

Understanding and minimizing the gender gap in US politics

October 11 2016, by Joe Hadfield

They are the majority in the U.S. population, but women hold only 20 percent of the seats in Congress and 24 percent in state legislatures.

This prominent disparity has inspired BYU political science professor Jessica Preece to conduct real-world experiments that help understand and fix the problem. Her research – including a forthcoming study in a top journal in political science – shows how a political party can better recruit [women](#) to run for office.

Specific recruiting > recruiting equally

Women are recruited to run for office less than men, partially because men are doing most of the recruiting and people tend to recruit others similar to themselves.

Some say that simply correcting this lopsided recruitment will solve the problem of unequal representation. But two of Preece's studies determined there's more that contributes to gender disparity than uneven recruitment.

Preece conducted a real-world experiment with the Utah County Republican Party for the first study, published in the current issue of *Political Behavior*. They recruited more than 5,500 men and women to attend a free candidate training seminar. Despite the identical invitations, women were half as likely to respond as men.

"It's not a bad idea to recruit equally, but it assumes that men and women are going to respond identically to recruitment," Preece said. "And we have lots of reasons to believe women might be less responsive to recruitment."

Preece's second study surveyed a national sample of municipal officials and found one reason why men and women respond differently. The study – recently published online in *Political Research Quarterly* – found that men assume the person recruiting them will also help them in the process of running for office. Women don't assume the same.

"They're hearing different things," Preece said. "The men are hearing, 'Will you run? I'd love to help you do it,' whereas the women are hearing, 'Will you run and do this really hard thing by yourself?' So it's no wonder they're responding differently."

Preece concludes in the study that political influencers have work to do.

"Party members need to be careful of their biases and make sure they're reaching out to women, looking for possible candidates in a variety of settings," Preece said. "And then they need to be sure they're specific about how they're going to help throughout the process."

A change in tone increases women's political interest

Simply adjusting the tone of the messages we send women can improve their interest in politics, according to a third study by Preece published earlier this year in *Politics & Gender*.

For this experiment, Preece had participants take a general political knowledge quiz. Afterward, they received either positive feedback ("Great job! You did very well."), accurate feedback ("You got X/16 correct. The average score is 9/16.") or no feedback as the control

message ("Thank you for taking the quiz.").

When women received accuracy feedback, their level of political interest didn't change. But when they received positive feedback, their interest in politics increased.

Conversely, positive feedback did nothing to increase men's political interest, but the accurate comparison feedback actually dampened their interest.

"You don't have to disproportionately tell women that they're good at politics, but if you tell everybody this, it will boost how interested women are in even trying," Preece said. "It appears the men already believe they're good and women don't have that same predisposition."

It's easy to see why women might not be confident in their political knowledge and abilities when the vast majority of visible political figures are male. This dominance of male elected officials on every level makes it appear like men must be naturally better at politics than women. Not so, says Preece.

"There's this vicious cycle of women not seeing women in politics, so they suspect that they're not going to be very good at politics," Preece said. "And then because they don't think they're going to be very good at it, they don't invest that much time or effort into learning about politics."

This cycle causes missed opportunities for growth. Government organizations are losing out on the perspectives and ideas that many capable women have to offer, simply because they haven't explored the opportunity.

"It's true that not everybody is going to love politics, but what we want to see is that everybody who could be good or could be interested in politics

has the opportunity and encouragement to do so," Preece said. "And I don't think we live in a world where that's the case yet."

Positive change is possible with some effort

Preece's research so far has explained some of the reasons behind the political gender gap; the next natural step is to figure out how to reverse the trends.

In a forthcoming study in the *American Journal of Political Science*, the researchers did another real-world experiment with a state Republican Party to see how the party could achieve its goal to increase women's participation.

For this field experiment, the state party sent a letter to precinct captains suggesting that they do two things: specifically recruit women and read a note from the party leader about the importance of women's voices in politics at the precinct meeting. Because of this letter, women's representation as delegates to the state convention increased from 24.6 percent to 30.6 percent.

"It was one single letter, and it was optional," Preece said. "The precinct captains weren't forced to comply. Some followed the suggestions and some didn't. And even with some not doing it, we still see this increase."

What it all means

Preece's research is hopeful: Change can happen. The barriers that prevent women running for office aren't as insurmountable as they seem. But research like hers is necessary, because understanding the problem is key to fixing it.

Preece explained that prior research has shown that when women run for office, they don't have trouble winning votes. Voters mostly vote based on political party, not gender.

Because of this, it isn't a lack of money or votes that prevent women from running. Instead, the real barriers to female elected officials are political leaders' uneven recruitment strategies and women's misperceptions of their ability and likelihood of success.

"We're not saying that running for office is easy, it's that there are many parts of the process that are equally difficult for men and women" Preece said. "But women should have more confidence in their ability to be successful.

"Or rather, everybody should assume they're going to lose their first race and not get too bogged down with it. It's just normal, and the important thing is to move on and be successful after you've learned those lessons the first time around."

More information: Jessica Robinson Preece et al. Run, Jane, Run! Gendered Responses to Political Party Recruitment, *Political Behavior* (2015). [DOI: 10.1007/s11109-015-9327-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-015-9327-3)

Provided by Brigham Young University

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