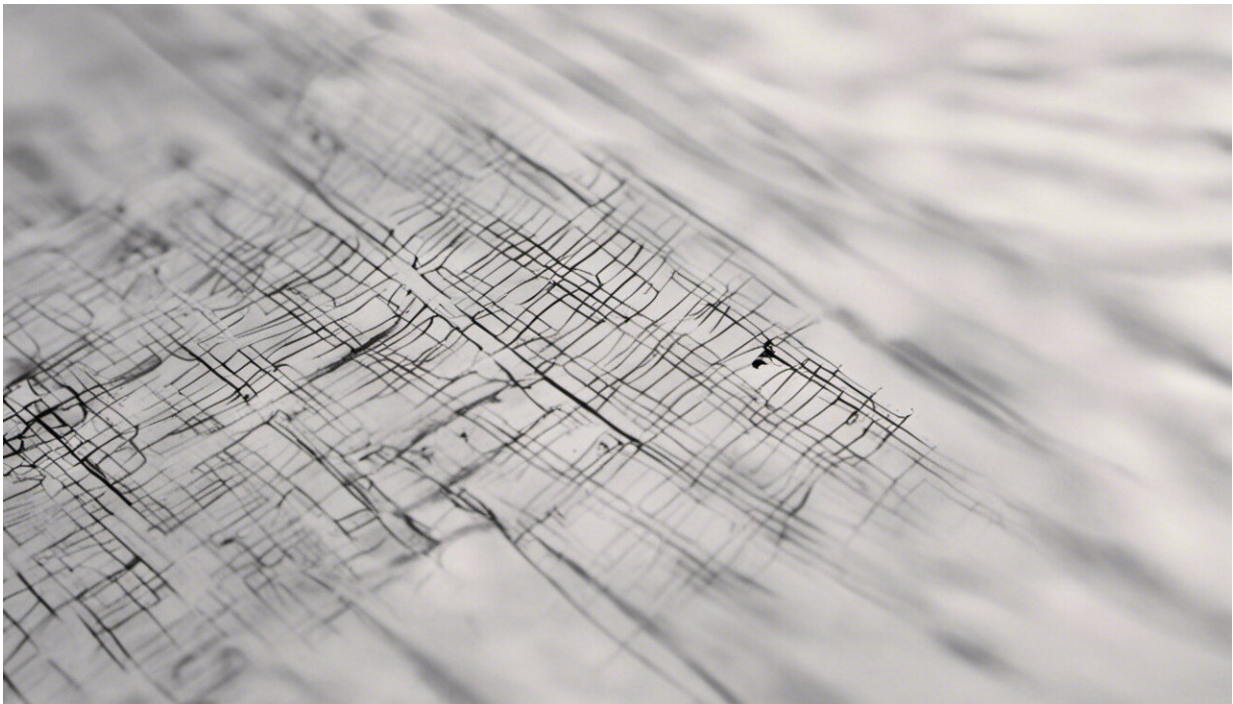


Women don't always find power in numbers, according to research

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Increasing the number of women in decision-making groups isn't necessarily enough to give them greater power, according to researchers at Princeton University and Brigham Young University.

Through controlled experiments and an examination of dozens of [school](#)

[boards](#) from across the country and racial-dialogue groups, the [researchers](#) found that women's influence depends not just on their numbers but also on the way a group makes its decisions.

Tali Mendelberg, a professor of politics at Princeton, and Christopher Karpowitz, an associate professor of [political science](#) at Brigham Young University who earned his Ph.D. at Princeton, explain their research and [conclusions](#) in "The Silent Sex: Gender, Deliberation and Institutions," published this year by Princeton University Press.

In this Q&A, Mendelberg discusses the research and how groups—as well as individuals—can apply the findings:

Question: What led you to research the power of women in decision-making?

Answer: There's a movement around the world to try to increase the number of women in political decision-making bodies, but very little is understood about what happens when the number of women rises. As the number of women rises, do you see women participating more and making a difference in policy? It's not clear that you do. Sometimes the numbers help, and sometimes they don't.

Q: How did you conduct this research?

A: We ran a very large controlled experiment in which we assembled about 500 people into groups of five, to resemble a committee. We randomly assigned the gender balance in the group. We wanted to see whether, aside from numbers, there's a way for a group to adapt certain procedures—rules of conduct—that would create norms of discussion that would be more inclusive of each person, including of women. So, we randomly assigned these groups to use either a majority rule or a

unanimous rule for decision-making. We chose unanimous rule to encourage a consensus process.

Q: What did you find?

A: What we found is that increasing numbers of women can help women's voices be heard, but you really need to get to a majority of women before you see a difference. Another finding is that having a majority of women can close the gender gap in how much people talk, how much influence they carry, how much they express their genuine opinions. It does make a difference. But it only makes a difference when the group is using majority rule. So having a majority of women matters to women when the group is oriented around the power of the majority. You have to fit the rule to the numbers, or vice versa.

Q: Why don't increased numbers of women help when the group is using a consensus rule?

A: When there are lots of women in the group and there's a consensus rule, the lone man or few men significantly accelerate their own participation. That was something we didn't expect. The minority of men leveraged the veto power each individual had to accelerate their own participation and influence even more than usual.

Q: How did your ideas about what affects the power of women hold up in school boards and racial-dialogue groups?

A: We were able to replicate the basic findings from the experiments with these naturally occurring groups. We found a very consistent pattern. It doesn't matter what part of the country you're looking at, the

political orientation of the area or the socioeconomic status. It's a strong gender pattern.

Q: Why is this a gender issue?

A: It's a dimension of social inequality. The reason we're finding these gender patterns is because some social identities—women, but also disadvantaged minorities—come into a meeting with a deficit of authority. They're not taken as seriously. They're not considered as competent. They're not considered to have as much relevant expertise.

Q: What do your findings say about efforts to increase the number of women on decision-making bodies?

A: In the real world, decision-making meetings often operate on a majority rule, and there are few women. So what we would say to those groups is, try to adopt something that looks like an inclusive procedure for running your meeting. Even if you say at the beginning: We want every voice to be heard. Every opinion is valuable. We want to make sure that we leave plenty of space for everyone to contribute. We're a cooperative, collaborative group. If you send that sort of a message and people actually act on it, that can go a long way toward mitigating this powerlessness that comes from low numbers for women. But if the group has a few men, it's better to avoid these consensus signals and signal that the majority rules.

Q: What's the message for women who participate in groups like the ones you studied?

A: We've often heard from women that they do feel marginalized, and

they're not really sure why. And they start to doubt themselves: Did I say the wrong thing? Should I have stayed silent? What am I doing wrong? Our message is you're not necessarily doing anything wrong. The group dynamic is what it is because women as a group are viewed as having less authority and less expertise. And when you can name that as a problem that lies outside yourself, it's very empowering. We're hoping to lift women's confidence and say: take more chances in the discussion. We're trying to encourage women: speak more, don't hold back as much. Have the courage to speak what's on your mind because ultimately it is valuable for the group to know.

Q: For men?

A: Part of the innovation of this project is to develop a list of ways to measure authority in the discussion. One of those indicators is the rate at which men negatively interrupt women while women are talking. Part of what happens with these groups where women's status is low is [women](#) are much more likely to be targeted by men in the group with negative interruptions. Our message to men is: You can be more self-aware also. Pay attention. Are you negatively interrupting? We don't want to make people too self-conscious, but we think that people can be just a little more self-aware of how many negative interruptions they are issuing.

Provided by Princeton University

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