It is all in the eye of the beholder. An experimental study on political ethnic stereotypes in Flanders (Belgium).[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Abstract

Ethnic minorities are strongly underrepresented in western democracies. For a better understanding of the role of voters in this political underrepresentation, we examine whether voters use political ethnic stereotypes. We focus on belief and issue competency stereotypes, describing respectively the perceived ideology and policy issue competencies of candidates.

We set up an experimental design in Flanders (Belgium). Our results show that voters consider ethnic minority candidates as more leftist than candidates of the ethnic majority and thus make use of ideological stereotypes. Nonetheless, the extent to which ethnic candidates are confronted with issue competency stereotypes is less unequivocal. Whilst there are no differences in perceived issue competency in terms of economy and integration, ethnic minority candidates were perceived as less competent to deal with the environment. Our results also demonstrate that rightist voters are in general more negative about the competencies of ethnic candidates, whereas leftist voters evaluate them more positively. This means that the overall lack of competency effects hides a more complex combination of positive and negative stereotypes.

Keywords

political representation, ethnic minorities, voter bias, political stereotypes, survey experiments

Introduction

Political assemblies in western democracies are traditionally dominated by white, highly educated, middle-aged men. The political underrepresentation of ethnic minorities is increasingly considered as a fundamental democratic deficit by academic scholars, political actors and citizens alike (Young, 2000; Ruedin, 2013; Bird et al., 2011; Bloemraad and Schönwälder, 2013). Nevertheless, despite recent attempts to accomplish a fairer representation, including specific target figures and recruitment efforts (Celis and Wauters, 2010; Bird, 2014), ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in most elected assemblies.

A better understanding of the political underrepresentation of ethnic minorities requires a more profound insight in the thresholds they face during the political recruitment process. As this process ultimately leads to the election of representatives (Mügge, 2016), voters constitute important actors in the recruitment process. Concerning voting behavior, previous research has made a distinction between ‘ethnic’ and ‘symbolic’ voting. The former focuses on the proclivity of ethnic minorities to vote for ethnic minority candidates. The latter stems from ethnic majority voters who want to show their support for ethnic inclusion (Swyngedouw and Jacobs, 2006). However, scholars have pointed to adverse reactions from majority voters as well, revealing electoral discrimination towards ethnic minority candidates (Portmann and Stojanović, 2018; Besco, 2018).

The aim of this article is to uncover some of the underlying mechanisms of symbolic voting, and lack thereof, by examining whether voters hold political stereotypes towards ethnic minority candidates. Political ethnic stereotypes can be defined as generalized expectations about the political beliefs and competencies of ethnic minority candidates (McDermott, 1998). Both types have the potential to influence voting behavior, as voters prefer candidates with an ideological position comparable to their own (Downs, 1957) and whom they believe to be competent (Goeminne and Swyngedouw, 2007).

Whilst previous research on political ethnic stereotypes has predominantly focused on the perception of black politicians in the US, we elaborate on Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The last decades, Flanders, like most other West European countries and regions, has been characterized by a noteworthy increase in its ethnic population. However, ethnic minorities still remain strongly underrepresented in the Flemish parliament, constituting 20.5% of the overall population but only 5.7% of the parliamentarians (Noppe et al., 2018; Minderhedenforum, 2014).

The added value of a Flemish case-study is threefold. First, the Flemish political context is characterized by a flexible list PR-system. This allows parties to compose diverse ballot lists representing people with different socio-demographic backgrounds, including ethnic minorities. Consequently, ticket balancing is more important in Flanders compared to the American majority system (Matland, 2005; Dancygier, 2014). Second, in the Flemish multiparty-system, ethnic minority politicians are not bounded to one single party like in the US (Celis and Erzeel, 2017; Sigelman et al., 1995). This limits the influence of party-related stereotypes on the evaluation of individual minority candidates. Third, we examine the underrepresentation of the biggest ethnic minority in Flanders, namely citizens of Moroccan origins. They constitute an ethnic minority which is confronted with less severe segregation compared to the previously studied ethnic minorities in the US, namely Blacks and to lesser extent Latinos (Iceland, 2014). In sum, this context leads to the theoretical expectations that ethnic stereotypes in Flanders might be less prominent and/or less negative compared to stereotypes towards Afro-Americans in the US.

We examine voters’ candidate perception on the basis of a survey experiment among Flemish students. University students are less susceptible to stereotypes compared to other population groups. We can expect that if this study demonstrates the presence of political ethnic stereotypes, their prevalence will be more substantial among the broader population and in other political contexts. Thus, the use of a student sample further enhances the strength of the least-likely character of this study. The students will be presented hypothetical candidates with a native or foreign name. By using hypothetical candidates, we can limit possible effects of personal preferences or attitudes about the contemporary public debate on candidate evaluation, and can control for moderating variables. This results in a more internally valid measure of the role of a candidate’s ethnicity (Campbell and Cowley, 2014).

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Our theoretical framework elaborates on the concept of political representation, the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities and political ethnic stereotypes. Hereafter, the hypotheses, research design and results are presented. The results indicate that whilst Flemish voters use ideological stereotypes, they do not make extensive use of issue competency stereotypes. However, important differences in how leftist and rightist voters evaluate the competencies of ethnic minority candidates are revealed.

