

Gender Gaps in the ERC Evaluation Process

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Receiving grant funding can significantly alter researchers' careers. Given that several demographic groups are still underrepresented in academia and that public funding agencies control a substantial amount of grant money, ensuring fairness in grant allocation processes is a key concern of research policy.

In this paper, we study gender disparities in the European Research Council (ERC) evaluation process. We examine whether female ERC applicants get worse evaluations from reviewers and whether these disparities worsen when more reviewers are male.

ERC proposals are submitted under three career stage-specific schemes, which are then assigned to one of 27 panels based on scientific field. Each panel consists of leading experts who evaluate the proposals in two stages. In the first stage, panel chairs assign proposals to several of the panel members for review. Reviewers provide written feedback and give scores (1–5) to the proposal and the candidate. Panel members then collectively assign letter grades (A to C), with A-rated proposals advancing to the second stage. In the second stage, proposals undergo external and further internal review, and candidates are interviewed before the panel makes the funding decision.

We analyze the first stage of the ERC evaluation process using three years of data on 24,000 proposals, each receiving between 3 and 13 reviewer scores and the panel score. Notably, the dataset includes information on the applicant's and the reviewer's gender.

First, we calculate gender gaps in the evaluation of the proposals submitted by male and female researchers. For the scores awarded by reviewers for both project and candidate we use the level of the score as the outcome (1–5). For the score awarded by the panel, we consider an indicator of whether a proposal moves to the second stage (A score).

The raw gender gap for reviewers' project scores is 0.08, meaning that male candidates receive scores 0.08 points higher on average. This is statistically significant but of limited magnitude when compared to the standard deviation of 0.99. We then adjust this gap for observed differences in domain, year, scheme, panel, and the share of male panelists. We also account for reviewer effects and interacted scheme-panel-year effects. After this adjustment, the gender gap in reviewer scores decreases to around 0.04, 4% of a standard deviation. Gender gaps in reviewers' scores for candidates exhibit a comparable pattern but with a larger magnitude. When all controls are considered, the gender gap amounts to 0.09, 10% of a standard deviation.

In terms of progression to the second round, there is no adjusted gender gap. However, a minor yet statistically significant gender gap emerges in the likelihood of receiving a *B* instead of a *C* rating. This suggests that in joint decision-making, panels tend to focus on proposals near the cutoff for advancing to the second stage, possibly mitigating individual reviewer biases.

We next calculate adjusted gender gaps separately for male and female reviewers. We find that the adjusted gender gap in project scores is 0.07 for male reviewers, while it is highly insignificant at -0.01 for female reviewers. This result persists in the evaluations of candidates, with smaller gender gaps observed when reviewers are female.

The larger gender gaps observed with male reviewers do not necessarily indicate in-group favoritism but may result from non-random allocation of proposals to reviewers. Although we lack direct measures of proposal quality, the fact that one proposal is evaluated by several reviewers allows us to include proposal and reviewer fixed effects. We find that male reviewers increase the gender gap in project scores by 0.06 (6% of a std. dev.) and in candidate scores by 0.07 points (8% of a std. dev.).

This suggests that, relative to female reviewers, male reviewers tend to rate male candidates more favorably. While indicative of potential in-group favoritism, the data do not definitively identify whether male or female reviewers exhibit bias.

In order to examine the sources of in-group favoritism, in particular field overlap, and to study gender-based favoritism, we are currently analyzing data obtained from the ERC.