages” limit a father’s presence to reproduction (Nongbri 2010, 161).

Many matrilineal groups on the African continent are clustered toward the lower end of this spectrum, with inconsistent patterns of women’s inheritance and matrilocality (Robinson and Gottlieb 2019; Lowes 2018). Meghalaya’s groups are closer to the high end of the spectrum, with inheritance firmly passing via women and matrilocality strongly enforced. Yet, men possess an equal role in coordinating resource management (Nongbri 2010). Meghalaya thus represents a strong (but not extreme) case for testing the impact of matriliney’s economic prescriptions on political economy outcomes, relative to matrilineal cultures in Africa (Robinson and Gottlieb 2019; Muriaas et al. 2019).

Matrilineal norms about political roles also merit consideration. Women’s political authority appears greater in Africa than Meghalaya. For example, women play a central role in selecting the paramount chief for the Chewa of Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia (Muriaas et al. 2019). In Meghalaya, women are excluded from formal positions of political power (Nongbri 2010). The primary advantage that matrilineal culture in Meghalaya presents women pertains to *economic* entitlements, as distinct from political authority.

**Meghalaya Context** Our study is situated in Meghalaya’s state capital Shillong, where the “largest part of the population is found,” with residents numbering just over 350,000 (Ryndem 2017, 53; Government of India 2011). Shillong is home to a large set of neighboring matrilineal and patrilineal groups. Matrilineal tribes, in particular the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos, make up approximately 91 percent of Meghalaya’s tribal population. The remaining 9 percent comprise patrilineal tribes (Government of India 2011). Mizos and Hmars are the most numerous patrilineal tribal groups, and have resided in Meghalaya since the state’s inception (Haokip 2013). 14 percent of Meghalaya’s population is non-tribal. Originating mainly from other northeastern states, with the remainder from mainland India, they today reside primarily in Shillong.

**Matriliny Norms** According to Ryndem (2017, 53), the Khasis “universally and traditionally follow” matrilineal principles, including social organization around descent from a common ancestress (*Iawbei*), who is the founding mother of the clan (*kur*). Within each clan, the most important unit is the immediate family, organized around the mother (*iing*). Ryndem (2017, 53-4) explains that “the *iing* is premised on the principle of the ritual unity of the sibling group and rests on the cooperation between [two parties:] the [sister] (*ka Khadduh*) who inherits the property and the elder brother who exercise(s) control and authority over the affairs of the *iing*... Khasi matriliney not only lays special emphasis on the solidarity of the matrilineal descent group, but also ensures that brothers have a permanent place in the natal *iing*”. It follows that “democratic principles are the pillars of the Khasi way of life” (Ryndem 2017, 57).

The equality of decisionmaking power that results in Meghalaya’s matrilineal groups cannot be overstated. Nongkinrih (2002, 163) explains that this begins with the equitable “division of authority between the head of the *iing* (mother) and her eldest brother” for managing resources. Furthermore, when important decisions arise, both sit with adult family members to “take collective decisions on various” issues about “managing the property.” Such equality translates directly into the daily process of intrahousehold decisionmaking. According to Mawrie (1981, 66-7): “Neither the husband nor the wife has a position lower than the other in their relationship. A woman has her own status

as a mother, and a man his status as a father and it is their business to manage and run their own household according to their wisdom, mutual understanding, and cooperation.”

**Patriarchy in Politics** Political office remains a strictly male domain in matrilineal tribes, as in patrilineal groups (Nongbri 2010). Across Meghalaya, “male domination can be seen ... in matters of state and village administration ... [which] has been an exclusive[ly] male prerogative” (Syiem 1998). The state is exempt from India’s constitutional mandate to implement quotas for women’s representation, enabling persistent female exclusion in local and national politics.<sup>3</sup> For example, in Meghalaya’s last three Vidhan Sabha (State Legislative Assembly) elections, between 2008–2018, women occupied a marginal 1.6-6.7% of seats (Bhogale et al. 2019). This pattern fits with our theoretical analysis of matriliney, wherein men retain *formal* positions of power such as political office due to broader patriarchal structures that persist in society. Despite exclusion from positions of authority, however, matrilineal women are active political participants: attending meetings, voicing concerns, and organizing to resolve socio-economic problems.

**Basis of Comparison** In Shillong, matrilineal and patrilineal communities live in close proximity, share analogous political institutions, subscribe to broader patriarchal structures, avail of common welfare state policies, and face comparable local economic milieus.<sup>4</sup> The primary difference follows cultural norms about lineage, which determine wealth ownership and control (Gneezy, Leonard and List 2009). We leverage this variation to study whether culturally-sanctioned wealth inequities drive the political economy gender gap.

## Research Design

**Qualitative Research** We employed a multi-methods research design in this study, relying on both qualitative and experimental methods. For our qualitative data collection, we conducted 10 focus groups and 100 structured ethnographic interviews with individuals

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<sup>3</sup>The Indian Constitution, Part IX mandate for Panchayats with women’s quotas does not apply to Meghalaya due to its predominantly tribal heritage (Articles 243 D, M, T, and ZC, [bit.ly/2s0TaW4](https://bit.ly/2s0TaW4)).

<sup>4</sup>Yet might matriliney in Meghalaya simply act as a proxy for other historical economic determinants of the gender gap? Appendix A2 presents detailed information on matriliney and its regional origins. There is no evidence that matriliney was adopted in response to economic imperatives (Bareh 1967).

belonging to matrilineal tribes in Shillong over the course of nine field research trips between 2014 and 2015. Appendix A3 discusses our qualitative research methodology.<sup>5</sup> Below, we present a mix of representative quotations and descriptive statistics to explain both the patterns and anomalies that emerged from our qualitative interviews. We bring in this evidence to interpret the mechanisms driving our experimental results.

