

ARE YOU MY MENTOR?

A FIELD EXPERIMENT ON GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND POLITICAL SELF-

STARTERS

SHORT TITLE: ARE YOU MY MENTOR?

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ABSTRACT: Do public officials respond unequally to requests for career advice? Through a correspondence experiment with 8,189 officials, we examine whether (hypothetical) male and female students who express interest in political careers receive differential responses from public officials. We report three striking findings. First, emails sent by female students were *more* likely to receive a response than those sent by male students, especially when the official was male. Second, the responses women received were as likely to be long, thoughtful, and contain an offer of help as those to men. Third, there were no partisan differences in responsiveness to male or female senders. Examining senders with Hispanic last names bolsters the results: Hispanic senders, especially men, were less likely to receive a quality response than non-Hispanic senders. Thus politicians may condition responsiveness and helpfulness on the ethnicity of constituents, but women who are self-starters in search of advice receive equal treatment.

Keywords: political career, audit study, field experiment, gender politics, Latino politics

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INTRODUCTION. A substantial body of research on the persistent under-representation of women in American politics has found gendered differences in the decision to run for office. Men are more likely to voice interest in holding public office from a young age, and are often “self-starters” in the path to a political career, while women more frequently require active recruitment before running (e.g., Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2012, 2013; Fox and Lawless 2004, 2014; Lawless and Fox 2013). The extra nudge needed to convert women into candidates is compounded by gender-bias in party recruitment strategies: even among qualified candidates, men are more likely to be actively recruited than women (Lawless and Fox 2013). Add to this the additional external validation that women need when considering entering a race (Fowler and McClure 1989), and the number of hurdles toward equal representation ticks ever upward. These findings have sparked an important line of inquiry into understanding how candidates are recruited and whether experimental interventions such as signals of strategic and financial support from party elites may help close the gender gap (Preece and Stoddard 2015; Butler and Preece 2016).

The focus on recruitment strategies and the psychological factors that dampen women’s political ambition is crucial, but it has perhaps also turned us away from studying the experiences and candidacies of women who *are* self-starters. A considerable number of women do decide on their own to enter the political fray: among female mayors surveyed in 2008 in the United States, one-third were complete self-starters (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2012, table 7.6), and over one-fifth of U.S. female state legislators report having sought office entirely on their own without being actively recruited (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013, figures 3.1 and 3.2). This means that among women that actually attain an elective office, upwards of 20 percent did not need an external nudge. Does this type of aspirant receive similar informal cues about her career choice as men? Or does gender condition the

reception of more ambitious women in a way that mirrors the gendered recruitment and socialization processes more generally?

We approach these questions using a field experiment designed to test whether, when women express an interest in politics, they are less likely to receive helpful and enthusiastic responses than men. Although race and ethnicity have been key concerns in experimental studies of constituents' access to public servants, we know of no other experimental study that is primarily concerned with how gender influences interactions with public officials.¹ However, one highly powered experiment that looks at these issues in the pipeline to Ph.D. programs finds a large bias in favor of white male students (Milkman et al. 2015), leading to a hypothesis that female political self-starters may also face discrimination in their attempts to learn about political careers. We conceive of early email correspondence as a type of “micro”-mentorship where even a small act of encouragement can teach an aspirant about the profession and provide cues about whether he or she will be welcome.

In our correspondence experiment (sometimes called an audit experiment), which entailed sending emails to 8,189 officials in the United States, hypothetical students expressed an interest in politics and asked officials for information on how to start down a political career path.² We ask whether officials are less responsive to female students that reach out to them for advice. Across our analyses, we find the arresting result that if anything, female students were *more* likely to receive responses and advice for pursuing political careers than men.

¹ White et al. (2015) note that most audit studies rely only on male names (fn. 16).

² We pre-registered hypotheses by the gender, party, office type (local vs. state) and state-level professionalization of the legislator using Experiments in Governance and Politics (EGAP)'s design registration form, <http://egap.org/registration-details/705>.

The incredibly thoughtful emails written by officials to students of different genders suggest that to the extent that bias exists in the political pipeline, it does not crop up at this early stage of political interest. On the other hand, examining senders with Hispanic last names shows that Hispanics, especially men, were less likely to receive a quality response than non-Hispanic senders. Thus politicians may condition access and helpfulness on the ethnicity of constituents, but women who are self-starters are not disadvantaged.

Figure 1: Treatment Wording

From: [Treatment: Student Sex]
To: [Legislator's email]
Subject: Help on a class project?

Dear [LEGISLATOR],

My name is [MALE/FEMALE] and I am a college sophomore. I'm interviewing politicians for a class project to learn about how they entered their field and what advice they might have for students interested in politics. As someone who really cares about my community, one day I hope to be a politician. What advice would you give to me?