Understanding the descriptive (under)representation of ethnic minorities

In public and academic debate, several terms and definitions are used to talk about ethnic minorities. Concepts as migrants, allochthones, foreigners and ethnic minorities are often alternated within the same discussion and they are defined in terms of birthplace, origin of (grand)parents, mother tongue and religion (Bird, 2004). We opt for ethnic minorities as this is an internationally used and neutral concept with no negative connotation. This concept is also used by the Flemish authorities and the Flemish spokesperson of people of foreign origin alike (Devriendt and Charkaoui, 2014; Noppe et al., 2018). The Flemish authorities define ethnic minorities as people who did not have the Belgian nationality by birth or those of whom at least one parent did not have the Belgian nationality by birth. According to this definition 20.5% of the Flemish population belongs to an ethnic minority (Noppe et al., 2018). However, mainly citizens of non-Western origin are perceived as ethnic minorities as they are more visibly different (Geldof, 2015; Eelbode, 2013). This study focusses on one specific non-western minority group in Flanders, namely citizens of Moroccan origin. They form an interesting case since their political role is highly susceptible to public debate (Celis et al., 2013; Janssen et al., 2017) and it is the biggest non-western minority in Flanders (Noppe et al., 2018).

Also the definitions and approaches of political representation in the literature are manifold. This article departs from the classic work of Hanna Pitkin (1967). In its purest form, political representation is defined as ‘*making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact*’ (Pitkin, 1967, p.8-9). Pitkin expounds on political representation by making a distinction between three specific dimensions of representation – formal, descriptive and substantive representation.

The focus of this article lies on the second dimension, i.e. descriptive representation. If the representative and the represented share some personal characteristics (e.g., gender or ethnicity), one can say that the former represents the latter in a descriptive manner. The importance of this dimension is manifold. One the one hand, it is related to Phillips’s (1995) politics of presence theory, stating that the descriptive representation of a social group enhances its substantive representation, which focusses on the representation of interests. On the other hand, it has a positive effect on the legitimacy of a democratic regime and the quality and output of the policy making process (Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999). Ideally, descriptive representation means that the political diversity serves as a mirror of the broader societal diversity in terms of ‘the most important characteristics’ (Phillips, 1995; Pitkin, 1967). Which characteristics ought to be represented, depends on the contemporary political cleavages that divide a society (Norris and Lovenduski, 1993). The current expansion of ethnic minority populations in western democracies, combined with recent discussions about migration and integration, expose the need for a more profound representation of ethnic minorities.

Previous research has targeted the *political recruitment process* and the *political opportunity structure* as influencing factors of descriptive representation. The former is a step-wise model determined by supply and demand factors (Norris and Lovenduski, 1993). Progressing from a large number of citizens who are eligible to run for political office (1) to a smaller pool who aspire to run for office (2) to an even smaller group who are nominated by the party to run for office (3), the model ultimately leads to the smallest band who are elected to office (4). Ethnic minorities often miss out on the transition from each stage to the next (Mügge, 2016).

The *political opportunity structure* can be defined as a set of contextual factors which influence the level of ethnic representation, including the political system (e.g., citizenship regime, electoral system and political culture), the party system (e.g., presence of extreme-right parties and party culture), and the characteristics of the ethnic minority population (e.g., social capital, political experience, geographical concentration) (Ruedin, 2013; Eelbode, 2013; Togeby, 2008; Trounstine and Valdini, 2008; Dancygier, 2014; Norris and Franklin, 1997; Celis and Wauters, 2013). All these factors have a potential influence on people’s attitudes towards the participation of ethnic minorities in politics. A multicultural citizenship regime, a political culture open to ethnic diversity and integrated ethnic minorities with a large social capital all increase the chances of ethnic minority political actors to become elected.

We focus on the last step of the political recruitment model and more specifically on the attitudes of ethnic majority voters towards ethnic minority candidates. In order to preclude any possible moderating effects of different political opportunities, we restrict our focus to Flanders and solely focus on one ethnic group, namely citizens of Moroccan origin.

A number of studies has documented how many and what kind of voters cast a personal vote for ethnic minorities. In this regard, a distinction is made between ‘ethnic’ and ‘symbolic’ voting. Previously, scholars have mainly focused on the former, regarding the proclivity of ethnic minorities to vote for ethnic minority candidates (Teney et al., 2010; Hoffman and Long, 2013; Martin, 2016). The latter, which constitutes the subject of this article, refers to votes from ethnic majority voters who want to show their support for ethnic inclusion (Swyngedouw and Jacobs, 2006). Scholars have argued that the overall amount of symbolic voting is limited in many western democracies, as ethnic majority voters remain reluctant to vote for minority candidates (Stegmaier et al., 2013; Thrasher et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2015; Hutchings and Valentino, 2004). Especially among rightist voters, the electoral support for ethnic minority candidates is low (Portmann and Stojanović, 2018; Besco, 2018). Swyngedouw and Jacobs (2006) come to the same conclusions for the Flemish context. They examined the electoral behavior for the 2003 federal election of a random sample of 1213 Flemish citizens. Only 5.5% of the participants had casted a preferential vote for one or more ethnic minority candidates. It is especially the voters of leftist parties (Groen and sp.a) who are most likely to cast a vote for a minority candidate. The more rightist voters perceive themselves, the smaller the probability to vote for a minority candidate.

Nevertheless, no full insight has yet been obtained in the underlying mechanisms of this voter bias towards ethnic minority candidates. Scholars have demonstrated that on the one hand, voters favor candidates having certain characteristics, such as a similar ideological position to their own or high levels of perceived competency (Popkin, 1994; Manzano and Sanchez, 2010), and that on the other hand, these inferences are influenced by candidates’ demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity (McDermott, 1998). Hence, demographic attributes serve as informational shortcuts, allowing voters to evaluate candidates with a minimum of effort and to decide whom to vote for (McDermott, 2009). We elaborate in the next section on candidate’s ethnicity as an important cognitive shortcut for candidate evaluation.

Political ethnic stereotypes

Voters’ generalized perceptions of the political behavior of ethnic minority candidates are termed political ethnic stereotypes. In the broad sense, they consist of perceptions about stereotypical traits, issue competencies and political beliefs of ethnic candidates(Schneider and Bos, 2011; McLaughlin and Thompson, 2016). In the strict sense, political stereotypes only comprise *ideological* and *issue competency* stereotypes, whereas *trait* stereotypes are rather seen as social stereotypes applied to the political context (McDermott, 1998). This study is restricted to political stereotypes in the strict sense.