**Matriliny Practices** To begin, we sought to understand contemporary matrilineal practices in Meghalaya. Our interviews corroborated the consistency and persistence of lineage systems. On the content of inheritance practices, for example, one Khasi woman explained: “Our society follows the matrilineal society. The inheritance is traced through the maternal side.” This means that daughters receive “the greater share of property, [including] immovable property” (Respondent 53, August 11, 2014). When we probed how household decisionmaking occurs, a common refrain emerged: “We usually sit and decide things together as a family. We all have equal rights in decision making in every aspect of the family like household budget, education, child bearing, and politics” (Respondent 30, July 14, 2014). Our interviews also confirmed the rigidity of political institutions. According to one Khasi woman, “elder male members” are the only “one[s] who...manage the locality” (Respondent 72, August 12, 2015).

**Survey and Sampling Strategy** The centerpiece of our empirical approach was a large, face-to-face survey that we conducted on a representative sample of Shillong’s population between February and July 2015. Our team interviewed 3,410 voting-age citizens who had lived in Shillong for at least ten years.<sup>6</sup> To create a representative sample, our

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<sup>5</sup>The focus groups helped us construct our sample frame and comparison sets, and design both the qualitative interview questionnaire and survey instrument. Our ethnographic interviews were designed to shed light on the mechanisms behind our experimental results and help explain patterns in the preferences and behavior of men and women in matrilineal groups.

<sup>6</sup>We matched enumerators and respondents on gender and ethnicity to encourage trust and reduce social desirability bias. The survey was offered in Khasi, Mizo, English, and Hindi. Enumerators used hand-held tablet devices that automated the randomization process in our experiments. To ensure our study neither interfered with nor disrupted local customs, we recruited all members of our research team from local tribal groups and we obtained permission from every block council head prior to our survey.

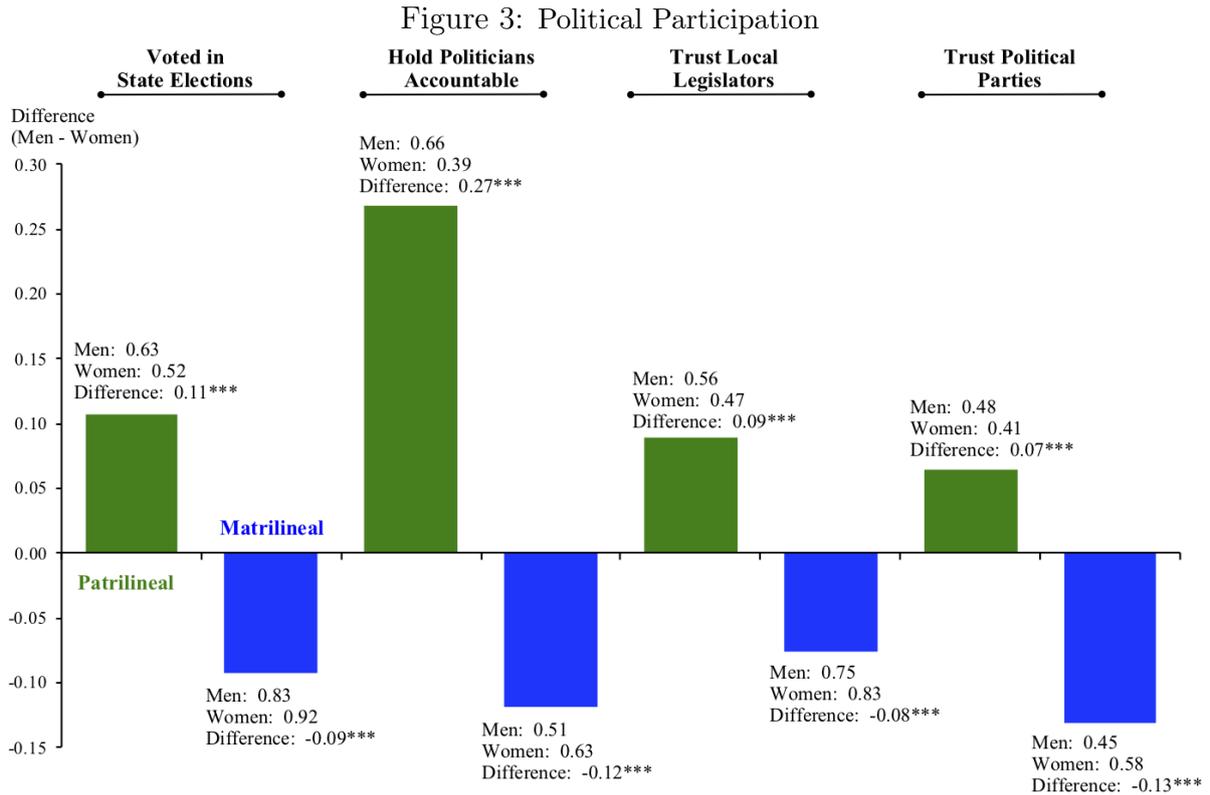
team first gathered data for every household via face-to-face visits with local community organizers. We generated a full census of all citizens residing in 25 randomly selected wards in Shillong. Stratified random sampling was used to select participants from the resulting census roll. To strengthen comparisons, we obtained balanced samples of men and women, from matrilineal and patrilineal groups, who were rich and poor (Appendix A4). Appendix A5 illustrates the geographical proximity of our sample’s kinship groups.

In our sample, genders are similar across cultures on most demographic characteristics (Appendix A6). The main differences across groups are the result of cultural traditions about wealth ownership that we explicitly study here, such as differential land- and asset-ownership rates. We also find differences in educational attainment, for which we control. Notably, those assigned to treatment versus control groups in our survey experiments have statistically indistinguishable observable characteristics (Appendices A7-A10).

