

Voters' evaluation of (contra-)prototypical political candidates. An experimental test of the interaction of candidate gender and policy positions cues in Flanders (Belgium).

Abstract

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

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

1. Introduction

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

One of the most commonly used cues is candidates' gender, which can usually be determined by the candidates' first name. Previous research highlights that voters unconsciously associate candidates' gender with particular capacities and opinions (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993), which are referred to as political gender stereotypes (Dolan, 2014). Numerous experimental studies point to the importance of issue competence stereotypes, according to which female candidates are more likely to be perceived as competent in communal issues, such as education, health care and helping the poor, whereas men would do a better job with agentic issues, such as military spending, foreign trade, agriculture and taxes (e.g.

Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Lawless, 2004; Matland, 1994).¹ These issue competence stereotypes are likely to influence the electoral popularity of candidates, as competence is found to be a central criterion in voters' assessment of election candidates (André, Pilet, & Wauters, 2010).

Most of the studies on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes are set in very conservative experimental settings in which only very limited information about the presented candidates is given. Following the literature on candidate characteristics and voter evaluations, candidate gender can be considered a low-information heuristic, primarily used when other, policy or candidate, information is absent (Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, Trounstein, & Vue, 2018; McDermott, 1997). When other information is presented, different information cues interact with each other and help voters to form coherent impressions about political candidates (Kundra & Sinclair, 1999). Interactions of candidate gender and other voter cues that have been studied before in proportional representation systems are candidate gender and party affiliation (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007), candidate gender and physical appearance (Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2009), and candidate gender and policy positions (Pedersen, Dahlggaard, & Citi, 2019).² The latter demonstrates that when voters are presented information about the policy positions of a candidate, this information does, in some cases, crowd out the effects of candidates' personal background characteristics on voters' perceptions. In these studies, voters' perceptions are mainly operationalized as their evaluation of candidates' general competence or electability. However, previous research fails to provide compelling evidence about whether the inclusion of policy information also affects the prevalence of issue competence stereotyping, the most persistent form of political gender stereotypes, and whether this effect is moderated by the content and the ideological orientation of the presented policy positions.

This paper will fill this gap by focussing on the effect of the provision of information about candidates' outspoken rightist or leftist policy positions on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes. The electoral relevance of candidates' policy positions is fairly obvious. Following Downs' (1957) spatial model of electoral choice, voters prefer the candidate that is closest to the voters' own policy positions. Consequently, when voters are confronted with information regarding the policy positions of a candidate, such information is expected to affect voters' evaluation of the candidate. However, voters are found to make multiple inferences from background characteristics and policy information affects these inferences unevenly (Pedersen et al., 2019). We therefore argue that policy information might not just remove the effects of candidate gender on voters' preferences. Rather, the provision of policy

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

² More recently, Badas and Stauffer (2019) empirically demonstrate that in the United States shared partisanship between candidates and voter is the best predictor of vote choice in partisan elections. In nonpartisan races, however, evidence of gender affinity effects is found.

information might also result in preference reversal, in which otherwise undesirable background characteristics turn into desirable characteristics in the eyes of voters. The latter can be linked to the idea of (contra-)prototypicality, i.e. the extent to which the characteristic traits attributed to political candidates are in line with the traits that one would stereotypically attribute to persons of that particular gender. In terms of policy positions, prototypical female candidates are believed to defend leftist policy positions, while prototypical men are expected to take rightist policy positions. Previous research into the effect of (contra-)prototypicality highlights that, if voters use gender stereotypes to form evaluations of political candidates, the effect of gender on these evaluations will be reversed for contra-prototypical candidates (Bauer, 2017; Lammers et al., 2009). That is, contra-prototypical female candidates (for example female candidates described as tough, assertive and outspoken) are seen as better candidates for agentic issues, while contra-prototypical male candidates (such as male candidates described as caring, compassionate and nurturing) are rated higher for communal issues (Bauer, 2017).

Based on an original survey experiment conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population, this paper explores to what extent the inclusion of information about candidates' outspoken rightist or leftist policy positions influences the presence of issue competence stereotypes in Flanders (Belgium). Flanders combines a highly proportional List PR-system and a stringent quota system. Candidate lists should consist of an equal number of men and women and the top two positions on each list must be occupied by candidates of different sexes. Whereas in 1995, the last election before the introduction of gender quotas, barely 17% of women were elected, this figure rose to 47% in the latest regional elections of 2019 (Author's own). Flanders' political context is found to be more gender-equal compared to majoritarian systems (Krook & Schwindt-Bayer, 2013) and previous research demonstrates that issue competence stereotypes only work in favour of men in male-dominated policy areas (Author's own). This was, however, also tested on the basis of a very conservative experimental design in which only very limited information about the presented candidates was given, unlike in real-world situations. Bauer (2015) and Kunda and Spencer (2003) provide compelling evidence that the prevalence of political gender stereotypes depends on the information environment in which candidates come forward. As this information environment was mainly disregarded in previous research, one needs to remain cautious when drawing conclusions about the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes in Flanders. By focusing on the impact of the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions, this study considers the role of individuating information as a factor that can affect stereotype reliance (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990).

