

# Political gender stereotypes in Flanders (Belgium): competent men versus leftist women?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Women continue to be underrepresented in parliaments across the globe. The attention of this paper is directed towards the role of voters in this phenomenon. Voters lack resources, time or interest to become informed about all candidates in elections. Therefore, they rely on voting cues, such as a candidate's gender. On the basis of this gender, voters ascribe particular personality traits, capacities and opinions to candidates, which are referred to as political gender stereotypes.

The prevalence of political gender stereotypes has almost exclusively been investigated in the United States. Since we cannot simply generalize these results to other contexts, we will explore whether political gender stereotypes also prevail in Flanders (Belgium). The electoral system (a PR list system) and the share of women in parliament (one of the highest in the world) clearly provide another context than the US. The applied experimental method is innovative and provides us with the opportunity to control for intervening factors that might bias our results.

The results of our study, conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population, provide evidence for the existence of stereotypical patterns. The differences in perceived issue competence are, however, rather small and not always unequivocal. Larger differences were found in terms of ideological position: female candidates are in general perceived as more leftist. This leads us to conclude that gender still matters to the fate of women candidates and that misperceptions about their ideological orientation might be persistent and difficult to overcome. Moreover, our results demonstrate that the argument that female politicians are perceived as more leftist because they disproportionately belong to leftist parties does not hold, since female politicians are more or less equally spread over the different parties in Belgium.

**Keywords:** gender, political representation, public opinion, political psychology, survey experiments

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Although women are becoming more successful in parliamentary elections and government appointments in recent years, the representation of women is still below parity: worldwide only 23% of Members of Parliament (MPs) are female; in European countries this percentage amounts to 26% (Inter-Parliamentary, 2017). Indeed, the starting point of many studies on gender and politics has been that men are overrepresented in politics, whereas women only constitute a small minority of elected officials (Ballington, 2005; Sapiro, 1981; Shvedova, 2005). This underrepresentation of women is potentially

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dangerous, because some interests are likely to be neglected, implying that there is a bias in the content of the political debate (Jones, 1997; Schwindt-Bayer, 2011; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). In other words, studying the political representation of women remains highly relevant, even when the percentage of female representatives is on the rise.

The four-stage model of political recruitment is very helpful for explaining women's underrepresentation. The model is sequential, progressing from the large number of citizens who are eligible to run for political office (1) to the smaller pool of citizens who aspire to run for political office (2) to the small group of citizens who are nominated to run for political office (3), and ultimately, to the smallest band of citizens who are elected to political office (4) (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993). In this study, we will focus on the final stage of the process, when candidates face voters. More in particular, it is the purpose of this paper to uncover one of these remaining sources of **bias** for women politicians: voters' **political gender stereotypes**.

Gender stereotypes are inherently present in our society. Invisible, yet persistent stereotypes about men and women also affect the political scenery (Celis & Meier, 2006). Our aim is to examine how these stereotypes influence voters' perceptions of male and female candidates. Voters lack resources, time or interest to become informed about all election candidates. Therefore, they rely on voting cues (McDermott, 2009), such as the gender of these candidates, and unconsciously associate this gender with particular personality traits, capacities and opinions (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b), which are referred to as political gender stereotypes (Brown, 1994; Dolan, 2014; Fox & Smith, 1998). In other words, these political gender stereotypes cannot be separated from general gender stereotypes, but are rather an expression or an application of the latter in the political sphere. As Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) demonstrated, voters have expectations of the traits that women and men possess and apply these expectations to their impressions of female and male candidates. Although it is logical to assume that female politicians will be perceived similar to women in general, Schneider and Bos (2014) contradict this reasoning. They suggest that, because female politicians are different from women in general (Richards & Hewstone, 2001), female politicians form a new stereotypical category with its own unique stereotypical qualities. This underlines the necessity to further explore the prevalence and content of political gender stereotypes which might be different from general gender stereotypes.

The prevalence of political gender stereotypes has been extensively documented in the United States (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Dolan, 2010, 2014; Fox & Smith, 1998; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Koch, 2000; Rosenwasser, Rogers, Fling, Silvers-Pickens, & Butemeyer, 1987; Sapiro, 1981), where female representatives are rather scarce and concentrated within the Democratic Party (CAWP, 2017). In these studies, hypothetical candidates were presented to respondents, mostly students, who were then asked to evaluate these candidates. Generally, women were considered as less capable and more leftist than men (Sapiro, 1981; Koch, 1999; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Dolan, 2014).

However, we cannot simply extrapolate the results of these American studies to other regions, since the United States has a distinct political culture and context. Moreover, citizens' views on women in politics may be subject to changes as they might become more familiar with female politicians entering parliament and government over time. This illustrates the necessity to conduct studies on the prevalence of political gender stereotypes in other contexts and settings. With the notable exception of Matland's (1994) study on political gender stereotyping among Norwegian voters, the European context has, to our knowledge, not been investigated in these matters.

The present study is innovative for three reasons. First, by focussing on Flanders, the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium, we are able to explore whether stereotyping patterns also prevail in a different context. The Flemish political context differs remarkably from the American in several respects, such as the electoral system, the share of elected women and the party system. Due to its extensive experience with women in parliament and government, and its long-standing and far-reaching quota-regulations (Meier, 2012), Flanders could even be viewed as a most-likely case for displaying gender neutral attitudes. A second added value of this study is that it has been conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population. Our results therefore have a greater generalizability compared to previous studies conducted among student samples. Third, we have set up a solid experimental design, minimizing the possibility of interfering biases. In order to subtly draw respondents' attention to the gender of the presented candidate, we provided images of male and female facial silhouettes. Since we did not include pictures and have not given names to the presented hypothetical candidates, the risk of bias is reduced significantly.

We hypothesized that general characteristic gender stereotypes are reflected in politics in two ways. On the one hand, voters' assumptions about a candidate's gender-linked personality traits drive expectations that women and men have different areas of **issue competence**, i.e. men are more capable on agentic issues, and women on communal issues. This issue competence stereotyping potentially has an important impact on actual vote choices, since previous research demonstrated that competence is a central criterion in voters' assessment of Belgian election candidates (André, Pilet, & Wauters, 2010; Goeminne & Swyngedouw, 2007). On the other hand, there is also a more political aspect: male and female politicians are stereotyped as having different **ideological positions**, i.e. women are perceived as more leftist than men (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b). There is yet another reason for the presence of this ideological position stereotyping: especially in the US, women politicians are predominantly found in the Democratic Party, which is more leftist (in European terms) than the Republicans. The perceived ideological position is supposed to be transferred from the party to the candidate by the voters. This ideological position stereotyping might constitute an electoral disadvantage for female candidates, as most voters tend to prefer viewpoints and candidates in the middle of the political spectrum (Downs, 1957).

The results of our study, conducted in 2017 among 2500 Flemish citizens, demonstrate that certain stereotypical patterns are prevalent in Flanders. Only minor differences were detected in terms of perceived issue competences, but the differences regarding the perceived ideological positions were more outspoken. Our results have important implications for the literature on women's political representation. First, the idea that perceptions about issue competences and ideological positions are part of an interconnected package is undermined, as results for both differ here. Second, the explanatory value of women's limited presence in rightist parliamentary parties for the existence of ideological position stereotypes is questioned. We show that even in political systems where female politicians are (almost) equally spread over different parties, they continue to be perceived as more leftist. This clearly goes against the reasoning that female politicians are perceived as being more leftist simply because they disproportionately belong to left parties. The results of our Flemish case-study are therefore also valuable for other countries and regions. It remains for future research to further disentangle the causal mechanism(s) behind the differences in women's and men's perceived ideological positions.

