From gender roles to gendered politics? The impact of Flemish voters' gender role conceptions on their perceptions of female candidates.[1]

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Abstract

The starting point of many studies on gender and politics has been that men are overrepresented in politics, whereas women constitute only a small minority of elected officials. From the side of voters, it is suggested that the underrepresentation of women can be partly explained by the persistent existence of gender stereotypes. There is an inconsistency between the predominantly communal qualities (e.g. nice, soft and compassionate) that people associate with women, and the predominantly agentic qualities (e.g. assertive and competitive) that people believe are required for good political leadership. Research on women's political underrepresentation has pointed to how these traditional views on gender roles among voters might work against female candidates.

However, more recent research lines question whether voters apply general feminine stereotypes to female politicians. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine whether (and in which manner) political gender stereotypes are different from general gender stereotypes. Based on an experimental study and a follow-up survey, conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish (Belgian) population, we make the connection at the individual level between voters' gendered attitudes (independent variable) and their evaluations of male and female candidates (dependent variable).

The present study points out that feminine stereotypes do not automatically motivate voter perceptions. Our results demonstrate that general gender stereotypes and traditional views on women's and men's roles are still prevalent in the Flemish society, however, they do not result in different evaluations of women's and men's (general) competences and ideological positions.

Key words: women, gender stereotypes, political representation, political psychology, survey experiments

1. Introduction

The political representation of women is still below parity: studies on gender and politics have consistently demonstrated that men are overrepresented, whereas women only constitute a small minority of elected officials (Ballington, 2005; Shvedova, 2005). This trend is even more apparent for the highest political leadership functions. This underrepresentation of women is potentially dangerous, because some interests are likely to be neglected, implying that there is a bias in the content of the political debate (Schwindt-Bayer, 2011; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Several explanations, both on the side of party selectors and voters, have been

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provided for this phenomenon. Previous research exploring the mechanisms behind voter biases points out that gender stereotyping processes explain, at least, a part of the puzzle (see for example Bauer, 2017; Ditonto, Hamilton, & Redlawsk, 2014; Dolan, 2014a; Holman, Merolla, & Zechmeister, 2016; Taylor-Robinson, Yarkoney-Sorek, & Geva, 2016).

Gender stereotypes are defined as "*a structured set of inferential relations that link personal attributes to the social categories male and female*" (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1979). There is an inconsistency between the predominantly communal qualities (e.g. nice, soft and compassionate) that people associate with women and the predominantly agentic qualities (e.g. assertive and competitive) that voters believe are required for good political leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Consequently, voters may hold the idea that women should be socialized towards a gender role that is more passive and private, whereas men are oriented towards leadership, public roles and autonomy (Brownmiller, 2013).

This cultural mismatch, or role incongruity, between women and the perceived demands of leadership underlies biased evaluations of female candidates (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Research on women's political underrepresentation has pointed out how these traditional views on gender roles might work against female candidates by influencing how voters perceive female candidates (e.g. Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). For example, stereotypes about traits (women are seen as more compassionate), stereotypes about political beliefs (women are seen as more leftist) and stereotypes about competences (women are seen as less competent, unless for typical female issues) all contribute to the idea that women would not perform as well as men in politics (Falk & Kenski, 2006).

Yet, more recent research lines put into question whether voters actually evaluate female candidates through the lens of feminine stereotypes (Bauer, 2015; Brooks, 2013; Dolan, 2014b; Huddy & Capelos, 2002). Bauer (2015) states that these stereotypes do not always shape how individuals perceive female candidates and that the use of feminine stereotypes in electoral evaluations is complex and conditional. For example, it has been demonstrated that voters only use feminine stereotypes when they receive information about a candidate that matches feminine stereotypes. It is therefore important to make a distinction between general gender stereotypes (i.e. the ascription of certain stereotyped characteristic traits to women and men) and political gender stereotypes (i.e. the application of these general gender stereotypes in the political sphere, which results in different expectations about the competences and ideological positions of male and female politicians).

The primary aim of this paper is to uncover whether political gender stereotypes differ from general gender stereotypes. In doing so, we will investigate if and how general gender stereotypes and traditional gender role conceptions come into play in the Flemish political sphere and affect voters' perceptions of and attitudes about female candidates.

Flanders, the largest region of Belgium, can be described as a gender-neutral context. It has a high share of female representatives and Flemish voters have been intensively exposed in the last decades to female politicians, both in leftist and rightist parties, taking up prominent roles in politics (such as party leader,

Minister of Finance, Minister of Justice and Minister of Home Affairs). Consequently, Flemish voters have been more confronted with gender equal information (such as the presence of women in top political positions) and tend to be more open to women in politics. This results in less biased perceptions of female candidates: stereotyped attitudes are less prevalent in Flanders (Devroe & Wauters, 2018), compared to, amongst others, the United States, in which the major part of the research on political gender stereotypes is set (see for example Dolan, 2014a; Holman et al., 2016; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Koch, 2002). However, this does not necessarily mean that gender stereotypes are completely absent at the individual level. By making the connection between voters' gendered attitudes and their evaluations and perceptions of male and female candidates, this paper enhances our understanding of factors that undermine women's equal participation in politics.

The present study is based on an online survey experiment and a follow-up survey, conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population. Voters' gender role conceptions are captured by a list of statements about the appropriate behavior for men and women derived from the Attitudes towards Women Scale (AWS) (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974) and by examining the extent to which they ascribe stereotyped traits to men and women. We hypothesize that voters who hold more traditional gender role conceptions will be more likely to differentiate between female and male politicians in terms of capacity for political leadership, issue competences and ideological positions.