We argue that the provision of information about candidates' policy positions, and the interplay hereof with candidate gender, could result in two different outcomes: 1) following Pedersen et al.'s (2019) study, a scenario in which the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions crowds out the effects of candidates' gender resulting in the total disappearance of issue competence stereotypes,

2) a scenario in which the interplay of the two cues could, based on the idea of (contra-)prototypicality, result in a reinforcing effect of the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes.

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

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section focuses on the origins of issue competence stereotypes and the potential moderating effect of candidates' policy positions, and elaborates on the causal mechanisms behind this effect. In the third section the methodological approach will be charted. This will be followed by a presentation and a thorough discussion of the research results. In the concluding section, it will be argued that studies on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes should take the effects of candidates' policy positions into account in order to come to a better understanding of the impact of candidate gender on voters' evaluations.

2. Issue competence stereotypes

Issue competence stereotypes, i.e. the different expectations among voters about the types of issues handled well by male and female politicians, have proved to be the most consistent form of political gender stereotyping (see for example Dolan, 2014; Matland, 1994). Although there is some variation over time and across different contexts, female candidates are generally more likely to be perceived as competent in communal issues linked to the traditional domain of the family, such as education, health care and helping the poor, whereas men would do a better job with agentic issues, such as military spending, foreign trade, agriculture and taxes.

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

2.1. Origins

Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) argue that issue competence stereotyping has two, quite different, origins. According to the trait approach, voters' assumptions about a candidate gender-linked personality traits drive expectations that women and men have different areas of issue expertise. There are remarkably uniform differences in the personality traits ascribed to men and women. A typical woman is seen as warm, gentle, kind and passive, whereas a typical man is viewed as tough, aggressive and assertive (Alexander & Andersen, 1993). Those stereotypic expectations about male and female political candidates' personality traits feed voters' expectations about their respective areas of issue competence:

female candidates are seen as better at dealing with child or elderly care because women are stereotyped as more compassionate and gentle than men, whereas male candidates are expected to be better at managing security issues because they are typically seen as tougher and more aggressive than women.

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

2.2. The moderating effect of policy positions

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

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

First, it is a common notion in the literature on vote choice and candidate characteristics that the inclusion of policy information can overwhelm and attenuate the effects of personal background characteristics when voters evaluate candidates (Kirkland & Coppock, 2018; Pedersen et al., 2019). Research in the Danish context demonstrates that the self-placement of voters on the left-right scale traditionally is the single best predictor of their party choice (Pedersen et al., 2019). Accordingly, when voters are presented information regarding the policy positions of a candidate, such information is expected to affect voter evaluations of the candidate. There is some empirical evidence to support this assumption: experiments demonstrate that party labels on judicial nominees crowd out the influence of ethnicity and race in the assessment of such nominees (Sen, 2017) and that ideological congruence with the nominee is the most important factor in an individual's decision to support a nominee (Badas &

Stauffer, 2018).³ Furthermore, Kirkland and Coppock (2018) find that information on party affiliation tends to crowd out the influence of candidate experience and Badas and Stauffer (2019) empirically demonstrate that shared partisanship between candidate and voter is the best predictor of vote choice in partisan elections. A recent study in the Norwegian context also confirms that voters care more about the issue positions of candidates than about their social characteristics (Pedersen et al., 2019).

The idea that voters mainly rely on candidates' policy positions also comes forward in Lodge and Taber's (2013) work on motivated political reasoning. Their arguments boil down to the fact that voters mainly look at the content of policy proposals and if they agree with the content, the personal background characteristics of the candidates proposing the policies are of secondary importance. Therefore, we argue that when voters are presented with candidates outlining their specific policy positions, voters will rely heavily on this information and less on the personal background characteristics of the candidates. This leads to the hypothesis that information regarding policy positions crowds out the influence of candidate gender on voters' evaluations and, hence, no distinction will be made between male and female candidates in terms of issue competences (H1).