**Empirical Specification** We first estimate the effects of cultural norms about resource entitlements on attitudinal and behavioral political outcomes, and then move to study the influence of our experimental treatments on economic policy preferences. For the later analysis, we use an OLS model of the form:  $DV_i = \alpha + \beta * T_i + \gamma * X_i + \epsilon_i$ , where  $DV_i$  is the outcome of interest,  $\alpha$  is a constant representing mean values for the control group,  $T_i$  is a binary indicator of randomly-assigned individual treatment status, and  $X_i$  refers to a vector of demographic controls: age, education level, wealth index, and religion. For all specifications we estimate robust standard errors. Results both without controls and with an extended set of social controls are qualitatively similar (see Appendices). When estimating the gender gap for non-experimental questions, we use t-tests to check whether differences in means across genders in each cultural group are significant.

## Results

**Political Participation and Engagement** We begin by analyzing the well-documented gender gap in political engagement. To test whether lineage norms explain gender differences across our matrilineal and patrilineal samples, we probed respondents about political behavior. First, we asked about their voting activity: “Did you vote in Meghalaya’s most recent MLA [Member of Legislative Assembly] election? Yes or No.” As



Labels display percent responses among men and women, respectively, and the difference in responses between genders (\*\*\*)  $p < 0.01$ .

Figure 3 shows, the results effectively flip across patrilineal and matrilineal societies.<sup>7</sup> In the patrilineal group, men are 11 percentage points more likely than women to report voting ( $p=0.000$ ). Matrilineal women, by contrast, are 9 percentage points more likely than men to vote ( $p=0.000$ ).<sup>8</sup> This result is striking. In Meghalaya’s matrilineal tribes, cultural norms specify that *men* should run for, and hold, office. However, matrilineal *women* are much more likely to go to the polls and decide their representatives.

We next consider two indicators of individual willingness to bear risks associated of political participation: trust and accountability. To evaluate commitment to make long-term, materially and socially-costly investments in politics, we queried whether respondents trusted their (a) local legislators, and (b) political parties “to do the right thing for people in Shillong.” Matrilineal women are 8 percentage points more likely to trust local legislators ( $p=0.000$ ) and 13 percentage points more likely to trust political parties ( $p=0.000$ ) than matrilineal men. But among patrilineal respondents, a traditional gender

<sup>7</sup>Appendix A11 provides additional details; A12 presents interacts gender with kinship groups.

<sup>8</sup>The gender gap reversal across cultural groups is significant ( $\beta=0.20$ ;  $p=0.000$ ); Appendix A11a.

gap emerges. Men are more likely than women to trust local legislators, by 9 percentage points ( $p=0.000$ ), and political parties, by 7 percentage points ( $p=0.007$ ).

Culturally-sanctioned wealth ownership norms also increase individual ability to make materially costly efforts to ensure political accountability. Incentives to do so may be higher if inherited wealth increases the stakes of politics. We asked respondents whether it was possible for them to hold local politicians accountable for the functions they are supposed to perform. Akin to prior results, the gender gap reverses: 63 percent of matrilineal women report being able to hold politicians accountable, but rates are significantly lower—51 percent—for matrilineal men ( $\beta = -0.12, p=0.000$ ). Patrilineal men are qualitatively similar to matrilineal women: 66 percent of men feel it is possible to hold officials accountable. But fewer patrilineal women agree: 39 percent ( $\beta = 0.27, p=0.000$ ).<sup>9</sup>

We turn to our qualitative research to investigate how and why matrilineal women evidence higher rates of political engagement than men. On how women participate, one woman recounted: “Women of our locality are active in politics, during election[s] we can see that they will leave everything and run for campaigning, [to] accompany the candidate during house-to-house visits and attend public meetings [*sic*]” (Respondent 38, June 20, 2014). Another noted: “I see in my own family, especially my mother was very active and used to take part in many political activities along with friends; other[s] take part as voters [*sic*]” (Respondent 15, May 15, 2014). Men agree, observing that women “actively participate, their numbers are more than the men, they are in rallies, meetings, canvass, etc.” (Respondent 34, June 16, 2014). Across our qualitative interviews, political interest and activity were consistently higher among women than men: 84% of women versus 74% of men report regular participation in elections by voting and other forms of political activities; the remainder (16% of women and 26% of men) said that they were not interested or did not have time to engage in electoral activities. Both genders were more likely to follow politics at the state and local (rather than national) level: 63% of women and 52% of men (versus 6% and 5% interested in national level elections), respectively. As one respondent explained, at this level of politics, officials “can protect

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<sup>9</sup>The gender gap difference across both cultures is significant ( $\beta=0.39; p=0.000$ ); Appendix A11d.

our people and can bring about development to the state” (Respondent 6, August 8, 2015). Again, however, women’s interest was consistently higher than that of men.

What explains matrilineal women’s higher political engagement? Women are frequently described as more committed and entitled to bear the costs of participation on behalf of society: “All the women in the family [are more politically engaged than men] because they feel that *they are the custodians of society*” (Respondent 50, August 2, 2014; emphasis added). For men’s engagement, self-interest appeared to be a persistent motivation. According to one man: “Most of the men, as I have seen... are very active especially during election because they keep some expectations from the candidate that if he wins he can refer a job or help with other benefits” (Respondent 21, June 16, 2014). Another man directly compared women and men’s motivation: “Nowadays, I could see that women are very active in politics, as campaigners, polling agents, and some of them are *die hard supporters*. [However,] most of [the] men who involve in politics [do so] *just for their own benefit*, i.e. to get money, free alcohol, and free food” (Respondent 22, Shillong, June 16, 2014; emphasis added).

