WHAT WOMEN (don’t) WANT

Professor Jessica Preece gives insight into gender politics and the psychology behind it.

Associate Professor Jessica Preece came to BYU shortly after earning her doctorate from UCLA, and currently teaches comparative and gender politics for the political science department.

Why did you decide to teach?

When I was a student here at BYU, I worked with several faculty as a TA. At some point along the way I took Political Science 200 (from Professor Christensen) and I really loved it because I loved the idea of thinking about politics and social interactions with a scientific mind. So sometime in my junior/senior year I started telling people I was going to go get a PhD in political science; at that point I had not actually really thought about it that much and it was sort of a way to get people off my back. But when I started talking about it that way, several professors jumped onboard, and next thing I knew I’d applied for lots of school and had been accepted and I was set to go to UCLA for graduate school – it was not some sort of epiphany; I started telling people I was going to do it – and I did it! I was at UCLA for 7 years and loved it – it’s a beautiful place and a great school.

What’s helped you most as a professor?

Something which has helped me recently is field experiments. To do field experiments you need real world partners who have programs that you’re going to help them tweak. In keeping with the idea that academia isn’t just reading books, one of the things that’s been really helpful has been having connections in the community that have been willing to work with us. We’ve worked with the Utah County Republican Party, the State Republican party, we’ve made some connections with the organization ‘Real Women Run’ here in UT, so having these connections and being involved in the community has been a wonderful opportunity to find research settings – settings to be able to ask interesting research questions and work with them to find the answers. It helps a lot with what we like to call ‘external validity,’ or in other words ‘do you really believe what their assertion is?’ So that’s also been very helpful is having connections with people who are doing things on the ground. You just get better data, you get more believable claims.

“academia isn’t just reading books”
What’s your field of interest?

My broad research interest is ‘how do people end up on the ballot; how do we end up with the candidates that we end up with?’ My dissertation looked at what are the party procedures for choosing candidates, but more recently what I’ve been working on is trying to figure out ‘how do people decide that they want to get involved with politics?’ What is that internal process, what influences people to say ‘yeah, politics, that’s for me, I can do that, I want to be a part of that.’ In particular, we see so few women in politics; what’s going on in women’s brains and in women’s experiences that is making them say ‘politics, yes, I want to be a part of that.’ What the research suggests is that when women run for office they win at more or less the same rates as men, and so the main problem is not that voters are not discriminating against women in the ballot; the bigger problem is that women are just not ON the ballot.

So what have you been working on recently?

My research has taken two directions recently on this question of ‘why are women less involved in politics?’ One of them is looking at from a psychological perspective; what are the things that are going on in women’s brains that are making them say ‘politics, yes, I want to be a part of that.’ What we found was that women who were praised about their performance on this quiz were much more likely to report that they were interested in politics and their interest in politics matched the men in that same category – whereas in the control group there was a gender gap in the interest in politics. In praise treatment the men and women were equally interested in politics. When given accurate comparison feedback, the gender gap also disappeared, but because men’s interest in politics dipped down (nothing happened to the women’s interest in politics). It’s getting onto the issue of confidence – that maybe women simply aren’t as confident and that a little bit of encouragement can actually have a big effect. We are also doing an MRI experiment right now that’s trying to get at the question of ‘how do people’s brains respond to political tasks, and when they’re asked to do political things what’s going on in their brain?’ So that all deals with the psychological question of ‘what’s going on in women’s brains?’ - and men’s brains too; how are they different, and what’s going on there.

