A woman's place? An experimental study on the interaction of gender and list position cues and its effect on voters' perceptions of political candidates.[1]

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Abstract

Vote decision-making processes in List-PR systems are often described as uncertain or complex. Since voters do not have full information about all candidates, they rely on informational cues as cognitive shortcuts to make a well-informed vote choice. It has been found that both gender and list position influence voters' perceptions of a candidate's competence, but the interaction of both remains underexposed. By including list position in the analysis, this paper explores a new and central element of PR electoral systems.

We conducted an experimental study among a representative sample of the Flemish (Belgian) population. Flanders, which combines a flexible list-PR system with far-reaching quota regulations, provides a good case study for exploring the interaction between gender and list position cues. Our results demonstrate that gendered perceptions of competence are not mediated by list position. Female candidates do not enjoy additional advantages from a head of list position, nor do women with a middle of list position suffer from lower perceived competence.

The present study illustrates that Flemish voters are not inherently negatively biased towards female candidates, at least when it comes to perceptions of competence. Flemish voters have been intensively exposed to female politicians in parliament and government. As such, this might explain their less biased evaluation, which applies to all female candidates. We therefore argue that the positive effects of a gender-neutral political context on voters' evaluation of women candidates are rather beneficial for all female candidates and not limited to high-level female candidates.

Keywords: heuristic cues, gender, list position, political representation, political psychology, survey experiments

1. Introduction

Voters often have very limited information about individual candidates (Carpini & Keeter, 1997), especially in List-PR systems, in which large numbers of candidates are presented on different party lists. It is therefore difficult to make well-informed vote choices. Tversky and Kahneman's (1975) bounded rationality theory states that, in such cases, people rely on a limited number of heuristic

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principles to reduce the complex tasks of assessing probabilities and making decisions. Even in low-information contexts, voters obtain some basic information about the candidates (McDermott, 1997), which is then used as heuristic cue, i.e. a cognitive shortcut to estimate the features of political candidates (Conover & Feldman, 1989; Tversky & Kahneman, 1975).

The ballot list is the most basic piece of information and is available to all voters. This is an important source of information and contains two crucial cues. First, a candidate's gender can usually be determined by the candidate's first name. It is commonly thought that citizens hold gendered attitudes about who fits the image of a good politician (Taylor-Robinson, Yarkoney-Sorek, & Geva, 2016). Research demonstrates that women are stereotyped as being less adept for leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011), as less competent for politics in general (Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a; Lawless, 2004) and as more competent in communal issues (e.g. child care, education and health care) (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Kahn, 1996; Matland, 1994). This is, however, conditional upon the political context, which can alter the influence of gender stereotypes on candidate evaluations (Holman, Merolla, & Zechmeister, 2016).

Second, also the list position of a candidate is a highly visible information cue, which can easily be observed by glancing through the ballot lists. Research has demonstrated that candidates gain a greater share of the vote when they are listed first on the ballot (Blom-Hansen, Elklit, Serritzlew, & Villadsen, 2016; Lutz, 2010; Maddens, Wauters, Noppe, & Fiers, 2006; Van Erkel & Thijssen, 2016). Different underlying mechanisms, such as selection and campaign effects, can be distinguished. Also competence effects explain part of the puzzle (Devroe & Wauters, 2017a): candidates on top of the ballot are perceived as more competent than candidates lower down the list. Consequently, a high list position can be seen as a heuristic for the competence of the candidates occupying these top positions.

Both gender and list position cues have an impact on voters' perceptions of the competence of political candidates. In this paper, we will focus on the interaction of those two heuristic cues. The theory of interactions (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997) states that both cues could interact to help voters to form coherent impressions (Kundra & Sinclair, 1999). For example, female candidate could benefit from a head of list position, because the information attached to a high list position (i.e. candidates listed first are highly competent) is deviant from the general impression of female candidates. Moreover, despite stringent quota regulations, the number of female head of list candidates is below that of male head of list candidates. Therefore, voters might have the impression that those female candidates who succeed in obtaining a top list position have to be extremely qualified. On the other hand, it could be argued that female candidates with a middle of list position will be worse off. Quota regulations are often criticized for leading to the selection of unqualified candidates just to meet the quota standards (see for example Júlio & Tavares, 2017; Wauters, Maddens, & Put, 2014; Weeks & Baldez, 2015), which possibly results in lower levels of perceived competence for female middle of list candidates.

Flanders, the largest region of Belgium, provides a good case study for exploring the interaction between gender and list position cues. It has a flexible List-PR system, leaving voters the choice between casting a preferential vote or a list vote, and far-reaching quota regulations, requiring that one of the two top places on the list should be reserved for a woman (Celis & Meier, 2006). An analysis of how the list position of a candidate interacts with gendered perceptions about his/her competence, provides us with the opportunity to expand our knowledge on the use of informational cues in voting contexts. By including position in the analysis, a new and crucial element of PR electoral systems will be explored.

Interaction of voter cues that have been studied before (see infra) in proportional representation systems are candidate gender and party affiliation (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007) and candidate gender and physical appearance (Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2009). Both studies found significant interaction effects between gender and other informational cues. In some cases this interaction brought about a negative effect for female candidates (i.e. opponents of political parties dislike female candidates more than male candidates), but in other cases a positive effect was found (i.e. female candidates are preferred when the most important problem of the day is related to communal issues).