The paper proceeds as follows. In order to set the context for subsequent discussions, the first section conceptualizes women's political representation and elaborates on factors that prevent women from being elected. The purpose of section two is to shed light on one specific aspect of voter bias, i.e. political gender stereotypes. We will dig deeper into some contextual variables that determine the extent to which political gender stereotypes are prevalent. A review of previous, mostly US-based, studies on political gender stereotypes provides a general direction for the development of our specific research questions and related hypotheses in the third section. In the fourth section, our methodological approach will be charted, and we will highlight the added value of conducting the study among a sample of the general population. This will be followed by a presentation and a thorough discussion of the research results. In the concluding section, it will be argued that gender still matters to the fate of female candidates and that stereotypical perceptions of women's ideological orientation enhance biases among (rightist) voters.

## **1. Women's political (under)representation**

It is generally believed that political representation consists of four distinct, but interconnected dimensions: formal, descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation (Pitkin, 1967). The descriptive dimension, which refers to the extent to which representatives stand for the represented (Norris & Franklin, 1997), is the most relevant for our study.

Descriptive representation is the keystone to women's representation, since it can be considered as the glue that binds the several dimensions together. The social background of members of political institutions determines their life experiences, which in turn determine their insights on certain policy problems and their linked policy priorities. This suggests that the descriptive (under)representation of certain groups has powerful implications for their substantive policy impact (Kanthak & Woon, 2015; Norris & Franklin, 1997). Women could be considered as a special interest group with a distinct position

and a shared set of problems (Sapiro, 1981), and therefore, their presence in the political arena is vital. This can be linked to Phillips' (1995) politics of presence idea, which states that the personal features of representatives are crucial, as they may influence the contents of public policies.

We rely on the four-stage model of political recruitment for explaining women's underrepresentation. As outlined in the introduction, this model is sequential, progressing from the large number of citizens who are eligible to run for political office to the smallest band of citizens who are elected to political office (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993). When no discrimination is at work, the characteristics of the individuals present at each of these stages should be roughly the same. However, in reality, women often miss out in greater rates in the transition from each stage to the next. Randall's (1987) supply and demand model can be considered to explain the number of female representatives. This model states that the number of elected women is the combined result of the qualifications of women as group to run for political office (supply) and the desire or willingness of elites to select female aspirants (demand) (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Supply and demand factors act on the crucial barriers of the recruitment model and are both highly gendered and mediated by features of the broader political context, such as electoral institutions, political parties and voters.

Regarding electoral institutions, numerous studies have shown that countries with PR systems have significantly more women in office (Caul, 1999; Matland, 1998; Norris, 1985, 2004; Rule, 1987), because of higher district magnitudes, higher turnover rates, and more opportunities to present a mixed group of candidates (Darcy, Welch, & Clark, 1994; Kenworthy & Malami, 1999; Krook & Schwindt-Bayer, 2013; Matland, 1993; Rule, 1987; Salmond, 2006; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005).

Our focus is on the role of voters. Some early work found that the public was reluctant to vote for female candidates. However, more recent studies, in which other factors such as list position, region, incumbency, campaign expenses and media coverage are controlled for, have found that, voters not only vote for male and female candidates at equal rates (Norris, Vallance, & Lovenduski, 1992; Wauters, Weekers, & Maddens, 2010), but may even prefer women to men (Black & Erickson, 2003; Brians, 2005; Murray, 2008). This contradicts the idea that closed lists, in which voters have less choice and quotas have a greater impact, are beneficial to women's representation (Krook & Schwindt-Bayer, 2013). All this throws up the question of the existence of a voter bias. In the next section, we will elaborate on one specific aspect of the voter bias, i.e. (political) gender stereotypes. These are important as they have (at least) the potential to shape people's desire for a greater or lesser role for women in elective office (Dolan, 2010). Our aim is to identify how voters apply general gender stereotypes in the political sphere and how this influences voters' perceptions of male and female politicians.

## **2. Voters' political gender stereotypes**

Gender stereotypes are defined as "*the structured set of inferential relations that link personal attributes to the social categories male and female*" (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1979, p. 225). These are a set of beliefs

about the personal attributes of a group of people, which are closely linked to traditional social or gender roles (Eagly, 1987b). Gender roles are “*the shared expectations about appropriate conduct that apply to individuals solely on the basis of their socially identified sex*” (Eagly & Wood, 1991). Gender stereotypes reflect perceivers’ observations of what people do in daily life and arise when women and men are observed typically to carry out different social roles.

There are remarkably uniform differences in the personality traits ascribed to men and women. A typical woman is stereotyped as warm, gentle, kind, passive, loyal, soft-spoken, tender, communal, concerned with the wellbeing and welfare of others, compassionate and moral (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Prentice & Carranza, 2002b), whereas a typical man is viewed as tough, aggressive, assertive, ambitious, analytical, competitive, controlling, decisive, independent, individualistic, emotionally stable, rational and a stronger leader (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Prentice & Carranza, 2002a). Eagly (1987b) summarized these findings 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.

In the political sphere, voters also have various cues at their disposal, among which the election candidate’s gender. This can be a source of information about a candidate’s views and capabilities, even when a voter is uninformed. There are certain gender stereotypes inherently present in our society. Some studies suggest that the trait stereotypes of women in general may not apply to female politicians (Richards & Hewstone, 2001; Schneider & Bos, 2014). We will therefore dig deeper in how (general) trait stereotypes are reflected in the political arena and how this influences voters’ perceptions of male and female candidates.

In their seminal work, Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) developed two varieties of political gender stereotypes, those based on women’s traits and those based on their beliefs. The former, referred to as the trait approach, states that voters’ assumptions about a candidate’s gender-linked personality traits drive expectations that women and men have different areas of issue competence. Since men are seen as competitive and assertive and women as communal and social, voters expect male politicians to excel in competitive issues in which the primary aim is to defeat competitors, while female politicians are expected to be better at communal issues, in which the focus is on the welfare of other people (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Brown, 1994; Kahn, 1996; Matland, 1994). In essence, this is about the expectation that male and female politicians have other areas of issue competence and specialization. We will therefore refer to this reasoning as *issue competence stereotyp(ing)/(es)*.

Gender stereotypes of politicians also include a political component. Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) named this the belief approach. This approach stresses a more political aspect: male and female

politicians are stereotyped as holding different political views. Research demonstrated that the sexes differ in their social and political attitudes (Diekmann, Eagly, & Kulesa, 2002). Koch (1999) and Huddy and Terkildsen (1993b) argued that female candidates are generally perceived as more liberal than male candidates of the same party. We will refer to this as *ideological position stereotyp(ing)/(es)*. It is logical to perceive female candidates as liberal (in European terms: leftist), because they are also seen as more competent to handle domestic and social welfare issues, but less adept at dealing with economic and defence issues (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b). Moreover, women are more commonly found among left-wing parties, especially in majority systems where the Democratic and liberal parties count significantly more women candidates and parliamentarians. In the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (2017-2019), only 8.7 % of Republican representatives are female, whereas this amounts to 32% of the Democratic representatives (CAWP, 2017). This creates a link between women and the party in a voter's mind, and constitutes as such an additional rationale for the fact that women politicians are perceived as more leftist.