Our results demonstrate that general gender stereotypes and traditional views on women's and men's roles are, to a certain extent, prevalent in Flanders. A part of our respondents endorses traditional roles for women and believes that women's locus is to be situated in the private sphere. However, these traditional gender role conceptions do not result in different evaluations of women's and men's capacity for political leadership and their ideological positions. Hence, general stereotypes are not automatically translated into political stereotypes.

This paper proceeds as follows. In order to set the context for subsequent discussions, the following section conceptualizes general and political gender stereotypes. In the third section, we develop our specific research question and related hypotheses. Our methodological approach will also be charted. This will be followed by a presentation and a thorough discussion of the research results. In the concluding section, it will be argued that general gender stereotypes do not automatically motivate voter perceptions: voters do hold gendered stereotypes about ordinary citizens, but this does not seem to affect their perceptions and evaluations of political candidates.

2. General and political gender stereotypes

Stereotyping is the process by which people, through either direct experience or other exposure, develop beliefs about group characteristics which are transferred to all members of that group (Dolan, 2014b). Applied to gender, gender stereotypes are "*consensual beliefs about the attributes of women and men*" (Eagly & Karau, 2002). On a general level, a typical woman is viewed as warm, gentle, kind, passive, loyal, communal, concerned with the wellbeing and welfare of others, compassionate and moral, whereas a typical man is

viewed as tough, aggressive, assertive, ambitious, analytical, competitive, controlling, decisive, independent, individualistic and a stronger leader (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Huddy & Capelos, 2002). Eagly (1987) summarized this in terms of two dimensions: the communal and the agentic. Women are believed to have more attributes of the communal dimension, which describes a concern with the welfare of other people, and men are supposed to have more attributes of the agentic dimension, which refers to an assertive and controlling tendency.

The prevalence of these gender stereotypes has a number of repercussions on a broader societal level. This refers amongst others to a dominant culture in society in which women are expected to take up subordinate roles, such as care-taker and nurturer, while it is seen as normal that men are holding powerful positions (Brownmiller, 2013; Lovenduski, 2005). Often a distinction is made between the public (the locus of men) and the private (the locus of women) sphere. For example, when it comes to labour market participation, women not only participate at a lower rate, they are also driven towards certain types of jobs, such as nursing or teaching, in which their caring and softer image is considered an asset. Also in the educational environment stereotypes matter and sometimes prevent girls from opting for technical or scientific educational programmes.

When it comes to the political sphere, if voters rely on these traditional roles, this might result in different expectations about the appropriate behavior for each gender. The gender stereotyping literature highlights that voters unconsciously associate candidate gender with particular capacities and opinions (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a), which are referred to as political gender stereotypes (Dolan, 2014a). 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 states that voters' assumptions about a candidate's gender-linked personality traits drive expectations that women and men have different areas of issue competence. On the other hand, gender stereotypes of politicians also include an ideological component. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) named this the belief approach and demonstrate that female candidates are generally perceived as more liberal (leftist in European terms) than male candidates of the same party.

The existence of political gender stereotypes has been extensively documented in the United States (Alexander & Andersen, 1991; Dolan, 2014a; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Koch, 2002; Lawless, 2004; Rosenwasser, Rogers, Fling, Silvers-Pickens, & Butemeyer, 1987; Sapiro, 1981). A number of stereotypical patterns have been detected in which female candidates are more likely to be perceived as competent in communal issues linked to the traditional domain of the family, such as education, health care and helping the poor, whereas men would do a better job with agentic issues, such as military spending, foreign trade, agriculture and taxes. Some studies also found considerable evidence for the existence of gender-belief stereotypes.

However, other studies illustrated that stereotypes have little effect on evaluations of female candidates (Brooks, 2013; Dolan, 2014b; Huddy & Capelos, 2002). These conflicting results suggest that the idea of an inextricable link between a female candidate's gender and feminine stereotypes is questionable and that

gender stereotypes not always impact on how individuals perceive female candidates. Brooks (2011) demonstrated that people hold strongly gendered stereotypes about ordinary people, but they do not seem to hold them about political candidates, because they have ambivalent ideas about what it means to be a female politician. Bauer (2015) states that stereotypes do not automatically enter into a voting decision when a female candidate is on the ballot: voters only use feminine stereotypes when they receive information about a candidate that matches feminine stereotypes. The role of individuating information as a factor that affects stereotype reliance has been introduced by Fiske and Neuberg (1990). Individuating information includes facts or details unique to a specific individual beyond their visible categorization as a man or a woman. For example, personality traits, biographical facts or policy positions are types of individuating information voters may have about a candidate, and this information may align with feminine or masculine stereotypes. Information inconsistent with a particular stereotype can suppress the activation of that stereotype. It is therefore incorrect to assume that general stereotypes about women are always translated into political stereotypes to evaluate female candidates (Bauer, 2015). Elaborating on how the process of stereotype activation works at the individual level can help explain the persistence of women's underrepresentation in politics.

3. Research questions and methodology
3.1. Research question and hypotheses

It is our aim to uncover if and how traditional gender role conceptions and gendered attitudes affect the political scenery in Flanders. This is summarized in our central research question:

RQ: How do voters' general gendered attitudes and gender role conceptions affect their perceptions of political candidates?

Voters have certain expectations of the traits that male and female candidates possess and their related competences and qualifications. The qualities that people associate with women conflict with the qualities that are generally required for success as a politician (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This role incongruity between women and the perceived demands of leadership results in biased evaluations of female candidates (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Moreover, conservative notions of the public/private divide reinforce the idea that women should play an apolitical role. Following this reasoning, we expect that individuals who hold highly stereotyped views on women's characteristic traits or who rely on traditional gender role conceptions will be more likely to believe that women are less competent for functioning in politics in general. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Voters who hold highly stereotyped views on characteristic traits and traditional gender role conceptions will be more likely to believe that women, compared to men, are less qualified for functioning in politics in general.