Sincerely, [MALE/FEMALE]

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN. Using information supplied by the New Organizing Institute, we constructed a database of elected and appointed officials at all levels of government in the U.S. (city, county, and state) that included the email addresses and basic demographic characteristics of 8,189 officials. Since staff may be responsible for communication, the unit of analysis is the email address of an official rather than the officials themselves. Figure 1 displays the text of the email. Officials were told that the sender was a student working on a class project about politicians' career paths, that the sender is interested in becoming a politician, and they were solicited for advice on how the student could become involved in politics. The email sender's name provided the only cue for gender.

The college student sender treatments, one male and one female, were assigned a “typical” name drawn from Census and Social Security data. The most common male and female names, such as Jacob and Lauren, communicate the sex of the sender but are less obviously tied to ethnicity or income. Table OA.2 provides a list of first and last names used. After randomly combining gender-typical first names with common last names, we generated Gmail accounts in the form: first.lastXXXXX@gmail.com, where XXXX were 4 random digits. The accounts were randomly assigned to send emails over one of two days, either a Sunday or Monday in October 2014, with no follow-up requests thereafter. Because of the November 2014 election, this is a time when we might expect heightened responsiveness, although the election could also place more time constraints on the offices.

In order to ensure that all treatment conditions were evenly distributed, we block randomized by legislators’ gender and state. We then randomly assigned the sender’s gender within each block. The first row in Table 1 summarizes the experimental design, and Table OA1 shows that there is balance across the experimental conditions of officials’ gender, ethnicity, partisanship, local or national office, and whether the email bounced.

RESULTS. Table 1 presents the main results. It considers the difference in response rates on eight outcome variables based on whether the email sender was purportedly male or female. These outcome variables include: (1) receiving a reply, (2) receiving a meaningful response, (3) receiving praise, (4) receiving an offer of help, (5) being warned against running, (6) receiving substantive advice, (7) response length measured by the log word count, (8) the character count in the reply. Additional details on the coding of the dependent variables are presented in Table OA.3. Examples of “meaningful” responses are in the appendix.

Table 1: Treatment Effects by Dependent Variable. All (two-tailed) p-values estimate the effect of the gender of the sender for different replies. The p-values are based on OLS regressions that control for strata fixed effects and cluster-robust standard errors. Strata were defined as gender and state of legislator for randomization. Standard errors are clustered at the email account level. Non-responses are included in the denominators.

Treatment:	Male Sender	Female Sender	
Design: Emails by condition (N)	4,097	4,092	
Dependent variable:			p-value of diff.
1. Received Reply	25%	27%	0.15
2. Meaningful Response	11%	13%	0.47
3. Praised	5%	6%	0.17
4. Offer to help	3%	<u>5%</u>	0.09
5. Warned Against Running	1%	1.50%	0.14
6. Substantive Advice	7%	8%	0.33
7. Log Word Count	1	<u>1.1</u>	0.06
8. Character Count	145	<u>170</u>	0.04

In Table 1 and throughout this section, all p-values and standard errors are based on OLS regressions that control for strata fixed effects and cluster-robust standard errors. For randomization, the strata were defined as a legislator’s gender and state. Standard errors are clustered at the email account level. Importantly, for word and character count, a “no reply” was coded as 0 to avoid post-treatment bias, meaning that the denominator is always the total number of emails sent from a male or female address.

Contrary to expectations, we found no favoritism towards male students. The first dependent variable in Table 1 measures the difference in response rates to male and female students. We expected that women would be less likely to receive a reply, however there are no differences across the sender’s gender. Moreover, women and men were as likely to receive what our coding scheme deemed a “meaningful” response – which was not a “canned” letter or a request for more information from the student; they were as likely to be praised (5.2% of responses on average); they were as likely to be *discouraged* from running as

male senders (on average 1.2% of emails received a discouraging response); and they were as likely to get substantive advice (7.7% of responses).

In fact, when gender differences occurred, female students were slightly *more* likely to be encouraged than their male counterparts. Five percent of female senders received an offer of help from the legislator as opposed to three percent of male legislators (row 4). And the responses sent to women tended to be longer over all (rows 7 and 8). In three of eight outcomes, women were more likely to be encouraged. This share is larger than what is likely to have happened by chance, implying that overall, when given an opportunity for informal networking and communication, politicians are not less supportive of women.