The influence of political gender stereotypes should, however, be considered alongside more central political and contextual variables to gain a fuller understanding of how voters evaluate and choose women candidates. This includes the political context and the type of electoral system. The political context consists, on the one hand, of the dominant norms and values in a country (i.e. political culture) and, on the other hand, of the positions occupied by women in society. Cultural values and attitudes towards women differ among societies (Inglehart, Norris, & Welzel, 2002) and there could be differences in how voters perceive female candidates between societies with a long history of women in key political positions and those where this is not the case. It is therefore necessary to extend the research on political gender stereotypes to other contexts. The second contextual variable is the type of electoral system. Dolan (2014) indicated that gender stereotypes do not play an important role in actual vote decision-making and vote choices, because of the dominant influence of party preference on people's vote choice. This is, however, in the context of the United States and its majoritarian electoral system. We do not know if this also applies in list PR systems, but, as previous research demonstrated, the assessment of a candidate's competence is an important criterion in the development of voting preferences in these contexts (André, Pilet, & Wauters, 2010). Research by Goeminne and Swyngendouw (2007) demonstrates that Belgian voters consider competence as the central criterion for assessing election candidates. It is our aim to explore how gender stereotypes impact, amongst others, on the assessment of competence of male and female election candidates in the context of a list PR system; Flanders (Belgium)

In sum, people ascribe certain stereotyped traits to women and men, which are closely linked to their traditional social roles (Eagly, 1987b). Women are perceived as being communal, whereas men are seen as agentic (Eagly, 1987a; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly & Wood, 1991). Studies have also demonstrated that these general stereotypes have implications for women's political careers, as voters evaluate

candidates' performance differently on the basis of the candidates' gender (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Koch, 1999, 2000, 2002; McDermott, 1997). In this study, we focus on the application of gender stereotypes in the political sphere. This application will be referred to as (so-called) political gender stereotypes, by which we mean the different evaluation of the perceived **issue competences** and **ideological positions** of male and female politicians.

### 3. State of the art

The existence of political gender stereotypes has been extensively documented in the United States (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Dolan, 2010, 2014; Fox & Smith, 1998; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Koch, 2000; Rosenwasser et al., 1987; Sapiro, 1981). The results of these studies point to certain stereotypical patterns.

Rosenwasser et al. (1987) demonstrated that female candidates are more likely to be perceived as competent in three areas: education, health care and maintaining honesty and integrity in government, while men are more likely to be rated as competent in dealing with defence and agriculture. Alexander and Andersen (1993) found that female candidates are better suited for day care, education, helping the poor and needy, AIDS, health care, environment and civil rights. Male candidates, on the other hand, would do a better job with military spending, foreign trade, agriculture and taxes.

Huddy and Terkildsen's (1993b) agree that typical female traits were thought to qualify female candidates for dealing better with compassion issues, such as education, health care and the problems of the poor and aged, whereas typical male traits were thought to help male candidates in coping better with military or police crises. These authors also found considerable evidence for the existence of gender-belief stereotypes, which portray a female politician as more liberal, Democratic and feminist than a male politician (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b).

More recently, the results from Lawless' (2004) study have revealed that citizens prefer masculine traits and characteristics in their leaders and believe that men are more likely to possess these qualities (Lawless, 2004). Dolan's (2010, 2014) results also confirmed the presence of gender stereotyped thinking: women are seen as better able to handle education and health care and men as more competent in handling terrorism. She concluded that stereotyped thinking is central to voters' evaluations of women candidates and to their voting behaviour (Dolan, 2010, 2014).

Few experimental studies evaluating women candidates have been conducted outside the United States. Matland (1994) found a substantial projection of gender stereotypes onto candidates with differences in perceived policy competencies in Norway, despite its reputation for a progressive political culture. Herrick and Sapieva (1998) demonstrated that male candidates are perceived as more competent on a number of policy areas in Kazakhstan. Recently, Taylor-Robinson and colleagues (2016) have found that candidate gender affects the perception of candidate abilities in Costa Rica, but in favour of women.



In Israel, on the other hand, a significant gender stereotyping effect, in which female candidates are evaluated lower than male candidates, has been revealed. This may come as no surprise, since Costa Rica can be described as a 'best case scenario' for society displaying gender neutral attitudes, due to its extensive experience with women in government. Israel, in contrast has had limited experience with women holding many seats in the Knesset or cabinet (Taylor-Robinson et al., 2016). These results highlight the importance of the political context: the important issues of the day and the history of women in government affects whether participants favourably evaluate female candidates.

Matland (1994) also pointed to the importance of the national context in the development of gender neutral attitudes. Gender roles differ between countries and cultures. Therefore, we cannot simply transfer previous, mostly US-based, findings to other contexts. Since voters' gender stereotypes have very rarely been analysed outside the US, it is vital to run a study on the prevalence of political gender stereotypes in continental Europe. We ran this study in Flanders (Belgium).

Flanders is an interesting case for several reasons, as it differs from the American (political) context in some important respects. First, the number of female representatives is higher in Belgium/Flanders (38%) compared to the United States (19%) (Inter-Parliamentary, 2017). This can be linked to differences in electoral formulas: PR systems, such as Belgium, have significantly more women in office than majoritarian systems (Caul, 1999; Matland, 1998, 2005; Norris, 1985, 2004; Rule, 1987; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). This is even reinforced by the existence of electoral gender quotas, which are absent in the American system. Apart from the presence in parliament, women have recently been well represented in the Flemish government (with several female deputy prime-ministers) and in parties (with several female party leaders).

This leads to a second argument related to exposure theory (Jennings, 2006): since Belgian voters are more acquainted with female politicians in (high) political positions, we expect them to be more open to women taking up their place in politics. Belgian voters tend to agree strongly with the statement that political responsibilities should be equally shared between men and women (Wauters & Devroe, 2015). The traditional differentiation in gender roles, which forms the base of gender stereotypes, is thus less present in Belgium.

Third, women are more equally spread over different parties in Flanders, making the link between leftist parties and women less obvious than in the United States. The share of women in the parliamentary parties in the Flemish parliament ranges from 33 % (for the extreme right *Vlaams Belang*) to 55 % (for the Christian-democratic CD&V and the social-democratic sp.a) (Rosadoc, 2014). This difference is especially relevant for our purposes, since it is often claimed that female politicians are perceived as more leftist because they mostly belong to left parties. By exploring how voters perceive the ideological position of female candidates in a context where they are more equally spread over the different parties, we are able to make a significant contribution to the existing literature on political gender stereotypes.

Finally, in Belgium's political system, there is less focus on individual leadership and personal characteristics. In American elections, there is a strong influence of individual campaign expenses and fund raising. Belgium can be considered as a more party-centred system, to the point that it has been described a '*partitocracy*' (Deschouwer, 2012). In the US, personal traits of candidates are more important, which often leads to gendered political races.

These differences between the US and Belgium/Flanders justify our claim that it is interesting to switch the context by studying whether political gender stereotypes also prevail in Flanders. Our aim is to explore whether findings from the US, which does not have a strong record for electing or appointing women to posts in government, are generalizable to other contexts. By doing so, this project adds new insights to the limited knowledge on the prevalence of political gender stereotypes outside the US and on the importance of the context in the development of gender attitudes.

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

#### **4. Research and methodological design**

##### **4.1. Research questions and related hypotheses**

The central objective of this paper is to identify the prevalence of gender stereotypes in Flanders (Belgium). This region could be viewed as a most-likely case for displaying gender neutral attitudes due to its extensive (both executive and legislative) experience with women in politics (Meier, 2012). Our study will be restricted to one monolingual region of Belgium, since it is crucial that the context in which the research takes places should be as constant as possible.

