

VOTERS' EVALUATION OF (CONTRA-) PROTOTYPICAL CANDIDATES

AN EXPERIMENTAL TEST OF THE INTERACTION OF CANDIDATE
GENDER AND POLICY POSITION CUES IN FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

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Abstract

Following social psychological models of impression formation, information about a candidate's policy positions shapes voters' impressions of their personal qualities (Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida, & Sullivan, 1990; Sullivan, Aldrich, Borgida, & Rahn, 1990). This paper presents an experimental test of the impact of the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes in Flanders (Belgium), i.e. the idea that male and female candidates have different areas of issue competence. Respondents are found to primarily base their evaluation of the presented candidates on the policy positions presented by the candidate and the extent to which they agree with the presented policy positions. It can therefore be concluded that the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions trumps the effects of candidate gender on voters' preferences. This decreased stereotype reliance is potentially beneficial for female candidates because it also decreases the chances of a voter bias.

Keywords: heuristic cues; gender, political gender stereotypes, survey experiment, political representation, voting behaviour

1. Introduction

When choosing which candidate to vote for, voters consider a large set of candidate characteristics, including socio-demographics, personality traits, party affiliation, incumbency status and physical outlook. Previous literature has extensively studied the question of how such features determine candidate choice (Dalton, 2013). However, in List-PR systems, in which large numbers of candidates are presented on different party list, voters often have very limited information about individual candidates (Carpini & Keeter, 1997). Tversky and Kahneman's (1975) bounded rationality theory states that, in such cases, people rely on a limited number of heuristic principles to reduce the complex vote decision-making process. These cues are referred to as "*cognitive shortcuts to estimate the features of political candidates*" (McDermott, 1997).

One of the most commonly used cues is candidates' gender, which can usually be determined by the candidate's first name. Previous research highlights that voters unconsciously associate candidates' gender with particular capacities and opinions (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993), which are referred to as political gender stereotypes (Dolan, 2014). Numerous experimental studies point to the importance of issue competence stereotypes, according to which female candidates are more likely to be perceived as competent in communal issues, 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 (e.g. Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Lawless, 2004; Matland, 1994).¹ These issue competence stereotypes are likely to influence the electoral popularity of candidates, as competence is found to be a central criterion in voters' assessment of election candidates (André, Pilet, & Wauters, 2010; Goeminne & Swyngedouw, 2007).

Most of the studies on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes are set in very conservative experimental settings in which only very limited information about the presented candidates is given. Following the literature on candidate characteristics and voter evaluations, candidate gender can be considered a low-information heuristic, primarily used when other, policy or candidate, information is absent (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, Trounstine, & Vue, 2018; Gift & Lastra-Anadón, 2018; McDermott, 1998). When other information is presented, different information cues interact with each other and help voters to form coherent impressions about political candidates (Kundra & Sinclair, 1999). Interactions of candidate gender and other voter cues that have been studied before in proportional representation systems are candidate gender and party affiliation (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007), candidate gender and physical appearance (Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2009), and candidate gender and policy positions

¹ Besides these issue competence stereotypes, other studies also found considerable evidence for the existence of ideological position stereotypes, i.e. the idea that female candidates are more leftist compared to male candidates (e.g. Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Koch, 2002) and general competence stereotypes, i.e. the idea that female candidates are less competent to function in politics in general than male candidates (e.g. Lovenduski, 2005), but this falls beyond the scope of this study.

(Pedersen, Dahlgard, & Citi, 2019). The latter demonstrates that when voters are presented information about the policy positions of a candidate, this information does, in some cases, crowd out the effects of candidates' personal background characteristics on voters' perceptions, but it provides no compelling evidence about whether this also affects the prevalence of issue competence stereotyping, the most persistent form of political gender stereotypes. As such, the fact that male and female candidates are generally considered equally competent, does not automatically imply that voters, when presented specific policy information, will not distinguish between men and women in terms of competence for particular policy areas, which are, by their nature, stronger linked to either men's stereotypic strengths (i.e. agentic issues) or women's stereotypic strengths (i.e. communal issues).

This paper will fill this gap by focussing on the effect of the provision of information about candidates' policy positions on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes. The electoral relevance of candidates' policy positions is fairly obvious. Following Downs's (1957) spatial model of electoral choice, voters prefer the candidate that is closest to the voters' own policy positions. Consequently, when voters are confronted with information regarding the policy positions of a candidate, such information is expected to affect voters' evaluation of the candidate. However, voters are found to make multiple inferences from background characteristics and policy information affects these inferences unevenly (Pedersen et al., 2019). We therefore argue that policy information might not just remove the effects of candidate gender on voters' preferences. Rather, the provision of policy information might also result in preference reversal, in which otherwise undesirable background characteristics turn into desirable characteristics in the eyes of voters. The latter can be linked to the idea of (contra-)prototypicality (see *infra*), i.e. the extent to which the characteristic traits attributed to political candidates are in line with the traits that one would stereotypically attribute to persons of that particular gender. Previous research into the effect of (contra-)prototypicality highlights that, if voters use gender stereotypes to form evaluations of political candidates, the effect of gender on these evaluations will be reversed for contra-prototypical candidates (Lammers et al., 2009). That is, contra-prototypical female candidates are seen as better candidates for agentic issues, while contra-prototypical male candidates are rated higher for communal issues.

Based on an original survey experiment conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population, this paper explores to what extent the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions influences the presence of issue competence stereotypes in Flanders (Belgium). Flanders combines a highly proportional List PR-system and a stringent quota system (Meier, 2012), which results in higher shares of elected women (one of the highest in the world). Its political context is found to be more gender-equal compared to majoritarian systems (Krook & Schwindt-Bayer, 2013) and previous research demonstrates that issue competence stereotypes are only prevalent to a limited extent and only work in the favour of men in male-dominated policy areas (Author's own). For defence issues, male candidates are perceived to be statistically significantly more competent compared to female

candidates whereas female candidates are not considered to be more competent on typical communal issues.