The central question is whether the list position of a candidate mediates gendered perceptions of competence. We hypothesized that the perceived level of competence of female head of list candidates will be higher compared to male head of list candidates. Rather surprisingly, our results, based on experimental research conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population, point to a different pattern. The interaction of gender and list position cues does not bring about statistically significant effects on voters' perceptions of competence.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we elaborate on gender cues and how they influence voters' perceptions of competence. The concept of list position cues and the underlying competence effect mechanism is introduced in the third section. In the fourth section, we focus on the interaction between both cues. We also develop our central research question and hypothesis. Our methodological approach will be charted in the fifth section. This will be followed by a presentation and a thorough discussion of the research results. In the concluding section, it will be argued that a gender-neutral political context has positive effects for all female candidates, irrespective of their list position.

2. Gender cues

The gender of a candidate, unlike other demographic cues such as age or level of education, can usually be determined by a candidate's first name. Voters associate the gender of a political candidate with particular personality traits, capacities and opinions (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b), which are referred to as political gender stereotypes (Dolan, 2014; Fox & Smith, 1998). In their seminal work, Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) developed two varieties of political gender stereotypes, those based on women's traits and those based on their beliefs. The former, which is labelled the trait approach, is especially relevant for our purposes. This approach states that voters' assumptions about a candidate's gender-

linked personality traits drive expectations that women and men have different areas of competence. Since women are seen as communal and social, they are expected to be better at communal issues related to the traditional domain of the family. Indeed, experimental studies have found that women's competence is restricted to communal areas, such as education and health care, whereas male candidates excel in all other issue domains (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Kahn, 1996; Matland, 1994).

The bulk of research on political gender stereotypes demonstrates that voters consider masculine characteristics as more important than feminine traits in politics, regardless of the level of office at stake (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Lawless, 2004; Rosenwasser & Dean, 1989). In other words, people believe that male candidates are stronger candidates and more knowledgeable than their female counterparts (Kahn, 1996). On the other hand, female politicians score significantly lower than male politicians on leadership and competence (Sapiro, 1981; Koch, 1999; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Dolan, 2014), two characteristics central to being a successful politician (Schneider & Bos, 2014).

It is, however, important to note that the effect of candidate gender is mediated by the broader political context. Results from Costa Rica and Israel highlight that the important issues of the day and the history of women in government affects whether voters positively evaluate female candidates. Women are more positively evaluated in Costa Rica, which can be described as a 'best case scenario' for displaying gender neutral attitudes due to its extensive experience with women in government, compared to Israel, which has limited experience with women holding seats in the Knesset or cabinet (Taylor-Robinson et al., 2016).

Results from Flanders, which has one of the highest shares of elected women in the world, confirm the patterns detected in Taylor et al.'s (2016) study and emphasize again the importance of the political context. Here, the differences in perceived issue competence are rather small and not always unequivocal. Gender-linked traits and competences only have an impact in some policy domains, for example defense. For other policy domains, the personal qualities needed to master them do not seem to simply correspond to typical male or female traits (Devroe & Wauters, 2017b). Flemish voters have been extensively exposed to female politicians, taking up prominent roles. As a consequence, Flemish voters might be less likely to hold gendered attitudes.

3. List position cues

In List-PR systems parties present their candidates in ordered lists. Being on top of the list is not based on random rotation of names, as in majoritarian systems, but the result of well-thought out selection processes by political parties. A positive effect of being listed first on the ballot on vote shares has been empirically demonstrated (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016; Faas & Schoen, 2006; Geys & Heyndels, 2003; Lutz, 2010; Marcinkiewicz, 2014; Van Erkel & Thijssen, 2016). This is labeled the Ballot Position Effect.

Different underlying mechanisms for this Ballot Position Effect can be distinguished: selection effects (parties select electorally attractive candidates for the top list positions), campaign effects (top candidates receive more attention in the election campaign) and easy vote mechanisms, ranging from purely irrational voting strategies to competence effects, in which the list position can be seen as a heuristic cue for the competence of candidates (Devroe & Wauters, 2017a; Van Erkel & Thijssen, 2016).

Competence effects refer to the idea that if a candidate gets a high position from his/her party, this candidate must be qualified and competent. Voters want to reduce the costs of acquiring and analyzing information about a large number of candidates. Therefore, they rely on the evaluation of the candidates by the party. The reasoning here is that parties have already made a selection based on the capability of (potential) candidates, which voters are likely to trust. Consequently, the list position can be considered as an extra voting cue by which political parties send signals to voters about the quality of the presented candidates (Devroe & Wauters, 2017a).

Experimental research affirms that the list position has an impact on voters' perceptions of the listed candidates' competence in Flanders (Devroe & Wauters, 2017a). The general effect (i.e. higher levels of perceived competence for top list candidates) is due to a mixture of advantages for the head of list and disadvantages for candidates in the middle of the list. The latter refers to the fact that a middle of list position has a negative impact on the perception of competence, indicating that voters are less convinced about the general competence of middle of list candidates.

4. Interaction of cues

The previous sections highlight that both gender and list position cues have an impact on voters' perceptions of candidates' level of competence, which is a central criterion in vote decision-making processes in PR systems (Goeminne & Swyngedouw, 2007). According to the theory of interactions (Peffley et al., 1997), different information cues possibly interact with each other, eventually leading to reinforcing or weakening effects. This is related to the dual process framework, which states that various informational cues work in tandem to help people form coherent impressions (Kundra & Sinclair, 1999).