Although Wallonia, the other main region of Belgium, uses the same electoral rules as Flanders, there are some remarkable differences regarding the electoral setting justifying a separate analysis. Districts are smaller in Wallonia, which makes the electoral system less proportional, and there are in general fewer women elected in Wallonia than in Flanders. This could be an indication of a political culture that is less open to women taking up prominent roles in politics. Moreover, Wallonia stands out for its very negative picture of political life. Proportionately fewer Walloon than Flemish voters are satisfied with democracy (Hooghe, Marien, & Pauwels, 2011), which could impact on the way voters look at politics and politicians. There is also a bigger focus on individual leadership in Wallonia. The results of the 2009 election for the Flemish and Walloon regional parliament demonstrated that preference votes are more frequently cast in Wallonia than in Flanders (André, Wauters, & Pilet, 2012). Moreover, the percentage of preference votes cast only for men is also higher in Wallonia (47,9 % compared to 43,2%). This could indicate that the personal characteristics of politicians are more important and that the political culture is less open to women in Wallonia.

Our analysis will, at least in this paper, be limited to the aggregate level. Our aim is to find out how general gender stereotypes are reflected in the political sphere. Previous studies have demonstrated that Belgian citizens hold general gender stereotypes. A recent study has concluded that women in general are associated with communal characteristics (i.e. caring, calm, affectionate and peaceable) and men with agentic characteristics (i.e. ambitious, adventurous and self-confident) (Amazone, 2015). We are particularly interested in the application of these *general* stereotypes in the *political* sphere. Our expectation is that they will be reflected in politics in two ways: opinions that female and male politicians have different issue competences and hold different ideological positions. This can be seen as the operationalization of general gender stereotypes in politics, which is reflected in our research questions:

**RQ1: Do voters evaluate the issue competences of female and male candidates differently?**

**RQ2: Do voters evaluate the ideological positions of female and male candidates differently?**

We are not only interested in the presence of these political gender stereotypes, but also in their contents and the direction of the perceived differences between male and female candidates. Regarding the different areas of issue expertise, we expect that women, because they are typically seen as communal and social, will be stereotyped as having more competence in communal issues, in which the primary aim is to help people (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Brown, 1994; Kahn, 1996; Matland, 1994). This leads us to the following hypotheses:

**H1a: The perceived general competences of women candidates on agentic issues will be lower than that of men candidates.**

**H1b: The perceived general competences of women candidates on neutral issues will be similar than that of men candidates.**

**H1c: The perceived general competences of women candidates on communal issues will be higher than that of men candidates.**

Another component of political gender stereotypes is the different perception of the social attitudes and political beliefs of women (Diekmann et al., 2002). The finding that women are perceived as more liberal (or more leftist in European terms) can be explained by the fact that women focus more on communal issues, but also because, in the US, the Democratic party counts significantly more women candidates and parliamentarians. This creates a link between women and party in a voter's mind in which the application of political gender stereotypes is overlapped with partisan stereotypes (Chang & Hitchon, 2004). This link is obviously less straightforward in Flanders, since women are more equally spread over the different parties (King & Matland, 2003). We believe, however, that, also in Flanders, female candidates will be perceived as being more leftist, since they are also seen as more competent to handle and support communal issues and to write more legislation on women's issues (Saint-Germain, 1989;

Welch & Thomas, 1991). This could also be related to the kind of characteristic traits that are typically ascribed to women, i.e. caring, sympathetic and warm.

## **H2: The perceived ideological position of women candidates will be more to the left than that of men candidates.**

### 4.2. Experimental design

In Spring 2017, we set up a quasi-experimental research design in which hypothetical candidates were presented to respondents in text messages in which only their sex, their position on the list and their policy position on a particular issue were mentioned. 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.

Our study used a 2x3x6 mixed complete block design. The candidate's gender (male versus female) and the list position (head of list, position in the middle or no list position mentioned) were manipulated as between-group factors. Six different policy issues were included in the research design. These issue domains were manipulated as within-groups factor and were presented in a completely randomized order. 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). Both (the results of) international studies and our Flemish context were taken into account to determine which issues should be included. 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 (see Appendix: Table 1)<sup>2</sup>. We also checked whether these findings hold in our Flemish context by exploring literature on portfolio allocations and by looking at the appointment of male and female ministers to these issue domains.

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, 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 head of list and middle of list candidates. The hypothetical candidates were presented as 'candidate X'. In Dutch, it is possible to indicate the different gender of these candidates ('kandidaat' for the male candidate and 'kandidate' for the female candidate). Likewise gender-linked pronouns were

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

used in the instructional paragraphs and questions. In all other respects, speeches and questionnaires were identical, in order not to provide any cues to the salience of gender.

The presented candidate profiles included several elements: a text message, an image of the ballot (where we indicated the list position of the candidate) and a facial silhouette of the hypothetical candidate. The inclusion of facial silhouettes is innovative and is a subtle cue to respondents about the gender of the candidate. Previous studies mostly indicated the gender of the presented candidate by presenting him/her with a clear male/female name (e.g. Dolan, 2014; Falk & Kenski, 2006; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b; Matland, 1994; Rosenwasser et al., 1987), or by including images (see for example Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2009). This could, however, bring in some noise in the experimental design. Lammers et al. (2009), for example, demonstrated that physical appearance also impacts on the perception of the presented person. Furthermore, it is difficult to find neutral-sounding names. Names can evoke certain prejudices because they possibly remind respondents of someone with the same name or because they simply (dis)like the name. We presented the candidates as ‘candidate X’, in order to overcome the name letter effect (Nuttin, 1985). This is a psychological mechanism indicating that subjects often prefer letters or letter combinations that include their own initials. The provision of text messages is a standard practise in experimental studies on political gender stereotypes (see for example Dolan, 2014; Matland, 1994; Rosenwasser, Rogers, Fling, Silvers-Pickens, & Butemeyer, 1987; Sapiro, 1981). These messages were as centrist as possible, and were based on a mix of the party programs of the 4 Flemish centre parties (CD&V, Open VLD, N-VA and sp.a), the Flemish government agreement and Flemish parties’ press statements. They were made as neutral as possible, with no obvious linkages to particular party positions or statements. An example of the presented profiles and a translation of the six different text messages can be found in the Appendix.

Respondents were stimulated in various ways to intensively study the presented profiles. First, text messages were displayed 20 seconds by default, which obliged respondents to read these messages. Since these messages were very short (about 100 words), we believe that respondents were able to read them in that time period. Second, manipulation checks were included to verify whether respondents were able to correctly answer questions about the candidate and the content of the message. All respondents had to answer a question about the sex of the presented candidate after the first treatment. Respondents who were not able to correctly answer this question could not further complete the questionnaire and their answers were not taken into account for the data analysis.<sup>3</sup> The presented results

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<sup>3</sup>.The incorrect answers are more or less equally spread over the different issue domains, and over the different candidates (male-female, head of list-middle of list-control group). The percentage of incorrect answers ranges from 0.80% to 6.60% for all 36 presented profiles. Because of the risk of a selection effect (for example if only politically interested respondents were able to correctly answer this question), we made a comparison between the final sample and respondents who could not answer the manipulation check correctly. This analysis reveals that these groups do not differ substantially on important aspects. There is a small selection bias in that our final sample is slightly higher educated and younger, but there are no outspoken differences concerning gender and level of political interest.

therefore only stem from respondents who were aware of the gender of the presented candidate for their evaluations. We also included other manipulation checks, for example about the content of the policy positions and the presented arguments, in order not to over-accentuate the importance of the candidate's gender. This approach worked well, since only 27 respondents were able to correctly guess the intention of our study (see *infra*). Furthermore, respondents were incentivized to read the text messages thoroughly by highlighting that a prize (iPad Air 2 128 GB) would be raffled among those who could answer all the substantive questions correctly. An analysis of the answers to these questions indicates that a vast majority of respondents were able to correctly answer them. The lowest score of correct answers amounts to 84,95 per cent. We can therefore be confident that the registered answers are of good quality.