We argue that the provision of information about candidates' policy positions, and the interplay hereof with candidate gender, could result in two different outcomes: 1) following Pedersen et al.'s study, a scenario in which the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions crowds out the effects of candidates' gender resulting in the total disappearance of issue competence stereotypes, 2) a scenario in which the interplay of the two cues could, based on the idea of (contra-)prototypicality, result in a reinforcing effect of the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes. This links to the idea that, even in a context where issue competence stereotypes are only present to a limited extent, they can be activated in voters' minds through the provision of individuating information (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990) about candidates' policy positions.

Our results highlight that respondents do not distinguish between male and female candidates presenting similar policy positions. Respondents primarily base their evaluation of the presented candidates on the policy positions presented by the candidate, and more specifically on the extent to which they agree with the presented policy positions, rather than on their gender. In addition, we also found that female candidates can overcome some of the disadvantages they experience in the area of issue competence stereotypes by highlighting their specific policy positions.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section focuses on the origins of issue competence stereotypes and the potential moderating effect of candidates' policy positions, and elaborates on the causal mechanisms behind this effect. In the third section the methodological approach will 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 studies on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes should take the effects of candidates' policy positions into account in order to come to a better understanding of the impact of candidate gender on voters' evaluations.

2. Issue competence stereotypes

Issue competence stereotypes, i.e. the different expectations among voters about the types of issues handled well by male and female politicians, have proved to be the most consistent form of political gender stereotyping (see for example Dolan, 2014; Matland, 1994; Taylor-Robinson, Yarkoney-Sorek, & Geva, 2016). Although there is some variation over time and across different contexts, female candidates are generally 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.

In order to get a clearer view on the causal mechanism(s) behind the possible effect of the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes, this section starts with outlining the origins of these issue competence stereotypes.

2.1. Origins

Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) argue that issue competence stereotyping has two, quite different, origins. According to the trait approach, voters' assumptions about a candidate gender-linked personality traits drive expectations that women and men have different areas of issue expertise. There are remarkably uniform differences in the personality traits ascribed to men and women. A typical women is seen as warm, gentle, kind and passive, whereas a typical man is viewed as tough, aggressive and assertive (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Eagly, 1987). Those stereotypic expectations about male and female political candidates' personality traits feed voters' expectations about their respective areas of issue competence: female candidates are seen as better at dealing with child or elderly care because women are stereotyped as more compassionate and gentle than men, whereas male candidates are expected to be better at managing security issues because they are typically seen as tougher and more aggressive than women.

Alternatively, following the belief approach, female candidates may also be seen as better at communal issues because they are stereotyped as more leftist than men. This line of reasoning explicitly makes a linkage between the ideological position attributed to male and female politicians and the issue ownership of leftist and rightist parties. There is some evidence to support the idea that male and female politicians are stereotyped as holding different political views (see for example Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Koch, 2002) and there is reason to suspect that candidates perceived as leftist are also seen as more competent to handle for example social welfare issues but less able to deal with economic and defence issues. The issue-ownership theory claims that voters identify parties with issues (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). As such, leftist parties are thought to care more about eradicating poverty or working on the unemployment issue than rightist parties. Rightist parties, on the other hand, are viewed as better able to deal with security and defence issues, which might explain why male politicians, who are more likely to be viewed as rightist, are thought to handle such issues more masterfully (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993).

2.2. The moderating effect of policy positions

As the assessment of a candidate's competence is an important criterion in the development of voting preferences in open and flexible List-PR systems (André et al., 2010; Goeminne & Swyngedouw, 2007), it is important to come to a better understanding of how the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions affects the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes, which is our central research question.

Based on previous research, we set out two different sets of hypotheses.

First, it is a common notion in the literature on vote choice and candidate characteristics that the inclusion of policy information can overwhelm and attenuate the effects of personal background characteristics when voters evaluate candidates (Arnesen, Duell, & Johannesson, 2019; Carnes & Sadin, 2015; Kirkland & Coppock, 2018; Pedersen et al., 2019). Research in the Danish context demonstrates that the self-placement of voters on the left-right scale traditionally is the single best predictor of their party choice (Pedersen et al., 2019). Accordingly, when voters are presented information regarding the policy positions of a candidate, such information is expected to affect voter evaluations of the candidate. There is some empirical evidence to support this assumption: experiments demonstrate that party labels on judicial nominees crowd out the influence of ethnicity and race in the assessment of such nominees (Kam, 2007; Sen, 2017) and Kirkland and Coppock (2018) find that information on party affiliation tends to crowd out the influence of candidate experience. Recent studies in the Norwegian context also confirm that voters care more about the issue positions of candidates than about their social characteristics (Arnesen et al., 2019; Pedersen et al., 2019).

As Pedersen et al. (2019) show, policy information might even be so important to the voter that it affects evaluations of candidates more than personal candidate characteristics do. Therefore, we argue that when voters are presented with candidates outlining their specific policy positions, voters will rely heavily on this information and less on the personal background characteristics of the candidates. This leads to the hypothesis that information regarding policy positions crowds out the influence of candidate gender on voters' evaluations and, hence, no distinction will be made between male and female candidates in terms of issue competences (H1).

However, it needs to be noted that specific background characteristics of candidates are not unequivocally positive or negative to voters. Voters make a multitude of inferences from background characteristics, and the same characteristics can lead voters to make inferences about the candidate that are positive on one dimension but negative on another dimension. For example, the candidate gender cue results in positive evaluations of women's competence to manage communal issues, but rather negative evaluations of women's ability to handle agentic issues. When policy information is included, this information may crowd out the negative inferences and turn an otherwise disadvantageous background characteristic into an advantage.