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

This can be linked to the idea of (contra-)prototypicality, which is a moderator of how a member of a certain gender is perceived. Previous research into the effect of (contra-)prototypicality highlights that, if voters use gender stereotypes to form evaluations of political candidates, the effect of gender on these evaluations will be reversed for contra-prototypical candidates (Bauer, 2017; Lammers et al., 2009). So far, the idea of prototypicality has only been investigated in terms of physical appearance (see Lammers et al., 2009) and characteristic traits (Bauer, 2017). First, the results of Lammers et al.'s (2009) study in the context of the Netherlands illustrate that voters rate contra-prototypical male candidates (i.e. men with feminine facial features) as better candidates for communal issues, while contra-prototypical female (i.e. women with masculine facial features) candidates are rated higher for agentic issues. Second, Bauer (2017) points out that female candidates may receive positive ratings on critical

³ This study, however, also shows that for individuals from underrepresented groups, a shared descriptive identity with the nominee will moderate the negative effect of ideological distance (Badas & Stauffer, 2018).

leadership abilities when they use an trait-based counterstereotype strategy, for example by emphasizing their agentic qualities.

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

First, as women are stereotypically seen as leftist and consequently more competent to manage communal issues, the inclusion of policy information linked to a rightist political outlook inverts the image voters have about female candidates in general. Female candidates proposing rightist policy positions will be considered as contra-prototypical in voters' minds and will therefore be attributed the characteristics and competences of the opposite gender. Hence, female candidates presenting rightist policy positions will be perceived as more competent to handle agentic issues compared to female candidates presenting leftist policy positions (H2a).⁴ The same applies to male candidates presenting leftist policy positions, who will be perceived as more competent to handle communal issues compared to male candidates presenting rightist policy positions (H2b).

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

3. Methodological design

In order to test these hypotheses, an online survey experiment was designed in which hypothetical candidates were presented to respondents in written messages in which their sex, some biographical information and their policy position on a number of issues were included. The party affiliation of the presented candidates was not mentioned in order not to influence the assessment of the presented candidates. Although this limits the external validity of our experiment to a certain extent, the experimental design applied here incentivizes our respondents to make the evaluation of the presented candidates based on the gender and policy position cue, which offers a high level of internal validity (Mutz, 2011). Previous research indeed shows that when both candidate gender and party are known to voters, partisan considerations will ultimately trump gender in the decision making process employed by voters (Badas & Stauffer, 2019; Dolan, 2010). Furthermore, we believe the lack of the partisan cue

⁴ Although engaging in agentic behaviours allows female candidates to overcome certain descriptive stereotypes of lesser competence, we could also find the exact opposite effect as there is research suggesting that voters are more negative towards female candidates if their behaviour is not congruent with the stereotypes voters hold about what women should be like (Forsyth, Heiney, & Wright, 1997; Krupnikov & Bauer, 2014).

is less disturbing as the policy positions taken by the presented candidates have a clear left-wing or right-wing orientation potentially enabling respondents to back out inferences about party affiliation.

Generally, experiments are a useful research tool as they allow to isolate specific causal effects by artificially manipulating the characteristics of a candidate and controlling the experimental environment (Mutz, 2011). The novelty of the specific experimental design applied here lies in the fact that it allows for more of the nuance of real-world elections than usual to enter the experimental environment by presenting candidates with an outspoken policy position in contrast to rather centrist and vague policy positions used in previous experimental studies (see for example Matland, 1994).

Our study used a 2x2x3 mixed complete block design. The candidate's gender (male versus female) and the policy position (outspoken rightist or outspoken rightist) were manipulated as between-group factors. Three different policy issues were manipulated as within-groups factor: one topic that is generally perceived as being communal (child care), one agentic topic (defence) and one gender-neutral topic (climate). This categorization is based on an extensive review of 16 international studies on the assignment of policy issues to men and women by three key actors, i.e. (mass) media, voters and party elites (Author's own)⁵. I also checked whether these findings hold in our Flemish context by exploring literature on portfolio allocations (Krook & O'Brien, 2012) and by looking at the appointment of male and female ministers to these issue domains. For each of the policy issues, a comparison will be made between four experimental groups: a leftist female candidate, a leftist male candidate, a rightist female candidate and a rightist male candidate.

Respondents were randomly assigned to three different treatments. After each text message, respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire about the presented candidate and message, before continuing to the next profile. The order of the issue domains was randomized in order to control for learning or order effects. There was also a random variation of male and female candidates, and of outspoken leftist or rightist candidates. The hypothetical candidates were presented as 'candidate X'. In Dutch, it is possible to indicate the different gender of these candidates ('kandidaat' for the male candidate and 'kandidate' for the female candidate). In all other respects, speeches and questionnaires were identical, in order not to provide any cues to the salience of gender.