Previous research in proportional representation systems focused on the interaction between gender and party affiliation (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007) and gender and physical appearance (Lammers et al., 2009). First, Aalberg and Jenssen (2007), in a Norwegian context, found a significant interaction effect between candidate's gender and party affiliation. They demonstrated that opponents of a party like the candidate better when the candidate is male than when the candidate is female. This indicates that supporters of a party are more positive towards female candidates. Consequently, being female does not hurt within a party, it is among the opponents of the party the cost lies. Second, Lammers et al. (2009)'s study on the Netherlands illustrated that the interaction of a candidate's gender, the most important problem and the physical appearance of the candidate influences election outcomes. If voters use gender cues to judge politicians, then the effects of these cues on bias toward men and women should be reversed for counter-

prototypical (in terms of physical outlook) candidates. Indeed, prototypical male (female) candidates were considered as better candidates when the most important problem issue is a competitive (communal) one. On the other hand, counter-prototypical male (female) candidates were considered as better candidates when the most important problem is a communal (competitive) one. In sum, both studies provide evidence for the idea that different informational cues work in tandem. In some cases this interaction brings about a reinforcing effect (i.e. opponents of political parties dislike female candidates more than male candidates), but in other cases a weakening effect is found (i.e. female candidates are preferred when the most important problem of the day is related to communal issues).

We believe that also list position cues might interact with gender cues and gendered expectations about the competences of male and female candidates. Although list position is an important feature of list-PR systems, its mediating effect on gendered perceptions of competence has remained untouched so far. Research shows that Flemish voters do not hold gendered perceptions on competence of female candidates (Devroe & Wauters, 2017b). This seems to indicate that Flemish voters are not inherently negatively biased towards female candidates. However, we do not know whether this applies to all female candidates, or for example only to high-level female politicians, such as head of list candidates. This can be linked to the debate on quota policies, in which it is often argued that the requirement to nominate more women candidates will lead to the election of women that are not up to the job (Wauters et al., 2014). This especially applies to female candidates with a lower list position of whom it is thought that they are only selected through an obligation to fulfill a quota, rather than for their qualities (Murray, 2010). The public debates surrounding quota adoption may shape expectations about who and how these female candidates are. By extension, the content of such discussions is likely to influence how the performance of female candidates is evaluated by the public in general (Franceschet, Krook, & Piscopo, 2009).

Our central research question is whether the list position of a candidate mediates gendered perceptions of competence.

RQ: Is the effect of a candidate's gender on his/her perceived level of competence mediated by list position?

Previous research demonstrates that voters believe that head of list candidates are better candidates in terms of perceived competence. When it comes to list composition, women have become better represented at the top of the lists from 2003 onwards in Flanders. This can be linked to the introduction of more stringent quota regulations in 2002. However, research demonstrates that the political parties only complied in a minimalistic way with the quota regulations concerning the top positions (Smulders, Put, & Maddens, 2014; Wauters et al., 2014) and that men are still overrepresented. As a consequence, voters might have the impression that those female candidates who actually make it to the top list positions have to be extremely qualified and have outstanding competences. In that case, voters are less

likely to apply a gender stereotyped view on women's competence, because other information, linked to a high list position, runs counter to their initial stereotype (Kundra & Sinclair, 1999). Furthermore, there is a basic assumption that strong competition leads to selection of the very best. Quota systems inherently involve and enhance competition between women, for example in the nomination process (Dahlerup, 2006). Therefore, we expect that female candidates will benefit more from a head of list position. This is summarized in the following hypothesis:

H1: The perceived general competence of female head of list candidates will be higher than that of male head of list candidates.

On the other hand, and also linked to the debate on quota policies, female candidates with a middle of list position could be worse off. We already know that a middle of list position has a negative impact on perceptions of competence. On top of that, methods of affirmative action such as electoral gender quotas, are controversial in many contexts and are often framed as unfair or as promoting unqualified individuals (in this case women) over more qualified ones (men) (Franceschet et al., 2009; Wauters et al., 2014; Weeks & Baldez, 2015). This gives the impression that these female candidates have been selected on the grounds of their gender, rather than their suitability for the job. Consequently, middle of list women have the possibility of being taken for quota women, as candidates who are only selected in order to meet the quota standards and to complete ballot lists (Murray, 2010). This reduces their esteem in the eyes of voters (Krook, 2008) and could have a negative effect on their perceived competence, which is summarized in the following hypothesis:

H2: The perceived general competences of women with a middle of list position will be lower than that of men with a middle of list position.

Before turning to the empirical analyses, we will discuss our methodological design in the next section.

5. Methodological design

We set up a quasi-experimental research design in which hypothetical candidates were presented to respondents in text messages in which only their sex, their position on the list and their policy position on a particular issue were mentioned. The party identification of the presented candidates was not indicated in order not to influence respondents' assessments of the presented candidates.

We focussed on Flanders. This is an interesting case for several reasons. It has a proportional electoral system with a flexible ballot list. Flexible formats give both party leaders and voters some say in the allocation of seats among its candidates (Schmidt, 2009): the order of the ballot list is determined by parties, but voters can change the order of candidates by casting preferential votes (Deschouwer, 2012). Voters can choose between two types of votes: a list vote (i.e. a vote for a political party) or a preferential vote (i.e. a vote for one or more candidates belonging to the same party). Candidates who receive enough preferential votes to pass the electoral threshold get elected automatically. Other candidates can

complement their pool of votes by making use of the list votes. These votes are distributed to candidates according to their order on the list, offering a substantial advantage to candidates at the top of the list (Wauters, Weekers, & Maddens, 2010).[2]

Moreover, Flanders has far-reaching quota regulations. The first quota law, introduced in 1994, stated that maximum two thirds of the candidates of a list could be of the same sex. The revised quota law, introduced in 2002, required an equal number of men and women on the list and that at least one of the three top places on the list should be reserved for a woman (Celis & Meier, 2006). In 2010, it became compulsory to have at least one women in the top two. Quota legislation has led to a substantial increase of women MPs and women have become much better represented at the top of the lists from 2003 onwards (Smulders et al., 2014; Wauters et al., 2014), although there still is a discrepancy with male candidates. This setting of a flexible List-PR system and far-reaching quota regulations makes Flanders a good case for exploring the interaction between gender and list position cues.