“voters aren’t discriminating against women... women just aren’t on the ballot”

I’m also working with a colleague – Dan Butler (an alum of the department) – we designed an experiment embedded in a survey and we gave it to male and female mayors. We gave them a scenario: ‘Jonny recruits Jennifer to want to run for office; how much support do you think they are going to give this candidate?’ It’s another way of getting at whether male and female mayors (politically active individuals), when they see recruitment happening, assume different things that go along with that; what are the implicit promises that they perceive coming along with attempts at recruitment. Do they think they will receive help fundraising? Do they think they will be introduced to the political network? What do they assume comes along with networking? So that’s another study on what’s going on in men and women’s brains to explain why they are interested in politics at differential rates.
On the other side there's this institutional perspective; what kinds of messages and what kinds of circumstances do women face in contrast to men when they are thinking about becoming involved in politics? We also did an experiment in Uganda; they have a system where there are reserved seats for women, so we went onto a university campus there and organized a candidate training seminar. The way that we invited students was randomly through a different invitation. Some reminded students that there were reserved seats for women. The question was – if female students are reminded that there are these reserved seats for women, institutionally set aside, does that make them more interested in running for office and being involved in politics? The answer is ‘no,’ we did not find that being reminded of the quotas had any effect on the women. It DID have a small effect on the men in getting them to be more involved in politics - so quite the opposite of what we expected, but that’s why we do experiments because sometimes you get surprising information. So that’s an example of an ‘institutional’ thing like a quota.

"how do people’s brains respond to political tasks?"

We also did some experiments with the Utah County Republican Party, to try to understand whether if you are invited to attend one of these candidate training seminars, are there specific messages which are more motivating to men and to women. If you talk about civic duty, or if you talk about time commitments, what kind of message resonates the most with men and women? We found some limited evidence that when you approach people inviting them to participate in politics and you talk about their qualifications and you say things such as ‘you’re one of our most active supporters’ that actually tends to encourage women to want to participate more. So that implies more that perhaps there’s something going on with confidence, etc. We have several other projects where if men and women recruit people in certain ways, does that have an impact on who shows up? Are there things that we can tweak to the institutional environment that can make it more women-friendly? One of the challenges other scholars have found is that recruitment is really important – people are much more likely to want to run for office if someone from a position of influence or power has told them, ‘you’d be good at this, have you thought about running for office?’ – but this sort of recruitment tends to happen within one’s social networks, and because the traditional party networks tend to be male dominated, women tend to get recruited less than men; they’re not at the lunches or on the golf course when these kinds of conversations are happening, and the people in power don’t know of these women because they’re in a different social circle or a different professional circle. So we’re trying to figure out ‘how do you really effectively recruit women in a way that’s going to resonate with them and help them feel as comfortable as men in the political environment?’

This is all a question of ‘how do you make politics appealing to women?’ and it’s about helping them realize that they are both wanted and needed in politics; both of those are necessary. I worked on a project with Professor Karpowitz and Professor Monson to study the caucus system in Utah, and what we found was it was very effective; they got a lot more women to come to the local state convention when the local precinct chairs reached out to women and when the party sent the message that they really wanted more women at the convention, and so more women got elected at the convention – about 5-8% more women showed up and were elected to be delegates to the Republican convention here in Utah when there was this combination of their local political leaders saying ‘have you thought of running for political office?’ and when they got this very clear message from the party that the party was interested in having the voices of women be heard.
I think there’s a lot of work to be done on ‘how do we help women know they’re wanted and needed? We want to hear from you – we want your perspectives; we want your diverse perspectives.’ Of course there’s the challenge of ‘what is the women’s perspective’ – every woman has a different perspective, just as every man has a different perspective. But if you only have a handful of women in politics, you don’t get a wide variety of women’s voices, and on average men and women do have different experiences and perspectives throughout their lives – they share a lot as well, but we want to maximize the different number of voices we are hearing and if we only have a small number of women in politics we are not achieving that diversity, and I think that’s really the goal; not that we need to find more women of a particular perspective, but if we just have more women in office we can get a wider variety of voices, and the marketplace of ideas will be more vibrant because of it.

“women tend to get less recruited than men”

women in politics we are not achieving that diversity, and I think that’s really the goal; not that we need to find more women of a particular perspective, but if we just have more women in office we can get a wider variety of voices, and the marketplace of ideas will be more vibrant because of it.

Professor Preece is currently an associate professor at BYU. She also co-directs the Gender and Civic Engagement Lab.