As mentioned before, stereotypes affect attitudes about female and male politicians in various ways. This refers to the idea that women and men have different areas of expertise (issue competences) and hold different

ideological positions. In terms of issue competence, it is reasonable to argue that female candidates will be seen as better at dealing with children and the aged, because they are stereotyped as more compassionate and concerned about the welfare of others than men, and because their responsibilities are limited to the family and the household. Men, on the other hand, will be expected to handle a military crisis more competently because they are typically seen as tougher, more aggressive and stronger leaders than women and because their locus is situated in the public sphere. This is summarized in the following hypotheses:

H2a: Individuals who have highly stereotyped views on characteristic traits and rely on traditional gender role conceptions will be more likely to perceive women as more competent than men to manage communal issues.

H2b: Individuals who have highly stereotyped views on characteristic traits and rely on traditional gender role conceptions will be more likely to perceive women as less competent than men to manage agentic issues.

Also stereotyped perceptions of ideological positions might be related to the kind of traits that are typically attributed to men and women. Since women are seen as softer and more compassionate, this might result in expectations that they will also pursue policy goals in a softer manner and with the intention of enhancing equality (i.e. a leftist approach). The opposite applies to men who are seen as harder and more competitive, resulting in a more rightist perception. Therefore, we posit that individuals who have highly stereotyped views on characteristic traits and who rely on traditional gender role conceptions will be more likely to uphold gendered views on women's and men's ideological positions.

H3: Individuals who hold highly stereotyped views on characteristic traits and traditional gender role conceptions will be more likely to perceive women as more leftist than men.

3.2. Methodology

Our results stem from a two-wave experimental study conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population in March-April 2017. The first wave consisted of an online survey experiment, 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. In the second wave (September 2017) , a follow-up survey was sent out to exactly the same sample of respondents.

The experiment used a 2x3x6 mixed complete block design. The candidate's sex (male versus female) and the list position (head of list, position in the middle of the list or no list position mentioned) were manipulated as between-group factors. Six different policy issues were manipulated as within-groups factor. We included two topics that are generally perceived as being communal (health care and education), two agentic topics (defence and finance) and two gender-neutral topics (tourism and climate). We did not mention the party affiliation of the presented candidates and the policy statements all took a centrist position, in order not to influence the assessment of the ideological position of the presented candidates.

Respondents were randomly assigned to six different treatments. After each text message, respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire about the presented candidate and message in order to grasp the use of political stereotypes. 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 across the issue domains.

The presented stimuli included several elements: a text message, an image of the ballot (where we indicated the list position of the candidate) and a facial silhouette (as a subtle cue to respondents about the sex of the candidate). The text messages were made as centrist as possible, and were based on a mix of the party programs of the four Flemish centre parties (CD&V, Open VLD, N-VA and sp.a), the Flemish government agreement and Flemish parties' press statements. By providing neutral policy positions and objective information, that does not align with feminine or masculine stereotypes, about the hypothetical candidates, we were able to rule out the possible influence of individuating information on stereotype reliance (Bauer, 2015). An example of the presented profiles and a translation of the six different text messages can be found in the Appendix.

Manipulation checks were included to verify whether respondents were able to correctly answer questions about the candidate and the content of the message. Furthermore, respondents were incentivized to read the text messages thoroughly by highlighting that a prize (iPad Air 2) would be raffled among those who could answer all the substantive questions correctly.

The experiment was conducted in March-April 2017. Respondents were drawn from iVOX's internet-based access panel, which is the largest online panel in Flanders with about 150,000 potential respondents. An invitation to participate was sent to 21,526 respondents. 11,837 of them actually received and read[2] the invitation and 4,052 agreed to participate. After discarding respondents who could not correctly answer the manipulation check about the sex of the first presented candidate, we retained 2,500 participants. From this sample, we additionally excluded two categories of respondents: 'speeder' respondents (those who completed the survey in less than half of the average completion time) and respondents who were able to find out the purpose of the study. After excluding these two types of respondents, we maintained a sample of 2,362 respondents (which is a response rate of 19.95 %).

Six months later, in September 2017, the same respondents were invited to participate in the second wave of the study. 1,624 respondents agreed to participate again. A description of the basic characteristics of the respondents can be found in the Appendix (see Table 1). In this online survey, we included some questions to grasp respondents' general gender stereotypes and their gender role conceptions. A list of 9 characteristic traits was presented and respondents had to indicate how masculine or feminine they perceived these traits (on a fully-labeled 7-point scale ranging from very masculine (1) to very feminine (7)). We also included some statements to grasp respondents' gender role conceptions. These statements were adaptions of the statements included in the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS). The AWS is the most widely used

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

measure about the proper roles of men and women and was designed to measure beliefs about the rights, roles and privileges women ought to have or be permitted (Spence et al., 1974, pp. 38-39). This scale has been used in several recent gender and politics studies (e.g. Glick & Fiske, 2001; Taylor-Robinson et al., 2016). Many items of the AWS assess beliefs regarding women's proper role in the household and the extent to which women are expected to fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother. A typical item from the AWS indicating the presence of traditional gender role conceptions states that "women should worry less about their rights and more about being good wives and mothers", whereas an item indicating the absence of traditional gender role conceptions states that "women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men". Respondents had to indicate the extent to which they agree with these statements on a (fully-labeled) 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (very much disagreeing) to 7 (very much agreeing). An overview of the included statements can be found in the Appendix. We also included questions on respondent's socio-demographic background characteristics. The gender and the age of the respondents will be included in the models as control factors.