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 variable (i.e. the gender of the candidate) plays 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. Some groups may be more likely to use candidate's gender as a significant voting cue than others. It is argued that men favour male candidates (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007), that higher educated persons are more likely to believe that gender is irrelevant (Falk & Kenski, 2006), and that politically interested voters, who have been intensively exposed to prominent female politicians, are more likely to be open to women in the political sphere (Jennings, 2006). The random assignment of respondents enabled us to control for these intervening variables. Third, by using hypothetical candidates without partisan affiliation, we did not intervene in actual discussion nor was there any effect of pre-existing preferences or personal (dis)tastes. Furthermore, the attributes of the candidates (ethnic origin, age, physical outlook,...) were held as constant as possible and, to a large extent, indiscernible in the text messages. Also the inclusion of facial silhouettes proved to be advantageous, just as the employment of a self-administered web-based survey (Groves et al., 2009), which brings in the advantage that we can exclude interviewer effects (De Leeuw & Hox, 2008). Taken together, all these measures offer a methodologically more rigid test (Lammers et al., 2009).

The experiment was conducted in March-April 2017. An invitation to participate was sent to 21,526 respondents. 11,837 of them actually received and read<sup>4</sup> the invitation and 4,052 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 2,500 participants. From this sample, we additionally excluded two categories of respondents. First, respondents who completed the survey too fast, and consequently gave random answers, were excluded. These so-called 'speeder respondents' were defined

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<sup>4</sup> The other invitations were apparently sent to invalid or outdated email addresses.

as those who completed the survey in less than half of the average completion time<sup>5</sup>. Second, a question about the possible purpose of this study was included at the end of the survey in order to check whether respondents were able to find this out. Twenty-seven respondents provided an answer that was more or less in line with the purpose of our research. We decided to exclude the answers of those respondents as there might be a social desirability bias in these answers. However, since we also asked them to indicate at what point they found this out (while completing the questions for the first, second,..., sixth candidate), we did not have to exclude all of their answers. The exact number of registered answers varies therefore by policy issue. After excluding these two types of respondents, we maintained a sample of 2,362 respondents (which is a response rate of 19.95 %). A description of the basic characteristics of the respondents can be found in the Appendix (see Table 2).

Our sample provides a distinct advantage over earlier studies of political gender stereotypes: the external validity of our experiment is enhanced by conducting the study among a sample of the population, whereas most other studies analyse students. In doing so, we increase the generalizability of our results. Although students are of voting age and vary in their level of involvement in politics, they are a more homogenous population than the general population (Chang & Hitchon, 2004). Moreover, it could be argued that students, the youngest voters, are more likely to have been exposed to women in (prominent) positions in government and parliament. They therefore might be more liberal in their attitudes towards female candidates (Kahn, 1994) and the chances are higher that they will have developed gender neutral attitudes. This justifies our claim that students may be seen as a least-likely-sample for the detection of political gender stereotypes, which negatively impacts on the generalizability of findings.

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

## **5. Results**

This section is divided into two parts. In the first part, we will elaborate on the perceived competence of male and female politicians for handling particular policy domains, referring to issue competence stereotyping (H1a, H1b and H1c). In the second part, the focus will be on the perceived ideological

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<sup>5</sup> The average completion time was 996 seconds. The boundary duration from which a response is considered valid was set at 498 seconds.

position of the hypothetical male and female candidates, referring to ideological position stereotyping (H2).

We are here particularly interested in the general differences between male and female candidates for our analyses. The effect of list position will not be included in this analysis.<sup>6</sup> We therefore recoded the candidate variable, consisting of six categories, for each policy domain into a variable with only two categories; male candidate versus female candidate. We calculated a weighting factor for each group per policy issue (ranging from 0.97 to 1.03) to exclude possible effects from the candidate's list position, as well as effects related to the respondent's gender (gender solidarity effects). This means that there is an equal share of male and female respondents, and of respondents confronted with different list positions of candidates in each group.

### 5.1 Perception of competence

For each policy issue, respondents were asked to indicate how competent the presented candidate would be in managing the issue. Responses were on a (fully-labelled) 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent). The mean scores for the presented male and female candidates' competence for each policy issue are presented in Figure 1. Statistically significant differences are indicated by means of asterisks next to the policy issues. The p-values displayed are based on one-tailed tests,<sup>7</sup> since all our hypotheses include one specific direction of an effect. More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (see Table 3).

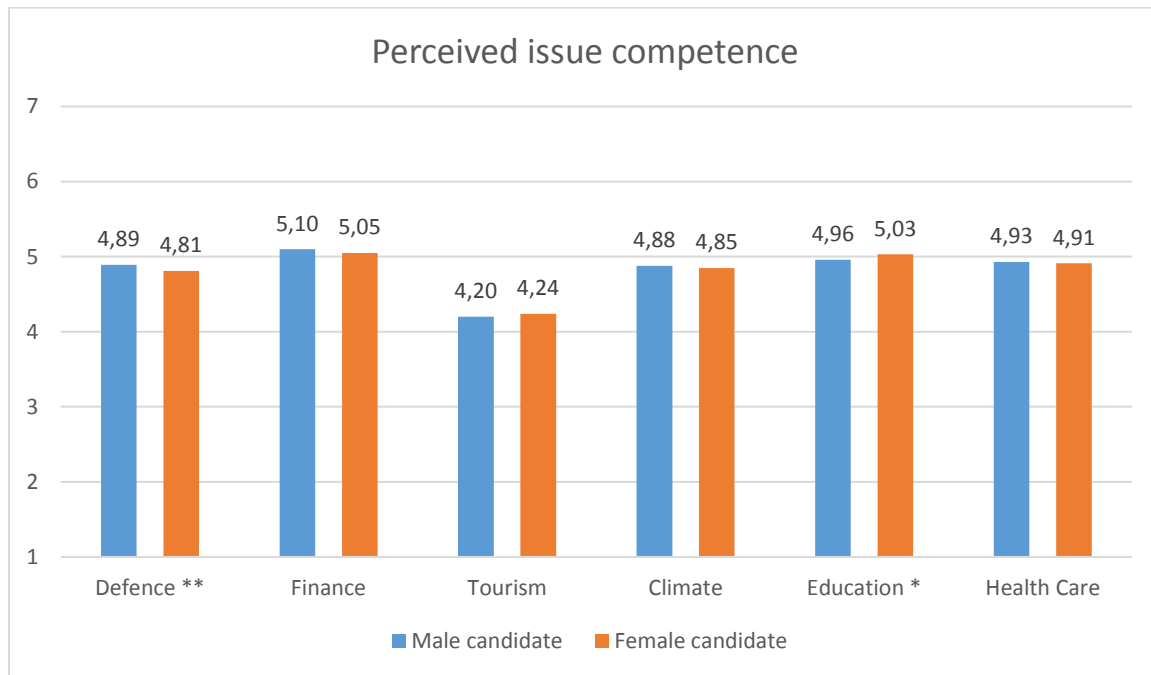
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<sup>6</sup> This element will be tackled in another paper which specifically focuses the effect of list position on the perceived competence of election candidates.

<sup>7</sup> One-tailed p-values can be calculated by dividing the significance level, derived in SPSS, by two.