Our theoretical framework considering political ethnic stereotypes mainly relies upon studies focusing on the representation of Afro-Americans. They constitute the ethnic group whose political underrepresentation has been most extensively linked to the use of political stereotypes. Considering i*deological* or *belief stereotypes*, the literature argues that ethnic majority voters perceive Afro-American candidates as more leftist than their white counterparts with a similar ideological profile (Jacobsmeier, 2014; Sigelman et al., 1995; Lerman and Sadin, 2016). Three explanations are mentioned. First, this stereotype originates from the observation that ethnic minority voters consistently vote for the Democratic Party, which is understood as the racial gap in voting behavior, and that most ethnic minority politicians belong to the Democratic Party (McDermott, 1998; McLaughlin and Thompson, 2016; Office of the Historian and Office of Art and Archives, s.d.). Second, American scholars have stated that voters attribute certain ‘liberal’ traits to ethnic minority candidates (e.g., blacks are empathic and better at helping the needy), which are translated into more leftist opinions. Third, ethnic minorities are typically perceived as competent to deal with ‘liberal’ issues (e.g., social equity issues) (Berinsky and Mendelberg, 2005; Sigelman et al., 1995), which further increases the perception that minority candidates are leftist.

Also *issue competency stereotypes* have been the subject of American scholars’ attention. They are considered to be prevalent in white American voters’ minds. McDermott (1998), Schneider and Bos (2011), Sigelman et al.[[2]](#endnote-1) (1995) and Weaver (2012) argue that minority candidates are perceived as better at dealing with ethnic issues (e.g., race relations and equal opportunities) compared to ethnic majority candidates), whilst they are considered as less competent to deal with core political issues (e.g., defense and economy).

Ethnic issues can be defined as issues with a strong positive correlation to ethnic minorities. Whereas some scholars restrict racial issues to issues that directly and only affect the targeted racial group (e.g., welfare for blacks) (Carmines and Stimson, 1982), we use a broader definition based on Schneider and Bos (2011). We define ethnic issues as issues that are directly related to the interests of and disproportionally affect ethnic minorities. Our approach is based on cognitive connections. These linkages can stem from stereotypical characteristic traits that are attributed to ethnic minorities and have a clear link with certain issues (e.g., being compassionate and issues considering the disadvantaged) (Peffley and Hurwitz, 1998). The unique living experiences of ethnic minorities can reinforce the connection with specific issues (e.g., experience with ethnic discrimination and issues considering equal rights) (Phillips, 1995; McLaughlin and Thompson, 2016). This is linked to Phillips’s (1995) politics of presence theory, which states that descriptive representatives are particularly competent to substantively defend the unique interests of their own social group(s) because they have a better understanding of the problems their co-group members encounter due to shared living experiences.

Core or major policy issues are also termed as non-ethnic issues. These are issues with a strong negative ethnic connotation. Like ethnic issues, this negative linkage can stem from stereotypical characteristics traits, but in this case the focus lies on stereotypical traits that are perceived as necessary to deal with a particular issue but which are not attributed to ethnic minorities (e.g., being hard-working or leadership-minded and issues related to defense, economy) (Schneider and Bos, 2011; Pager and Karafin, 2009).[[3]](#endnote-2)

Three important nuances should be added to the discussion about ethnic issue competency stereotypes. First, it is possible that ethnic minority candidates are perceived as less competent for functioning in politics in general, regardless of the issue at stake. A possible predictor of the underestimation of their general political competencies is their (perceived) lack of political experience, which forms a strong determinant for perceived candidate competency (Miller et al., 1986). Not only do ethnic majority voters tend to downgrade minority candidates’ experience (Weaver, 2012; Williams, 1990), ethnic minority candidates are indeed oftentimes newcomers on the political stage and therefore, lack certain relevant experience (Thrasher et al., 2013).

Second, a reverse reasoning is possible. Ethnic minority candidates could be perceived as more competent in general as a consequence of overcoming additional political barriers impeding their selection. These barriers stem from the socioeconomic, sociocultural and political inequalities that ethnic minorities in general are faced with (Dancygier et al., 2015; Griffin and Newman, 2007; Weaver, 2012). This reasoning is also linked to the compensation hypothesis, stating that ethnic minority candidates need a higher level of personal qualifications in order to tackle damaging stereotypes that impair their electoral chances (Black and Erickson, 2006).

Voter characteristics form a third nuance in this discussion. Weaver (2012) demonstrates that voters’ perception about the competency of ethnic candidates is particularly influenced by their own ideological position. Liberal (leftist) voters have generally more positive views toward ethnic minority candidates compared to their conservative (rightist) counterparts. The former ‘are more likely to control racially-based preferences to accord with egalitarian principles’ and that the latter ‘show stronger explicit and implicit favoritism for whites […] over blacks […]’ (Weaver, 2012: 170). Besco (2018) and Portmann and Stojanović (2018) have come to similar conclusions. They argue that it is mostly rightist voters who reject ethnic minority candidates. Ethnic minority candidates running for rightist parties face electoral discrimination as rightist voters will be reluctant to vote for them. Ethnic minority candidates, on the contrary, running for leftist parties will remain to a large degree insulated from electoral discrimination.

In sum, whilst the American literature is quite conclusive in terms of ideological stereotypes, the results concerning (issue) competency stereotypes are less straightforward.

Case selection and hypotheses

Previous research on political ethnic stereotypes has predominantly expatiated on black politicians in the US. The prevalence of stereotypical expectations is, however, influenced by the cultural and institutional context. Consequently, American research results cannot simply be generalized to other geographic regions with other political cultures and systems, including Europe. This study shifts the spotlight to Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

A Flemish case-study is an interesting addition to the current literature for several reasons. To begin with, there are several reasons to assume that multi-party systems, such as Flanders, differ from two-party systems, such as the US, in terms of the sorts of political ethnic stereotypes that prevail and the degree to which they emerge.