This can be linked to the idea of (contra-)prototypicality, which is a moderator of how a member of a certain gender is perceived. Previous research into the effect of (contra-)prototypicality highlight that, if voters use gender stereotypes to form evaluations of political candidates, the effect of gender on these evaluations will be reversed for contra-prototypical candidates (Lammers et al., 2009). So far, the idea of prototypicality has only been investigated in terms of physical appearance (see Lammers et al., 2009). The results of this study in the context of the Netherlands illustrate that voters rate contra-prototypical

male candidates (i.e. men with feminine facial features) as better candidates for communal issues, while contra-prototypical female (i.e. women with masculine facial features) candidates are rated higher for agentic issues.

When we extend this line of reasoning to the inclusion of policy positions, the following set of hypotheses can be discerned:

First, as women are stereotypically seen as leftist and consequently more competent to manage communal issues, the inclusion of policy information linked to a rightist political outlook inverts the image voters have about female candidates in general. Female candidates proposing rightist policy positions will be considered as contra-prototypical in voters' minds and will therefore be attributed the characteristics and competences of the opposite gender. Hence, female candidates presenting rightist policy positions will be perceived as more competent to handle agentic issues compared to female candidates presenting leftist policy positions (H2a). The same applies to male candidates presenting leftist policy positions, who will be perceived as more competent to handle communal issues compared to male candidates presenting rightist policy positions (H2b).

Second, when female candidates present leftist policy positions, voters' stereotypic image of female candidates is confirmed. These female candidates will therefore be considered as prototypical and, following the belief approach, they will be perceived as more competent to manage communal issues compared to female candidates presenting rightist policy positions (H3a). This also applies to male candidates presenting rightist policy positions, who will be perceived as more competent to handle agentic issues compared to male candidates presenting leftist policy positions (H3b).

3. Methodological design

In order to test these hypotheses, an online survey experiment was designed in which hypothetical candidates were presented to respondents in written messages in which only their sex, some biographical information and their policy position on a number of issues were included. The party affiliation of the presented candidates was not mentioned in order not to influence the assessment of the presented candidates.

Online survey experiments are accessible and affordable ways of data-collection with limited odds on a social desirability bias, since no interviewer effect can occur. Generally, experiments are a useful research tool as they allow to isolate specific causal effects by artificially manipulating the characteristics of a candidate and controlling the experimental environment (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2011; Mutz, 2011). The novelty of the specific experimental design applied here lies in the fact that it allows for more of the nuance of real-world elections than usual to enter the experimental environment by presenting candidates with an outspoken policy position in contrast to

rather centrist and vague policy positions used in previous experimental studies (see for example Matland, 1994).

Our study used a 2x2x3 mixed complete block design. The candidate's gender (male versus female) and the policy position (outspoken rightist or outspoken rightist) were manipulated as between-group factors. Three different policy issues were manipulated as within-groups factor: one topic that is generally perceived as being communal (child care), one agentic topic (defence) and one gender-neutral topic. This categorization is based on an extensive review of 16 international studies on the assignment of policy issues to men and women by three key actors, i.e. (mass) media, voters and party elites (Author's own)². I also checked whether these findings hold in our Flemish context by exploring literature on portfolio allocations (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2008; Krook & O'Brien, 2012; Rodríguez, 2010; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006) and by looking at the appointment of male and female ministers to these issue domains. For each of the policy issues, a comparison will be made between four experimental groups: a leftist female candidate, a leftist male candidate, a rightist female candidate and a rightist male candidate.

Respondents were randomly assigned to three different treatments. After each text message, respondents 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 learning or order effects (Chang & Hitchon, 2004). There was also a random variation of male and female candidates, and of outspoken leftist or rightist 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 stimuli included several elements: a written message, including the candidate's policy position, 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; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Matland, 1994; Rosenwasser, Rogers, Fling, Silvers-Pickens, & Butemeyer, 1987). However, physical appearance also impacts on the perception of the presented candidates (Lammers et al., 2009). Furthermore, also names can evoke certain prejudices because they possibly remind respondents of someone with the same name or because they simply

² Recent research lines have suggested that it cannot be a priori determined what women's (and men's) interests are. Women's interests are heterogeneous and diverse (Celis, Erzeel, Severs, & Vandeleene, 2015): they have multiple interests in different policy domains. In our research design, however, we refer to issues and how they are perceived, and not to women's interests as such.

(dis)like the name. The text messages were outspoken rightist or leftist and were based on a mix of the party programs of the Flemish rightist parties (Open VLD, N-VA and Vlaams Belang) and the Flemish leftist parties (sp.a, Groen and PVDA).³ An example of the presented profiles and a translation of the 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. 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 Other manipulation checks were included as well, in order not to over-accentuate the importance of the candidate's gender. This approach worked well, since only 4 respondents were able to correctly guess the intention of our study (see *infra*).

The most important advantage of an experimental approach is the possibility to control for a number of intervening factors. Several measures were taken to ensure that only our key variables (i.e. the gender of the candidate and the nature of the presented policy positions) play 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. As there were no significant differences on respondents' background variables (age, gender or level of education) across the treatments, we can be confident that the random assignment worked as intended. Third, by using hypothetical candidates without partisan affiliation, we did not intervene in actual discussions nor was there any effect of pre-existing preferences or personal (dis)tastes. Furthermore, the attributes of the candidates (ethnic origin, age, physical outlook,...) were held as constant as possible throughout the written messages. Taken together, all these measures offer a methodologically rigid test.

The experiment was conducted in February 2020. Respondents were drawn from Bilendi'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 3,891 respondents. 2,723 of them actually received and read⁵ the invitation and 966 agreed to participate. After discarding respondents who could not correctly answer the question about the sex of the first presented candidate (see above), we retained 605 participants, which is a response rate of about 22%. In order to avoid post-treatment biases

³ Pilot tests of the experimental design (among student samples) confirmed that the ideological orientation of the various policy positions was sufficiently clear and interpreted as outspoken leftist or rightist.