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



\* $p < 0,1$ , \*\*  $p < 0,05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0,01$  (one-tailed)

The results demonstrate that there are only minor differences in the perceived competences of the presented male and female candidates, and therefore they contradict our expectations. For the interpretation of these results, we divide the policy issues into three categories: agentic, communal and neutral issues. Regarding the agentic issues (defence and finance), the competence of the male candidates is valued higher (respectively 4,89 and 5,10 compared to 4,81 and 5,05). This seems to be a confirmation of our first hypothesis (H1a). However, only for defence, these differences are statistically significant ( $p=0.044$ ).

When it comes to the neutral policy issues (tourism and climate), we were, as expected, unable to discover statistically significant differences. In one case (tourism), the female candidate is perceived somewhat more competently, in the other case (climate) the male candidate is considered slightly more competent. These differences are minimal and not statistically significant. In this sense, these results are in line with our expectation that respondents would not make large distinctions in neutral policy issues (H1b).

When we look at the communal issues (education and health care), we see a different picture. The female candidate's perceived competence in handling education is estimated higher than that of the male candidate (5,03 compared to 4,96). This seems to confirm our expectation, although the difference is only marginally statistically significant ( $p=0.055$ ). For health care, however, we see an opposite trend: the perceived competence is somewhat higher for the male candidate than for the female candidate (4,93

compared to 4,91). But here again, the difference is very minimal and not statistically significant ( $p=0.699$ ). Hypothesis 1c should therefore be rejected.

For each candidate, we also included a question on the general competence of the presented candidates for being active in politics. Here again, we were not able to detect any statistically significant differences between male and female candidates.

In sum, there seems to be little differences between men and women regarding perceived competency. This finding also holds when we only take the responses of male respondents into consideration (not in the figure). Gender solidarity theory posits that men are less likely to value female traits and are more in favor of male leaderships. The male respondents in our sample, however, do not seem to differentiate in their perceptions of female and male candidates' issue competences.

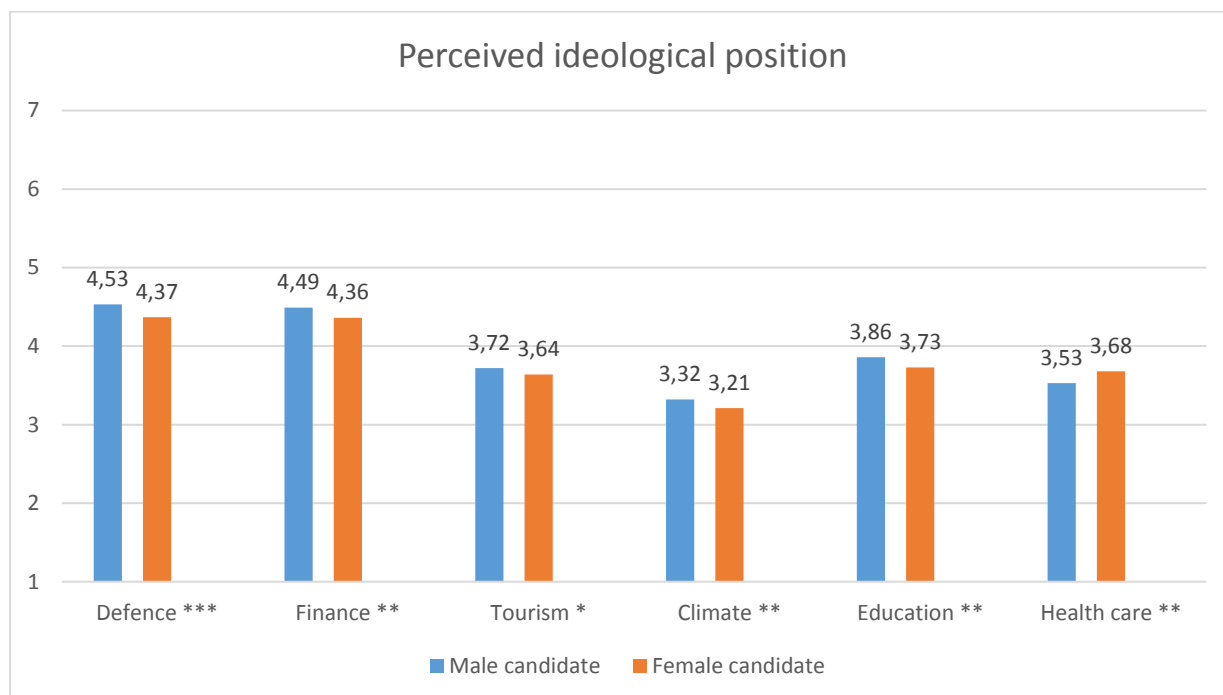
## 5.2 Perception of ideological positions

A second component of political gender stereotypes is the different perception of the ideological positions of women (Diekman et al., 2002). Respondents were asked to position the presented candidates on a left-right scale<sup>8</sup>, ranging from 1 (very leftist) to 7 (very rightist). The mean score for the ideological position of the presented male and female candidates in each policy issue are presented in Figure 2. Statistically significant differences are indicated by means of asterisks next to the policy issues. The displayed p-values are also one-tailed here. More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (see Table 4).

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<sup>8</sup> In order to increase the comparability of our results, we labeled every point of the left-right scale and included a definition of 'leftist' and 'rightist' in the questionnaire. Being leftist was defined as "standing for solidarity and taking care of minorities and weaker people". Being rightist was defined as "standing for freedom and believing that the individual is responsible for him/herself".

**Figure 2: Mean scores indicating the perceived ideological position of the presented male and female candidates in each policy issue on a scale from 1 (very left) to 7 (very right)**



\* $p < 0,1$ , \*\*  $p < 0,05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0,01$  (one-tailed)

The results must be interpreted in the following way: the lower the score, the more leftist the candidate is perceived. In general, the results indicate that the presented female candidates are perceived as being more to the left than their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup> The differences regarding perceived ideological positioning are clearly more pronounced than those for perceived issue competence. In all cases, these differences are also statistically significant. This is a clear confirmation of our second hypothesis (H2).

However, one result is again at odds with our expectations: for health care, the presented male candidate obtained a lower score than the female candidate (3,53 compared to 3,68). Moreover, this difference is statistically significant ( $p = 0.011$ ). This result contradicts our hypothesis. It is challenging to unravel this surprising finding since none of the possible explanations seems plausible. First, it could be related to the content of the text message (see Appendix). Although the focus is on enhancing the involvement of the individual patient in his/her care, an expansion of health care services is also mentioned. The latter might be seen as a leftist position. Indeed, candidates received the second most leftist rating for this policy issue (the most leftist scores were reported for climate). How do we then explain that the female candidate is perceived as being more rightist? This might be due to the current minister of Public Health: Maggie De Block, a liberal-democratic female politician (Open VLD). She has been federal minister of social affairs and health care since 2014 and is one of the most popular and well-known politicians in

<sup>9</sup> Generally, all candidates were considered as being rather centrist (the mean scores are all somewhere between 3.21 and 4.53). This comes as no surprise, because we developed centrist positions for the presented candidates.

the country. She pursues a rather rightist policy in Public Health with proposals to limit sickness benefits over time and sharpened controls for long-term sick employees. The presented female candidate for health care could be linked with this politician in some respondents' minds. Based on their perceptions of reality, these respondents could then believe that this female candidate is slightly more rightist. If this is the case, we could expect that the rightist perception of female politicians in health care will be most outspoken among politically interested respondents (since they are more likely to grasp the content of a minister's policy). Our results, however, point in a different direction: the gap between the perceived ideological position of female and male politicians in health care is greater among less politically interested respondents than among politically interested respondents<sup>10</sup>.