The external validity of our study is enhanced by conducting the study among a sample of the population, whereas most other studies on political gender stereotypes analyse (university) students. Unlike student samples, our sample is more diverse in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. Moreover, students (i.e. 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, 1994), which could negatively impact on the generalizability of findings. We also set quotas for the sex, age and level of education of our respondents to maximize their representativeness. In addition, our sample was weighted for sex and age (weighting factors ranging from 0.76 to 1.47).

4. Results
4.1. Mapping general gender stereotypes

For the first part of the analysis, we will focus on the *characteristic traits*. Respondents were presented a list of 9 characteristic traits and had to indicate how masculine or feminine they considered these traits to be on a 7-points scale, ranging from very masculine (1) to very feminine (7). We recoded this variable into a variable with only three categories: masculine perception (consisting of very masculine, masculine and rather masculine), gender-neutral perception and feminine perception (consisting of very feminine, feminine and rather feminine). The descriptive results are presented in Figure 1. More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (Table 2).

Figure 1: General gender stereotypes – respondents' perceptions of characteristic traits
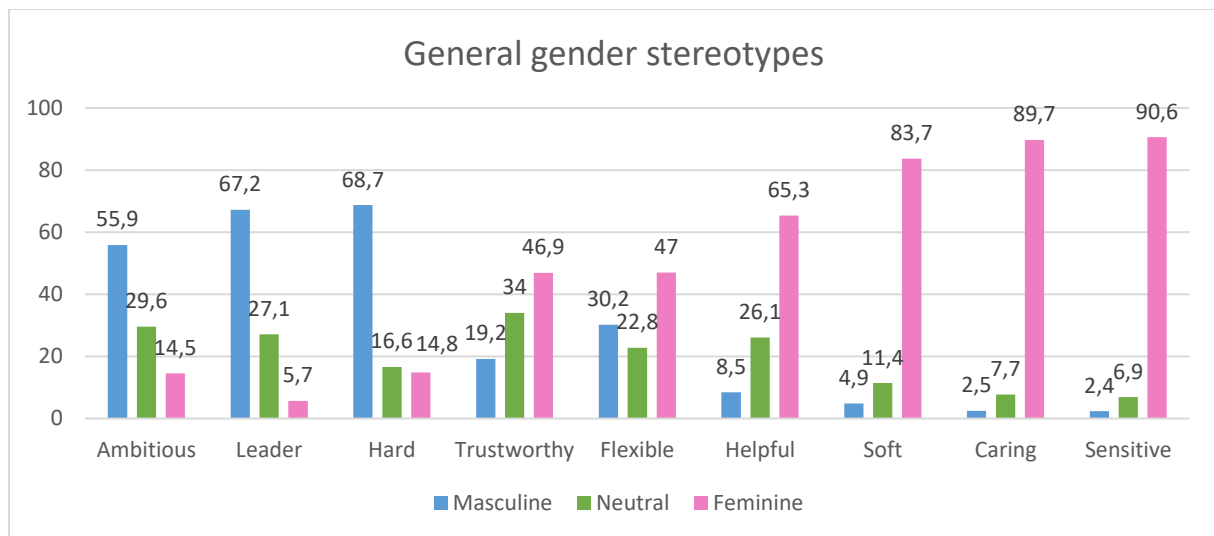
The results in Figure 1 demonstrate that some characteristic traits are clearly linked to femininity and others to masculinity. The most outspoken feminine characteristic traits are sensitive, soft and caring, whereas the most outspoken masculine characteristic traits are ambitious, hard and leader. This is in line with the so-called communal and agentic qualities that are ascribed to women and men (Eagly, 1987), which seems to indicate that, to a certain extent, general gender stereotypes are prevalent in Flanders. A principal component analysis with varimax rotation based on the nine characteristic traits led to three factors: female characteristics, male characteristics and gender-neutral characteristics. The KMO-test amounted to ,791 and Bartlett's test was significant (p=.000). The factor of female characteristics had a Cronbach's alpha of ,768, that of male characteristics had a Cronbach's alpha of ,433 and that of gender-neutral characteristics had a Cronbach's alpha of ,377. The results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Factor analysis characteristic traits

	Female characteristics	Male characteristics	Gender-neutral characteristics
Caring	,825		
Soft	,796		
Helpful	,690		
Sensitive	,677		
Ambitious		,816	
Leader		,664	
Hard		,481	
Flexible			,821
Trustworthy			,645

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a. Rotation converged in 4 iterations.

Next, when it comes to respondents' *gender role conceptions*, the results in Figure 2 demonstrate that, at least a part of our respondents, holds traditional views on women's and men's gender roles. 10.5% of our respondents does not agree with the statement that political responsibilities should be equally shared between men and women and 11.3% of our respondents believes that women should rather focus on their household responsibilities instead of striving for a professional career. This indicates that some respondents endorse more traditional roles for women and that they believe that women's role should be limited to the private sphere of the home and the family. More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (Table 3).