To dig deeper, we asked respondents to describe the factors that led them to support a particular political candidate over others. Among the open-ended answers, the most consistent response was candidate policy platforms, which 47% of women and 39% of men prioritized. Yet the second-most-popular preference diverged starkly by gender: 31% of men focus on candidate character and personality, versus 6% of women. Whereas such traits reflect qualities a person nurtures independently of society, women’s second-highest priority is firmly grounded in social outcomes: capability to get things done (33% of women and 24% of men). If we consider political trust as a commodity requiring costly social investments, following Levi and Stoker (2000), there is an unsurprising gender divergence around women’s third-to-top preference—candidate trustworthiness and honesty—prioritized by 22% of women versus 10% of men. Again, matrilineal women exhibit more commitment to, and trust in, politics as a costly social process.

Overall, we find a reversal of the gender gap in political participation across cultures. Men are more politically engaged, have more trust in political representatives, and believe

that they are better able to hold political officials accountable relative to women in patrilineal communities, where men traditionally own wealth. However, women are more engaged, trusting, and confident in their agency to hold officials accountable than men in matrilineal communities. Here women, as socially-sanctioned wealth owners, are more concerned about socially beneficial political participation and able to bear its “costs.”

**Preferences about Taxation and Redistribution** Next, we employ a vignette experiment to test whether differences in lineage norms help explain the gender gap in economic policy preferences regarding the welfare state. The treatment introduces a personal cost to individual support for the welfare state.<sup>10</sup> We expect treated individuals will be less likely to support welfare state policies as they anticipate relinquishing wealth *they control*.

Table 1 reports the treatment effect on average support levels for public welfare schemes. A decisive gender gap emerges in patrilineal policy preferences for redistribution, resonating with contemporary global patterns (recall Figure 1). Men, who exclusively control wealth, react negatively to the introduction of a personal cost to support public welfare. The treatment decreases patrilineal men’s support for state-provided services by three percentage points ( $p=0.016$ ).<sup>11</sup> However, for patrilineal women, who do not control wealth, support is resistant to this cost; the impact of the treatment is statistically insignificant. We obtain similar results when we exclude controls, include a larger battery of social and political controls, and run ordered logit specifications (Appendices A13-14). In contrast, the gender gap closes entirely in our matrilineal sample.

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<sup>10</sup>Experimental treatment in brackets: “In Meghalaya, many people lack access to essential services like water and electricity. Do you support an increase in the funding of government programs that provide essential services for the poor [*even if this means that the government must raise money from people like you*]?” Response options: Yes/No (coded as 1 or 0, respectively).

<sup>11</sup>It is striking that across control groups, average levels of support for welfare state policies are high, a pattern that helps explain the magnitudes of the treatment effects in this experiment. Interestingly, matrilineal women and men have virtually indistinguishable levels of support for redistribution even prior to the treatment’s emphasis of personal costs. By contrast, and in line with our theoretical argument, patrilineal men evidence lower support for welfare state policies compared to patrilineal women in the control condition, and further reduce their support once the personal cost of redistribution is highlighted.

Table 1: **Effect of Personal Cost Treatment on Policy Preferences**

	<b>Patrilineal</b>	<b>Matrilineal</b>
<b>Men</b>		
Explicit cost to policy	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.02)
Constant (control)	0.94	0.99
<i>Observations</i>	868	854
<b>Women</b>		
Explicit cost to policy	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)
Constant (control)	1.02	0.97
<i>Observations</i>	838	850
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes

*Note:* Demographic controls include: age, educational level, wealth index, and religion. Robust standard errors in parentheses: \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

The treatment significantly deters both men and women, who jointly control wealth, from supporting state-provided services. Support for welfare state policies drops by four percentage points, both for men ( $p=0.027$ ) and women ( $p=0.001$ ).<sup>12</sup>

Cultural norms incentivizing gender-egalitarian wealth management practices are a crucial piece of the explanation about converging preferences in the matrilineal group. Because shared priorities drive resource allocation in matrilineal households, both genders are equally sensitive to the cost of redistribution. Our interviews reaffirm shared gendered concerns about the welfare state’s cost. For example, when asked whether the government should raise money from the rich to help poor citizens, one Khasi woman exemplifies responses: “I don’t agree with this because most of the rich people became rich because of their hard work” (Respondent 36, June 17, 2014). Another woman reiterated: “The

<sup>12</sup>Notably, the gender gap in treatment effects is significantly different across cultural groups ( $\beta=-1.98$ ;  $p=0.035$ ); A14 presents regression analysis of the treatment’s marginal effects within and across groups. To put the magnitude of these effects in context, a drop in support for the welfare state by 4 percentage points represents a halving of women’s differential prioritization of government resources to reduce poverty across Africa, where the gender gap ranges from 7.4–10.7 percentage points (Gottlieb, Grossman and Robinson 2016; Clayton et al. 2019). In addition, Margalit (2013, 84-7) conducts a similar experiment in the US and finds a smaller coefficient—a one percentage point change in support for welfare policies—upon inclusion of personal cost (“even if this might raise your taxes”) for the group (Democrats) that has comparably high baseline levels of support (just over 80%).

government cannot raise money from the rich. This is because the rich earn because of their hard work so it is not fair for the government to raise money from the rich” (Respondent 97, August 28, 2015). Matrilineal men concur: “No, it’s not [required for the rich to reduce poverty]. But some who are good they [may] help the poor by giving household goods and some by monetary [contributions]” (Respondent 28, June 16, 2014).