⁴ The incorrect answers are more or less equally spread over the different issue domains, and over the different candidates (male-female, outspoken leftist or rightist). The percentage of incorrect answers ranges from 0.80% to 6.00% for all 12 presented profiles. Because of the risk of a selection effect, we made a comparison between the final sample and respondents who could not answer the manipulation check correctly. These groups do not differ substantially on important aspects. There is a small selection bias in that our final sample is slightly younger, but there are no outspoken differences concerning gender and level of education.

⁵ The other invitations were apparently sent to invalid or outdated email addresses.

(Montgomery, Nyhan, & Torres, 2018), no additional categories of respondents were excluded from this sample.⁶ A description of the basic characteristics of the respondents can be found in the Appendix (see Table A.1).

The external validity of our experiment is enhanced by conducting the study among a sample of the population, whereas most other studies analyse university students. In doing so, we increase the generalizability of our results. Students are a more homogenous population than the general population (Chang & Hitchon, 2004) and 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 limit the generalizability of the results.

Although it is difficult to determine how well the online panel members represent the general population (De Leeuw & Hox, 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 0.79 to 1.14).

After each presented candidate profile, respondents were asked to evaluate the presented candidate in terms of perceived issue competence on a fully-labelled 7-point scale. A question in which respondents had to indicate how applicable a number of characteristic traits were to the presented candidates was also included, in order to test whether the candidates were actually perceived as (contra)-prototypical (also on a fully-labelled 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very inapplicable) to 7 (very applicable)). Three agentic characteristic traits (i.e. ambitious, hard and stronger leader) were included, as well as three communal characteristic traits (i.e. caring, sensitive and soft) (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). An analysis of the responses to this question shows that female candidates who proclaim right-wing policy positions are perceived to be statistically significantly more ambitious, harder and a stronger leader, and statistically significantly less caring, sensitive and soft compared to female candidates who proclaim leftist policy issues. The same holds for male candidates. More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (see Table A.2). This clearly demonstrates that our respondents attribute contra-prototypical characteristic traits to male candidates presenting outspoken leftist policy positions and female candidates presenting outspoken rightist policy positions. Whether this also has an effect on respondents' perceptions of the issue competences of the presented candidates is the central focus of the analyses presented in the next section.

⁶ To test the robustness of our results, separate analyses (available upon request) were performed for those respondents (4) that could find out the purpose of the research and so-called 'speeder-respondents' (51) who completed the survey faster than half the median completion time. However, the results of these analyses are in line with the results for the full sample, which adds to the robustness of our findings. Therefore, no additional respondents were excluded.

4. Results

This section is divided into two parts. The first section (4.1) presents descriptive analyses and focuses on whether statistically significant differences between male rightist and leftist and female rightist and leftist candidates could be found. In section 4.2, a number of regression models are presented in order to add an explanatory framework to our results.

4.1. Descriptive analysis

For this part of the analysis, we are interested in whether statistically significant differences in terms of perceived issue competence of male and female rightist and leftist candidates could be discerned. This was measured by a question asking respondents to indicate how competent the presented candidate would be to manage the issue domains at hand (defence, child care and climate). Responses were on fully-labelled 7-point scales ranging from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent).

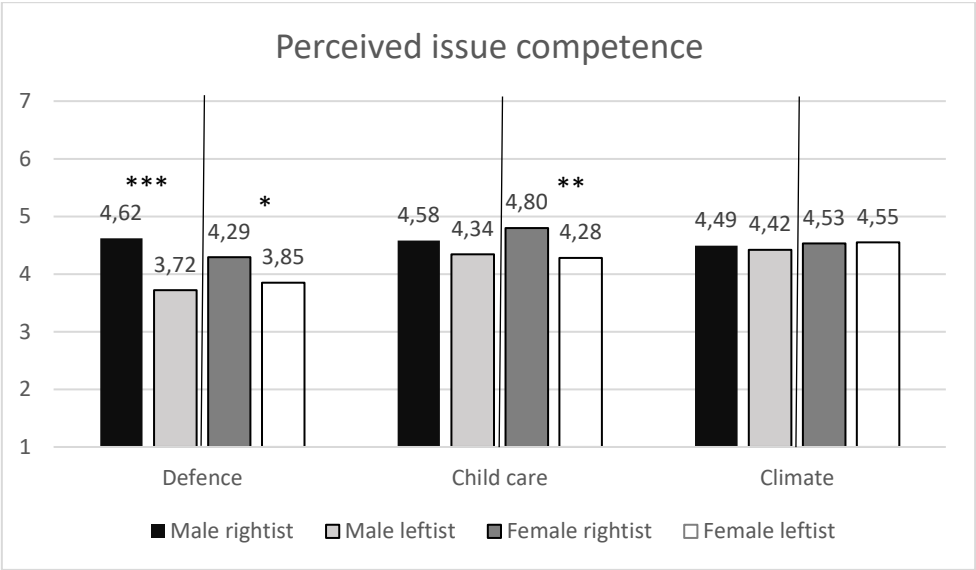
As the Levene's test for homogeneity of variance was statistically significant for the outcome measures, a Welch's ANOVA was used to examine whether there were significant differences in groups' means between the different candidate profiles (i.e. male rightist, male leftist, female rightist and female leftist) (Moder, 2010). Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for each of the four candidate profiles for perceived issue competence for defence, child care and climate.

