

Levelling the field: Overcoming gender bias through fairer candidate selection

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Summary

A new international study, commissioned by the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney as part of W21, its 21st century Global Women's Initiative, has found that having an equal amount of women and men in the candidate pool significantly helps to overcome selection bias against women. It suggests that representing women equally – whether on ballot papers or on recruitment shortlists – can increase the number of women selected over men and could be used to encourage more gender diverse representation in leadership positions.

Introduction

There is increasing concern to find public and corporate policy solutions for the dramatic under-representation of women in leadership and elected positions. In the United States, women represent only 24 percent of state legislatures and less than 20 percent of Congress. In the Australian Federal Parliament, women represent 26 percent of the House of Representatives and there is only one female cabinet minister.

US House of Representatives (2013-15)



Improving the number of candidates for selection is a critical precursor to improving the diversity of selected candidates. Research suggests that people have difficulty comparing seemingly dissimilar options and tend to restrict themselves to choosing from “alike types” (e.g. male candidates) when these comprise the majority of the choice set. An analysis of local government data containing 149 councils in New South Wales shows that the average percentage of female candidates for each council was only 31 percent. The average percentage of women elected to council was 27 percent.¹ This example highlights how gender diversity in the candidature is intimately linked to the gender diversity of the selected candidates.

The Intervention and Experiment

The intervention aimed to overcome the biases induced by unbalanced choicesets by requiring an equal number of male and female candidates in the pool. There were no constraints on which gender is ultimately selected, only that there were equal numbers of both genders in the pool.

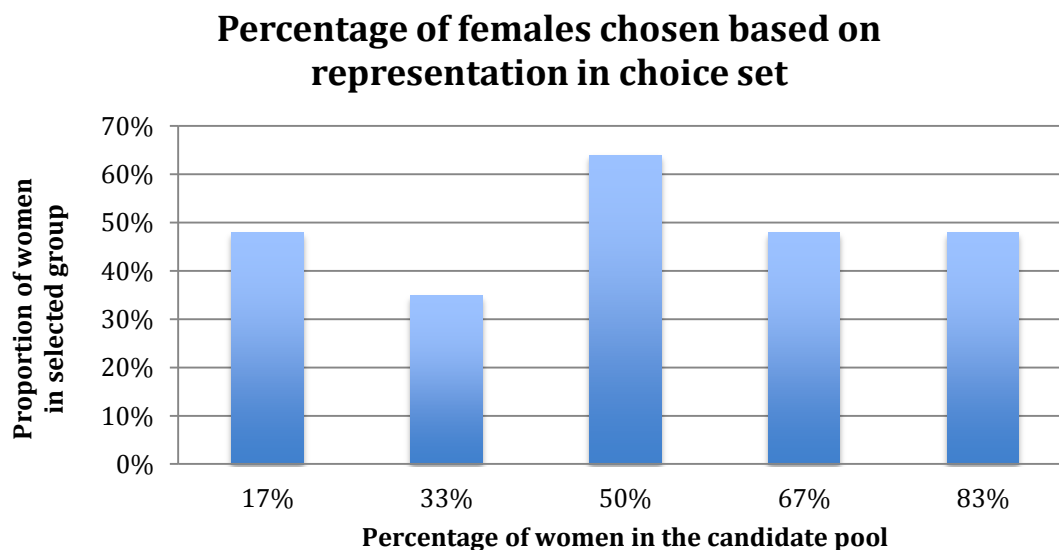
¹ DPC, NSW Division of Local Government, Department of Premier and Cabinet (2013) Comparative Information on NSW Local Government 2011/12.

This intervention was tested using an anonymous incentivized computer experiment in two stages. In the first stage subjects were given a maths task that involved correctly adding as many sets of five two-digit numbers as possible.² They were paid for each correct answer they gave.

The second stage involved a selection decision, where subjects chose one person out of a group of six who would complete the same maths task, with the subject receiving payment based on the chosen person's performance in the second round. Subjects could see the person's round one performance scores but made their decision before they could see the person's round two scores. Scores were taken from real participants from a previous Harvard University study.³

Results

Preliminary results indicate that providing a choice set of equal numbers of men and women results in a significantly higher number of females being chosen compared to the base case of a choice set where only one third of candidates are female (based on the NSW local government data).



Conclusion

Gender discrimination in hiring, promotion, and democratic representation is difficult to overcome because it is hard to prove gender discrimination and gender biases are often subconscious.

This intervention controls for the effect of unbalanced candidate pools and provides a subconscious de-biasing that doesn't require the decision-maker to actively override their selection biases in order to choose more gender diverse candidates. It is also relatively easy to implement and less controversial than imposing quotas on selected candidates.

² Niederle, Muriel, and Lise Vesterlund (2007) Do Women Shy Away From Competition? Do Men Compete Too Much? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122, 1067-1101.

³ Bohnet, I., Van Geen, A. V., & Bazerman, M. H. (2012). When performance trumps gender bias: Joint versus separate evaluation. Harvard Kennedy School of Government Working Paper number 8506867.