Figure 2: Respondents' gender role conceptions – statements Attitudes Towards Women scale[3]
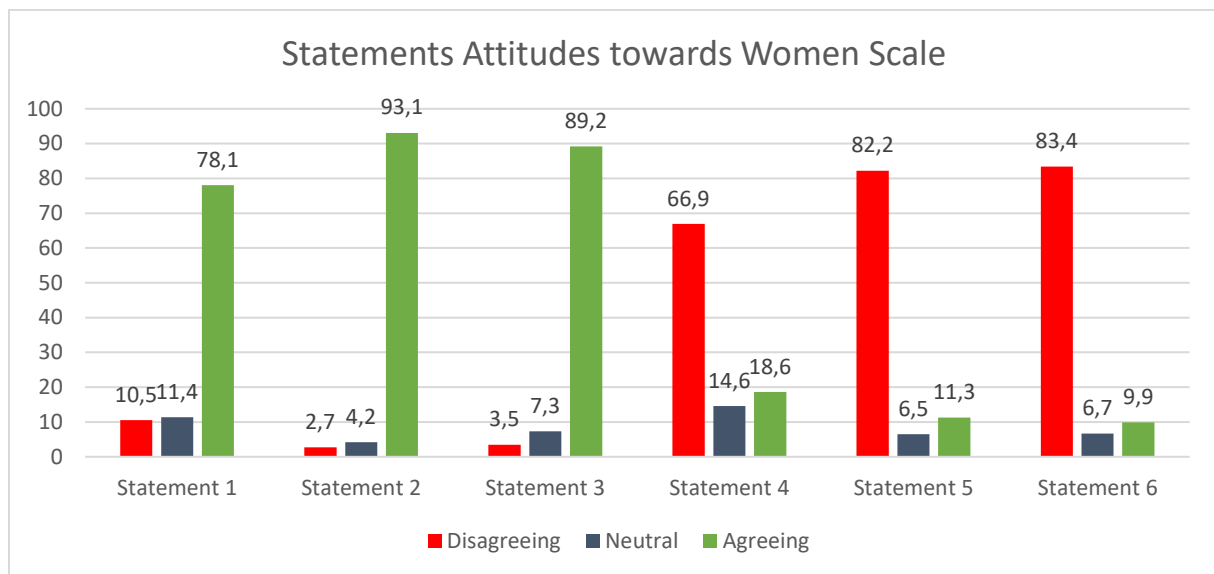
Further analysis indicates that all statements load on one factor. A principal component analysis with varimax rotation based on the 6 statements led to a single factor.[4] The assumptions hold up well. The KMO-test amounted to ,846 and Bartlett's test was significant (p=.000). The factor had a Cronbach's alpha of ,806. Table 2 presents the results of the factor analysis.

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[3] Statement 1 = Political responsibilities should be equally shared between men and women, Statement 2 = Men also have to take up responsibilities, such as washing and cleaning, Statement 3 = Women should be on an equal level with men in business and professional life, Statement 4 = Men should always be regarded as the legal representatives of the family, Statement 5 = Women should focus on the household and raising children, instead of striving for a professional career and Statement 6 = Women should worry less about their rights and equal opportunities, but rather focus on being a good mother and wife.

[4] For sake of clarity, all statements were re-coded o improve comparability. All scales range from 1 to 7 and have to be interpreted as follows: the higher the score, the more traditional respondents' gender role conceptions are.

Table 2: Factor analysis statements grasping respondents' gender role conceptions

	Gender role conceptions
Women should be concerned with their duties of childbearing and house tending rather than with desires for professional or business careers	,801
Women should worry less about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers".	,796
Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men	,771
Men must be regarded as the legal representatives of the family	,707
Men should share in household tasks such as washing dishes and doing the laundry	,669
Political responsibilities should be equally shared between men and women	,568

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
a. 1 components extracted.

4.2. Linking general stereotypes to political stereotypes

The above analyses point out that, to a certain extent, general gender stereotypes are prevalent among our respondent sample. A rather limited, but significant part of our respondents, considers women as being soft and sensitive, whereas leadership abilities are ascribed to men. Also traditional gender role conceptions, in which women's locus is rather situated in the private sphere of the family and the household, are present. The question remains, however, whether these general stereotyping patterns also come into play in the political sphere and whether they impact on voters' perceptions of political candidates. In order to answer this question, we ran multiple linear regression analyses with the perceived general competence (1), issue competence (2) and ideological position (3) of the presented candidates as dependent variables. Respondents had to evaluate the presented candidates on these aspects by means of fully-labeled 7-points scales, ranging

from 1 (very incompetent/very leftist) to 7 (very competent/very rightist). The basic descriptive results for the dependent variables can be found in the Appendix (see Table 4).

Several predictor variables were included in the models. We included a dummy-variable for candidate's gender (female versus male) as well as the factor scores (related to either characteristic traits and gender role conceptions derived from the factor analyses outlined above). Also interaction terms with these factor scores and the candidate's gender were included in order to grasp whether gendered attitudes and more traditional views on gender roles lead to different perceptions of female politicians. Finally, we also included two control variables: respondents' gender and age in order to control for gender solidarity and generational effects.

The results for perceived *competence for functioning in politics in general* are presented in Table 3. The statistical significance is indicated by means of asterisks next to the coefficients.

Table 3: Linear regression model predicting the perceived general competence of the presented candidates

	Perceived general competence		
	B	**SE**	**Stand. B**
Female candidate (versus male candidate)	-,059**	,025	-,024
Factor female characteristics	,067***	,018	,056
Factor male characteristics	-,030*	,018	-,025
Factor gender-neutral characteristics	,069***	,019	,057
Factor gender role conceptions	-,065***	,019	-,054
Interaction female candidate x factor female characteristics	-,028	,025	-,016
Interaction female candidate x factor male characteristics	,000	,025	,000
Interaction female candidate x factor gender-neutral characteristics	-,029	,026	-,017
Interaction female candidate x gender role conceptions	-,022	,026	-,013
Female respondents (versus male respondents)	,007	,028	,003
Age	,003***	,001	,041
Constant	4,516***		
Adjusted R²	,010		
N	9 270		