Our study used a 2x3x6 mixed complete block design. The candidate's gender (male versus female) and the list position (head of list, position in the middle or no list position mentioned) were manipulated as between-group factors. The hypothetical candidates presented their views on six different policy issues. We selected two policy issues that are generally linked to women's competences (health care and education), two policy issues that are generally linked to men's domains (defence and finance) and two gender-neutral issues (tourism and climate). These issue domains were manipulated as within-groups factor.

The experiment was conducted in March-April 2017. An invitation to participate was sent to 21 526 respondents. 11 837 of them actually received and read[3] the invitation and 4052 agreed to participate. After discarding respondents who could not correctly answer the first manipulation check (a question about the gender of the presented candidate), we retained 2500 participants. The external validity of our experiment is enhanced by conducting the study among a sample of the population, whereas most other experimental studies analyse students. Although students are of voting age and vary in their level of involvement in politics, they are a more homogenous population than the general population (Chang & Hitchon, 2004). Moreover, it could be argued that students, the youngest voters, are more likely to have been exposed to women in (prominent) positions in government and parliament. They therefore might be more liberal in their attitudes towards female candidates (Kahn, 1996) and the chances are higher that they will have developed gender neutral attitudes. Furthermore, several measures were taken to increase the representativeness of our sample. Respondents were drawn from iVOX's internet-based access

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[2] A new law, introduced at the beginning of the 21st century, halved the impact of list votes on the allocation of seats to candidates, thereby slightly diminishing the advantage of higher ranked candidates. It is therefore more common nowadays that lower positioned candidates get elected, especially in the context of local elections, because they receive a high amount of preferential votes (Van Erkel & Thijssen, 2016).

[3] The other invitations were sent to invalid or outdated email addresses.

panel, which is the largest online panel in Flanders with about 150,000 potential respondents. Although it is difficult to determine how well these panel members represent the general population (De Leeuw & Hox, 2008; Manfreda & Vehovar, 2008), we tried to maximize their representativeness. We set several quotas: a hard quota for the gender of the respondents and soft quotas for their age and level of education. In addition, our sample was weighted for gender and age (weighting factors ranging from 0.76 to 1.47).

The respondents were randomly assigned to six different treatments. After each text message, they were asked to complete a questionnaire about the presented candidate and message, before continuing to the next profile. The order of the issue domains was randomized in order to control for order effects. There was also a random variation of male and female candidates, and of head of list and middle of list candidates. The hypothetical candidates were presented as 'candidate X'. In Dutch, it is possible to indicate the different gender of these candidates ('kandidaat' for the male candidate and 'kandidate' for the female candidate). Likewise, gender-linked pronouns were used in the instructional paragraphs and questions. In all other respects, speeches and questionnaires were identical, in order not to provide any cues to the salience of gender.

The presented candidate profiles included several elements: a text message, an image of the ballot (where we indicated the list position of the candidate) and a facial silhouette of the hypothetical candidate. The inclusion of facial silhouettes is innovative and is a subtle cue to respondents about the gender of the candidate. Previous studies mostly indicated the gender of the presented candidate by presenting him/her with a clear male/female name (e.g. Dolan, 2014; Falk & Kenski, 2006; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Matland, 1994; Rosenwasser, Rogers, Fling, Silvers-Pickens, & Butemeyer, 1987), or by including images (see for example Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Lammers et al., 2009). This could, however, bring in some noise in the experimental design. Lammers et al. (2009), for example, demonstrated that physical appearance also impacts on the perception of the presented person. Also names can evoke certain prejudices because they possibly remind respondents of someone with the same name or because they simply (dis)like the name.

The provision of text messages is a standard practise in experimental studies on political gender stereotypes (see for example Dolan, 2014; Matland, 1994; Rosenwasser et al., 1987; Sapiro, 1981). These messages are based on a mix of the party programs of the 4 Flemish centre parties (CD&V, Open VLD, N-VA and sp.a), the Flemish government agreement and Flemish parties' press statements. They were made as neutral as possible, with no obvious linkages to particular party positions or statements. An example of the presented profiles and a translation of the six different text messages can be found in the Appendix.

Respondents were stimulated in various ways to intensively study the presented profiles. First, text messages were displayed 20 seconds by default, which obliged respondents to read these messages.

Second, manipulation checks were included to verify whether respondents were able to correctly answer questions about the candidate and the content of the message. All respondents had to answer a question about the sex of the presented candidate after the first treatment. Respondents who were not able to correctly answer this question could not further complete the questionnaire and their answers were not taken into account for the data analysis.[4] The presented results therefore only stem from respondents who were aware of the gender of the presented candidate for their evaluations. We also included other manipulation checks, for example about the list position of the presented candidate (see infra), the content of the policy positions and the presented arguments, in order not to over-accentuate the importance of the candidate's gender. This approach performed well, since only 27 respondents were able to correctly guess the intention of our study (see infra). Furthermore, respondents were incentivized to read the text messages thoroughly by highlighting that a prize (iPad Air 2 128 GB) would be raffled among those who could answer all the substantive questions correctly. An analysis of the answers to these questions indicates that a vast majority of respondents were able to correctly answer them. The lowest score of correct answers amounts to 84,95 per cent. We are therefore confident that the registered answers meet our quality standards.

The most important advantage of an experimental approach is the possibility to control for a number of intervening factors. We took several measures to ensure that only our key variables (i.e. the gender of the candidate and his/her list position) played a role in the evaluation made by the respondents. First, the institutional context was held constant by focusing on Flanders. Second, the characteristics of respondents were controlled by randomly assigning them to one of the different treatments and by making comparisons between experimental groups. Third, by using hypothetical candidates without partisan affiliation, we did not intervene in actual discussion nor was there any effect of pre-existing preferences or personal (dis)tastes. Taken together, all these measures offer a methodologically more rigid test.