First, the American two-party system is characterized by a strong allegiance of ethnic minorities to the Democratic Party (Sigelman et al., 1995). Hence, there is a clear link between ethnic minorities and a liberal/leftist ideology. In multi-party systems, ethnic minorities are more widely spread over parties with diverging ideologies (Celis and Erzeel, 2017; Bird et al., 2011), making the link with a leftist ideology less obvious. Even the conservative rightist regionalist party in Flanders (N-VA) has some prominent ethnic minority people in their ranks including a government member and the first mayor in Flanders with a non-EU ethnic background. Therefore, the stereotypical image that ethnic minorities are leftist could have lost some of its power.

Second, political parties’ issue ownership is more stable in two-party systems compared to multi-party systems (Walgrave et al., 2009). Whereas in the US the Democratic Party is typically perceived as competent in healthcare and the Republican Party as competent in defense (Sagarzazu and Kluver, 2017), such distinctions are more ambiguous in Flanders. Knowing that Flemish ethnic minorities are more widely spread over parties with different ideologies and that parties’ issue ownership ties are weaker compared to the American situation, party-linked competency stereotypes will presumably be less prominently present in Flanders.

In addition, the US is characterized by a distinct arrangement of interracial patterns of social cohesion, which might result in a stronger presence of ethnic stereotypes than in Flanders. Ethnic minorities in the US have been faced with a legacy of historical oppression and troubled interethnic relations (Black and Erickson, 2006). Ethnic segregation in Europe is a more recent and generally softer phenomenon (Iceland, 2014). Europe’s stronger interventionist policies encourage more interethnic contact and hence, lead to less segregation compared to the American *laissez faire* tradition (Iceland, 2014). The specific American context leaves open the question whether ethnic minorities are equally targeted in a stereotypical way in regions where they have been less subject to severe social discrimination, such as Flanders.

However, we still have reason to believe that there will exist some kind of ethnic prejudice and stereotyping among Flemish citizens. Indeed, the fairly high levels of ethnocentrism among the Flemish citizenry (Hooghe et al., 2006) and established ethnic discrimination on the labor market, house market and in schools (Heylen and Van den Broeck, 2016; Derous et al., 2017; Baert et al., 2017; Baert and Vujic, 2016) show that there remain abundant reasons to believe that ethnic stereotypes will also prevail in the Flemish political context.

Our research questions are twofold:

***RQ1. Do Flemish voters adopt ideological and issue competency stereotypes about ethnic minority candidates?***

***RQ2. Are rightist voters in Flanders more likely to adopt ideological and issue stereotypes about ethnic minority candidates than leftist voters?***

As in the US, there are several reasons to assume that *ideological ethnic stereotypes* (RQ1) will prevail in Flanders. Although less outspoken than in the US, ethnic minority candidates remain prominently present in leftist parties (PVDA, Groen and sp.a) (Celis and Wauters, 2013; Swyngedouw and Jacobs, 2006). This linkage between ethnic minorities and a leftist ideological position is reinforced by their on average lower socioeconomic status compared to the ethnic majority (Geldof, 2015; Phalet et al., 2005). Furthermore it is possible that voters will view ethnic minority politicians as competent on what are perceived as leftist issues (e.g., welfare, civil rights) and to hold liberal issue stances (e.g., big government) (Weaver, 2012; Citrin et al., 1990; Lerman and Sadin, 2016; Sigelman et al., 1995).

***H1: Voters perceive Moroccan candidates as more leftist than Flemish candidates***

Concerning *issue competency stereotypes* (RQ1), we are interested in the perceived level of competency on three domains: economy, integration and environment. We predict ethnic minority candidate to score high on ethnic-related issues, such as integration. We believe that voters will perceive minority candidates as competent to deal with integration, since this is a policy issue closely linked to the living experiences of ethnic minorities in general, to their specific group interests, and to stereotypical characteristic traits that are attributed to minorities. In contrast, we expect voters to evaluate minority candidates poorly on economy (McDermott, 1998; Schneider and Bos, 2011; Sigelman et al., 1995; Weaver, 2012). As American scholars have previously stated, ethnic majority voters might not attribute the necessary trait characteristics (being manipulative, disciplined, powerful and leadership-minded) to deal with core policy domains to ethnic minority candidates (Schneider and Bos, 2011; Pager and Karafin, 2009). In addition, due to the generally low socioeconomic status of ethnic minorities (Bird et al., 2011), voters might reason that ethnic minority candidates are primarily focused on enhancing the living circumstances of their social group instead of ameliorating the economic activity of a society as a whole. Whereas existing research is restricted to the two aforementioned categories, we complement our study with what we perceive as an ‘ethnic-neutral’ policy domain, i.e. without a straightforward ethnic connotation, here being the environment (Moskowitz and Stroh, 1994). We expect no significant differences in perceived competency on this issue.

***H2: Voters perceive Moroccan candidates as less competent to deal with economy than Flemish candidates.***

***H3: Voters perceive Moroccan candidates as more competent to deal with integration than Flemish candidates.***

***H4: Voters do not make a distinction between Moroccan and Flemish candidates concerning competency to deal with the environment.***

With the second research question, we complement our work with an explanatory approach by examining how the presence of ethnic stereotypes is mediated by voters’ ideological position.

Its importance for the study of ethnic stereotypes is twofold. First, leftist voters have, on average, more open attitudes towards ethnic minorities compared to rightist voters. Leftist voters tend to attach more value to racial equality and have a weaker tendency for in-group favoritism and expressing negative racial biases. (Extreme-)rightist voters are generally more likely to hold ethnically-based preferences and ethnocentric attitudes (Weaver, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2013; Nosek et al., 2009; Meeusen et al., 2017; Rydgren, 2008). This makes us confident that leftist and rightist voters will have different opinions about ethnic minority candidates as well. Second, voters tend to prefer those candidates of whom they believe to have an ideological position close to their own (Downs, 1957).