The presented stimuli included several elements: a written message, including the candidate's policy position, and a facial silhouette of the hypothetical candidate. The inclusion of facial silhouettes is innovative and is a subtle cue to respondents about the gender of the candidate. While the use of facial

⁵ 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.

silhouettes might raise questions about external validity (Dolan, 2010), it enables us to rule out certain biases. In order to come to a better understanding of the causal mechanism(s) at play, respondents should solely base their evaluation of the presented candidates on the gender and the policy position of the candidates. As physical appearance also impacts on voters' perceptions (Lammers et al., 2009) and names can evoke certain prejudices, we decided not to include pictures or names and opted for a visual presentation of the candidate gender cue by means of facial silhouettes. In addition, we also used gender-linked pronouns in the description of the candidates and in the instructional paragraphs and questions, in order to highlight the gender of the candidates more clearly. The text messages were outspoken rightist or leftist and were based on a mix of the party programs of the Flemish rightist parties (Open VLD, N-VA and Vlaams Belang) and the Flemish leftist parties (sp.a, Groen and PVDA).⁶ An example of the presented profiles and a translation of the different text messages can be found in the Appendix.

Manipulation checks were included to verify whether respondents were able to correctly answer questions about the candidate and the content of the message. All respondents had to answer a question about the sex of the presented candidate after the first treatment. Respondents who were not able to correctly answer this question could not further complete the questionnaire and their answers were not taken into account for the data analysis.⁷ Other manipulation checks were included as well, in order not to over-accentuate the importance of the candidate's gender. This approach worked well, since only 4 respondents were able to correctly guess the intention of our study (see *infra*). In order to control for the possible intervening effect of respondents' characteristics, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the different treatments and comparisons were made between experimental groups. As there were no significant differences on respondents' background variables (age, gender or level of education) across the treatments, we can be confident that the random assignment worked as intended.

The experiment was conducted in February 2020. Respondents were drawn from Bilendi's internet-based access panel, which is the largest online panel in Flanders with about 150,000 potential respondents.⁸ An invitation to participate was sent to 3,891 respondents. 2,723 of them actually received and read⁹ the invitation and 966 agreed to participate. After discarding respondents who could not correctly answer the question about the sex of the first presented candidate (see above), we retained 605

⁶ Pilot tests of the experimental design (among student samples) confirmed that the ideological orientation of the various policy positions was sufficiently clear and interpreted as outspoken leftist or rightist.

⁷ The incorrect answers are more or less equally spread over the different issue domains, and over the different candidates (male-female, outspoken leftist or rightist). The percentage of incorrect answers ranges from 0.80% to 6.00% for all 12 presented profiles. Because of the risk of a selection effect, we made a comparison between the final sample and respondents who could not answer the manipulation check correctly. These groups do not differ substantially on important aspects. There is a small selection bias in that our final sample is slightly younger, but there are no outspoken differences concerning gender and level of education.

⁸ Although it is difficult to determine how well the online panel members represent the general population, we tried to maximize their representativeness. We set several quotas: a hard quota for the gender of the respondents and soft quotas for their age and level of education. In addition, our sample was weighted for gender and age (weighting factors ranging from 0.79 to 1.14).

⁹ The other invitations were apparently sent to invalid or outdated email addresses.

participants, which is a response rate of about 22%. In order to avoid post-treatment biases (Montgomery, Nyhan, & Torres, 2018), no additional categories of respondents were excluded from this sample.¹⁰ A description of the basic characteristics of the respondents can be found in the Appendix (see Table A.1).

The external validity of our experiment is enhanced by conducting the study among a sample of the population, whereas most other studies analyse university students. In doing so, we increase the generalizability of our results. Students are a more homogenous population than the general population and are more likely to have been exposed to women in (prominent) positions in government and parliament. They therefore might be more liberal in their attitudes towards female candidates (Kahn, 1994), which could limit the generalizability of the results.

After each presented candidate profile, respondents were asked to evaluate the presented candidate in terms of perceived issue competence. A question in which respondents had to indicate how applicable a number of characteristic traits were to the presented candidates was also included, in order to test whether the candidates were actually perceived as (contra)-prototypical (also on a fully-labelled 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very inapplicable) to 7 (very applicable)). Three agentic characteristic traits (i.e. ambitious, hard and stronger leader) were included, as well as three communal characteristic traits (i.e. caring, sensitive and soft) (Alexander & Andersen, 1993). An analysis of the responses to this question shows that female candidates who proclaim right-wing policy positions are perceived to be statistically significantly more ambitious, harder and a stronger leader, and statistically significantly less caring, sensitive and soft compared to female candidates who proclaim leftist policy issues. The same holds for male candidates. More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (see Table A.2). This clearly demonstrates that our respondents attribute contra-prototypical characteristic traits to male candidates presenting outspoken leftist policy positions and female candidates presenting outspoken rightist policy positions. Whether this also has an effect on respondents' perceptions of the issue competences of the presented candidates is the central focus of the analyses presented in the next section.

4. Results

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

¹⁰ To test the robustness of our results, separate analyses (available upon request) were performed for those respondents (4) that could find out the purpose of the research and so-called 'speeder-respondents' (51) who completed the survey faster than half the median completion time. However, the results of these analyses are in line with the results for the full sample, which adds to the robustness of our findings. Therefore, no additional respondents were excluded.