We also asked respondents whether reducing poverty should be the responsibility of the government, citizens, or both and coded the open ended answers provided. A remarkable congruity emerges across matrilineal genders: 47% of both women and men consider the government as having the main responsibility to curb poverty. Another 35% of women and 37% of men said that the government does not hold primary responsibility, but it should help citizens to pull themselves out of poverty. Finally, 16% of women and 13% of men said the government and citizens have a joint responsibility to reduce poverty. Notably, the importance of self-reliance and private, familial-style coordination consistently emerge as important, alongside support for state action. For one man: “Yes, the government...has a big role to reduce and to eradicate poverty, as it is like the mother of all the citizens, and she must find all means and methods or ways to lift up herself and its citizens above the poverty line.” Yet for him, “it is [also] the responsibility of the citizen to fight against poverty. It is the responsibility of the people as only through the will of the citizen itself they can eradicate poverty” (Respondent 56, August 12, 2014). Female responses indicate a similar wrestling with personal and state agency. For one woman: “Yes, it is the responsibility of the government along with the participations of the citizen to work together to reduce poverty. The government should generate more schemes to improve the living condition of the peoples.” Throughout, she is adamant that reducing poverty requires citizen action “because without the hard work of the citizen itself the government cannot do anything” (Respondent 52, August 11, 2014).

**Linking Participation to Preferences** We now analyze the intersection of political participation and preferences about public goods, building on the prior two analyses. In particular, we expect that cultural norms about wealth ownership and control will predict which gender is most likely to participate via a costly action: communicating preferences

about redistribution policies to relevant actors. We expect cultural norms about wealth control will explain the content of the preferences that individuals express: genders with culturally-sanctioned control should be sensitive to the cost of public goods. To test this hypothesis, we implemented a behavioral experiment to probe each respondent’s willingness to take action to advocate preferences about the welfare state. The behavioral component involved voluntarily filling out and mailing a pre-stamped postcard.<sup>13</sup>

Table 2 presents the results of this behavioral study. We report the treatment’s impact on individual support or opposition for the policy expressed in the received postcards.<sup>14</sup> In patrilineal groups, evidence of the conventional gender gap emerges again. Introducing an explicit cost makes men, the exclusive owners and controllers of wealth, 12 percentage points more likely to express opposition to welfare policies ( $p=0.042$ ). In contrast, policy cost does not have a statistically significant effect on the communicated policy preferences of patrilineal women, the group excluded from owning wealth. But results differ among matrilineal groups.<sup>15</sup> Women—as traditional wealth owners—are 14 percentage points more likely to “participate” to express opposition to welfare state policies when informed about their cost ( $p=0.001$ ). The treatment effect on the expressed preferences of those traditionally excluded from owning wealth (here, men) is statistically insignificant.<sup>16</sup> These results support our contention that cultural entitlements to wealth help

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<sup>13</sup>The postcard text follows, with the experimental treatment in brackets (complete instructions in Appendix A15): “Dear Sir/Madam, I **support**  / I **oppose** , raising the level of funding for government programmes that help the poor and the unemployed with training, employment and social services [*even if this means that the government must raise money from people like me*].”

<sup>14</sup>12 percent of respondents (410 of 3,410) completed and mailed back postcards.

<sup>15</sup>Note that matrilineal women are significantly more likely to mail postcards than matrilineal men, while the rates of mailing postcards between patrilineal women and men are not statistically different. Overall support for the welfare state is very high across all groups. Table 2 indicates that support levels are similar for patrilineal men and women. Matrilineal men and women appear to have differing baseline levels, but our restricted sample size limits inferential leverage for this comparison.

<sup>16</sup>The gender gap in revealed preferences differs significantly across groups ( $\beta=-3.01$ ;  $p=0.059$ ). See appendix A16 for analyses of the treatment’s marginal effects within and across cultural groups.

explain participation to express policy preferences and preclude costly redistribution.<sup>17</sup>

Table 2: **Effect of Postcard Treatment on Policy Preferences**

	<b>Patrilineal</b>	<b>Matrilineal</b>
<b>Men</b>		
Explicit cost to policy	-0.12** (0.06)	-0.11 (0.12)
Constant (control)	1.04	1.06
<i>Observations</i>	101	50
<b>Women</b>		
Explicit cost to policy	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.14*** (0.04)
Constant (control)	1.03	0.90
<i>Observations</i>	112	147
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes

*Note:* Demographic controls include: age, educational level, wealth index, and religion. Robust standard errors in parentheses: \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

## Mechanisms

Do cultural norms dictating the gender-specific ownership of wealth generate incentives for both genders to coordinate household economic decisionmaking when entitlements are distributed relatively equitably across genders? We begin by testing experimentally two key empirical implications of our theoretical mechanism.

**Household Decisionmaking Authority** First, our theory predicts that for patriarchal cultures with patrilineal norms that magnify male dominance, the dominant gender will consistently claim exclusive “final” decisionmaking authority. In contrast, if lineage norms

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<sup>17</sup>Note that comparing results only among postcard senders will produce biased estimates if the treatment systematically alters respondents’ willingness to mail the postcards. This does not appear to be a concern, however. We find that individual propensity to submit postcards is independent of treatment status (Appendix A17). Our results are robust to including a control for what is most likely to physically constrain behavior: distance from the nearest post office, as well as to excluding or including our standard controls (Appendices A16, A18). Additionally, we use a Heckman selection model to account for individual propensity to send postcards in estimating the treatment effect. To do so, we first predict the probability of inclusion in our sample—that is, sending a postcard—based on one’s distance from the nearest post office. While this factor is a good predictor of sending postcards, it should be less likely to influence individuals’ preferences. Our results remain robust to this adjustment (Appendix A19).

favor women, improving gender equality, we expect that “final” control over decisions will be less rigid, and responsive to the preferences of whomever generates more household wealth. To probe this claim, we designed an experimental question to understand the effect of gender-specific wealth control norms on individual authority to allocate household resources.<sup>18</sup> The treatment shifts the economic arrangement from a common scenario, where men are the sole income earners, to one where women fill this role. We hypothesize that cultures with gender-inegalitarian norms regarding wealth management will be unresponsive to the treatment, whereas those with gender-egalitarian norms will adjust support for women’s decisionmaking power in response to their economic contribution.

