

Women are as likely as men to accept a gender pay gap if they benefit from it

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Women are just as inclined as men to vote against a policy to reduce a gender pay gap if they are personally benefiting from the status quo. This is [one of the main findings of my new study](#), which was published in January 2021 in the journal *Applied Economics Letters*.

I conducted a series of laboratory experiments in which I recruited participants to do a 30-question quiz. The participants knew from the start that they would be paid based on the number of questions they answered correctly. In roughly half of the sessions, the quiz was written in a way to give men an advantage. I achieved this by choosing questions that were mainly on topics that surveys show men tend to be more interested in than women, such as [sports](#) and [certain movie genres](#). The

quiz for the other half of the sessions were designed in a similar way to give women an advantage.

In the version with a male bias, men answered an average of 21 questions correctly, while women answered only 13 right. This was meant to mimic the current real-world situation in which men, on average, earn more than women. The questions were carefully chosen so that the quiz that favored women had mirrored results: the average woman answered 21 correctly, the average man just 13.

Three times at different stages of the experiment participants voted to either be paid \$1 for every correct answer or to give the group that was at a disadvantage a leg up. If the second payment option won the majority [vote](#), the disadvantaged participants would get \$1.25 per right answer, while those who benefited from the biased test would receive just 85 cents.

In all three votes, which had similar results, I found that women were actually more likely than men to vote against the policy that would have led to a narrowing of the pay gap when they earned more money in the quiz. On average, 96.8% of women's votes were against the proposed corrective payment policy when they were more likely to correctly answer the questions, compared with 90.5% of the men's votes when they had the edge.

In addition, when women were at a disadvantage, they were more likely to vote in favor of the corrective policy, with 79.5% supporting it versus 73% for the men.

While social science laboratory experiments like mine cannot fully capture every nuance, I believe my qualitative results are similar to what we would find in the real world.

Why it matters

Debate over the gender pay gap [can become quite heated](#).

The latest data from Pew Research Center show [women make 84 cents on the dollar](#) of what men earn—a gap that hasn't changed much in recent years.

And surveys have found that [men are more likely to oppose measures](#) to correct this gap and even question whether the gap exists in the first place. A 2019 SurveyMonkey poll showed that [46% of men believe](#) the [gender pay gap](#) "is made up to serve a political purpose" rather than a "legitimate issue."

My research suggests [women](#) might feel the same if the positions were reversed. Additionally, it suggests that men would also likely be equally vociferous in calling for a narrowing of the gap if they found themselves in a world where they were holding the short end of the stick.

Ideally, I hope this research will lead people to reexamine the positions they hold on issues like this one and consider how self-interest may be driving their arguments. Maybe it can lead to more understanding and increase the focus in these debates on the available evidence.

What's next

In my current and future work, I seek to experimentally determine people's willingness to sacrifice personal financial gains in favor of an outcome that they see as serving the common good. This involves, for example, testing how much income the average employee or executive is willing to sacrifice to reduce income inequality.

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