From our initial sample, we additionally excluded three categories of respondents. First, respondents who completed the survey too fast (and consequently gave random answers) were excluded. These so-called speeder respondents were defined as those who completed the survey in less than half of the average completion time[5]. Second, we also excluded respondents who could not correctly answer the question about the list position of the presented candidate. We only excluded those respondents who

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[4] The incorrect answers are more or less equally spread over the different issue domains, and over the different candidates (male-female, head of list-middle of list-control group). The percentage of incorrect answers ranges from 0.80% to 6.60% for all 36 presented profiles. Because of the risk of a selection effect (for example if only politically interested respondents were able to correctly answer this question), we made a comparison between the final sample and respondents who could not answer the manipulation check correctly. This analysis revealed that these groups did not differ substantially on important aspects. There was a small selection bias in that our final sample was slightly higher educated and younger, but there were no outspoken differences concerning gender and level of political interest.

[5] The average completion time was 996 seconds. The boundary duration from which a response is considered valid was set at 498 seconds.

misunderstood the list position of head of list candidates (111 respondents) and middle of list candidates (122 respondents). For the control group (i.e. candidates whose list position was not mentioned), we did not exclude any incorrect answers.[6] Third, a question about the possible purpose of the study was included at the end of the survey to check whether respondents were able to find this out. Twenty-seven respondents provided an answer that was more or less in line with the purpose of our research. We decided to exclude the answers of those respondents because of a potential social desirability bias. However, since we also asked them to indicate at what point they found this out (while completing the questions for the first, second,…, sixth candidate), we did not have to exclude all of their answers. The exact number of registered answers varies therefore by policy issue. Our final sample consists of 2129 respondents (which is a response rate of 17,99 %). A description of the basic characteristics of the respondents can be found in the Appendix (see Table 1).

6. Results

This section is divided into two parts. First, we focus on the aggregated level and perceived general competence. In the next part, we will include the different policy issues in the analysis and compare the perceived issue competence of female and male head of list and middle of list candidates (see 6.2).

6.1. Aggregated analysis

For this part of the analysis, we will not differentiate between the different policy issues included in the design, but focus on the aggregated level. Every respondent was presented six candidates, one for each policy issue. Consequently, the number of total observations amounts to 12, 774. The candidate variable, consisting of six categories, was recoded in a variable with only four categories: male head of list and middle of list candidate, and female head of list and middle of list candidate. The control group was left out. We calculated weighting factors for each group to exclude possible effects from respondent's gender (gender solidarity effects). This means that there is an equal share of male and female respondents in each group.

Each candidate profile was followed by a set of questions about the presented candidate. Respondents were asked to indicate how competent the presented candidate would be for politics in general. Responses were on a (fully-labelled) 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent). A One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to examine whether there were significant differences in groups' means. The means and standard deviations for each of the four groups are presented in Table 1. The Levene's test for homogeneity of variance was not significant [1.538, $p >$ .05]. The one-way ANOVA of perceived general competence (see Table 2 in the Appendix) indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the perceived levels of general competence.

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[6] The provided answer categories for this question were not reliable to assess whether respondents were aware of the fact that the list position of these candidates was not mentioned.

Table 1: One-way ANOVA: Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived General Competence

Candidate	N	Mean	SD
Male head of list	2078	4.71	1.266
Female head of list	2122	4.72	1.212
Male middle position	2033	4.61	1.197
Female middle position	2062	4.59	1.211
Total	8295	4.66	1.223

Post hoc comparisons using Tukey procedures were used to determine which pairs of the four group means differed. These results are given in Table 2. When it comes to the main effect of candidate gender, there are no statistically significant differences between the perceived level of competence of male and female candidates.[7] This is in line with findings from Costa Rica (Taylor-Robinson et al., 2016) and previous research on issue competence stereotyping in Flanders (Devroe & Wauters, 2017b). These results indicate that respondents are not inherently negatively biased towards female candidates and estimate the general competence of male and female candidates more or less equally. As argued before, this might be related to the fact that there is a high number of female candidates and representatives in Flanders, which can be attributed to the existence of electoral gender quotas for about 25 years. Flemish voters have been extensively exposed to female candidates, resulting in a less biased evaluation and a more woman-friendly political context.

Table 2: Tukey Post Hoc Results of Perceived General Competence by Presented Candidate

		Mean Differences			
	Mean	1.	2.	3.	4.
Male head of list (1)	4.71	0.000	-0.008	0.105*	0.128**
Female head of list (2)	4.72	0.008	0.000	0.113*	0.136**
Male middle position (3)	4.61	-0.105*	-0.113*	0.000	0.023
Female middle position (4)	4.59	-0.128**	-0.136**	-0.023	0.000

* p<.05, **p<.01 (two-tailed)

We also see that a higher list position results in a better evaluation of general competence, both for male and female candidates. But more importantly, the mean score for female head of list candidates (M=4.72) does not differ significantly from male head of list candidates (M=4.71), although the bonus from a head of list position is somewhat more outspoken for female candidates (0.136 compared to

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[7] This effect also holds when we do not take list position into account (analysis not in table).

0.105). Nevertheless, we have to reject our first hypothesis (H1) stating that the perceived general competence of female head of list candidates will be higher than that of male head of list candidates.

Rather surprisingly, our second hypothesis, stating that the perceived general competence of female candidates with a middle of list position will be lower than that of male candidates occupying a middle of list position, also has to be rejected. The mean score for female middle of list candidates (M=4.59) does not differ significantly from that of male middle of list candidates (M=4.61).