Table 3 presents the results of our analysis (Appendix A20 excludes controls). In matrilineal cultures, when women become the dominant income-earners both genders are significantly less likely to see the husband as the final decision-maker for household wealth allocation. But this effect diverges in patrilineal groups, where only *women* think decisionmaking should shift with income.<sup>19</sup> These findings support our hypothesis about the substantive difference in financial decisionmaking authority across cultures. In cultures where lineage norms exacerbate inequality, members of the gender culturally-empowered to make decisions (patrilineal men) retain their sense of authority even when they are not the household’s main economic contributor. Where egalitarian wealth control norms hold, in matrilineal groups, authority over “final” household decisionmaking is more responsive to individual economic contributions in a gender-blind fashion.

**Decisionmaking and Policy Preferences** Second, we conduct an experimental test to investigate whether altering the mechanism for distributing public goods—either by engaging or circumnavigating the household head—changes the value individuals place on

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<sup>18</sup>Respondents received the following question (experimental treatment in brackets): “Imagine a typical husband and wife in your community. [*The wife stays at home while the husband earns money/ The husband stays at home while the wife earns money*]. Let’s assume the two of them disagree over a costly household purchase. Should the man be the person to make the final decision?” “No” (0) or “Yes” (1).

<sup>19</sup>Both patrilineal men and women express high levels of support for men making decisions at baseline, underlining the prevalence of “classic patriarchy.” Few matrilineal women, and a majority of matrilineal men (for whom income is the only source of financial autonomy), express such support at baseline.

Table 3: **Gendered Wealth Treatment Effect on Decisionmaking Preferences**

	<b>Patrilineal</b>	<b>Matrilineal</b>
<b>Men</b>		
Wife is the main earner	0.01 (0.02)	-0.17*** (0.02)
Constant (control)	0.67	0.99
<i>Observations</i>	577	564
<b>Women</b>		
Wife is the main earner	-0.03* (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)
Constant (control)	0.62	0.36
<i>Observations</i>	560	567
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes

*Note:* Demographic controls include: age, educational level, wealth index, and religion. Robust standard errors in parentheses: \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

redistribution.<sup>20</sup> The treatment examines the impact of distributing cash directly to the household head versus *30 percent less cash* via government programs. In our comparison (control) group, individuals receive an equal amount of financial resources via each distribution mechanism. This measures whether policies that give financial resources *only* to the individual at the top of a household’s social hierarchy make those financial resources less valuable to lower-status individuals, relative to policies that directly transfer resources from the state to all individuals in a household. If our theoretical mechanisms hold, then the treatment should nudge individuals to choose the financially more lucrative option—regardless of who receives resources—when norms are gender-egalitarian. Where both genders have a voice in wealth management, their ability to benefit from the state’s financial resources should not vary with the distribution mechanism. By contrast, where wealth control norms are gender-inegalitarian, the dominant gender should benefit disproportionately from the receipt of goods given to household heads. Here, the treatment should increase support for the more lucrative distribution channel—via the household head—*only for those who anticipate benefits*: men. In patrilineal groups, we thus expect

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<sup>20</sup>Respondents received the following question, with the experimental treatment in brackets: “Which policy would you prefer? (1) The government will give Rs. 1,000 per month in cash to household heads of poor families to improve their welfare. (2) The government will spend [*Rs. 1,000/Rs. 700*] per month on programs to improve the welfare of poor families.” Choice of policy 1 vs. 2 coded as 0 or 1, respectively.

Table 4: **Public Goods Distribution Channel Treatment Effect on Preferences**

	<b>Patrilineal</b>	<b>Matrilineal</b>
<b>Men</b>		
Costly government distribution	-0.07* (0.04)	-0.08** (0.04)
Constant (control)	0.54	0.48
<i>Observations</i>	578	568
<b>Women</b>		
Costly government distribution	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.16*** (0.04)
Constant (control)	0.81	0.24
<i>Observations</i>	556	560
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes

*Note:* Demographic controls include: age, educational level, wealth index, and religion. Robust standard errors in parentheses: \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

gender-divergent preferences for distribution channels.

Table 4 displays the effect of the treatment: making transfers from the state to the head more remunerative than direct transfers from the state to each individual (see also Appendix A21). For matrilineal groups, the treatment induces preference convergence around maximizing household wealth. The treatment makes women and men significantly more likely to prefer direct cash transfers to the household head. In patrilineal cultures, the treatment causes *only* men, the group with culturally-sanctioned authority to control wealth, to choose the most financially lucrative option of direct cash transfers. Lacking direct control over wealth, patrilineal women continue to support state distribution to individuals even when this means fewer total household resources.<sup>21</sup> This parallels our main experimental finding: patrilineal women’s “reservation price” for state distribution of goods is significantly less sensitive to the cost their household bears for procuring these goods than that of patrilineal men, matrilineal women, and matrilineal men.

**Qualitative Research** Our qualitative research underscores the role played by lineage norms that create incentives for gender-egalitarian decisionmaking in matrilineal groups. These lower the stakes of “final” decisionmaking authority by making collective decision-

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<sup>21</sup>At baseline, patrilineal women represent the group with the highest support for a “public channel” for state-led redistribution, in line with our theory.

making the cornerstone of household action. The importance of hearing all voices—via “consultation” or “sitting together” cannot be overstated. According to one middle-aged woman: “We...consult all members in the family and make a decision on [the] majority’s suggestions” (Respondent 54, August 11, 2014). Similarly, a man notes: “Both me and my wife take responsibility about [financial, budgetary] estimates and things needed by [the] family” (Respondent 1, March 27, 2014). Another woman explains: “Issues which are important and which concern and involve huge expenditure or which are related to the welfare or future of anyone, then we sit and discuss them as a whole family” (Respondent 45, July 13, 2014). Such consultation can even extend outside the immediate family, as an older woman notes: “I discuss with my sons and we take the decision as a family although I do consult my eldest sister on some matters” (Respondent 16, May 16, 2014). The notion of familial equality even led to justifications for why young children are excluded from decisions; for one Khasi mother: “All the decision[s] I have to take together along with my husband, as my children are still studying in primary classes therefore they don’t understand [how] to take decision, as they are [too] young.” (Respondent 76, 13 August, 2015). Equality within the household is taken seriously by all.