Second, this might be related to differences in terms of left-right positioning of the respondents that were asked to evaluate the male candidate and those who had to evaluate the female candidate. Again, our results contradict this idea, since we found no significant differences in terms of respondents' left-right positioning<sup>11</sup>. Third, this may be due to a contra-stereotypical effect. Health care in itself is a rather leftist policy issue and male candidates are generally perceived as more rightist. When a male candidate takes a stand in a leftist policy issue, this may evoke a counter stereotypical image, which could have a reverse effect and creates a perception of being even more leftist. The leftist perception of the policy issue is then projected on the presented male candidate. If this is the case, we should find the same pattern for education, which is also labelled leftist. However, our results for education point in a different direction. The results for health care remain puzzling and ask for more comprehensive and/or additional analyses.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

The underrepresentation of women in politics is one of the fundamental problems modern democracies continue to struggle with. The purpose of this paper was to uncover one of the remaining sources of bias for female politicians: the prevalence of political gender stereotypes in elections. Stereotypes play an important role in human judgment (Deaux & Lewis, 1984): voters have expectations of the traits that women and men possess and apply these expectations to their impressions of female and male candidates, which affects candidates' perceived issue competence and ideological position (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b).

The prevalence of political gender stereotypes has almost exclusively been investigated in the American context. Gender stereotypes are, however, conditional upon the context (electoral system, political

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<sup>10</sup> Politically interested respondents (= those who follow the political actuality on a daily basis) position female candidates 0,030 points more to the right than male candidates. This difference amounts to 0,190 among less politically interested respondents.

<sup>11</sup> The mean score for ideological self-positioning was 3,97 for the respondents who had to evaluate the male candidate and 3,99 for those who had to evaluate the female candidate ( $p=0,820$ ).

culture, etc). Therefore, findings in the US do not necessarily prevail in other countries or regions. We conducted one of the first experimental studies on this topic in Europe, and more in particular in the Flemish region in Belgium. This context differs in several important respects (such as the electoral system and the number of female representatives) from the American political context. Our quasi-experimental design enabled us to control for intervening factors. Moreover, contrary to previous studies, the external validity of our study was enhanced by conducting the study among a sample of the general population. Most previous studies relied on a student sample, which is a more homogenous population (Chang & Hitchon, 2004) who might be more liberal in their attitudes towards female candidates (Kahn, 1994).

Political gender stereotypes were operationalized as the different perception of the issue competences and the ideological position of male and female candidates. On the one hand, voters believe that women and men have different areas of issue competence: women are stereotyped as having more competence in communal issues, in which the primary aim is to help people, whereas men are stereotyped as having more competence in agentic issues, which are related to defeating competition (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Brown, 1994; Kahn, 1996; Matland, 1994). The current results are somewhat at odds with our expectations.

We detected only minor differences in the **perceived competence** of the presented male and female candidates. Regarding the agentic issues (defence and finance), the competence of the male candidate is valued higher, but only for defence the difference is also statistically significant. For neutral issues (climate and tourism), we find, as expected, no differences in the evaluation of the competence of men and women. We see a slightly different picture for the communal issues (education and health care): the female candidate's perceived competence is higher for handling education, but lower for health care. The differences in perceived issue competence are, thus in general rather small and not always unequivocal. This seems to indicate that gender-linked traits and competences only have an impact in some policy domains (for example defence, which may not come as a surprise since previous research already demonstrated that defence can be considered as the most typical masculine policy domain (Lawless, 2004)). For other policy domains, the personal qualities needed to master them do not seem to simply correspond to typical male or female traits.

On the other hand, women are also perceived as more leftist (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993b). This is clearly confirmed by our results: when politicians proclaim a centrist political position, female politicians are perceived as being more to the left.<sup>12</sup> This finding, however, questions the prevalence of women MPs in leftist parties as explanation for the different evaluations of ideological beliefs of women and men. Several prominent women politicians in Flanders (ministers and party leaders) belong to

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<sup>12</sup> The presented policy statements all took a centrist position. We are therefore not able to make judgements about how voters perceive the ideological position of candidates proclaiming more outspoken leftist or rightist positions.

(centre-)right parties, and also in the neighbouring countries, prominent politicians belong to centre-right (Merkel, May) or even far-right parties (Le Pen, Petry). Although the link between women MPs and left-wing parties is less present in Flanders than in the US, female candidates are still perceived as being more leftist.

Consequently, there must be other explanations for this phenomenon. We give a few suggestions. First, this might stem from the general assumption that female *politicians* in reality support more leftist positions and policy proposals aimed at fostering equality. Second, it might arise from the idea that female *voters* are less supportive of rightist parties and increasingly more inclined to describe themselves as leftist (Inglehart & Norris, 2000), which is then also transferred to female politicians. Flemish women indeed position themselves more on the left-side of the political spectrum compared to Flemish men (Celis et al., 2015) and are more inclined to vote for socialist/leftist parties (Celis et al., 2015; Deschouwer, Delwit, Hooghe, & Walgrave, 2010).<sup>13</sup> Third, this might also be related to the kind of traits (such as caring, compassionate and soft) that are typically attributed to women. The idea is that these traits impact on the perceived beliefs of women politicians rather than on their perceived capabilities. The reasoning would then be that women are equally capable of handling e.g. financial issues than men, but that women will do this in a softer manner and with the intention of enhancing equality (i.e. a more leftist approach).

In sum, and referring back to the title of this paper, our results confirm the perception of leftist women, but not that of competent men (in agentic issues).

Our results have a number of implications. First, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which the different facets (i.e. traits, issue competences and ideological beliefs) of political gender stereotypes are linked (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993a, 1993b; Koch, 2000; Schneider & Bos, 2014). Our findings contradict the idea that gender stereotypes are tightly interconnected packages: perceptions of candidates' ideological positions seem to be standing apart from their perceived issue competences.

Second, the present study illustrates that gender still matters to the fate of women candidates. Voters may use a candidate's gender to simplify political choices and to make inference about a candidate's issue positions and ideological orientations.<sup>14</sup> These stereotypes can exert an influence on different stages of the electoral process, for example when female candidates decide to run or not or when they make choices on how to campaign. Perceptions about women's leftist ideological positions seem to be more persistent than perceptions about women's issue competences. This possibly leads to

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<sup>13</sup> This is also confirmed in our results: the average ideological position of female respondents is 3,75; for male respondents this is 4,21. The willingness to vote for leftist/socialist parties (i.e. Groen and sp.a) is also greater among female respondents.

<sup>14</sup> However, gender stereotypes are no homogenous packages and might differ across different segments of the population. Some voters are more likely to hold political gender stereotypes. The importance of gender stereotypes might, for example, vary across age groups, gender, level of political interest, etc. This will be integrated in another paper about individual-level factors explaining the prevalence of political gender stereotypes.

misperceptions by voters of the ideological orientations of candidates and may lead to perceptions of female candidates as being more leftist than they actually are. These misperceptions might be difficult to overcome as female candidates would need to adopt more conservative positions on some policy issues. Recently, we have been witnessing the rise of prominent female politicians in (far-) right political parties across Europe. Participating in (far-) right parties could be part of a strategy of female candidates to overcome misperceptions about their political beliefs and soft image. This could, however, also be driven by strategies of (far-) right parties who actively seek for prominent female politicians in order to get rid of their hard and, often, negative image. In that case, the appointment of women as party presidents in rightist parties could be interpreted as an attempt to soften their image in order to appeal to a broader part of the electorate, as is for example the case with the French Front National and Marine Le Pen.