In sum, on an aggregated level, list position does not seem to mediate the effect of a candidate's gender on his/her perceived level of competence. The perceived general competence is more or less equal for both groups. In the next parts, we will include the policy issues in the analysis in order to see whether there is an interaction with the issue domain at hand.

6.2. Issue competence analysis

For this part of the analysis, we are interested in the perceived issue competence of female and male head of list and middle of list candidates. The female and male candidate variable, each consisting of three categories, was recoded in a variable with only two categories: head of list and middle of list candidate. The control category was again excluded. Here too, we calculated weighting factors for each group per policy issue to exclude possible effects from respondent's gender (gender solidarity effects).

The mean scores for the presented female and male head of list and middle of list candidates' perceived issue competence are presented in Table 3. Significance scores are presented for the difference between female and male candidates. More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (see Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6).

Table 3: Mean scores indicating the perceived issue competence of female and male head of list and middle of list candidates for each policy issue on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent)

|	Male head	Female head	Sig.	Diff.	Male middle	Female middle	Sig.	Diff.
Defence	5,00 (N=348)	4,88 (N=348)	0,130	-0.12	4,80 (N=355)	4,80 (N=351)	0,981	=
Finance	5,15 (N=364)	5,16 (N=366)	0,864	+0.01	5,03 (N=333)	4,96 (N=340)	0,405	-0.07
Tourism	4,16 (N=337)	4,25 (N=344)	0,409	+0.09	4,22 (N=356)	4,16 (N=358)	0,525	-0.06
Climate	4,77 (N=350)	4,89 (N=360)	0,177	+0.12	4,99 (N=343)	4,85 (N=336)	0,113	-0.14
Education	5,05 (N=323)	5,13 (N=340)	0,339	+0.08	4,85 (N=321)	4,93 (N=324)	0,349	+0.08
Health care	4,99 (N=367)	5,01 (N=353)	0,765	+0.02	4,86 (N=338)	4,84 (N=339)	0,822	-0.02

*p<0,1, ** p<0,05, ***p<0,01 (two-tailed)

The inclusion of the policy issues into our analysis does not seem to bring about noticeable changes. Female head of list candidates are perceived as being more competent than male head of list candidates for almost all policy issues, except for defense. This is not surprisingly, since previous research also pointed out that defense is the most typical masculine policy issue (Lawless, 2004). However, these differences are not statistically significant. On the other hand, female middle of list candidates are perceived as being less competent than male middle of list candidates, except for education, which is one of the most outspoken communal issues. Also these differences are not statistically significant.

By making a comparison between the mean differences for female and male candidates, we can estimate whether the list position has a mediating effect on gendered perceptions of competence. When we look at Figure 1, an interesting pattern emerges, although it fails to reach statistical significance. When the candidate occupies a head of list position, the perceived issue competence is almost always higher for female candidates (orange bars) compared to male candidates (blue bars). But, when the candidate occupies a middle of list position, the perceived issue competence of male candidates (grey bars) is higher compared to female candidates (yellow bars). This seems to indicate a minor effect, in which female candidates are rewarded for a high list position, but punished for a middle of list position. However, there are no statistically significant differences in the mean scores for female and male head

of list candidates, nor for female and male middle of list candidates. These results again disprove our hypotheses.

Figure 1: Mean scores indicating the perceived competence of the presented male and female head of list and middle of list candidates for each policy issue on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent)
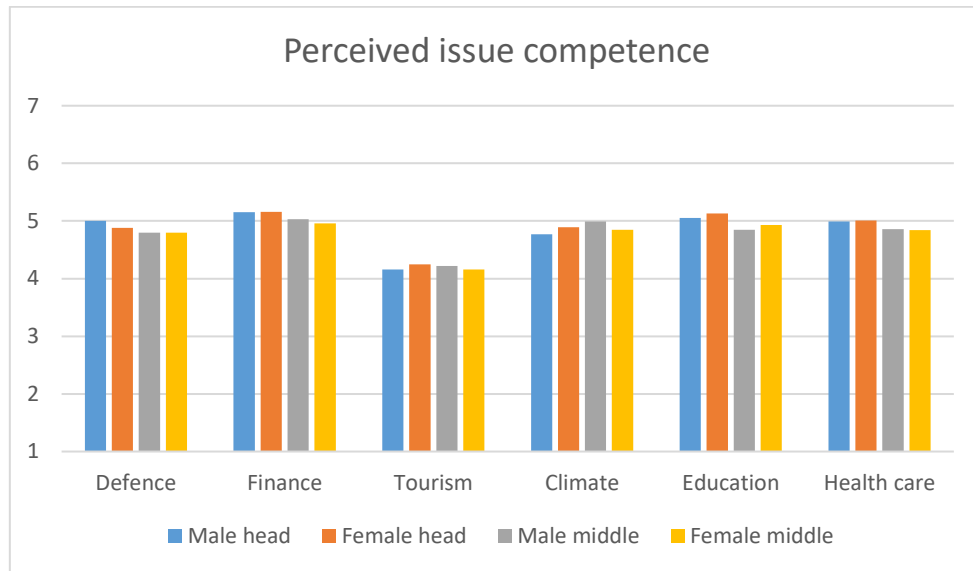
*p<0,1, ** p<0,05, ***p<0,01 (two-tailed)

7. Discussion and conclusion

Both gender and list position cues have an influence on voters' perceptions of the competences of political candidates. However, previous research did not go into the interaction of these cues. Competence is a central criterion in vote decision-making processes. It is therefore important to uncover the mediating effects of list position on gendered perceptions of competence. We focused on the interaction of both cues in the Flemish (Belgian) context. This provides a good case study, because of the combination of flexible List-PR system and far-reaching quota regulations requiring that one of the two top places on the list should be reserved for a woman (Celis & Meier, 2006).

