

Election aversion means that leveling the electoral playing field may not be enough to convince women to run for office

Of the 535 seats in the 114th U.S. Congress, women hold 104, or just over 19 percent. While this is the greatest number of women to hold office in Congressional history, there is clearly a great deal of work to be done before equality is achieved. In new research, [Kristin Kanthak](#) and [Jonathan Woon](#) look at the reasons behind the continuing lack of representation of women in politics, even after efforts to level the electoral playing field. They find that women are much less willing to compete in elections than men, even if they are equally qualified and confident in their own abilities.



Women have made great strides in achieving social parity, narrowing economic and educational differences such as [labor force participation](#), [college graduation rates](#), and [law school enrollment](#). But disparities in political representation remain. When women run, [they win at about the same rate as men](#), so it would seem that [the gender gap in elected office](#) could be explained by the fact that few women are willing to run for office to begin with. Using a [carefully controlled experiment](#), we found evidence for an important factor missing from conventional explanations for this gap: [gender-based election aversion](#). Women are much less willing to compete in elections than men, even if they are equally qualified and equally confident in their abilities. There is something about *elections themselves* that put off potential women candidates.



Researchers have long known that women and men do not face a level electoral playing field. For example, men have [more access to the funds necessary](#) to run, they have [fewer family obligations](#), and they even [have more electoral ambition and are more likely to think about running for office](#) than women. And indeed, organizations dedicated to increasing the numbers of women candidates are making great strides toward leveling that playing field. Myriad organizations – from the nearly 30 year old [Emily's List](#) to newcomer [Right Now Women PAC](#) to [local groups nationwide](#) – provide training and encouragement to potential women candidates. If all it took to encourage women to run for office were these organizations dedicated to promoting and encouraging the number of women candidates, women would now be running for office at a rate similar to that of men. They are not.

But as researchers, that made us wonder: What would happen if these organizations succeeded? Suppose we could create a world in which the electoral playing field really was level. If women and men faced the exact same costs and benefits to running, would women's willingness to run still lag behind that of men? We were able to level that playing field by taking the question to the social sciences laboratory. In the lab, we can control the costs and the benefits of running for both men and women. Furthermore, we can carefully measure quantities such as abilities and beliefs that are nearly impossible to measure in the field.

With support from the National Science Foundation (SES-1154739), we conducted an experiment in the [Pittsburgh Experimental Economics Laboratory \(PEEL\)](#) at the University of Pittsburgh, recruiting 177 women and 173 men for our study. Once in the lab, we asked our subjects to perform a simple addition task, and we paid them based on how many of these addition problems they solved correctly. The addition task serves as our laboratory analogue of "policy ability." Importantly, men and women are equally good at this task. We then told them that everyone would do the task again, but this time, their payment would be based primarily on the performance of a representative from their group. Thus, everyone has the same incentive to find the best representative, but they don't know who that is or where they stand relative to others in their group.



Featured image: Senate Democratic Women Discuss Importance Of Raising Minimum Wage To Women Credit: Senate Democrats (Flickr, CC-BY-2.0)

We then asked them if they would like to volunteer to be selected at random to be the representative (though we didn't use the word "volunteer"). Next, we told them that they would again perform the task, and their payment would again be based primarily on the performance of a representative (in the exact same way). But this time, the representative would be *elected*, rather than chosen at random from volunteers. Women and men volunteered at the same rate, but women were far less likely to put themselves forward as candidates, despite the fact that both decisions concerned the exact same job.

For us, this was the most important result of our study: the difference in women's willingness to volunteer to perform the task for the group and their unwillingness to run in an election to perform the same task for the group, *holding everything else constant*. In other words, the "volunteer" decision was identical to the "election" decision in every way, save for the existence of the election. The task was the same, the need for a representative was the same, and the payment structure was the same. Even the subjects were the same. (We were also careful to measure confidence and risk preferences, and these too were the same, ruling out alternative explanations.) Because of the control the laboratory setting provides us, we can be confident that it is *the election itself* that causes the decrease in women's willingness to participate – a phenomenon we call *election aversion*.

Women are averse to running in elections, but that would be less of a problem if they were also worse at governing. To the contrary, there is a good deal of evidence that women may be systematically *better* at some aspects of governing than their male counterparts. Women in American legislatures [bring home more federal money](#), [keep their bills alive longer \(but only when in the minority party\)](#), and [pass at least as much legislation](#) as do their male counterparts. Furthermore, research in organizational behavior tells us that groups that include women [exhibit higher collective intelligence](#) than male-dominated groups. And women also [tend to show less bias](#) toward those who may disagree with them politically. These are all traits that may be beneficial in a political environment that is crippled with nearly historic levels of political polarization.

What, then, does our experimental result tell us about the so-called "real world"? We certainly don't mean to imply that a naturally occurring election presents a level playing field for men and women – we know it does not. Rather, it provides us with a glimpse into how people make decisions about running for office that we would not have discovered without a careful experiment.

This picture of political decision-making has implications beyond the initial question of how to convince more women to run in elections. Potential candidates approach the question of whether or not to run for office by weighing a variety of considerations, not just their ability to do the job. In most jobs, people are hired based on their ability to perform the job they are hired to do. But the job of holding political office differs from most other jobs

because the abilities one must display to get the office – campaigning – are very different from the abilities one must display to perform the duties of office well – governing. Our results, then, indicate that the existence of election aversion may mean that the best people for the job may not even be willing to run for the position in the first place, a finding that has implications for both the diversity and the quality of the people who represent us.

*This article is based on the paper ‘[Women Don’t Run? Election Aversion and Candidate Entry](#)’, in the *American Journal of Political Science*.*

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Jonathan Woon, a native of Foster City, Calif., joined Pitt’s faculty in 2007. In his research, he conducts experiments and applies mathematical models to political processes to examine how strategic and reputational incentives affect representation and legislative policymaking. His published work has contributed to understanding electoral accountability, how members of Congress introduce and position legislation, and how reputations of political parties evolve and affect congressional elections. Woon received his PhD in political economics from Stanford University.



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