

# How gender affects the response rates of politicians to inquiries about healthcare and unemployment support



*Are women and men equally likely to receive answers when they contact politicians for information about healthcare and unemployment benefits? Drawing on a new study, [Zoila Ponce de Leon](#) and [Gabriele Magni](#) find that MPs are significantly more likely to respond to women overall, and that female legislators are more responsive, in general, than their male counterparts. Increasing the numbers of women in office would therefore lead to a higher quality of representation.*

The spread of Covid-19 has posed severe challenges for governments around the world. The health and economic crises the pandemic prompted in several countries have sparked a widespread need for information, particularly when it comes to accessing essential services such as healthcare and unemployment benefits.

Members of Parliament (MPs) can be a source of information for many. In the face of people in need of information, responsive MPs have the potential to make a difference. However, not all political leaders are equally responsive. Research shows that different traits can make some leaders more responsive, especially toward certain constituents.

Are women and men equally likely to receive answers when they contact politicians for information about healthcare and unemployment benefits? Women face discrimination in many realms of politics, but evidence is limited on whether such discrimination extends to interactions between women and elected officials. In [a recent study](#), we explore gender bias with the first large-scale audit experiment in five European and six Latin American countries. A citizen alias whose gender is randomised contacted all sitting MPs inquiring about unemployment benefits or healthcare services. The results are surprising.

We find that MPs are overall significantly more likely to respond to women (+3% points), especially in Europe (+4.3% points). In Europe, female legislators reply more often to women than men at a substantively meaningful rate (+8.4% points). We also find that women MPs are more responsive, in general, than their male counterparts (+5% points). These findings imply that more women in office would lead to a higher quality of representation, especially for women. Increasing the number of female legislators is therefore crucial at a time when [women constitute less than 50% of members of parliament in all but four countries in the world](#).

## Experimental design: Contacting MPs in 11 countries

We conducted audit experiments in 11 countries: five in Europe (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and the Netherlands) and six in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay). These countries present various electoral systems (majoritarian, open-list proportional representation, and closed-list proportional representation) and shares of female MPs.

In each country, a citizen alias contacted MPs via email, asking for help to access unemployment benefits (in Europe) and healthcare services (in Latin America). The messages, written in the official language of each country, were short and composed of simple sentences to increase the requests' credibility. To explore gender bias in legislator responsiveness, we varied the gender of the citizen alias sending the message within each country. We randomised the sender's first name, selecting a common name in the country whose gender could be easily identified. We also chose popular last names, which had no regional connotation and were the same for men and women in each country. We then recorded the replies that we received from MPs within two months of the date when we sent the email.

## Experimental Findings: Women receive more answers from politicians than men

Women who contacted politicians asking for help were more likely to receive a response (26% of requests sent by women received a reply compared to 23% of requests sent by men). Women consistently received more responses in all European countries, while in Latin America they received more replies only in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. Overall, the most substantial differences in response rate to women vs. men emerged in France (6% points), Germany (5% points), and Chile (5% points).

Why did women receive more responses? The answer lies in the greater responsiveness of female MPs to women. While both male and female MPs replied more to women, the difference in response rates, conditional on the sender's gender, is larger for female elected officials: 30% of female MPs replied to women, while only 26% responded to men. In contrast, 24.5% of the male MPs replied to women, compared to 22% who replied to men. The greater responsiveness of female politicians to women is especially strong in Europe, where female MPs replied to women 44% of the time and to men 36% of the time.

What should we make of this finding? In an ideal society where discrimination is absent, women and men should be equally well represented and benefit from similar responsiveness. However, women have consistently experienced marginalisation in politics and society. Previous observational work on gender and politics has highlighted the importance of descriptive representation to advance the substantive representation of women. Our research shows that the presence of women in parliament bolsters another dimension of substantive representation, inasmuch as helping constituents access government services is a core function of elected officials. Having more women in parliament is essential not only because it improves public policy outcomes for women, but also because it leads to higher responsiveness to women.

### **Observational findings: Responsiveness varies across countries and women politicians are more responsive**

We also found considerable variation across countries in the overall response rate, which ranged from 6% in Mexico to 89% in Ireland. Response rates were generally higher in Europe, although two Latin American countries – Uruguay (25%) and Chile (23%) – produced response rates greater than France (22%) and Italy (18%). Even though MPs' status and expected duties vary across cases, these results reveal a substantial variation in politicians' responsiveness. When they are looking for help with healthcare or economic needs, citizens can more successfully rely on politicians as a source of information in some countries than others.

Moreover, not all politicians reply at the same rate. Women legislators are more likely to respond than their male counterparts. Female MPs replied 28% of the time, compared to 23% of male MPs. This difference reveals that female politicians are more sensitive to the demands of their constituents and are more likely to offer the information that citizens need in times of distress. Women legislators are more responsive to both requests for information about unemployment benefits and healthcare services.

### **Conclusion**

By conducting similar experiments in multiple countries, our article expands our knowledge of the effect of constituent gender on elected officials' responsiveness in a variety of cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. The vast majority of prior audit experiments took place in the United States, and the few non-American studies have often been single-country experiments.

Our study also adds to the rich literature on the link between the descriptive and the substantive representation of women. While experimental studies on gender bias in legislator responsiveness have generally reported null effects, we found that women receive more replies. Importantly, in Europe, this is because of the higher responsiveness from female legislators.

Providing help to citizens with problems that arise in their daily life is a crucial aspect of representation. This is especially true during Covid-19, when many people have been affected by health issues and job losses. The pandemic also has a gender dimension: some evidence suggests that it has [disproportionately affected women](#) and that [female political leaders have taken more effective action](#). Our findings confirm that women politicians exhibit a higher degree of responsiveness to citizens, and particularly to women who may be looking for answers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the [Journal of Experimental Political Science](#)**

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Andrew Smith \(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#)*

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