Considering our first stereotype, it is known that ethnic minority politicians are more numerous among leftist parties and more frequently hold leftist policy beliefs. As a consequence, the ideological stereotype about ethnic minority candidates is founded in empirical trends that are furthermore easily accessible to both leftist and rightist voters. We can hence presume that both leftist and rightist voters will perceive ethnic minority candidates as more leftist than their majority counterparts.

***H5: Both leftist and rightist voters perceive Moroccan candidates as more leftist than Flemish candidates.***

Departing from the two-folded reasoning described above, we can presume that leftist and rightist voters will translate the same ideological stereotype into diverging issue competency stereotypes. Knowing that leftist voters have generally positive attitudes towards ethnic minorities and that they favor leftist candidates, we presume that they will valuate ethnic minority candidates as fairly competent. In contrast, rightist voters have more averse attitudes towards minorities and prefer rightist candidates. Thus, they are likely to evaluate the leftist-perceived minority candidate as rather incompetent.

***H6: The gap in perceived competency between Flemish and Moroccan candidates is larger among rightist voters than among leftist voters.***

Methodology

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online-based survey experiment among Flemish students who had to evaluate hypothetical Flemish and Moroccan candidates. By using hypothetical candidates, we eliminate the possibility that personal (dis)tastes or attitudes about the contemporary public debate influence their opinion about the candidate. It also offers the opportunity to restrict candidate information and controlling moderating variables, which results in a more internally valid measure of the role of candidates’ ethnicity (Campbell and Cowley, 2014). Conducting the survey online offers an accessible and affordable way of data-collection with limited odds of a social desirability bias, considering the absence of an interviewer. Moreover, an online setting prevents respondents from changing their answers once they realize what the aim of the study is.

We opted for a 3x2x2 mixed research design. The policy domain (economy, integration, environment) formed the within-factor, since each respondent was exposed to three hypothetical candidates, one for each policy issue. The hypothetical candidates varied along ethnicity (Flemish/Moroccan) and gender (male/female), being the between-factors. The cases in our dataset were weighted by candidate gender in order to have equal shares of male/female candidates in each ethnic group.

Each candidate was introduced via a short text message, which contained the name of the candidate and a centrist policy position on one particular domain (economy/integration/environment). A typical Flemish or Moroccan name served as a cue for the candidate’s ethnicity. Not explicitly mentioning the ethnic origin of the candidates enabled us to limit the number of respondents who correctly guessed the aim of the survey (infra).[[4]](#endnote-3) Per issue, the positions are identical for all profiles. The messages were as ideologically centrist as possible and were based on the party programs of five Flemish parties (CD&V, Open VLD, N-VA, sp.a, Groen) and the Flemish government agreement. The order in which the three issues were shown as well as the name assignment of the candidates, was randomized. Since this study is restricted to ethnicity cues, no additional information such as party membership was provided

After each text message, respondents were asked to position the presented candidate on a fully-labelled 7-point Likert scale referring to the perceived ideological position of the candidate, ranging from extreme left to extreme right. A second 7-point scale focused on the perceived issue-related competency of the candidate, ranging from very incompetent to very competent. Additionally, we asked our respondents to position themselves on a 7-point scale, ranging from extreme leftist to extreme rightist.

For this study, we used a sample of Flemish university students enrolled at Ghent University, who completed the survey in the course of 2017. We opted for a student sample as budget constraints did not allow for a representative sample selection and students were easily approachable before or after lectures. Students from both hard and soft sciences were included in our sample.

Using a student sample often leads to skepticism about the generalization of the results (Schneider and Bos, 2011). Since students’ socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes are not representative for the general population, student samples are often regarded as externally invalid. We contest these assumptions and state that a student sample is a relevant case to test the aforementioned hypotheses. For the purposes of this research, the student sample acts as a least-likely case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). First, higher education invokes greater attachment to norms of equality and ethnic tolerance, a decrease of racial prejudice and an increased openness to ethnic diversity (Messing et al., 2016; Wodtke, 2012). Second, a higher level of education is correlated with higher levels of political sophistication (Hillygus, 2005). This, in turn, reduces the liability that respondents will use cognitive shortcuts to appraise a candidate since students dispose of more nuanced information on which to base their evaluation (Coronel and Federmeier, 2016; Marien et al., 2013). Hence, students are voters with a low probability of holding political ethnic stereotypes. Being a critical case, our student sample permits a more stringent test of the hypotheses and therefore allows careful deductions to the general population (Flyvbjerg, 2006). When university students actually do hold political ethnic stereotypes, it is likely that they can be found among lower-educated people as well.

Several respondent categories were excluded from our initial sample (N=367). To begin with, we restricted our analysis to ethnic majority voters[[5]](#endnote-4) and hence, excluded respondents of non-EU origin. Furthermore, we restricted our analysis to automatic processes of stereotype-usage. According to the dual-process logic, stereotypes consist of automatic and controlled processes (Devine, 1989). The former leads to the unconscious use of stereotypes. Consequently, even if recipients are not aware that certain stereotypes are triggered or do not attach any value to them, their reasoning can still be affected by the activated stereotypes. When controlled processes are at stake, people are aware that certain stereotypes are activated. Consequently, they can choose to act in accordance to these stereotypes or to deviate from them (Devine, 1989; Terkildsen, 1993). As we solely wish to measure automatic processes, we asked the respondents at the end of the survey to indicate what they thought to be the research objective and at which point during the survey they reached that conclusion. If respondents answered correctly, we excluded them from the analyses of evaluation of the candidates that were presented after the moment of realization. With measure, we also avoid the inclusion of social desirable answers given by respondents who were aware of the goal of this research. Two additional categories were eliminated to ensure that only respondents who had carefully read the candidate profiles were taken into account. First, ‘speeder respondents’ were omitted from our analysis as they have a higher possibility of giving random answers. Speeder respondents were defined as those who completed the survey in less than half of the average completion time.[[6]](#endnote-5) Second, manipulation checks were included in our survey. After each candidate profile, respondents were asked a simple question about its content, (e.g., ‘what was the name of the candidate?’). Respondents who failed to answer the question correctly were excluded from the corresponding analyses. An overview of the results of the manipulation checks can be found in the appendix. Due to the above measures, the sample size of our respective analyses are slightly diverging.