Table 1: One-way ANOVA: Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Issue Competence for Defence, Child Care and Climate

| Candidate | Defence | Child care | Climate |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Male rightist | 4.62 (1.12) | 4.57 (1.27) | 4.49 (1.38) |
| Male leftist | 3.72 (1.41) | 4.34 (1.33) | 4.41 (1.42) |
| Female rightist | 4.28 (1.39) | 4.80 (1.13) | 4.53 (1.43) |
| Female leftist | 3.85 (1.36) | 4.29 (1.39) | 4.55 (1.46) |
| Total | 4.12 (1.39) | 4.50 (1.30) | 4.50 (1.42) |

The Welch's ANOVA of perceived issue competence for defence, child care and climate (see Tables A.3, A.4 and A.5 in the Appendix) indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the perceived levels of issue competence for defence and child care, but not for climate. Post hoc comparisons using the Games-Howell multiple comparisons method were used to determine which pairs of the four group means differed. These results are presented in Figure 1. Significance scores are presented for the difference between male rightist and leftist candidates and between female rightist and leftist candidates, as this the focal point of our analysis. More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (see Table A.6).

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)

On a general level, our results show that respondents seem to prefer candidates, both male and female, presenting rightist policy positions for the different policy issues. Furthermore, the results in Table A.6 in the Appendix demonstrate that there are no statistically significant differences between male and female candidates proclaiming the same policy positions. This could be seen as a first indication that respondents attach more importance to the policy positions taken by the candidate than to the gender of the candidate, which is line with our first hypothesis (H1).

Looking at the different issue domains, some interesting results stand out. When it comes to defence, male candidates proclaiming a rightist policy position are perceived to be statistically significantly more competent than male candidates presenting a leftist position (p=.000). In that sense, respondents prefer prototypical male candidate for defence, an agentic issue, which could be considered as a confirmation of hypothesis 3b. Also female candidates presenting a rightist policy position are perceived to be statistically significantly more competent to handle defence issues than female candidates presenting leftist policy issues, although this is only significant at the .10-level (p=.054). As female candidates proclaiming rightist policy positions could be considered as contra-prototypical, this result can be seen as a confirmation of hypothesis 2a. It is also interesting to note that female candidates presenting rightist policy positions are perceived to be statistically significantly more competent to handle defence issues than male candidates presenting leftist policy positions (p=.005). This seems to indicate that respondents base their evaluation of the presented candidates primarily on the policy position proposed by the candidates rather than on their gender.

When it comes to child care, female candidates presenting rightist policy positions are perceived to be statistically significantly more competent compared to female candidates proclaiming leftist policy positions ($p=.003$). This implies that for communal issues too, respondents prefer contra-prototypical female candidates, which goes against our hypothesis 2b. For male candidates, no statistically significant differences could be uncovered. However, we also note that also for this policy issue, leftist male candidates are estimated to be statistically significantly less competent than female candidates presenting rightist policy positions ($p=.009$).

In line with the previously mentioned results of the ANOVA, there are no statistically significant differences between the different candidate profiles for climate.

In sum, the results presented in this section point to a number of statistically significant effects, some of which are clearly in line with our expectations, but others not. The results are also inconclusive as to which aspect is more important in voters' evaluations: candidate gender or the policy positions taken by the candidate. Therefore, in the next section explanatory analyses will be presented in order to identify the main predictors of respondents' perceptions of the issue competence of the presented candidates.

4.2. Explanatory analysis

A number of regression analyses with the candidates' perceived issue competence for defence and child care as the main dependent variable were conducted. As the central focus of the analyses presented below concerns which factor is decisive in voters' evaluation of the presented candidates, the baseline model (Model I) only includes a dummy-variable for candidate's gender (female versus male). In Model II a dummy-variable for the candidate's policy position (leftist versus rightist) is added. Model III offers a more stringent test by including several control variables.

These individual-level control variables refer to respondents' general attitudes (interest in politics) and some basic socio-demographics (gender, age and level of education). In order to grasp respondent's level of political interest, they were asked to indicate how often they follow politics in the news (daily, 2 or 3 times a week, once a week, less than once a week, never). This was recoded in a binary variable: 'High level of political interest' including those respondents who follow politics daily, 2-3 times a week or once a week versus 'Low level of political interest' including all the other respondents. The gender variable for the respondents is a simple binary variable with the categories Male (0) and Female (1). Level of education was measured by the highest obtained degree and consists of 6 categories: 1=no degree, 2=primary education, 3=lower secondary education, 4=higher secondary education, 5=non-university higher education and 6=university education. This was recoded in a binary variable: 'Lower educated' (including categories 1, 2, 3 and 4) and 'Higher educated' (including categories 5 and 6).

We also included a number of other control variables. First, we controlled for the extent to which the respondents agreed with the presented policy statement. This was measured on fully-labeled 7-points

scale ranging from 1 (very much disagreeing) to 7 (very much agreeing). Second, a control variable was included for the ideological position of the respondents. Ideological positioning was measured by self-placement on a 7-points left-right scale ranging from very rightist (1) to very leftist (7). The regression coefficients are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Linear regression models predicting the perceived issue competence of the presented candidates for defence and child care

| | Defence | | | Child care | | |
|---|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| | Model I | Model II | Model III | Model I | Model II | Model III |
| Female candidate (versus male candidate) | -.131 (.115) | -.094 (.112) | -.054 (.077) | .090 (.108) | .090 (.109) | .112 (.107) |
| Leftist candidate (versus rightist candidate) | | -.677*** (.112) | -.470*** (.077) | | .006 (.109) | .013 (.108) |
| Control variables | | | | | | |
| Higher educated (versus lower educated) | | | -.004 (.088) | | | -.040 (.123) |
| Low level of political interest (versus high level of political interest) | | | -.219 ** (.109) | | | .119 (.151) |
| Female respondent (versus male respondent) | | | .171** (.082) | | | .264 ** (.114) |
| Age | | | -.002 (.003) | | | .002 (.004) |
| Ideological position respondent (from very leftist to very rightist) | | | -.022 (.028) | | | -.151*** (.039) |
| Agreement | | | .618*** (.025) | | | .084** (.034) |
| Constant | 4.181*** | 4.513*** | 2.077*** | 4.447*** | 4.444*** | 4.528*** |
| Adjusted R ² | .001 | .058 | .556 | .001 | .001 | .041 |
| F | (1,580) = 1.303 | (2, 579) = 18.995 | (9,569) = 77.095 | (1,581) = 0,688 | (2,580) =0,345 | (8,571) = 4.056 |
| N | 581 | 581 | 577 | 582 | 582 | 579 |

* p < 0.1 ; ** p < 0.05 ; *** p < 0.001 – Standard errors in parentheses

When it comes to the main effects, we see that candidate gender does not add significantly to the models. This indicates that respondents are not negatively biased towards female candidates and estimate male and female candidates' issue competences more or less equally. The presented candidates' ideological position has a statistically significant effect on the perceived issue competence for defence (p=.000), but not for child care. Strikingly, female respondents give a statistically significantly higher score than male respondents, for both policy areas (p=.038).