* p < 0,1 ; ** p < 0,05 ; *** p < 0,001

Adjusted R² = .010, F(11, 9182) = 9,436, p <.001

When it comes to the main effect, we see that there is a statistically significant effect for candidate's gender: female candidates are perceived as less competent (indicated by the negative sign) than male candidates for functioning in politics in general (p= .020). This indicates that voters do have a different perception of female and male political candidates. However, our results also demonstrate that this is not related to general gender stereotypes or gendered attitudes. Although there is a significant effect for the factors female characteristics

(p= .000), male characteristics (p= .092), gender-neutral characteristics (p= .000) and gender role conceptions (p= .001), none of the interaction terms reaches statistical significance. The interaction coefficient for gender role conceptions is negative, indicating that respondents holding more traditional gender role conceptions perceive female candidates as less competent than male candidates. However, there is only a very marginal difference (p= .412). Since none of the interaction effects is statistically significant, this seems to indicate that respondents' perceptions of female candidates is not conditioned by traditional gender role conceptions or gendered attitudes. We therefore have to reject our first hypothesis.

In terms of *perceived ideological position*, the results presented in Table 4 point out that female candidates are perceived as being more leftist (indicated by the negative sign) than male candidates. Here again, the effect is statistically significant (p= .019). The interaction coefficients point to a number of interesting patterns, but they fail to reach statistical significance. The coefficient for gender role conceptions is negative, indicating that respondents holding traditional views on the appropriate role for women in public and private life, perceive female candidates as more leftist than male candidates. Yet, this effect does not reach statistical significance (p= .225). Therefore, we have to conclude that respondents' perception of the ideological position of female candidates is standing apart from their general gender stereotypes or traditional gender role conceptions, which contradicts our second hypothesis.

Table 4: Linear regression model predicting the perceived ideological position of the presented candidates

	Perceived ideological position		
	B	**SE**	**Stand. B**
Female candidate (versus male candidate)	-,069**	,029	-,024
Factor female characteristics	-,028	,020	-,020
Factor male characteristics	,002	,021	,002
Factor gender-neutral characteristics	,020	,022	,014
Factor gender role conceptions	-,018	,022	-,013
Interaction female candidate x factor female characteristics	,030	,029	,015
Interaction female candidate x factor male characteristics	,002	,029	,001
Interaction female candidate x factor gender-neutral characteristics	-,006	,030	-,003
Interaction female candidate x gender role conceptions	-,037	,030	-,019
Female respondents (versus male respondents)	-,241***	,032	-,086
Age	,007***	,001	,080
Constant	3,686***		
Adjusted R²	,014		
N	9 270		

* p < 0,1 ; ** p < 0,05 ; *** p < 0,001

Adjusted R^2 = .014, $F_{(11, 9182)}$ 12,451, p <.001

Table 5: Linear regression models predicting the perceived issue competence of the presented candidates

	Defense			Education			Tourism		
	B	**SE**	**Stand. B**	**B**	**SE**	**Stand. B**	**B**	**SE**	**Stand. B**
Female candidate (versus male candidate)	-,074	,057	-,033	,089	,056	,040	-,023	,066	-,009
Factor female characteristics	,064*	,038	,058	,066	,041	,060	,086*	,046	,066
Factor male characteristics	,055	,038	,049	,004	,042	,004	,015	,049	,012
Factor gender-neutral characteristics	,012	,041	,010	-,001	,044	-,001	,151**	,051	,116
Factor gender role conceptions	-,055	,042	-,050	-,043	,044	-,039	,107	,050	,083
Interaction female candidate x factor female characteristics	-,006	,057	-,004	,050	,056	,033	,075	,066	,040
Interaction female candidate x factor male characteristics	-,087	,057	-,052	-,078	,057	-,052	-,022	,066	-,013
Interaction female candidate x factor gender-neutral characteristics	,024	,059	,014	,055	,059	,037	-,148**	,069	-,083
Interaction female candidate x gender role conceptions	-,045	,059	-,028	-,044	,059	-,029	-,128**	,069	-,071
Female respondents (versus male respondents)	-,196**	,062	-,088	-,101	,062	-,046	-,058*	,072	-,023
Age	,005**	,002	,070	,002	,002	,029	-,003	,002	-,036
Constant	4,739 ***			4,885***			4,338***		
Adjusted R²	,011			,009			,010		
N	1 532			1 531			1 532		

* p < 0,1 ; ** p < 0,05 ; *** p < 0,001

Adj. R² = .011, F(11, 1520) = 2,571, p <.001 – Adj. R² = .009, F(11, 1519) = 2,309, p <.001 – Adj. R² = .010, F(11, 1520) = 2,475, p<.001

	Climate			Finance			Health care		
	B	**SE**	**Stand. B**	**B**	**SE**	**Stand. B**	**B**	**SE**	**Stand. B**
Female candidate (versus male candidate)	-,030	,059	-,013	-,070	,058	-,031	-,054	,060	-,023
Factor female characteristics	,086**	,041	,074	,030	,041	,026	,176***	,043	,151
Factor male characteristics	-,027	,043	-,023	-,098**	,041	-,086	-,045	,043	-,039
Factor gender-neutral characteristics	,066	,044	,056	,037	,043	,032	,073	,047	,062
Factor gender role conceptions	-,165***	,043	-,141	-,018	,044	-,016	-,117**	,045	-,100
Interaction female candidate x factor female characteristics	-,060	,059	-,035	,028	,058	,017	-,201***	,059	-,123
Interaction female candidate x factor male characteristics	-,089	,059	-,055	,074	,058	,047	,027	,060	,017
Interaction female candidate x factor gender-neutral characteristics	-,018	,062	-,010	-,039	,060	-,025	-,041	,062	-,026
Interaction female candidate x gender role conceptions	,040	,062	,023	-,021	,061	-,013	,032	,062	,019
Female respondents (versus male respondents)	,051	,065	,022	-,070	,064	-,031	,148**	,065	,063
Age	-,002	,002	-,024	,004**	,002	,055	,005**	,002	,066
Constant	4,968***			4,940***			4,628***		
Adjusted R²	,025			,004			,024		
N	1 531			1 536			1 532		