Results

In what follows, we discuss the results of the conducted ANOVA-tests, complemented by boxplots when clarification was desired. We start with an analysis of the *ideological stereotypes*, according to which Moroccan candidates are perceived as more leftist (H1). The results for all issue profiles in Figure 1 clearly support H1. For the economic profile (p=0.005), Moroccan candidates are positioned 0.4 points more to the left than their Flemish counterparts. For the integration profile (p=0.1), Moroccan candidates are positioned 0.14 points more leftist. Lastly, for the environmental profile (p=0.024), the differences are also significant with a difference of 0.23 points. Looking at the aggregated results of all issue profiles, our hypothesis is confirmed as well (p=0.01): Moroccan candidates are in general perceived as 0.24 points more leftist than Flemish candidates. These results could be an indication that the lower socioeconomic status of ethnic minorities and the fact that (most) prominent ethnic minority politicians belong to leftist parties, indeed create a stereotypical link in voters’ minds.

***Figure 1. Mean scores indicating the perceived ideological position of Flemish and Moroccan candidates on a scale from 1 (extreme leftist) to 7 (extreme rightist)***

*\* p< 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01 (one-tailed)*

*Figure 2* shows that there are only few differences in perceived *issue-related competency* between Flemish and Moroccan candidates. Flemish candidates are perceived to be slightly more competent in issues related to the economy (+0.06, p=0.312), whilst Moroccan candidates are perceived to be slightly more competent in issues related to integration (+0.11, p=0.275). Nonetheless, these differences are not significant. Thus, the hypotheses that Moroccan candidates would be perceived as less competent to deal with economy (H2) and as more competent to deal with integration (H3) receive only very limited support. However, the accompanying boxplots (*Figure 3*) do indicate some important differences in the distribution concerning perceived competency in economic affairs. Whereas the same median can be distinguished for the perceptions about Flemish and Moroccan candidates, the interquartile distance is bigger for Moroccan candidates than for Flemish candidates, which implicates that the lower whisker for Moroccan candidates reaches far below that of Flemish candidates. For Flemish candidates, the lower quartile is equal to 5, whereas for Moroccan candidates, the lower quartile is equal to 4. Consequently, *Figure 3* makes us more reluctant to dismiss H2, as the descriptive statistics show that Flemish candidates are considered as competent by more respondents than Moroccan candidates are. For integration, however, *Figure 3* sketches the same picture as *Figure 2* with only limited differences between Flemish and Moroccan candidates.

More strikingly, the differences in perceived competency concerning environmental issues are significant as shown in *Figure 2.* The figure results in *Figure 3* are however less apparent. Flemish candidates are rated 0.31 points more competent compared to Moroccan candidates (p=0.014). The hypothesis stating that respondents do not make a distinction between Moroccan and Flemish candidates concerning competency to deal with environment (H4) can be rejected.

Hence, our initial assumption that environment can be considered as a policy domain without an ethnic connotation can be renounced. Our results are in line with Moskowitz and Stroh’s (1994) study on electoral racism. They argue that even on “mainstream” issues, such as environmental protection, black politicians are negatively affected by distorted perceptions about their policy preferences. As our general results do not point to direct racism in terms of issue competency, other explanations should account for the significant differences in perceived environmental competency. First, due to their on average low socioeconomic status, post-materialistic values might not be an electoral priority for ethnic minorities (Eelbode, 2013; Jacobs & Teney, 2010). Consequently, voters might expect that the environment does not constitute a priority for ethnic minority candidates and hence, that they are less competent to deal with environmental issues. A second possibility is that voters might associate climate action more with western authorities than with non-western authorities. Hence, politicians (in this case candidates) with a western (here Flemish) name might be considered as more competent to deal with environment than politicians with a non-Western (here Moroccan) name. A last additional explanation could be found in the high level of education of the respondents. The reasons mentioned above are possible explanations why voters in general evaluate Moroccan candidates as less competent to deal with environmental issues. Starting from the premise that the higher-educated attach greater importance to environmental improvement, it is probable that they perceive the gap in competency to be wider between Flemish and Moroccan candidates compared to lower-educated voters.

***Figure 2.* *Mean scores indicating the perceived issue competency of Flemish and Moroccan candidates on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent)***

*\* p< 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01 (one-tailed)*

***Figure 3.* *Boxplots indicating the perceived issue competency of Flemish and Moroccan candidates on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent)***



Next, we shift to the explanatory analyses. The analyses described above demonstrate that in Flemish voters’ minds ideological stereotypes are considerably stronger than issue competency stereotypes. We will now examine whether these trends are mediated by voters’ ideological position. To do so, we recoded the ‘voter ideology’ variable into three categories: leftist voters (1-3), centrist voters (4) and rightist voters (5-7) and omitted the second category from the analyses as centrist voters were not covered by any of the aforementioned hypotheses.