4.1. Descriptive analysis

Before proceeding to our main analyses, it is important to note that across the board, the respondents do not make a distinction between male and female candidates. On the aggregated level, the baseline effect of gender is not statistically significant.¹¹ Our central analysis therefore focuses on whether statistically significant effects can be found when the policy positions of the candidates are taken into account and across the different policy issues. For the first part of the analysis, we are interested in whether statistically significant differences in terms of perceived issue competence of male and female rightist and leftist candidates could be discerned. This was measured by a question asking respondents to indicate how competent the presented candidate would be to manage the issue domains at hand (defence, child care and climate). Responses were on fully-labelled 7-point scales ranging from 1 (very incompetent) tot 7 (very competent).

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

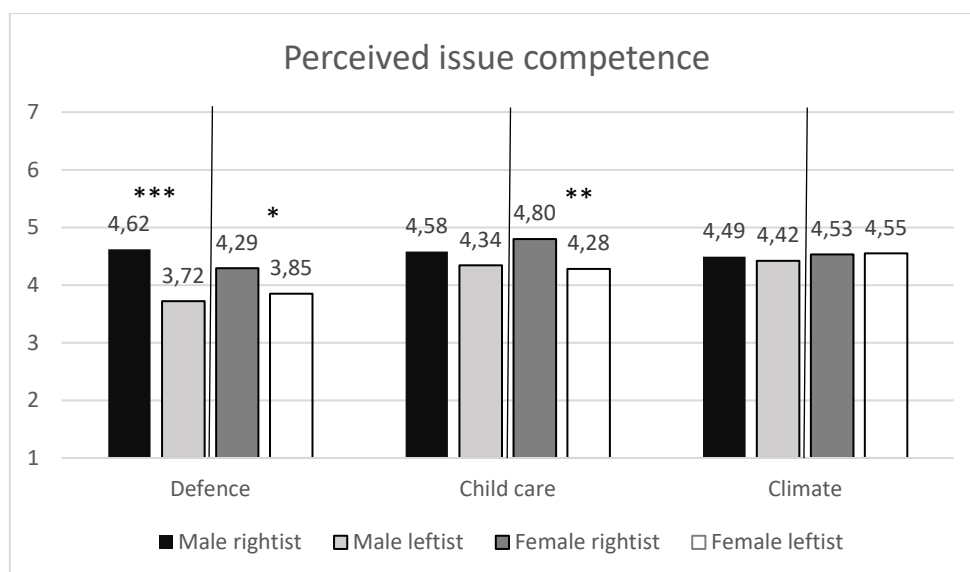
Table 1: One-way ANOVA: Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Issue Competence for Defence, Child Care and Climate

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

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

¹¹ More detailed results can be found in the Appendix (see Figure A.1).

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



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

On a general level, our results show that respondents prefer candidates, both male and female, presenting rightist policy positions for the different policy issues. This may come as no surprise as in recent years we have been witnessing a trend in which (far-)right parties, such as the N-VA and Vlaams Belang, are clearly on the rise in Flanders.¹² Furthermore, the results in Table A.6 in the Appendix demonstrate that there are no statistically significant differences between male and female candidates proclaiming the same policy positions. This could be seen as a first indication that respondents attach more importance to the policy positions taken by the candidate than to the gender of the candidate, which is line with our first hypothesis (H1).

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

¹² In the most recent elections for the Flemish regional parliament in 2019 Vlaams Belang and N-VA together obtained 43.3% of the votes.

policy positions are perceived to be statistically significantly more competent to handle defence issues than male candidates presenting leftist policy positions ($p=.005$). This seems to indicate that respondents base their evaluation of the presented candidates primarily on the policy position proposed by the candidates rather than on their gender.

When it comes to child care, female candidates presenting rightist policy positions are perceived to be statistically significantly more competent compared to female candidates proclaiming leftist policy positions ($p=.003$). This implies that for communal issues too, respondents prefer contra-prototypical female candidates, which goes against our hypothesis 2b. The argument that female candidates might face negative reactions by voters if their behaviour does not align with the prescriptive aspect of female gender stereotypes (i.e. what women should be; in particular that women ought to be communal) (Forsyth et al., 1997; Rudman & Glick, 2001), does not seem to hold in this case. The fact that our respondents generally have a preference for right-wing parties results in a better evaluation of (female) candidates holding rightist policy positions as well. This could again be seen as an indication that voters are rather guided by the policy positions of the candidates than by their gender.

For male candidates, no statistically significant differences could be uncovered. However, we note that also for this policy issue, leftist male candidates are estimated to be statistically significantly less competent than female candidates presenting rightist policy positions ($p=.009$). In line with the previously mentioned results of the ANOVA, there are no statistically significant differences between the different candidate profiles for climate.