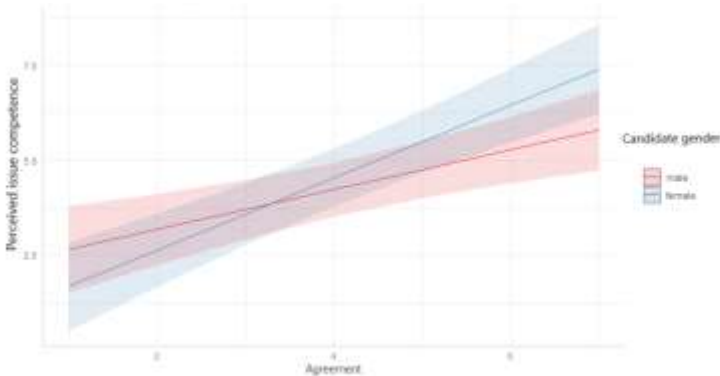
Most importantly, the most important predictor of the candidates' perceived issue competence is the extent to which respondents agree with the policy positions they presented (p=.000). The more respondents agree with the policy positions taken by the candidates for a particular issue, the more

competent they believe the candidate is to manage this issue, which can be considered as a confirmation of hypothesis 1 stating that information regarding policy positions crowds out the influence of candidate gender.

Furthermore, to test whether this effect is similar for female candidates compared to male candidates, we also ran different linear regression models with the interaction between candidate's gender and level of agreement included (see Table A.7 in the Appendix). This yields even more interesting findings: when it comes to the main effect of candidate gender, female candidates are perceived to be statistically significantly less competent compared to male candidates to handle defense issues ($p=.002$). Regarding the interaction term, female candidates are rewarded more by respondents if they present policy positions that are in line with those of the respondents compared to male candidates. For defense, the statistically significant interaction term between candidate's gender and level of agreement points out that female candidates presenting policy positions that are in line with those of the respondents are considered to be 0.149 points more competent to handle defense issues compared to male candidates ($p=.002$). For child care, the effect is not statistically significant ($p=.475$). Although it could initially be concluded that respondents do not seem to distinguish between female and male candidates in terms of perceived issue competence, we see that female candidates receive greater rewards in terms of perceived issue competence for defence when they present a policy position that is closer to that of the respondents.

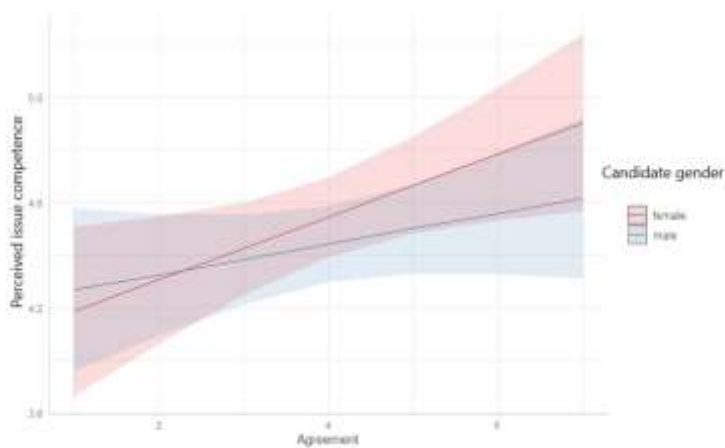
However, interpreting the results based on regression coefficients alone is not straightforward. Therefore, predicted values were computed (see plots in Figures 2 and 3). The plots show that the more respondents agree with the presented policy position, the more competent they perceive the presented candidates to be. The increase is more outspoken for female candidates and for defence issues (Figure 2). Nonetheless, as the confidence intervals overlap in both plots, the effect cannot be considered statistically significant.

Figure 2: Predicted values perceived issue competence Defence



Note: All covariates were held at the mean

Figure 3: Predicted values perceived issue competence Childcare



Note: All covariates were held at the mean

5. Conclusion

This paper presents an experimental test of the impact of the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes. This relates to the idea that candidate gender is a low-information heuristic, primarily used when other policy or candidate information is absent (Crowder-Meyer et al., 2018; Gift & Lastra-Anadón, 2018; McDermott, 1998). Building on social psychological models of impression information, the inclusion of information regarding the policy position of a candidate is expected to affect voters' evaluation of the candidate (Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida, & Sullivan, 1990; Sullivan, Aldrich, Borgida, & Rahn, 1990). However, as voters are found to make multiple inferences from background characteristics and policy information affects these inferences unevenly (Pedersen et al., 2019), it is not clear whether this would be beneficial or disadvantageous for female candidates and how this impacts on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes.

The results of our online survey experiment conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population point out that respondents primarily base their evaluation of the presented candidates on the policy positions presented by the candidate rather than on their gender. On a general level, respondents do not distinguish between male and female candidates presenting similar policy positions. It can therefore be concluded that the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions trumps the effects of candidate gender on voters' preferences.