We start with *ideological stereotypes*. *Figure 4* shows that both leftist and rightist voters perceive Moroccan candidates as more leftist than Flemish candidates, with the results being slightly more outspoken for rightist voters. For leftist voters, there are only significant differences for the issue profile about economy, where Moroccan candidates are perceived as 0.55 (p=0.02) points more leftist than their Flemish counterparts. There are no significant differences for the two other profiles, with Moroccan candidates being perceived as +0.03 points more rightist (p=0.45) and -0.06 points more leftist (p=0.33) respectively. The results for rightist candidates were more straightforward. Moroccan candidates were perceived as 0.48 (p=0.02), 0.19 (p=0.18) and 0.35 (p=0.04) points more leftists for all three profiles. We want to emphasize that whilst the differences in ideological position for the integration profile were significant for the entire sample, no significant differences are found when looking at leftist and rightist voters separately. In sum, we can confirm H5 which states that both leftist and rightist respondents evaluate Moroccan candidates as more leftist.

***Figure 4. Mean scores indicating the ideological position of Flemish and Moroccan candidates on a scale from 1 (extreme leftist) to 7 (extreme rightist) as perceived by leftist and rightist respondents***

*\* p< 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01 (one-tailed)*

*Figure 5* shows how leftist and rightist voters perceive the *issue competency* of Flemish and Moroccan candidates.[[7]](#endnote-6) Leftist voters consider Moroccan candidates as *more* competent than Flemish candidates to deal with the economy (+0.3, p=0.07) and integration (+0.23, p=0.125). Whilst the differences in means fail to reach significance for integration, *Figure 6* points to important differences in the degree of dispersion. The median of the orange boxplot is higher than the median of the blue one (6>5), indicating that also on integration, more leftist respondents tend to evaluate Moroccan candidates as being more competent. Contrary to economy- and integration-related competencies, both *Figure 5* and *Figure 6* show that Flemish candidates are perceived as more competent to deal with the environment among leftist voters (+0.54, p=0.008).

Rightist voters are significantly more positive towards Flemish candidates compared to Moroccan candidates concerning economic (+0.51, p=0.02) and environmental (+0.26, p=0.08) competencies, as shown in *Figure 5*. Interestingly, the results for integration-related competency are more ambiguous. Whereas the differences in means are insignificant (-0.02, p=0.47), we do not some considerable differences regarding the distribution of the results. First, the second and third quartile for Flemish candidates are pinpointed at 5. For Moroccan candidates, the second quartile lies at 5 and the third at 6. In other words, 25% of the respondents grant Flemish candidates a score equal or higher to 5, whilst this is 50% for Moroccan candidates. Secondly, when voters evaluate candidates as incompetent, Moroccan candidates are often punished more severely than Flemish voters, as shown by the lower whisker (*Figure 7*). This could be an indication that some rightist voters evaluate Flemish candidates as more competent than Moroccan candidates, with exception of typical ethnic-related domains, such as integration.

Consequently, H6 is partially confirmed as the results show a link between respondents’ ideological position and gaps in perceived competencies between Moroccan and Flemish candidates. In general, these results provide evidence for the use of positive stereotypes by leftist voters, whereas rightist voters tend to make use of negative stereotypes. This interplay between positive and negative stereotypes levels out general issue competency stereotypes, which explains why only minor differences were observed in *Figure 2.*

***Figure 5. Mean scores indicating the issue competency of Flemish and Moroccan candidates on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent) as perceived by leftist and rightist voters***

*\* p< 0.1, \*\*p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01 (one-tailed)*

***Figure 6.* *Boxplots indicating the issue competency of Flemish and Moroccan candidates on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent) as perceived by leftist voters***



***Figure 7.* *Boxplots indicating the issue competency of Flemish and Moroccan candidates on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent) as perceived by rightist voters***



Discussion and conclusion

The political underrepresentation of ethnic minorities constitutes a severe shortcoming of modern democracies (Mansbridge, 1999; Young, 2000). In order to gain more insight in the mechanisms behind this underrepresentation, this article focused on the prevalence of political ethnic stereotypes among Flemish voters. We hypothesized that ethnic minority candidates would be viewed as more leftist, more competent in integration and less competent in economic fields in general, but that these evaluations would be mediated by voters’ ideological position.

Regarding ideological stereotypes, our results show that Flemish voters, irrespective of their own ideological preferences, perceive Moroccan candidates to be more leftist than Flemish candidates. This could be a potential electoral disadvantage for rightist minority candidates. Their main pool of voters constitutes of rightist citizens who prefer candidates with a similar ideological position to their own (Downs, 1957). When rightist voters perceive minority candidates as more leftist than majority candidates, the odds that they will cast their vote for a minority candidate diminishes in favor of the majority candidate. Ethnic minority candidates can proactively react to these stereotypical judgements by adopting an electoral strategy that mobilizes ethnic majority voters (e.g., by more openly adopting rightist positions) without losing ethnic votes (Citrin, Green, & Sears,1990; Claro da Fonseca, 2011). Leftist ethnic minority candidates will be less inclined to suffer from such drawbacks, as their electorate exists of leftist voters.

The results for competency stereotypes are more striking. We only found significant differences in perceived competency to deal with the environment, for which Moroccan candidates scored significantly lower than their Flemish counterparts. The overall small differences in terms of perceived competency can be seen as a positive forecast for the electoral success of minority candidates. Because voters tend to prefer candidates whom they strongly believe to be competent (Goeminne and Swyngedouw, 2007; Manzano and Sanchez, 2010), negative issue competency stereotypes regarding ethnic minority candidates could decrease their electoral success. As in this study Moroccan candidates are perceived as equally competent as Flemish candidates on two out of three policy domains, we have reasons to assume that ethnic minority candidates do not face an extra electoral punishment due to issue competency stereotypes.