Furthermore, the idea that female politicians are more leftist than males shapes voters' expectations about the specific issue positions of female candidates. The political impact of these ideological stereotypes deserves further consideration as it may enhance a bias among voters and more specifically among (centre-)rightist voters who may be reluctant to vote for 'leftist women'. If Downs (1957) median voter theorem still holds today, this perception of 'leftist' women might constitute an electoral disadvantage for these women, as most voters tend to prefer viewpoints and candidates in the middle of the political spectre. It is in this respect important to stress that all the candidates that we presented took centrist positions in their messages.

Third, previous research pointed to the importance of a country's political context for understanding the prevalence of political gender stereotypes. Our results demonstrate that, even in contexts where voters have been intensively exposed to female politicians and where female candidates are spread over the different parties, such as Flanders, stereotyped images of women's ideological positions remain prevalent (but not stereotypes about policy competences). It could therefore prove useful to replicate this study in other contexts and regions in order to further disentangle the mechanisms behind this effect. Furthermore, the interaction of gender with other characteristics of election candidates, such as their party affiliation, ethnicity, region of origin or level of education, could also be a fruitful area for further research.

Another issue for further research concerns the linkage between stereotyping patterns and actual voting behaviour. Although we point to one of the underlying factors of voter biases, it was not our intention to actually link this to voting behaviour. In the present study, we decided to maximize control: each candidate was presented separately and we provided only minimal information about the candidates. Our results clearly provide evidence for the use of gender stereotypes as heuristics or shortcuts in low-information contexts (McDermott, 1997). 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. The current study already gives a cautious indication of the potential importance of stereotyping patterns. When it comes to assessments of competence, an important criterion for vote choices in list PR systems, female candidates do not seem to be disadvantaged. However, also ideological motives often form the basis of election choices. Different (mis)perceptions about women and men's ideological positions could therefore have a sizable impact on voting behaviour and in that way undermine women's political representation.



## Appendix


**Table 1: Categorization of male, female and neutral policy domains**

	Bekgaard and Kjaer (2012)	Hooghe and De Swert (2009)	Kahn (1994a)	Kahn and Goldenberg (1991)	Diaz (2005)	Davis (1997)	Krook and O'Brien (2012)	Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson (2014)	Hermson, Lay, and Stokes (2003)	Huddy and Terkildsen (1993)	Rosenwasser et al. (1987)	Sapiro (1981a)	Dolan (2010)	Lawless (2004)	Alexander and Andersen (1993)	RESULT	#
Health care	/	♀	♀	♀	/	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	14
Education	/	♀	♀	♀	/	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	♀	14
Family policy	/	♀	/	/	♀	♀	♀	♀	/	♀	♀	/	♀	♀	♀	♀	12
Social welfare	/	♀	/	♀	♀	/	♀	♀	/	♀	/	/	/	/	♀	♀	8
Child care	♀	♀	/	/	/	/	♀	♀	♀	♀	/	/	/	/	/	♀	7
Poverty	/	/	/	/	/	/	♀	/	♀	♀	/	/	/	♀	♀	♀	6
Culture	/	♀	/	/	/	♀	♀	♀	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	♀	4
Minority rights	/	/	/	♀	/	/	N	/	/	♀	/	/	/	/	/	♀	3
Defense / military	/	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	15
Economy/finance	/	♂	/	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	/	♂	♂	♂	♂	♂	13
Agriculture	/	N	/	♂	/	♂	♂	♂	♂	/	/	♂	♂	/	♂	♂	9
International relations – foreign affairs	/	♂	♂	♂	♂	/	♂	♂	/	/	/	/	♂	/	♂	♂	8
National security & crime	/	N	/	/	/	/	♂	♂	♂	/	/	♂	♂	N	/	♂	5
Employment	/	/	/	/	/	♂	♂	♂	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	♂	3
Transportation	♂	/	/	/	/	/	N	♂	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	♂	2
Taxes	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	♂	/	/	/	/	/	♂	♂	2
Immigration	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	♂	/	/	/	/	/	/	♂	1
Sports	/	/	/	/	/	N	N	N	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	N	3
Tourism	/	/	/	/	/	N	N	N	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	N	3
Justice	/	♂	/	/	/	N	N	N	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	N	3
Climate	/	N	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	N	1
Environment	/	/	/	♀	/	N	N	N	♀	/	/	N	/	/	♀	N	4

The first eight columns (marked in yellow) refer to studies on mass media perceptions and portfolio allocations, the last eight (marked in green) refer to experimental studies on political gender stereotypes. For each study, we coded the results in the following way: if a particular policy issue is seen as male,


we code it ‘♂’; if it is seen as female, we code it ‘♀’; and if it is seen as gender-neutral, we code it ‘N’. When the policy issue was not part of the analysis, this is indicated with ‘/’.

## Presented candidate profiles




**Candidate X**  
Head of list

“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.”




<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Candidate X
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 2
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 3
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 4
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 5
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 6
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 7
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 8
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 9
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 10
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 11
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 12
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 13
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 14
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 15
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 16
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 17
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 18
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 19
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 20



**Candidate X**  
Position 10

“I am **candidate X** and I am placed **10<sup>th</sup>** 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.”



<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 1
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 2
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 3
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 4
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 5
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 6
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 7
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 8
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 9
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	Candidate X
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 11
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 12
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 13
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 14
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 15
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 16
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 17
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 18
<input type="radio"/>	Candidate 19
<input type="radio"/>	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 10<sup>th</sup> 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 utmost 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 2: Description of the experiment’s participants – weighted for age and gender (N=2362)**

<b>Gender</b>	
Male	50,3%
Female	49,7%
<b>Age</b>	
<37	27,0%
37 – 56	36,9%
57+	36,1%
<b>Level of education</b>	
No degree	0,8%
Primary education	2,8%
Lower secondary education	16,8%
Higher secondary education	37,3%

Non-university higher education	24,5%
University education	17,8%
<b>Average left right positioning (1=very leftist, 7=very rightist)</b>	3,98
<b>Preferred party</b>	
CD&V	13,7%
Groen	16,1%
N-VA	34%
Open VLD	10,4%
PVDA	6,6%
Sp.a	9,3%
Vlaams Belang	10%
<b>How often do they follow politics in the news?</b>	
On a daily basis	54,1%
2-3 times a week	22,8%
Once a week	8,0%
Less than once a week	10,6%
Never	4,5%

**Table 3: Mean scores indicating the perceived competence of the presented male and female candidates for each policy issue**

	Male candidate	Female candidate	Sig.
<b>Defence</b>	4,89 (N=1174)	4,81 (N=1176)	0,044 **
<b>Finance</b>	5,10 (N=1180)	5,05 (N=1172)	0,178
<b>Tourism</b>	4,20 (N=1146)	4,24 (N=1202)	0,234
<b>Climate</b>	4,88 (N= 1167)	4,85 (N=1180)	0,283
<b>Education</b>	4,96 (N=1168)	5,03 (N=1178)	0,055*
<b>Health care</b>	4,93 (N=1173)	4,91 (N=1174)	0,350

**Table 4: Mean scores indicating the perceived ideological position of the presented male and female candidates in each policy issue**

	Male candidate	Female candidate	Sig.
<b>Defence</b>	4,53 (N=1174)	4,37 (N=1176)	0,001 ***
<b>Finance</b>	4,49 (N=1180)	4,36 (N=1172)	0,011 **
<b>Tourism</b>	3,72 (N=1146)	3,64 (N=1202)	0,072 *
<b>Climate</b>	3,32 (N= 1167)	3,21 (N=1180)	0,022 **
<b>Education</b>	3,86 (N=1168)	3,73 (N=1178)	0,008 **
<b>Health care</b>	3,53 (N=1173)	3,68 (N=1174)	0,011 **

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