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

4.2. Explanatory analysis

A number of regression analyses with the candidates' perceived issue competence for defence and child care as the main dependent variable were conducted.¹³ As the central focus of the analyses presented below concerns which factor is decisive in voters' evaluation of the presented candidates, the baseline model (Model I) only includes a dummy-variable for candidate's gender (female versus male). In Model II a dummy-variable for the candidate's policy position (leftist versus rightist) is added. Model III offers a more stringent test by including several control variables.

¹³ For this part of the analysis, we will only present models for defence and child care, as no statistically significant effects could be discerned for climate issues in the bivariate analyses. The interested reader can find the regression models for climate in the Appendix (see Table A.7).

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

We also included a number of other control variables. First, we controlled for the extent to which the respondents agreed with the presented policy statements. This is built on Lodge and Taber's (2013) work on motivated political reasoning and their central argument that when individuals agree with a policy or candidate, they tend to give it positive evaluations without any further critical engagement. Level of agreement was measured on fully-labeled 7-points scale ranging from 1 (very much disagreeing) to 7 (very much agreeing). Second, a control variable was included for the ideological position of the respondents. Ideological positioning was measured by self-placement on a 7-points left-right scale ranging from very rightist (1) to very leftist (7). The regression coefficients are presented in Table 2.

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

	Defence			Child care		
	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model I	Model II	Model III
Female candidate (versus male candidate)	-.131 (.115)	-.094 (.112)	-.054 (.077)	.090 (.108)	.090 (.109)	.112 (.107)
Leftist candidate (versus rightist candidate)		-.677*** (.112)	-.470*** (.077)		.006 (.109)	.013 (.108)
Control variables						
Higher educated (versus lower educated)			-.004 (.088)			-.040 (.123)
Low level of political interest (versus high level of political interest)			-.219 ** (.109)			.119 (.151)
Female respondent (versus male respondent)			.171** (.082)			.264 ** (.114)
Age			-.002 (.003)			.002 (.004)
Ideological position respondent (from very leftist to very rightist)			-.022 (.028)			-.151*** (.039)

Agreement			.618*** (.025)			.084** (.034)
Constant	4.181***	4.513***	2.077***	4.447***	4.444***	4.528***
Adjusted R ²	.001	.058	.556	.001	.001	.041
F	(1,580) = 1.303	(2, 579) = 18.995	(9,569) = 77.095	(1,581) = 0.688	(2,580) = =0.345	(8,571) = 4.056
N	581	581	577	582	582	579

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

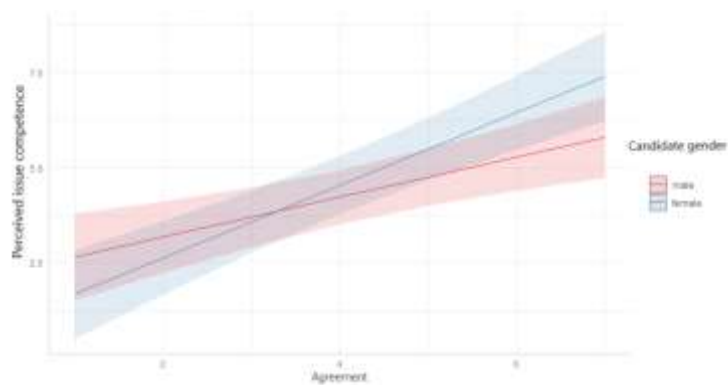
When it comes to the main effects, we see that candidate gender does not add significantly to the models. This indicates that respondents are not negatively biased towards female candidates and estimate male and female candidates' issue competences more or less equally. The presented candidates' ideological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

The most important predictor of the candidates' perceived issue competence is the extent to which respondents agree with the policy positions they presented ($p=.000$). The more respondents agree with the policy positions taken by the candidates for a particular issue, the more competent they believe the candidate is to manage this issue, which can be considered as a confirmation of hypothesis 1 stating that information regarding policy positions crowds out the influence of candidate gender.

Furthermore, previous research has shown that the personal background characteristics of candidates may matter more when voters disagree with the policy positions voiced by the candidates (Lodge & Taber, 2013). Motivated gender stereotype theory (Kundra & Sinclair, 1999) argues that individuals will only use feminine stereotypes to negatively judge female candidates when they perceive a conflict or disagreement with that particular woman. We therefore also tested whether the effect of level agreement is similar for female candidates compared to male candidates by running linear regression models with the interaction between candidate's gender and level of agreement included (see Table A.8 in the Appendix).