* p < 0,1 ; ** p < 0,05 ; *** p < 0,001

Adj. R² = .025, $F_{(11, 1519)}$ = 4,636, p <.001 – Adj. R² = .004, $F_{(11, 1524)}$ = 1,534, p >.001 – Adj. R² = .024, $F_{(11, 1520)}$ = 4;433, p<.001

Lastly, we also take a look at the perceived issue competence of the presented candidates, as presented in Table 5. When it comes to the main effects, our results indicate that female candidates are perceived as less competent to handle defense, tourism, climate, finance and health care, but more competent to handle education, but none of these effects reaches statistical significance. Gendered perceptions about candidates' issue competences are thus practically absent in Flanders.

However, in a very limited number of cases, there is a significant interaction effect. For example, for health care, the interaction coefficient for female characteristics is negative, indicating that respondents who consider being soft, caring and sensitive as very feminine characteristic traits, perceive female candidates as less competent to handle health care issues than male candidates. This effect is statistically significant (p= .001). This is a remarkable finding, since it would be reasonable to argue that health care policies are ought to require a sense of sensitiveness to a certain extent. Another, albeit marginally, statistical significant interaction effect is found for tourism (p= .063). Here, the coefficient is negative, indicating that respondents holding traditional views on women's and men's roles, perceive female candidates as less competent to handle tourism issues. This is a rather surprising finding, since tourism is generally perceived as a gender-neutral issue, which does not require specific female or male characteristic traits or abilities.

5. Conclusions

The central focus of this paper was to uncover whether feminine stereotypes and traditional gender role conceptions come into play in the political sphere and affect voters' perceptions of political candidates. Earlier research on women's political underrepresentation has pointed out how these traditional views might work against female candidates by influencing how voters perceive female candidates (e.g. Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). However, more recent research lines question whether feminine stereotypes actually motivate voter perceptions. Bauer (2015) highlights that voters only use feminine stereotypes when voters receive information about a candidate that matches feminine stereotypes. Information inconsistent with a particular stereotype can suppress the activation of stereotypes. Hence, general stereotypes about women are not always translated into political stereotypes to evaluate female candidates. Therefore, we believe that a better understanding of the application of stereotyping patterns at the individual level can help explain the persistence of women's political underrepresentation. Based on an experimental study and a follow-up survey, conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population, in which we presented objective and neutral information about hypothetical candidates, we are able to make the connection between voters' gendered attitudes and their evaluations and perceptions of male and female politicians.

Our results demonstrate that, to a certain extent, gender stereotypes and traditional views on women's and men's roles are prevalent in Flanders. The perception of characteristic traits is gendered: some traits, such as soft, caring and sensitive, are clearly linked to femininity, whereas others, such as ambitious, hard and leader, are linked to masculinity. A part of our respondents also holds traditional views on the appropriate behavior for women and men: one tenth believes that women should rather focus on their household responsibilities

instead of striving for a professional career and that political responsibilities should not be equally shared between women and men. This is an indication that some respondents endorse more traditional roles for women and that they believe that women's locus is to be situated in the private sphere.

To unravel whether these general stereotyping patterns also affect the political scenery and whether they impact on voters' perceptions of political candidates, we ran multiple linear regression analyses with the perceived general competence, issue competence and ideological position of the presented hypothetical candidates as dependent variables. Our results point out that female candidates are considered as less competent to function in politics in general and as more leftist than their male counterparts. In terms of issue competences, no significant effects were found.

More importantly, our results show that general gender stereotypes or traditional gender role conceptions do not affect these evaluations. Although some respondents clearly rely on traditional gender roles, this does not result in different expectations about the appropriate behavior for women and men in the political sphere. In almost all cases, none of the included interaction terms reached statistical significance, which seems to indicate that respondents' perceptions of female candidates' (general) competences and ideological position is standing apart from their general gender stereotypes or traditional gender role conceptions. Voters who hold more gendered attitudes and traditional gender role conceptions are thus not more likely to differentiate between female and male political candidates in terms of capacity for political leadership, issue competences and ideological positions.

This leads us to conclude that traditional views on gender roles do not work against female candidates. This contradicts the argument put forward by Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) that traditional gender role conceptions are largely responsible for the most pervasive forms of political gender stereotypes. Our results seem to suggest that stereotypes do not automatically motivate voter perceptions. Following Brooks (2011), the present study provides evidence for the idea that voters do hold gendered stereotypes about ordinary citizens, but this does not seem to affect their perceptions of political candidates. This also calls into question Deaux and Lewis' (1984) statement of an implicit linkage between various components of gender stereotypes.

Nevertheless, a number of new questions arises. The fact that we did found statistical significant differences in terms of perceived general competence and ideological position indicates that voters do distinguish between male and female candidates. If this cannot be explained by traditional gender role conceptions or gendered attitudes, it remains for future research to delve deeper into the causes of these phenomena. Our results suggest that, even in contexts where voters have been intensively exposed to female politicians, stereotyped images of women remain prevalent. It could therefore prove useful to replicate this study in other contexts and regions in order to further disentangle the mechanisms behind this effect. Another issue for further research concerns the linkage between stereotyping patterns and actual voting behavior. In the present study, we decided to maximize control: each candidate was presented separately and we provided only minimal information about the candidates. A real vote choice, however, is only rarely made in contexts of low-information: it is often the result of a comparison between different candidates, representing different

parties, who have been prominently exposed in the media. This is a distinct cognitive process. It would therefore be interesting to supplement this study with research about the determinants of vote choice and the role of gender stereotypes in that regard.