When we asked respondents to indicate how decisions over important issues are made in the household and coded responses according to major categories, a remarkable convergence emerges: 80% of women and 79% of men mentioned that the entire family or the husband and wife jointly made decisions regarding important household matters. A minority (20% of women and 21% men) mentioned that one gender made major decisions alone. It is important to note that matrilineal women and men prioritize substantively different policy domains for state action, as in other patriarchal settings (Khan 2017). When asked to rank policies that they consider most important for the state to tackle, women were most likely to mention water access and sanitation, while men were most likely to mention employment and corruption. That is, matrilineal women and men are not “unique” when it comes to prioritizing policies that have gender-based implications. Yet they face incentives to coordinate how their households make decisions in economic matters. In sum, then, our qualitative research uncovers resilient gender-egalitarian norms

that lower the stakes of “final” decisionmaking authority in matrilineal households, in contrast to the more rigid hierarchical norms practiced in patrilineal societies.

**Role of Lineage Norms** In our theoretical framework, lineage norms governing wealth transmission are major drivers of the gender gap. This implies that gendered differences are likely more pronounced among individuals with higher levels of wealth. We explore this prediction observationally, by partitioning our sample into individuals with high and low wealth, and re-analyzing our experiment from Table 1 (see Appendix A22).<sup>22</sup> The treatment effect (i.e., introducing a personal financial cost to welfare state policies) is concentrated among the subset of high wealth individuals—those who would disproportionately have to bear the cost of redistribution. In patrilineal groups, only men with high levels of culturally-sanctioned assets reduce support for redistribution when an explicit personal cost is invoked ( $\beta=-0.04$ ;  $p=0.051$ ). In line with their inconsequential control of culturally-determined wealth, there is no such effect among patrilineal women. By contrast, both high-wealth matrilineal men ( $\beta=-0.06$ ;  $p=0.045$ ) and women ( $\beta=-0.04$ ;  $p=0.005$ ) respond to the treatment by lowering support for the welfare state.<sup>23</sup> These results support the claim that wealthy individuals with the agency to manage wealth are most sensitive to redistribution’s personal cost.

Do cultural norms unrelated to wealth ownership matter for interpreting our findings? We consider three observable sets of social practices. First, in Meghalaya’s matrilineal tribes, parents are more likely to reside with adult daughters than sons; patrilineal parents typically reside with sons. These differing co-residence practices may impact indi-

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<sup>22</sup>We define ‘High wealth’ individuals as owning either land, a house, or the equivalent asset for non-landed households: a car. In our field research, respondents repeatedly mentioned these three assets as important for inheritance. Vehicles are viewed as luxury goods that most frequently enter low-income families in Shillong through inheritance. To contextualize, popular domestic car brands like Maruti Suzuki range in price between Rs. 3–12 lakhs, representing 6 to 25 years of income for our ‘Low wealth’ respondents.

<sup>23</sup>The treatment also lowers policy support among matrilineal women with fewer assets. This is consistent with our qualitative research: matrilineal women consistently express the belief that they have a broad responsibility for “stewardship” of wealth regardless of the assets they personally possess.

vidual preferences for state action. Second, matrilineal groups are more likely to practice Christianity than patrilineal groups; different religious traditions might support varied social roles for women. Third, higher marriage rates among patrilineal groups in our sample may alter political preferences. However, we find no evidence that variation in co-residence, religion, levels of religiosity, or individual marital status drives the gender gap. Our analyses are robust to the inclusion of these controls (Appendices A12-14, A16, A18, and A20-23).

It is important to acknowledge that matrilineal culture *writ large* is a complex, dynamic body of lived experiences and practices. One way to probe this complexity is to ask whether urbanization and migration have weakened traditional cultural norms in Meghalaya's matrilineal communities. Notably, we find significant mobilization by matrilineal groups to protect their distinct culture. Opposition to in-migration is particularly clear amongst matrilineal men and women (Appendix A24a). This is precisely due to concerns that immigrants will alter matrilineal practices; as one woman explained, she opposed "mixed marriage between the locals and the migrants; this threatens the ...culture of the locals" (Respondent 24, June 16, 2014). Intermarriage rates are also extremely low among our subjects. Out of 3,410 respondents in our representative survey, just 21 (less than 1%) were born in mixed (matrilineal-patrilineal) marriages, and among our qualitative interviewees, 2% had one matrilineal and one non-matrilineal parent.<sup>24</sup> Finally, matrilineal groups are markedly more reluctant than patrilineal respondents to invite non-matrilineal outsiders into their homes to share food (Appendix A24b) and politically active matrilineal respondents appear more likely to maintain cultural autonomy than those who are not active (Appendix A24c). Scholars also underline significant matrilineal resistance to perceived external cultural threats (Nongbri 2010). These features explain the salience of cultural norms that we document in our study; nonetheless, we view longitudinal re-

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<sup>24</sup>Respondents noted two universally acknowledged social sanctions for intermarriage: disinheritance and dissolution of all familial and social ties to the matrilineal community. Still, the 2% from mixed families described inheritance practices similarly to other respondents. For example, one man noted "In my family, mostly the female [children] inherit the land and properties" (Respondent 20, June 16, 2014).

search that interrogates whether potential changes in matrilineal culture over time impact gendered political preferences and behavior to be a promising avenue for future work.