Our results also show that it is not so much the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions, but rather the extent to which respondents agree with the presented policy positions, that shapes respondents' perceptions about the presented candidates' issue competence. The mere presence of candidates' policy positions therefore does not seem to be sufficient to completely overrule the effect of candidate gender. Its content, and the extent to which this corresponds to respondents' opinions, seems to be decisive in this regard.

Furthermore, and in line with the previous finding, our results show that in some cases, the inclusion of information about female candidates' policy positions is beneficial for voters' evaluation of their issue competences. Although previous research pointed out that defence is the most typical masculine policy issue (Holman, Merolla, & Zechmeister, 2016; Lawless, 2004), female candidates presenting rightist policy positions are considered to be statistically more competent to handle defence issues compared to female candidates presenting leftist policy positions, as well as to male candidates presenting leftist policy positions. On top of that, female candidates are also rewarded more by respondents if they present policy positions that are in line with those of the respondents compared to male candidates. This links to Huddy and Terkildsen's (1993) early findings that female candidates can successfully reverse gender-trait stereotypes by portraying themselves as possessing typical masculine traits (i.e. in this particular case by holding outspoken rightist policy positions) and, hence, be considered as contra-prototypical candidates (Lammers et al., 2009). In that sense, a potential fruitful strategy for female candidates might be to convey voters that they possess both typical communal and agentic personality traits. In doing so, female candidates continue to gain credit on communal issues and benefit further from the possession of typical masculine traits on agentic issues such as defence and economics.

Our results have a number of implications. First, our results point out that voters heavily rely on the information about the candidates' policy position in their evaluations of political candidates. When candidates are presented with policy information, no patterns of issue competence stereotyping can be observed. The results of previous studies on the prevalence of political gender stereotypes should therefore be interpreted with caution as they may provide us with inaccurate conclusions on how voters respond to candidate gender if they do not take the effects of policy information or other information cues into account. Dolan (2014) rightly suggests that stereotypes do not act in a vacuum: they interact with other prejudices and contextual elements. It can therefore be argued that the kind of setting applied in most experimental research misses much of the nuance voters face in real-world elections as they encounter a range of information throughout the course of an election campaign. The present study attempted to bring the real world back in and to create a more dynamic experimental setting. This innovative design has proven to be a useful tool to enhance the external validity of experimental studies.

Second, as respondents' evaluation of the presented candidates is found to be strongly influenced by the extent to which they agree with the content of the policy positions and the nature of the issues at stake, our results actually present a positive outlook for female candidates in Flanders. General agreement with a candidate's policy positions results in voters attributing more positive qualities to the candidate. Voters' perceptions of candidates therefore seem rather evidence-based (i.e. related to the direction and the content of the policy that they pursue) than stereotype-based. This decreased stereotype reliance is potentially beneficial for female candidates because it also decreases the chances of a voter bias.

Third, it is often argued that the prevalence of political gender stereotypes is found to be dependent on the information environment (Bauer, 2015; Kunda & Spencer, 2003) in which candidates come forward. This information environment typically contains additional information on personal characteristics of candidates and on contextual elements. Candidates' policy positions can be considered as a type of individuating information. However, our results show that the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions does not result in the activation of political gender stereotypes. Further research would be needed in order to test whether this is also the case in other, less gender-neutral, contexts. Future research could also examine to what extent other elements of the information environment, more specifically contextual elements such as the number of women in politics and the major focus of the government's policy agenda, affect the activation of political gender stereotypes. This will enable us to get a clearer picture of the factors that help explain the underrepresentation of women in politics.

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Appendix

Example of the presented candidate profiles and written messages



Child care – leftist position

The first years of life are crucial for children's development. Children are often unable to make up for the delay that they experienced in their early years during the rest of their lives. To assure equal opportunities for everyone, I advocate 1 day of free childcare per week from the first year of life and 2 days of free childcare per week in the second year of life. I would also like to make the fees for childcare income-based in order to attract children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, free, healthy and sustainable meals must be provided.

Child care – rightist position

I believe that a feasible combination of work, family responsibilities and leisure is paramount. I therefore advocate giving priority for childcare places to parents who are professionally employed or follow work-oriented trainings. In addition, efforts should also be made to provide flexible and occasional care for children of parents who have part-time and temporary jobs, attend training courses or work irregular hours. This is the only way to realize our ambition of full employment. More flexibility should be allowed so that childcare initiatives can temporarily exceed their maximum capacity without structural overcrowding.

Climate – leftist position

The climate is the basis of our prosperity and quality of life. A climate act with clear and ambitious goals is a must to secure our future and that of our children. We will only be able to make a difference by clear and concrete climate measures. If everyone makes an effort, we can install a real energy revolution together, in which we will only make use of renewable energy by 2030 and make all our buildings energy efficient. I also advocate investments in sustainable mobility. By doing everything that is within our possibilities now, we will be ready for the future.

Climate – rightist position

The fight against climate change needs to be tackled ambitiously, with realistic and feasible goals, but it is equally important that this does not affect the competitiveness of our companies. Investments in research, development and human capital must provide us with new solutions. I strive for climate innovation: by focusing strongly on innovate, we can create jobs and solve climate problems. In doing so, our solutions can contribute to the fight against global warming and stimulate the economy.