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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=1624)

Gender	
Male	49,9%
Female	50,1%
Age	
<37	24,0%
37 – 56	36,8%
57+	39,2%
Level of education	
Primary education	5,4%
Lower secondary education	20,8%
Higher secondary education	40,3%
Non-university higher education	20,4%
University education	13,3%
Average left right positioning (1=very leftist, 7=very rightist)	3,98
Preferred party	
CD&V	13,9%
Groen	16,0%
N-VA	33,9%
Open VLD	9,5%
PVDA	7,1%
Sp.a	9,7%
Vlaams Belang	9,8%
How often do they follow politics in the news?	
On a daily basis	54,1%
2-3 times a week	23,8%
Once a week	7,2%
Less than once a week	10,1%
Never	4,7%

Attitudes towards Women Scale: included statements

- "Men must be regarded as the legal representatives of the family"
- "Political responsibilities should be equally shared between men and women"
- "Men should share in household tasks such as washing dishes and doing the laundry"
- "Women should be concerned with their duties of childbearing and house tending rather than with desires for professional or business careers"
- "Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men"
- "Women should worry less about their rights and more about becoming good wives and mothers"

Table 2: General gender stereotypes – respondents' perceptions of characteristic traits

	Very masculine	Masculine	Rather masculine	Neutral	Rather feminine	Feminine	Very feminine
Ambitious	1.6%	11.5%	42.8%	29.6%	11.1%	2.7%	0.7%
	55.9%			29.6%	14.5%		
Trustworthy	0.7%	3.7%	14.8%	34.0%	36.2%	8.8%	1.9%
	19.2%			34.0%	**46.9%**		
Flexible	1.4%	5.0%	23.8%	22.8%	34.4%	10.2%	2.4%
	30.2%			22.8%	**47%**		
Sensitive	0.2%	0.5%	1.7%	6.9%	51.8%	29.5%	9.3%
	2.4%			6.9%	**90.6%**		
Hard	4.9%	22.1%	41.7%	16.6%	10.3%	3.5%	1.0%
	68.7%			16.6%	14.8%		
Hulpvaardig	0.3%	1.4%	6.8%	26.1%	49.1%	13.9%	2.3%
	8.5%			26.1%	**65.3%**		
Leader	4.0%	16.3%	46.9%	27.1%	3.7%	1.5%	0.5%
	67.2%			27.1%	5.7%		
Soft	0.1%	0.7%	4.1%	11.4%	59.0%	20.2%	4.5%
	4.9%			11.4%	**83.7%**		
Caring	0.1%	0.6%	1.8%	7.7%	53.9%	26.1%	9.7%
	2.5%			7.7%	**89.7%**		

Table 3: Respondents' gender role conceptions – statements Attitudes Towards Women scale

	Very much disagreeing	Disagreeing	Rather disagreeing	Neutral	Rather agreeing	Agreeing	Very much agreeing
Political responsibilities should be equally shared between men and women.	1.9%	3.0%	5.6%	11.4%	13.2%	34.3%	30.6%
		10.5%		11.4%		**78.1%**	
Men also have to take up household responsibilities, such as washing and cleaning.	0.3%	0.5%	1.9%	4.2%	16.2%	43.6%	33.3%
		2.7%		4.2%		**93.1%**	
Women should be on an equal level with men in business and professional life.	0.8%	0.5%	2.2%	7.3%	12.0%	33.8%	43.4%
		3.5%		7.3%		**89.2%**	
Men should always be regarded as the legal representative of the family.	22.7%	28.9%	15.3%	14.6%	12.0%	5.0%	1.6%
		66.9%		14.6%		18.6%	
Women should focus on the household and raising children, instead of striving for a professional career.	34.6%	33.1%	14.5%	6.5%	7.8%	2.0%	1.5%
		82.2%		6.5%		11.3%	
Women should worry less about their rights and equal opportunities, but rather focus on being a good mother and wife.	39.6%	30.0%	13.8%	6.7%	6.5%	1.7%	1.7%
		83.4%		6.7%		9.9%	

Table 4: Basic descriptives of the dependent variables

	General competence	Ideological position	Competence Defense	Competence Education
N	9 194	9 194	1 532	1 531
Mean	4,64	3,89	4,85	4,98
Std. Error of the Mean	,013	,015	,029	,028
Std. Deviation	1,21	1,41	1,12	1,10
Skewness	-,609	-,023	-,714	-,873
Std. Error of Skewness	,026	,026	,063	,063
Kurtosis	,049	-,929	,472	,850
Std. Error of Kurtosis	,051	,051	,125	,125
Variance	1,467	1,983	1,248	1,211
Minimum	1	1	1	1
Maximum	7	7	7	7

	Competence Tourism	Competence Climate	Competence Finance	Competence Health care
N	1 532	1 531	1 536	1 532
Mean	4,20	4,89	5,07	4,92
Std. Error of the Mean	,033	,030	,029	,030
Std. Deviation	1,22	1,17	1,14	1,17
Skewness	-,301	-,783	-,874	-,643
Std. Error of Skewness	,063	,063	,062	,063
Kurtosis	-,597	,389	,913	,038
Std. Error of Kurtosis	,125	,125	,125	,125
Variance	1,695	1,369	1,290	1,378
Minimum	1	1	1	1
Maximum	7	7	7	7