Our results, based on an experimental study conducted among a representative sample of the general population, illustrate that list position does not mediate the effect of a candidate's gender on his/her perceived level of competence. Both male and female candidates benefit from a high list position. The difference in mean score is somewhat more outspoken for female candidates, but, rather surprisingly, not statistically significant different from men's. Consequently, the idea that strong competition leads to selection of the best and that voters will think that female head of list candidates will have outstanding qualifications was not confirmed.

Our second hypothesis also had to be rejected. The perceived competence of female candidates with a middle of list position is not statistically significant different from that of male middle of list candidates. The argument, proposed by quota opponents, that the use of electoral gender quotas will bring about the perception that parties select less qualified candidates in order to meet the quota standards does not hold. Female middle of list candidates do not suffer from lower perceived competence.

Overall, voters do not seem to differentiate between female and male candidates. This might be an indication that respondents are not inherently negatively biased towards female candidates and estimate the competence of male and female candidates more or less equally. This again highlights the importance of the political context in the development of gender-neutral attitudes. Apart from a high number of female MP's, linked to the long existence of electoral gender quotas, women have recently been well represented in the Flemish government (with several female deputy prime-ministers) and in parties (with several female party leaders). Flemish voters have been intensively exposed to female politicians in high political positions, which seems to result in gender-neutral attitudes. These gender-neutral attitudes are not restricted to prominent or high-level female politicians, but apply to all female candidates. Consequently, the positive effects of a gender-neutral political context are beneficial for all female candidates, irrespective of their list position.

Our findings have a number of implications. First, the present study demonstrates that female candidates do not seem to be disadvantaged at the polls. Competence is a central criterion in voters' assessments of election candidates in List-PR systems (André, Pilet, & Wauters, 2010; Goeminne & Swyngedouw, 2007). Since voters do not differentiate between female and male candidates in terms of competence, the risk for a voter bias is significantly reduced. However, it might be that other aspects of a voter bias negatively affect voters' perceptions of female candidates. It would therefore be interesting to supplement this study with research about the determinants of vote choice. In that light, it is important to note that, although voters have various cues at their disposal, not all cues will actually be used. There might be variation in how strongly candidates are linked to certain cues, related to prior knowledge about the candidates (Conover & Feldman, 1989).

Second, referring back to the title of this paper, societies are often influenced by an ideology of a woman's place. This links to the idea that women are more likely to hold low status positions (Eagly & Steffen, 1984) and should play an apolitical role (Shvedova, 2005). This seems to less apparent in our Flemish case-study. Flemish voters have been intensively exposed to female politicians, holding diverse executive and legislative mandates. According to the theory of exposure (Jennings, 2006), this possibly results in a less biased evaluation of female candidates. It could therefore prove useful to replicate this study in other contexts and regions in order to further disentangle the interplay between gender cues and other contextual elements. It would be particularly useful to make a comparison with other List-PR

systems with quota regulations, such as Poland, Portugal and Spain, or most Latin-American countries, or with other List-PR systems without quota regulations, such as Israel and Sweden.

Last but not least, it is important to note that the reliance on heuristic cues depends on the level of political interest (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007) and education (Falk & Kenski, 2006). It could thus be that our results only reveal a tip of the iceberg and that voters with little political interest are more likely to use gender as a heuristic cue and to differentiate between male and female candidates in terms of competence, but this remains for future research.

Appendix

Presented candidate profiles

"I am **candidate X** and I am **head of list** for my party. My views regarding **defense** are as follows: in order to take up our responsibilities in the international community, there is the need for a **credible diplomacy policy**. A **small** but well-**organized** Belgian army must, in accordance with our neighboring countries, be a reliable partner within **NATO**, which is an important framework for collaboration with other countries such as the US. A **realistic investment path** should allow us to prepare for future security challenges. In doing so, we demonstrate that we take **international solidarity** seriously, and that we continue to contribute to **international peace-building**, for which we are currently already internationally recognized."

Candidate X
Head of list

●	**Candidate X**
○	Candidate 2
○	Candidate 3
○	Candidate 4
○	Candidate 5
○	Candidate 6
○	Candidate 7
○	Candidate 8
○	Candidate 9
○	Candidate 10
○	Candidate 11
○	Candidate 12
○	Candidate 13
○	Candidate 14
○	Candidate 15
○	Candidate 16
○	Candidate 17
○	Candidate 18
○	Candidate 19
○	Candidate 20

"I am **candidate X** and I am placed **10th** on the ballot. These are my views on **education**: our Flemish educational system is of a **high quality**. This needs to be valued. We can build on our strengths, but have to address and resolve our bottlenecks. Investments in **infrastructure** and the creation of **additional places** are of great importance. In the next three years, we will invest € 150 000 000 in order to create additional places in cities and municipalities who are struggling with population growth and a lack of space. In addition, we will focus on a **permanent monitoring** of the allocated funds to ensure that these resources also actually result in additional places."

Candidate X
Position 10

○	Candidate 1
○	Candidate 2
○	Candidate 3
○	Candidate 4
○	Candidate 5
○	Candidate 6
○	Candidate 7
○	Candidate 8
○	Candidate 9
●	**Candidate X**
○	Candidate 11
○	Candidate 12
○	Candidate 13
○	Candidate 14
○	Candidate 15
○	Candidate 16
○	Candidate 17
○	Candidate 18
○	Candidate 19
○	Candidate 20

Tourism: "I am candidate X. My views on tourism are the following: tourism and holidays play an important role in our lives. The Flemish tourist sector must further develop as an efficient and sustainable sector. Central to our tourism policy are some important leverage projects. I would like to invest € 1 300 000 in the construction of 44 tourist accommodations, spread throughout Flanders. These investments are necessary to increase family friendliness and accessibility. This investment must focus on our main tourist attractions, such as cycling, walking, dining, art, heritage, nature, the diamond and fashion sector. These tourist attractions could also be pleasant for our citizens if they are also given the opportunity to enjoy them."