Study-group heterogeneity. To see whether these overall results mask differences across officials, we investigate responses for several sub-groups. First, we calculate response rates based on the gender associated with the officials' email account. Table OA.4 shows that emails sent to *male* legislators drive most of the increased response rate to female students. Across both sender genders, emails sent to female legislators received responses 27 percent of the time. However, emails sent from male accounts to male office-holders received responses 24 percent of the time, while those sent from female senders to male legislators received a response 27 percent of the time.³ Second, we examined whether response rates varied based on the officials' partisan affiliations. Despite the presence of a U.S. gender voting gap in a Democratic direction and a common association of female politicians with liberal leanings (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2009), both Democratic and Republican officials were around 2 percentage points more likely to reply to female than male senders (see Table OA.5 for full results). Finally we consider the level of office held by the official. 74 percent

³ Because we cannot be certain who within an office is replying to the emails, future research may wish to conduct audit studies of legislative staff and examine how gender make-up and division of responsibilities within the office varies by the gender of the politician.

of the officials contacted served at the city or county level. Overall, we find that state officials replied to 26 percent of emails while local officials replied to 27 percent. Across both groups of officials, we continue to find that female senders were more likely to receive helpful replies than male senders (see Table OA.6 for full results).

Internal validity: How credible is the pro-woman bias – the finding that women received preferential treatment? The study is highly powered, with a sufficient number of emails sent (N=8,189) and responses received (N=2,127) to detect differences in responses as small as two percentage points. Nevertheless, social desirability bias could drive respondents (legislators or their aides), especially those in male officials’ offices, to be particularly sensitive to inquiries by women. One way to investigate this is by utilizing the fact that many common last names have discernible Latin roots.⁴ Emails sent with the surnames Garcia, Hernandez, Martinez, and Rodriguez (comprising 11% of the emails sent) were as likely to receive a reply as non-Hispanic senders (24% vs. 26%, $p=0.3$). However, Table OA.7 shows that *senders with Latinx last names were less likely to receive a meaningful response, less likely to be encouraged to run, and less likely to receive substantive advice.*

When these findings are broken down by the gender of the Latinx sender, we find that most of these differences stem from *male* senders (see Table OA.8). Female senders with non-ethnic first names but Latinx surnames receive similar response rates across all seven indicators while male senders with non-ethnic first names but Latinx last names were given less encouragement than men with non-ethnic names. The effect of being Latinx is negative for both male and female students, but we did not find “additive” bias for being female *and* Hispanic. The fact that we find differential patterns of response to senders with Latinx last

⁴ This is a happy feature of choosing common surnames, not part of the registered design. We thank Don Green for this suggestion.

names increases our confidence that the findings of heightened responsiveness to women are not simply an artifact of the method.

External validity: There are three concerns for external validity. The first two have to do with the realism of the experiment itself. If parties are the big recruiters, does it make sense to think of correspondence with officials as an important factor in candidates' decisions to run? Second, would political aspirants, or even more narrowly, college students, actively seek advice from office holders? As argued above, upwards of twenty percent of women who hold mayoral or state legislative office were self-starters, making the traditional recruitment process by parties only one possible avenue for candidate emergence. Second, although women in general may be less likely to contact political elites, this is probably not the case for political self-starters. Hence it seems reasonable to assume at least some degree of early contact with officeholders absent a prior connection.

A third concern for external validity is whether the findings are better understood as speaking to the literature on elite access or constituency services. The emails did not imply that the student was a constituent, and the content was often addressed to the micro-mentorship question at hand: of all the emails sent, 37% of all replies received contained either an offer of help or substantive advice on entering politics. In these responses, officials were specifically discussing the path to politics, often drawing on their own experiences, in ways more akin to the small acts of mentorship we describe above than run of the mill constituency service. Moreover, if our treatments were interpreted as constituency service we would have expected 1.) that ethnic minorities would have received lower response rates over all (e.g. Butler and Broockman 2011; White et al. 2015), and 2.) that female legislators would be the most likely to reply because they do more constituency service. We find that senders with Hispanic last names are as likely to receive a response as non-Hispanic senders,

but that the *content* of these responses is less thoughtful and helpful. So unlike in the elite access literature, minorities have equal “access” here, but are given less information about how to pursue a political career. Second, we do not find that female legislators respond more, again pushing against standard knowledge about constituency service.

DISCUSSION Our study finds that students who contact politicians for advice do not receive vastly different attention based on their gender. In fact, there appears to be a pro-woman bias in small acts of mentorship by these officials. Taken at face value, this is encouraging, but in closing we note that the vast majority of emails sent (74%) received no response. As recent research suggests, men and women may interpret this “rejection” differently. If, as London et al. (2012) show, women are more easily discouraged, or, as Butler and Preece (2016) find, women place a lower probability on the support they would receive than men, then we can still make sense of women’s under-representation even in a world of positive encouragement. On a more positive note, sharing these findings of pro-woman bias may modify the narratives women consider when entering politics (Holman and Schneider 2016) and increase the number of women that act as political self-starters

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