

Targeting Men could Raise Women Voters' Turnout

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Although women's electoral participation in Pakistan has been on the rise, large gender gaps in turnout continue to persist. How can women's turnout be increased in developing countries like Pakistan? Some researchers point to the disparity in resources as an explanation for the persistent gender gap in voting. However, in a recent article in the APSR (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000375>), the authors suggest that lack of resources alone does not explain women's low participation in politics. Instead, male members of a household often control resources in patriarchal societies, and act as gatekeepers of women's political participation. In fact, the authors found that campaigns to increase women's turnout are most effective when they target men, in addition to women.

Men act as gatekeepers in contexts where women depend on them to facilitate their political participation, owing to pervasive restrictions on their mobility and men's control over household resources. The authors suggest that this requires a reconceptualization of the resource theory: resources are collectively—not individually—owned and alleviating household level barriers to women's participation is therefore key to raising women's turnout.

To test this argument the authors conducted a field experiment in Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city, prior to the 2018 general elections. Their decision to conduct the experiment in Lahore is driven by the expectations of their theory: while men control resources that restrict women's political participation in almost all patriarchal contexts, short-term change is most likely when norms and attitudes towards women's participation are somewhat permissive. Indeed, the authors find that in the urban setting of Lahore, more than 90% of men and women agree that it is appropriate for women to vote.

As part of the experiment, the authors randomly assigned 2,500 Lahore households to one of four different groups: households that receive a visit from a female canvasser targeted to female members of the household, households that receive a visit from a male canvasser targeted to male household members, households that receive both kinds of visits, and households that receive neither. The canvassers arrived at the households unannounced and spent 20 minutes discussing the importance of women's participation in the upcoming election. Using handheld tablets, they showed par-



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ticipants a five-minute video about a woman feeling inspired to vote over concern for the delivery of services in her neighborhood. She also receives help from her brother to drive her to the polls. The canvasser then shared general information about voting and the election process. The survey team returned within a few days of the 2018 elections to measure women's turnout by recording whether voting-age women in the household had indelible ink marks on their fingers.

The authors find that canvassing does not increase women's turnout in households which only received a visit from a female canvasser. However, a visit from a male canvasser to speak to male members of the household increases women's turnout by 5.4 percentage points, while a visit to both male and female members of the household increases women's turnout by 8.0 percentage points. This is a substantively large increase given the gender gap in the 2018 Pakistani election was around 9 percentage points.

Speaking to men about the importance of women's participation in politics is therefore critical in improving women's turnout. This is particularly true in contexts where norms around women's political participation are permissive, yet women depend on men to facilitate their participation. What is even more interesting is that men continue to express support for women's political participation two months after the election. In a follow-up survey, the authors found that men in households that received both male and female canvassing are 6.2 percentage points more likely than households that received no visit to display a sticker promoting women's political participation in their home's entryway. This is an important (and innovative) behavioral measure of men's lasting support for women's political participation.

This study provides an important policy lesson for closing gender gaps in voting in developing countries. In addition to the substance of informational interventions, it is important to target those interventions at potential decision makers. When political decisions are taken at a household level, and norms towards women's political participation are permissive, then engaging the household decision makers can improve women's turnout. In fact, it can lead to lasting support from men for women's role in enhancing democracy. The authors acknowledge that their findings are revealing of an unequal status-quo where women lack autonomy over their own participation, and that ultimately this status-quo is what needs to change over a longer period of time. ■

CHEEMA, ALI, SARAH KHAN, ASAD LIAQAT, and SHANDANA KHAN MOHMAND. 2022. "Canvassing the Gatekeepers: A Field Experiment to Increase Women Voters' Turnout in Pakistan." *American Political Science Review*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000375>