## Discussion

Do cultural norms governing wealth entitlements—lineage—influence the gender gap in political participation and economic policy preferences? Our study of Meghalaya’s patrilineal and matrilineal tribes uncovers evidence of a conventional gender gap when wealth is transferred from father to son. In patrilineal communities, men are more likely than women to participate in politics and support a leaner welfare state. But when daughters inherit wealth from mothers (i.e., matrilineal tribes), it is women who display higher levels of grassroots political engagement. The bifurcation of entitlements—political and social to men, and economic to women—incentivizes both genders to engage in intra-household financial decisionmaking. As a result, economic policy preferences converge.

Our case selection enables us to control for the influence of formal institutions, as the cultural groups we study are subject to a similar set of federal, state, and local-level political institutions. In addition, our evidence suggests that gender-based biological variations are insufficient explanations for the political economy gender gap, contra Barres (2006). By contrast, our deep qualitative investigations and survey and behavioral experiments uncover evidence of the clear mechanisms through which lineage norms impact gendered political behavior in private and public. These results point to the importance of cultural norms in arbitrating political access and priorities.

We focus on lineage norms in this study, yet our theory also applies to a broader set of norms defining women’s financial agency, including those governing investments in education, skills accumulation, labor market integration, career advancement, and provision of care. A growing body of research suggests that norms can restrict women’s access not only to formal employment (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006), but also to the ability to claim fundamental economic voice and opportunities (Brulé 2020; Teele 2018). Our theoretical lens suggests that the broader tapestry of cultural norms structuring women’s access to resources likely also drives gendered differences in state engagement and policy preferences, molding the very infrastructure of the welfare state.

Acknowledging the importance of norms governing resource entitlements suggests that understanding what transforms them—and why change is so rare—is crucial. We make three observations, drawn from historical cases. First, conflict can initiate major change. Consider Cambodia. Genocide caused the deaths of the majority of working-age men, catapulting women into the roles of primary breadwinners for their families; subsequently, women’s political engagement rose, with female-led organizations encouraging women to enter into politics (Jacobsen 2008, 155). Similar trends appear in post-conflict Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, and Mozambique (Tripp 2015). These cases suggest that societal upheavals can overturn social norms prohibiting women’s accumulation of wealth, with important consequences for their political engagement.

Second, demographic shocks that increase female economic opportunities can fundamentally change women’s engagement with the state and its policy levers. One explanation of the “Nordic model” underlines a regional response to the “familial crisis” in the late-19th century, when fertility rates declined precipitously (Folbre 2020, 250). Greater economic mobility for women coincided with the development of strong women’s associations and “state feminism,” ensuring husbands and wives possessed equal rights to property and joint responsibility for family maintenance (Melby, Ravn and Wetterberg 2008, 3-12). Women’s early mobilization with economic entitlements initiated a virtuous cycle of an increasingly gender-egalitarian state and society, where a growing welfare state helped expand women’s economic agency via extensive employment opportunities and “defamilialization of responsibility for providing welfare” (Melby, Ravn and Wetterberg 2008, 3). Togeby (1994) documents, in turn, how women’s rising political participation followed increased female employment rates in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

Third, even when inheritance norms become gender egalitarian—as they have in many western societies—political economy gender gaps may persist. Most basically, lineage norms compete with a host of *other* norms, including prescriptions about child-rearing, occupational specialization, and remuneration, that systematically limit women’s economic prospects. Skocpol (1992) argues that even after the overturning of coverture laws enabled gender-equal inheritance in the US between 1850–1920, women’s economic exclu-

sion in other domains hindered their political efficacy. Efforts to establish “maternalist” welfare state policies were thwarted by women’s low economic status. This suggests that without concerted policy efforts and social movements to rebalance economic inequality, piecemeal improvements in economic security are unlikely to fundamentally alter women’s resources for political engagement and intrahousehold agency. Transformations are especially challenging when states codify patriarchal doctrines, in particular by institutionalizing a “political role for religion” (Htun and Weldon 2018, 18) because in such settings, gender-equal policies challenge the very roots of political authority.

Policywise, a corollary of our argument is that increasing women’s economic opportunities without commensurately shifting social norms that constrain women’s resource entitlements may be insufficient to trigger changes in political representation. For example, interventions that increase women’s access to microcredit in cultural settings where men ultimately make decisions over the management of household finances are unlikely to enhance women’s political agency. Indeed, the exceptional microcredit programs that alter women’s political behavior are those that explicitly aim to alter social norms about women’s control over resources (Kabeer 2017). In a similar vein, improving employment opportunities or property rights for women in conservative cultures can generate backlash—a phenomenon documented in settings from rural India to Ethiopia (Brulé 2020; Mabsout and Van Staveren 2010). While improving economic inclusion is vital, policymakers should anticipate backlash, build mechanisms to protect the vulnerable, and incentivize egalitarian negotiations between status quo and policy beneficiaries.

Our study opens the door for new work on the relationship between norms, access to economic resources, and state policy. First, researchers should investigate how cultural norms generating economic inequality influence political outcomes across a range of ascriptive identities, including ethnic, racial, and “insider-outsider” cleavages. Second, our theory can be used to explore gender differentials in other policy arenas, such as preferences about who “deserves” access to public goods, and which distribution strategies are optimal in cases of extreme scarcity or duress like refugee crises. Third, if gendered lineage norms influence preferences about the optimal size of the welfare state, histor-

ical investigations into these cultural prescriptions may help explain the varied size of early states, as well as their subsequent development around the world. More broadly, our analytic agenda can help explain how asymmetries in cultural norms about wealth transmission create mutually-reinforcing cycles of political exclusion or inclusion.

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