Climate: "I am candidate X and I am the head of list for my part. These are my views on climate: global warming is our main global challenge. Flanders must be ambitious to achieve the Belgian climate targets. I call for ambitious, but at the same time realistic long-term greenhouse gas reduction targets. For the Flemish share in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, we must follow a gradual trajectory in the coming years to achieve a 15,7 percentage decline by 2020. A more solid dealing with energy resources and the usage of renewable energy sources should make a significant contribution to achieving the climate goals."

Finance: "I am candidate X and I am placed 10th on the ballot. My views on finance are as follows: a balanced budget is needed in order to provide good prospects to the future generations. This is a difficult task in the current uncertain economic climate. Nevertheless, our aim should be to maintain sound economic policies and not to pass the burden to the next generations. Certainly as the effects of aging are becoming increasingly apparent, a balanced budget is a prerequisite for securing our future propensity. It is therefore also important that we continuously monitor and adjust our budgetary plans."

Health care: "I am candidate X. These are my views on health care: the expansion and strengthening of health care services is crucial, especially in times of increasing need for good chronic, mental health and elderly care. I am in favor of a care-model in which the individual patient becomes more involved in decisions about his/her own care. We must do our outmost to empower the individual patient and to consider him/her as a full partner in the care relationship. The individual patient should be in charge of his/her care path as much as possible. Furthermore, it is also important to strengthen the patient's social network."

Table 1: Description of the experiment's participants – weighted for age and gender (N=2129)

Gender	
Male	50,2%
Female	49,8%
Age	
<37	28,3%
37 – 56	37,0%

57+	34,7%
Level of education	
Primary education	4,5%
Lower secondary education	20,0%
Higher secondary education	40,8%
Non-university higher education	21%
University education	13,7%
Average left right positioning (1=very leftist, 7=very rightist)	3,97
Preferred party	
CD&V	12,9%
Groen	16,6%
N-VA	33,9%
Open VLD	11,0%
PVDA	6,4%
Sp.a	9,6%
Vlaams Belang	9,6%
How often do they follow politics in the news?	
On a daily basis	53,5%
2-3 times a week	23,6%
Once a week	8,1%
Less than once a week	10,6%
Never	4,2%

Table 2: Analysis of Variance for Perceived General Competence

Candidate	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig
Between Groups	30.862	3	10.287	6.889	.000
Within Groups	12380.352	8291	1.493		
Total	12411.214	8294			

Table 3: Mean scores indicating the perceived issue competence of female head of list and middle of list candidates for each policy issue on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent)

	Head of list	Middle of list	Sig.	Difference
Defence	4,88 (N=348)	4,80 (N=351)	0,343	+0.08
Finance	5,16 (N=366)	4,96 (N=340)	0,015	+0.20
Tourism	4,25 (N=344)	4,16 (N=358)	0,376	+0.09
Climate	4,89 (N=360)	4,85 (N=336)	0,623	+0.04
Education	5,13 (N=340)	4,93 (N=324)	0,028**	+0.20
Health care	5,01 (N=353)	4,84 (N=339)	0,050*	+0.17

*p<0,1, ** p<0,05, ***p<0,01 (two-tailed)

Table 4: Mean scores indicating the perceived issue competence of male head of list and middle of list candidates for each policy issue on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent)

	Head of list	Middle of list	Sig.	Difference
Defence	5,00 (N=348)	4,80 (N=355)	0,019**	+0.20
Finance	5,15 (N=364)	5,03 (N=333)	0,154	+0.12
Tourism	4,16 (N=337)	4,22 (N=356)	0,561	-0.08
Climate	4,77 (N=350)	4,99 (N=343)	0,016**	-0.22
Education	5,05 (N=323)	4,85 (N=321)	0,022**	+0.20
Health care	4,99 (N=367)	4,86 (N=338)	0,142	+0.13

*p<0,1, ** p<0,05, ***p<0,01 (two-tailed)

Table 5: Mean scores indicating the perceived issue competence of male head of list and female head of list candidates for each policy issue on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent)

	Male head of list	Female head of list	Sig.	Difference
Defence	5,00 (N=348)	4,88 (N=348)	0,130	-0.12
Finance	5,15 (N=364)	5,16 (N=366)	0,864	+0.01
Tourism	4,16 (N=337)	4,25 (N=344)	0,409	+0.09
Climate	4,77 (N=350)	4,89 (N=360)	0,177	+0.12
Education	5,05 (N=323)	5,13 (N=340)	0,339	+0.08
Health care	4,99 (N=367)	5,01 (N=353)	0,765	+0.02

*p<0,1, ** p<0,05, ***p<0,01 (two-tailed)

Table 6: Mean scores indicating the perceived issue competence of male middle of list and female middle of list candidates for each policy issue on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent)

	Male candidate	Female candidate	Sig.	Difference
Defence	4,80 (N=355)	4,80 (N=351)	0,981	=
Finance	5,03 (N=333)	4,96 (N=340)	0,405	-0.07
Tourism	4,22 (N=356)	4,16 (N=368)	0,525	-0.06
Climate	4,99 (N=343)	4,85 (N=336)	0,113	-0.14
Education	4,85 (N=321)	4,93 (N=324)	0,349	+0.08
Health care	4,86 (N=338)	4,84 (N=339)	0,822	-0.02

*p<0,1, ** p<0,05, ***p<0,01 (two-tailed)

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