Table A.1: Description of the experiment's participants – weighted for age, gender and level of education (N=605) compared to the general population (if data available)

| Gender | Sample | General population |
|---|---------------|---------------------------|
| Male | 49.4% | 49.5% |
| Female | 50.5% | 50.5% |
| Age | | |
| <35 | 23.1% | 23.1% |
| 35 – 54 | 35.1% | 35.1% |
| 55+ | 41.7% | 41.7% |
| Level of education | | |
| Primary education | 2.6% | 13.9% |
| Lower secondary education | 15.3% | 20.5% |
| Higher secondary education | 52.6% | 35.7% |
| Non-university higher education | 17.3% | 15.3% |
| University education | 12.3% | 14.6% |
| Average left right positioning (1=very leftist, 7=very rightist) | 4.33 | / |
| Preferred party | | |
| CD&V | 9.1% | 15.4% |
| Groen | 7.6% | 10.1% |
| N-VA | 27.7% | 24.8% |
| Open VLD | 6.1% | 13.1% |
| PVDA | 5.9% | 5.3% |
| Sp.a | 7.6% | 10.4% |
| Vlaams Belang | 19.8% | 18.5% |
| Don't know | 16.4% | / |
| How often do they follow politics in the news? | | |
| On a daily basis | 59.0% | / |
| 2-3 times a week | 17.2% | / |
| Once a week | 6.3% | / |
| Less than once a week | 13.1% | / |
| Never | 4.4% | / |

Table A.2. Mean scores indicating the attribution of different characteristic traits to the presented candidates on a scale from 1 (very inapplicable) to 7 (very applicable)

| Characteristic trait | Female rightist | Female leftist | Sig. | Male rightist | Male leftist | Sig. |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Ambitious | 4.87 (1.19) | 4.64 (1.26) | .005 | 4.93 (1.22) | 4.68 (1.33) | .004 |
| Hard | 4.13 (1.36) | 3.35 (1.40) | .000 | 4.34 (1.39) | 3.48 (1.42) | .000 |
| Stronger leader | 4.27 (1.31) | 3.74 (1.40) | .000 | 4.46 (1.32) | 3.84 (1.38) | .000 |
| Sensitive | 3.90 (1.28) | 4.68 (1.28) | .000 | 3.81 (1.28) | 4.41 (1.30) | .000 |
| Soft | 3.81 (1.24) | 4.35 (1.34) | .000 | 3.60 (1.29) | 4.32 (1.37) | .000 |
| Caring | 4.20 (1.36) | 4.70 (1.32) | .000 | 4.02 (1.40) | 4.56 (1.37) | .000 |

Table A.3: Welch's ANOVA for Perceived Issue Competence - Defense

| Candidate | SS | Df | MS | F | Sig |
|-----------------------|----------|-----|--------|--------|------|
| Between Groups | 76.514 | 3 | 25.505 | 14.128 | .000 |
| Within Groups | 1041.625 | 577 | 1.805 | | |
| Total | 1118.139 | 580 | | | |

Table A.4: Welch's ANOVA for Perceived Issue Competence – Child Care

| Candidate | SS | Df | MS | F | Sig |
|-----------------------|----------|-----|-------|-------|------|
| Between Groups | 24.781 | 3 | 8.260 | 4.983 | .002 |
| Within Groups | 988.032 | 596 | 1.658 | | |
| Total | 1012.812 | 599 | | | |

Table A.5: Welch's ANOVA for Perceived Issue Competence - Climate

| Candidate | SS | Df | MS | F | Sig |
|-----------------------|----------|-----|-------|------|------|
| Between Groups | 1.569 | 3 | .523 | .259 | .855 |
| Within Groups | 1211.725 | 601 | 2.016 | | |
| Total | 1213.294 | 604 | | | |

Table A.6: Games-Howell Post Hoc Results of Perceived Issue Competence for Defence, Child Care and Climate

| Mean Differences – Defence | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Mean | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
| Male rightist (1) | 4.64 | 0.000 | 0.895*** | 0.332 | 0.769*** |
| Male leftist (2) | 3.72 | -0.895*** | 0.000 | -0.563** | -0.129 |
| Female rightist (3) | 4.28 | -0.332 | 0.563** | 0.000 | 0.436* |
| Female leftist (4) | 3.85 | -0.769*** | 0.127 | -0.436* | 0.000 |
| Mean Differences – Child Care | | | | | |
| | Mean | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
| Male rightist (1) | 4.57 | 0.000 | 0.235 | -0.220 | 0.288 |
| Male leftist (2) | 4.34 | -0.235 | 0.000 | -0.455** | 0.052 |
| Female rightist (3) | 4.80 | 0.220 | 0.455** | 0.000 | 0.508** |
| Female leftist (4) | 4.29 | -0.288 | -0.053 | -0.507** | 0.000 |
| Mean Differences – Climate | | | | | |
| | Mean | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
| Male rightist (1) | 4.49 | 0.000 | 0.070 | -0.042 | -0.063 |
| Male leftist (2) | 4.41 | -0.070 | 0.000 | -0.112 | -0.134 |
| Female rightist (3) | 4.53 | 0.042 | 0.112 | 0.000 | -0.021 |
| Female leftist (4) | 4.55 | 0.063 | 0.134 | 0.021 | 0.000 |

* p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed)

Table 2: Linear regression model with interaction term predicting the perceived issue competence of the presented candidates for defence and child care

| | Perceived issue competence defence | Perceived issue competence child care |
|---|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Female candidate (versus male candidate) | -.646** (.207) | -.082 (.291) |
| Leftist candidate (versus rightist candidate) | -.480*** (.077) | .010 (.108) |
| Higher educated (versus lower educated) | -.006 (.087) | -.040 (.123) |
| Low level of political interest (versus high level of political interest) | -.217** (.108) | .119 (.151) |
| Female respondent (versus male respondent) | .164** (.082) | .261** (.114) |
| Age | -.002 (.003) | .002 (.688) |
| Ideological position respondent (from very leftist to very rightist) | -.022 (.028) | -.151*** (.039) |
| Agreement | .549*** (.033) | .062 (.046) |
| Interaction agreement x candidate gender | .149** (.048) | .048 (.068) |
| Constant | 2.362*** | 4.622*** |
| Adjusted R ² | .569 | .055 |
| F | (9, 568) = 83.373 | (9, 570) = 3.659 |
| N | 577 | 579 |

* p < 0.1 ; ** p < 0.05 ; *** p < 0.001 – Standard errors in parentheses