

If party leaders want more women to run, they need to convince them that the “old boys’ network” will support them too.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/02/08/if-party-leaders-want-more-women-to-run-they-need-to-convince-them-that-the-old-boys-net

2/8/2017

Despite the growing profile of many women politicians, women are still underrepresented in political office. One potential reason for this representation gap is the difficulty political elites face in convincing women to run. In new research, [Jessica Preece](#) used a randomized survey of more than 3,600 elected American municipal officials to determine how they reacted to an offer from a party official to help a new recruit. She finds that while male officials believed that they would be given support by a party chair, women did not. Her findings show that it is important for recruiters to explain all of the concrete ways in which they are prepared to help women recruits to build a successful campaign.

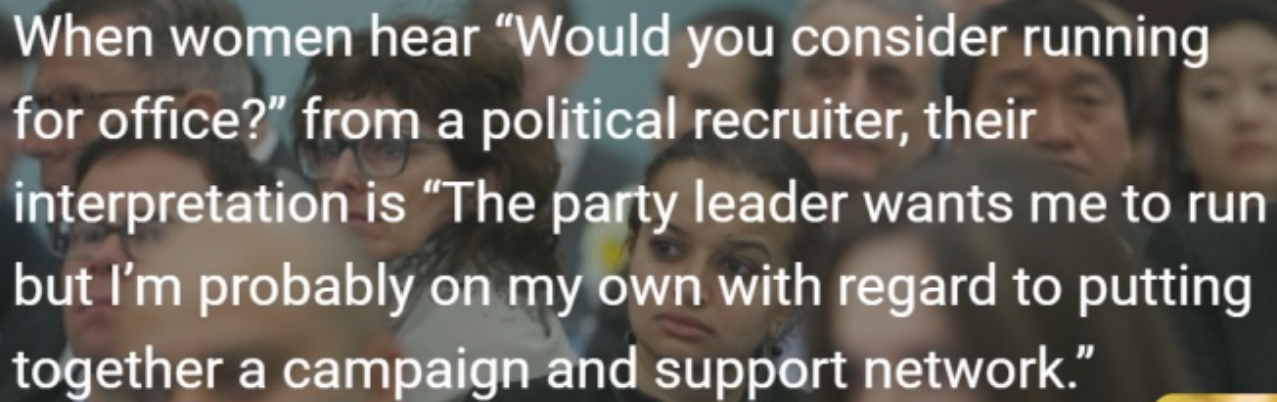


Why are women [so underrepresented in political office](#)? There are many reasons, but scholars have recently noted that one important reason is that political elites are [less likely to recruit women](#) to run for office than men. On top of this, there is emerging evidence that even when political elites *do* recruit women, [typical approaches aren't very effective](#) at convincing them to run. [Our new research](#) suggests that this is because men view typical recruitment tactics as an implicit promise of behind-the-scenes support for their candidacy, while women do not. This means that political recruiters need to be explicit about the ways in which they are eager to help a woman run a successful campaign if they want her to take their recruitment seriously.

To understand why women are less likely to respond positively to political recruitment, Dan Butler of Washington University in St. Louis and I, surveyed more than [3,600 elected American municipal officials](#) during the summer of 2014. In the United States, mayors and city councilors are the most [common pool of individuals from which political elites recruit candidates](#) for higher office (for example, state legislatures or Congress). Hence, they are the ideal group to survey regarding questions of political recruitment.

In the survey, we presented these officials with a vignette about a state party chair from their political party who was recruiting an individual to run for a seat in the state legislature. In one version, the recruit was a man; in another version, the recruit was an otherwise identical woman. Each official was randomly assigned to see only one of these versions of the survey. This randomized survey method allows us to compare how officials believe female recruits fare relative to male recruits in the same way that a randomized drug trial allows medical researchers to compare how effective a drug is relative to a placebo.

After the official read the vignette, we asked him or her how likely they thought it would be for his or her state party chair to 1) meet with this recruit to discuss campaign strategy, 2) introduce this recruit to campaign donors, and 3) help this recruit gain endorsements from prominent elected officials. This kind of informal support and mentorship is crucial for recruits, but it also exemplifies the kind of help that is generally dispensed through the “old boys’ network.” Our goal was to find out whether municipal officials believe that party elites are more likely to give this kind of aid to male recruits than to female recruits. In other words, do municipal officials believe the old boys’ network is still alive and well?



When women hear “Would you consider running for office?” from a political recruiter, their interpretation is “The party leader wants me to run but I’m probably on my own with regard to putting together a campaign and support network.”

- Jessica Robinson Preece, Brigham Young University



Overall, we found that male and female municipal officials had about the same impression of the general frequency with which state party chairs help recruits. Both male and female municipal officials believe party officials engage in networking on behalf of recruits quite frequently.

Male officials revealed that they believe this help is dispensed equally to male and female recruits. They did believe that it was somewhat more likely to go to politically experienced recruits rather than political novices, though. Since they themselves are politically experienced, the implication is that they believe that party officials will offer a lot of informal support to candidates like them.

In contrast, the female municipal officials believe that this help goes disproportionately to male recruits. For example, the women who saw the hypothetical male recruit believed that the party leader was “likely” to meet with him, but the women who saw the identical hypothetical female candidate thought it was closer to “neither likely, nor unlikely” that party leader would meet with her. In fact, the size of women’s perception of bias against women is more than twice as large as the size of men’s perception of bias against inexperienced candidates. Whether the hypothetical female recruit had prior political experience or not made no difference in how much support the women believed she would get from party leaders. And, this finding is the same regardless of whether the municipal official was a Republican, Democrat, or independent. In short, female municipal officials believe that party leaders are significantly less likely to use their political networks and connections to support candidates like them.

This helps to explain why women are less likely to respond positively to recruitment efforts than men. When men hear “Would you consider running for office?” from a political recruiter, their interpretation is something like “The party leader wants me to run and will support my candidacy with networking and behind-the-scenes effort.” When women hear “Would you consider running for office?” from a political recruiter, their interpretation is “The party leader wants me to run but I’m probably on my own with regard to putting together a campaign and support network.” No wonder running for office seems so much less appealing for women!

This has important practical implications for political recruiters who are interested in increasing the number of women running for office. Rather than simply suggesting that a woman run, it is important for recruiters to also explain all of the concrete ways in which they are prepared to help the recruit build a successful campaign. Do you have lists of donors you are able to share? Offer to share them. Do you know a good campaign manager and marketing firm that would work with her? Give her the contact information. Do you know several officeholders and/or interest group leaders who are likely to publicly endorse her? Organize a lunch where she can meet with

them.

In short, if political recruiters want women to run, they are going to need to convince women that the old boys' club is ready to invite them to join.

*This article is based on the paper, ['Recruitment and Perceptions of Gender Bias in Party Leader Support'](#), in *Political Research Quarterly*.*

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Jessica Robinson Preece got her PhD in Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles and is an assistant professor at Brigham Young University. She studies candidate emergence and recruitment, with an emphasis on gender. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, *Political Behavior*, and *Legislative Studies Quarterly*.



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