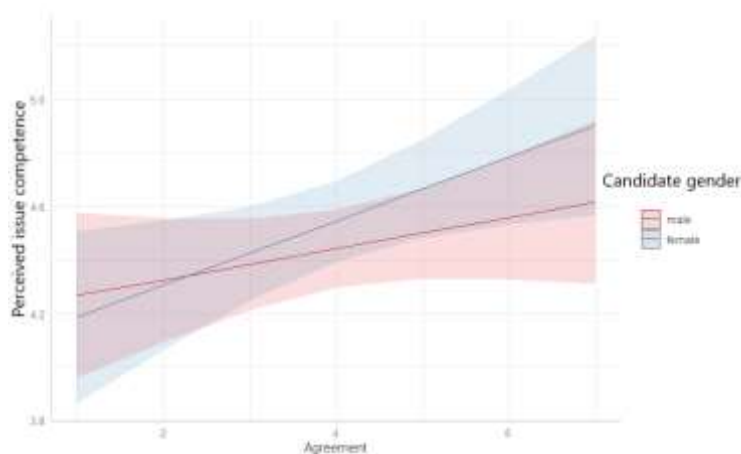
However, interpreting the results based on regression coefficients alone is not straightforward. Therefore, predicted values were computed (see plots in Figures 2 and 3). The plots show that when respondents only limitedly agree with the policy position of the candidates, the difference in perceived issue competence of male and female candidates is small. At higher levels of agreement, this difference becomes larger and women have an advantage over men. Nonetheless, as the confidence intervals overlap in both plots, the effects cannot be considered statistically significant. These results go against Lodge and Taber's (2013) argument that when individuals disagree with a policy, they will engage in rationalization processes of why they dislike the policy. Female candidates are not 'punished' more if they present policy positions that are not in line with those of the respondents.

Figure 2: Predicted values perceived issue competence Defence



Note: All covariates were held at the mean

Figure 3: Predicted values perceived issue competence Childcare



Note: All covariates were held at the mean

5. Conclusion

This paper presents an experimental test of the impact of the inclusion of information about candidates' outspoken rightist or leftist policy positions on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes. This relates to the idea that candidate gender is a low-information heuristic, primarily used when other policy or candidate information is absent (Crowder-Meyer et al., 2018; McDermott, 1997). Building on social psychological models of impression information, the inclusion of information regarding the policy position of a candidate is expected to affect voters' evaluation of the candidate (Rahn et al., 1990). However, as voters are found to make multiple inferences from background characteristics and policy information affects these inferences unevenly (Pedersen et al., 2019), it is not clear whether this would be beneficial or disadvantageous for female candidates and how this impacts on the prevalence of issue competence stereotypes.

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

Our results also show that it is not so much the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions in itself, but rather the extent to which respondents agree with the content of the presented policy positions that shapes respondents' perceptions about the presented candidates' issue competence. When respondents agree with the policy position, they tend to accept it and give the candidate proposing the policy positions a positive evaluation. Interestingly, the mere presence of candidates' policy positions does not seem to be sufficient to completely overrule the effect of candidate gender as suggested by previous work. Its content, and the extent to which this corresponds to respondents' opinions, is rather decisive in this regard.

Furthermore, and in line with the previous finding, our results show that in some cases, the inclusion of information about female candidates' policy positions is beneficial for voters' evaluation of their issue competences. Although previous research pointed out that defence is the most typical masculine policy issue (Holman, Merolla, & Zechmeister, 2016; Lawless, 2004), female candidates presenting rightist policy positions are considered to be statistically more competent to handle defence issues compared to female candidates presenting leftist policy positions, as well as to male candidates presenting leftist policy positions. This links to Huddy and Terkildsen's (1993) early findings that female candidates can successfully reverse gender-trait stereotypes by portraying themselves as possessing typical masculine traits (i.e. in this particular case by holding outspoken rightist policy positions) and, hence, be considered as contra-prototypical candidates (Lammers et al., 2009). Although previous research points to the risk that women who do so, will experience a backlash effect (Krupnikov & Bauer, 2014) because they violate the prescriptive aspect of female gender stereotypes (in particular that women ought to be communal) (Rudman & Glick, 2001), this does not seem to apply here. In that sense, a potential fruitful strategy for female candidates might be to convey voters that they possess both typical communal and agentic personality traits. In doing so, female candidates continue to gain credit on communal issues and benefit further from the possession of typical masculine traits on agentic issues such as defence and economics.

Our results have a number of implications. First, our results point out that voters heavily rely on the information about the candidates' policy position in their evaluations of political candidates. When candidates are presented with policy information, no patterns of issue competence stereotyping can be observed. The results of previous studies on the prevalence of political gender stereotypes should

therefore be interpreted with caution as they may provide us with inaccurate conclusions on how voters respond to candidate gender if they do not take the effects of policy information or other information cues into account. Our findings also speak to the importance of information availability and information reliance in elections. Previous research emphasizes that we live in a society with significant information inequalities since many voters are not well informed about candidates' opinions and beliefs (Fowler & Margolis, 2014). The present study illustrates that these information imbalances potentially have important electoral consequences for women's representation as the availability of information about candidates' policy positions is found to trump the effect of the candidate gender cue. Uninformed voters who rely more heavily on the candidate gender cue and gender stereotyping patterns may make voting mistakes because they are unaware of female candidates' policy positions and fail to see how their policy preferences align with those of female candidates.