Our results also reveal that leftist voters tend to perceive Moroccan candidates more competent than Flemish candidates, whereas rightist voters tend to evaluate them as less competent. These findings complement earlier research on voting behavior which argues that leftist majority voters are more likely to cast a vote for ethnic minority candidates (Jacobs et al., 2013). Their positive bias towards ethnic minority candidates regarding competency provides an additional explanation for this difference in voting behavior next to the importance leftist voters attach to interracial equality. We cannot exclude the possibility, however, that leftist voters evaluate Moroccan candidates as more competent because they perceive them as more leftist and not because they attach more importance to ethnic equality, nor because they are more sensible for the thresholds they have to counter. This can be linked to Downs’s (1957) model of voting behavior, stating that voters are most likely to vote for the candidate whose ideological position is closest to their own. Hence, we can expect that voters are also more likely to perceive candidates with a similar ideological position to their own as more qualified.

The Flemish context diverges from the American context on several aspects. The Flemish list PR-system, multiparty-system and weak ethnic segregation offer a foundation to expect that ethnic stereotypes will be less prominent in Flanders compared to the US. However, belief stereotypes remain outspoken among Flemish voters. We can therefore conclude that the cognitive power of prominent ethnic minority politicians belonging to rightist Flemish parties is not enough to countervail the cognitive image of leftist ethnic minority politicians.

The results concerning issue competency stereotypes are less straightforward compared to the American context. Whereas several American studies (Schneider and Bos, 2011; Sigelman et al., 1995; Weaver, 2012; McDermott, 1998) have proven that white Americans perceive Blacks as more competent to deal with integration-related issues and less competent to deal with economic issues, this study showed no significant differences in Flemish and Moroccan candidates’ perceived degree of competency on economic and integration-related fields. This study thus offers a first confirmation that issue competency stereotypes are indeed less prominent in Flanders than in the US.

Additionally, the peculiar results considering perceived competency in economy and integration may raise questions about the labeling of issue profiles in terms of ethnic connotation. In the beginning of our discourse on competency stereotypes, ethnic issues were defined as issues with a strong positive correlation to ethnic minorities whilst non-ethnic issues were defined as issues with a strong negative correlation. Integration was labelled as an ethnic issue and economy as a non-ethnic issue. The prevalence of typical (non-)ethnic issues was explained by linkages to stereotypical trait characteristics and the unique living experiences of ethnic minorities. Since neither economic or integration-related affairs appear to strongly correlate with Flemish or Moroccan candidates, the strength of this categorization and the accompanying linkages for the Flemish case need to be reconsidered.

On the one hand, the strength of the linkage between traits and issue competency stereotypes might have been overestimated. It is possible that Flemish voters consider ethnic minority candidates as a subtype rather than a subgroup of ethnic minorities in general. Whereas subgroups still share many stereotypical traits with the main group, subtypes disconfirm the general group stereotype to a very large extent (Schneider and Bos, 2011). This would imply that the general ethnic stereotypes (e.g., being compassionate, not hard-working or leadership-minded) will not, or only to a small extent, apply to ethnic minority candidates. Consequently, when voters are confronted with an ethnic minority candidate, no general ethnic characteristic trait stereotypes will become activated.

On the other hand, the influence of living experiences on perceived competency may not be primarily one-sided as our initial reasoning but may be two-sided, resulting in equal scores for minority and majority candidates. To begin with, voters perceive ethnic minority candidates to be equally competent to deal with economy as majority candidates. It is possible that, in voters’ eyes, their unique living experiences and social background do not make them less competent to deal with economy, but simply competent on other economic aspects. Their on average lower economic status and level of education might, for instance, result in unique insights in problems of low-payed jobs and unemployment. In the same way, voters might perceive minority and majority candidates to be equally competent in integration. Voters might perceive minority candidates to have a good insight in integration-related problems, since they have a higher probability of having experienced some form of exclusion. In turn, voters might believe that majority candidates are more aware of the domestic culture and thus are competent in defining what integration should look like.

However, we cannot omit an ethnicity effect for all policy domains since dealing with environmental issues remains strongly perceived as a strength of majority politicians. Future research should tap into the discussion about which issues can be defined as ethnic, non-ethnic or mixed and based on which grounds.

It is important to note that, due to its experimental character, this study did not capture the complexity of real life situations and therefore the importance of ethnicity as a determinant of candidate evaluation might be overestimated. However, as only a very limited number of respondents could guess the goal of this research, we are confident that not too much attention was directed towards this aspect.

Furthermore, considering that the research population was restricted to Flemish students, our research results cannot be generalized to the general population. There are, nonetheless, several reasons why we can argue that political ethnic stereotypes will emerge within the broader population in Flanders and maybe even abroad. First, Flemish students can be considered as a least-likely case. Second, the Flemish political context is less susceptible for the creation of political ethnic stereotypes. Third, also the small sample size and the considerable effect size and significance levels make us confident that our findings will also appear in larger and more diverse groups.

Future research can dig deeper into several aspects that were presented in this paper. To begin with, candidate profiles can be extended with party membership information or more outspoken ideological positions. In addition, future research can investigate whether ethnic minority and majority voters hold different political ethnic stereotypes. Moreover, scholars can examine whether voters perceive male and female minority candidates differently. Finally, research can be conducted on whether candidates from other ethnic minority groups are stereotyped differently compared to Moroccan candidates.

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1. Paper prepared for the Politicologenetmaal, 7-8 June 2018, Leiden, The Netherlands. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sigelman et al. (1995) argued that the relation between candidate ethnicity and perceived competency is mediated by candidate ideology. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. See Weaver (2012) for a more nuanced view. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Only 8 out of 353 respondents correctly guessed the research objective. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. We consider both respondents of Belgian or EU-origin as ethnic majority voters (Geldof, 2015; Togeby, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. The average completion time was 628 seconds. The boundary duration from which a response is considered valid was set at 314 seconds. 10 candidates out of 367 respondents were consequently excluded. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Centrist voters do not make any significant distinction between Flemish and Moroccan candidates. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)