

# RESEARCH INSIGHTS



## Can Female Representation Decrease Gender-Based Violence?



The number of femicides in a district decreases by about 10 percent the year a female Representative is elected, but we find no effect on rapes.



Looking at the entire duration of the term, the effect on femicides vanishes and there is a significant increase of around 25 percent in the number of rape victims. This pattern is consistent with higher reporting rather than an increase in the actual prevalence of violence.



The drop in femicides is mainly driven by a deterrence effect that results from higher police responsiveness and effort in solving gender-related crimes.

### CONTEXT

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Domestic violence is a silent epidemic in the United States. One in four American women have experienced severe physical violence by their partner. Twenty percent of women will be raped in their lifetime, and every day three women are murdered by a current or former partner. Despite the magnitude of the problem, Americans often think of gender-based violence as an issue concerning poorer countries or segregated and marginalized communities. This paper studies a potentially protective factor: female representation. Female politicians can directly influence policy or become an indirect driver of change in women's social and political status.

### PROJECT

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We rely on a regression discontinuity design on close mixed-gender races to identify the effect of female political leaders on gender-based violence. We combine official data on reported crime from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with data on elections for the U.S. House of Representatives for the period 1970-2017. We focus on two distinct felonies, femicides and rapes, which vary in their degree of misreporting. We argue that our measure of domestic violence based on femicides is less biased since it is a fatal crime that is hard to misreport.

## RESULTS

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According to our main estimates, the number of femicides in a district decreases by about 10 percent the year a female Representative is elected, but we find no effect on rapes. We show that the absence of significant effects on reported rapes can be attributed to the combination of increased reporting and lower incidence of that crime, factors that offset each other. When we instead look at the entire duration of the term, i.e., the two years in office, we see that the effect on femicides vanishes. However, there is a significant increase of around 25 percent in the number of rape victims. We argue that this pattern is consistent with higher reporting rather than an increase in the actual prevalence of violence.

We explore two potential mechanisms that may be driving our results: police effort and attitudes towards reporting and the police. During the first year in office, we see a decrease of 7.5 percent in the number of female victims of unsolved cases of murder in the police records, while we fail to find such an effect when the victim is male. Furthermore, over the entire term, the number of clearances in the case of rapes goes up by around 50 percent. We also show that, after the election of a female Representative, women exhibit a greater propensity to complain about harassment and discrimination as well as more favorable attitudes towards the police. We rule out that the election of a female Representative leads to any changes in men's views about reporting or attitudes towards the police.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

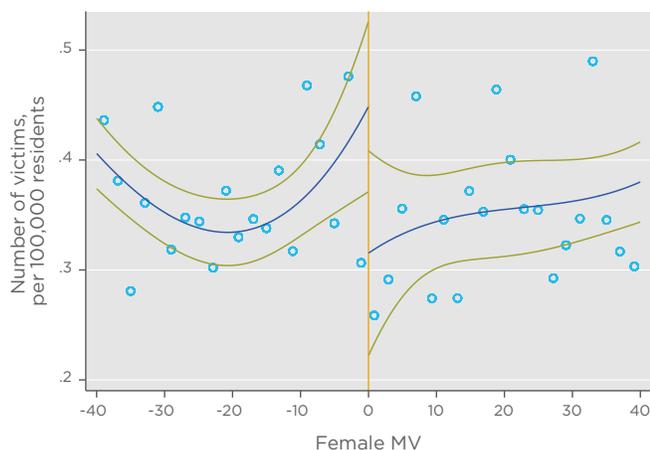
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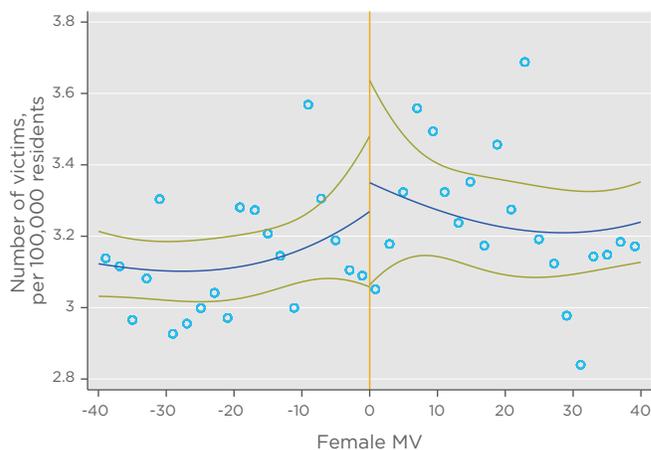
Thousands of women and girls are facing insecurity and violence in the United States. We show that the election of a female politician reduces the incidence of gender-based violence in the United States. The drop is mainly due to a higher responsiveness and effort of the police in solving gender-related crimes after a female politician is elected. We argue that the police response induces a deterrence effect.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that provides evidence on the importance and effectiveness of female representation in the United States in addressing violence against women. This paper is therefore an important step in investigating the role of female political representation in developed economies in closing the gender equality gap.

**Figure 1. The Short-Term effect of Electing a Female Representative on Femicides**



**Figure 2. The Short-Term effect of Electing a Female Representative on Rapes**



Note: Measures on the y-axis expressed as number of victims per 100,000 residents. *Female MV* is the margin of votes of the female candidate in district  $d$  in year  $t$ .  $MV > 0$  when the winning candidate is female and  $MV < 0$  when male. Scatter points represents values averaged within bins of 2% of  $MV$ . The blue line represents fitted values from a third-order polynomial in the margin of victory  $MV$ , fitted separately on each side of the threshold, while the green lines are the 95% confidence interval of that polynomial. Values refer to the first year of the term.



## FULL STUDY

[Frisancho, Veronica, Evi Pappa, and Chiara Santantonio. 2022. “When Women Win: Can Female Representation Decrease Gender-Based Violence?”](#)

## DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND CHIEF ECONOMIST

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