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

Third, it is often argued that the prevalence of political gender stereotypes is found to be dependent on the information environment (Bauer, 2015; Kunda & Spencer, 2003) in which candidates come forward. This information environment typically contains additional information on personal characteristics of candidates and on contextual elements. Our results show that the inclusion of information about candidates' policy positions does not result in the activation of political gender stereotypes. Further research would be needed in order to test whether this is also the case in other, less gender-neutral, contexts and whether we should find the same effects for all voters. It is reasonable to argue that for example older and rightist voters might hold more traditional views about what women and men are competent to do. Future research could also examine to what extent other elements of the information environment, more specifically contextual elements such as the number of women in politics and the major focus of the government's policy agenda, affect the activation of political gender stereotypes. This will enable us to get a clearer picture of the factors that help explain the underrepresentation of women in politics.

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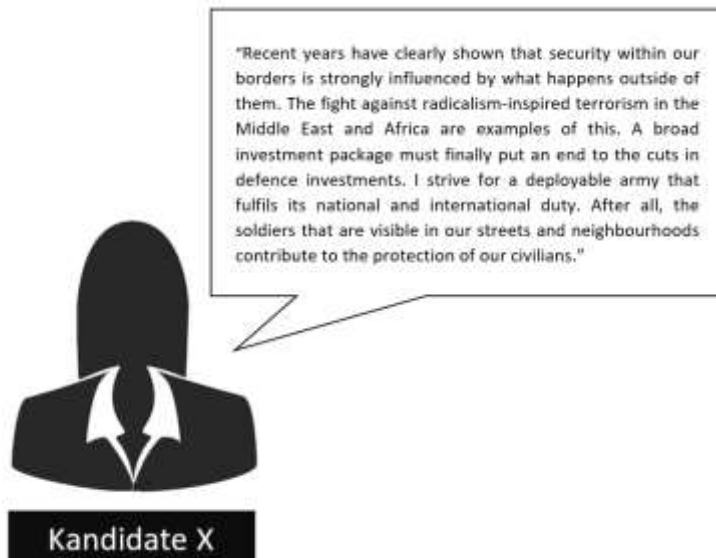
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Appendix

Example of the presented candidate profiles and written messages



Child care – leftist position

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

Child care – rightist position

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

Climate – leftist position

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

Climate – rightist position

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table A.7: Linear regression models predicting the perceived issue competence of the presented candidates for climate

	Climate		
	Model I	Model II	Model III
Female candidate (versus male candidate)	-.059 (.118)	-.057 (.118)	-.040 (.118)
Leftist candidate (versus rightist candidate)		-.041 (.118)	-.032 (.119)
Control variables			
Higher educated (versus lower educated)			-.004 (.135)
Low level of political interest (versus high level of political interest)			-.099 (.166)
Female respondent (versus male respondent)			.350** (.126)
Age			.006 (.004)
Ideological position respondent (from very leftist to very rightist)			-.015 (.043)
Agreement			.054 (.038)
Constant	4.531***	4.552***	3.983***
Adjusted R ²	.001	.003	.007
F	(1,584) = 0.256	(2, 583) = 0.189	(8, 573) = 1.513
N	585	585	581

Table A.8: Linear regression model with interaction term predicting the perceived issue competence of the presented candidates for defence and child care

	Perceived issue competence defence	Perceived issue competence child care
Female candidate (versus male candidate)	-.646** (.207)	-.082 (.291)
Leftist candidate (versus rightist candidate)	-.480*** (.077)	.010 (.108)
Higher educated (versus lower educated)	-.006 (.087)	-.040 (.123)
Low level of political interest (versus high level of political interest)	-.217** (.108)	.119 (.151)
Female respondent (versus male respondent)	.164** (.082)	.261** (.114)
Age	-.002 (.003)	.002 (.688)

Ideological position respondent (from very leftist to very rightist)	-.022 (.028)	-.151*** (.039)
Agreement	.549*** (.033)	.062 (.046)
Interaction agreement x candidate gender	.149** (.048)	.048 (.068)
Constant	2.362***	4.622***
Adjusted R ²	.569	.055
F	(9, 568) = 83.373	(9, 570) = 3.659
N	577	579

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

Figure A.1: Mean scores indicating the perceived general competence of male and female candidates on a scale from 1 (very incompetent) to 7 (very competent).

