

# HOW ABOUT THE FEMALE VOICE

## EVALUATING THE REPRESENTATION OF FLEMISH MINISTERS IN NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

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### **Abstract**

The representation of female politicians has been the subject of numerous studies within feminist media research. They almost unanimously report a numerical underrepresentation of female representatives and more emphasis on their appearance, age, and family life. This generates two primary effects that are detrimental to a modern democratic society. First and foremost, underrepresentation harms the evaluation of officeholders and candidates and, by extension, their chances of election victory or the preservation of their elected office (Goodyear-Grant, 2013). Second, the absence of role models in political roles makes it more likely for adolescents to stay alienated from seeking political office. The result will be 'a continuation of political underrepresentation for the foreseeable future' (Goodyear-Grant, 2013). Although there are many recent studies on the subject, most of them focus solely on the representation of women candidates in an electoral context (Lühiste & Banducci, 2016; D'Heer, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2021). This paper wants to address these shortcomings by conducting an in-depth quantitative content analysis of 4,298 individual mentions in 3,528 articles from five different Flemish newspapers about nine ministers during three distinct periods of the legislative cycle. We find that the numerical underrepresentation of women is less evident than in previous research. In terms of substantive media representation, female politicians' private lives, age, and personality traits are not referred to more often than those of their male colleagues. However, we do notice a strong focus on women's gender throughout the entire political cycle and their physical appearance during the election period.

**Keywords:** Content analysis, newspaper coverage, gender bias, Flanders, representation, women, politics

## Introduction

In Western societies, including Belgium, we can witness a trend toward a better descriptive representation of women in politics (Childs and Krook, 2009; Hooghe, Jacobs, and Claes, 2015). However, that does not mean that the fight for equal representation in Belgian politics is over. Politicians exist in a mediatized political environment where the media are citizens' primary source of information. Therefore, any systematic gender bias in media coverage is likely to contribute to the underrepresentation of women politicians (Aaldering and Van Der Pas, 2018).

In the past, women have often addressed inequalities in news reporting. Their experiences are mentioned frequently in academic literature. Research within feminist media studies has shown how female politicians are less visible in the news compared to their male counterparts (Hooghe, Jacobs and Claes, 2015; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). In addition, articles refer more often to women's family life, gender, personality, age, and appearance (Banwart, Bystrom and Robertson, 2003; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019).

News in which women are underrepresented or covered stereotypically generates two primary effects that are detrimental to a modern democratic society. First and foremost, both numerical and substantive underrepresentation in the media harms the evaluation of officeholders and candidates and, by extension, their chances of election victory or the preservation of their elected office (Goodyear-Grant, 2013). Second, the more female politicians are represented in media coverage, the more likely young people are to become politically active as they engage with political topics to a higher degree. The mere presence of role models in political roles makes it more likely for adolescents to 'pay attention to and discuss politics' with their peers (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). If they stay alienated from seeking political office because of media and gender bias, the result will be 'a continuation of political underrepresentation for the foreseeable future' (Goodyear-Grant, 2013).

These findings confirm that research about the representation of female politicians is of great societal importance. Although there are many recent studies, most of them focus solely on the media representation of candidates in an electoral context (Lühiste and Banducci, 2016; D'Heer, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2021). Research on the media representation during other stages of the political cycle or elite politicians is lacking. Nevertheless, studying all political periods instead of focusing on campaigns is crucial as 'voter's perceptions of politicians are largely based on media coverage during times of routine politics' (Aaldering and Van Der Pas, 2018). Many voters have already decided who will receive their vote long before the start of the election campaign (Jennings and Wlezien, 2016).

In addition, most studies focus exclusively on electoral candidates. Nevertheless, this is a highly heterogeneous body. This heterogeneity can influence the results of previous studies. According to Galtung and Ruge (1965), the more power a politician has, the more relevant and newsworthy he or she is. This power is, generally, determined by the position of a politician. Ministers, party leaders, and heads of government all belong to this powerful political elite and, as a result, receive more attention.

An election list consists of politicians with and without this elite position. Therefore, it is necessary to control for the political power effect.

This paper wants to address both shortcomings by conducting an in-depth quantitative content analysis of 4,298 individual mentions in 3,528 articles from five different Flemish newspapers. These articles were collected during three distinct periods: the election period of 2019, the formation of a new Flemish government, and several months during the regular political year of 2021. All articles focus on the nine ministers of the current Flemish Government to control for the political power effect.

The central objective of this study is to examine the situation regarding the numerical and substantive media representation of Flemish female politicians in comparison to their male colleagues. We want to (1) check whether journalists mention women as much as their male counterparts, (2) whether they represent female politicians in a more gender-stereotyped way, and (3) whether there are differences in representation depending on the specific period of the election cycle.

We find that the numerical underrepresentation of women is less evident than in previous research. In terms of substantive media representation, female politicians' private lives, age, and personality traits are not referred to more often than those of their male colleagues. However, we do notice a strong focus on women's gender throughout the entire political cycle and their physical appearance during the election period.

## **Influence of the Fourth Power**

### **Power of the Media**

'People today are the most media-saturated and media-engaged human beings in history,' which makes news one of the most influential sources of information and opinions, especially amongst the newer generations (Wood, 2011). Most people do not experience politics directly, and as a result, their perceptions of this specific world are largely carved by the mass media and the images they create (Kahn, 1994). Consequently, it is important how people, ideas, and events are portrayed. Who is left out and what is not covered are equally influential when we construct opinions. A 'realistic and varied' gender representation concerning politics is, therefore, of the utmost importance (D'Heer, Vergotte De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2019).

News media play an increasingly significant role in modern politics as there is an ongoing trend towards the 'mediatization' of the domain. It used to be the case that the media were 'subordinate' to the political sphere. Today, media have a much broader influence over the issues on which they write, who should represent a party/idea in the media, and how political events, actors, and processes are potentially 'framed' (Aalberg and Strömbäck, 2011).

The focus has shifted from parties to politicians, and it is individuals who appear in the news. Modern media play a crucial role in connecting citizens to political actors (Vos, 2014). It is, thus, essential for political actors to be noticeable in the media. British Members of Parliament, for example, have observed that voters do not believe MP's work for the constituency's common interest unless they have a high-profile media presence (Ross and Sreberny, 2000). This suggests that what matters most is not reality per se, but the 'social constructions of reality shaped by media coverage' (Nimmo and Combs, 1983).

Although coverage of individual politicians has increased, it remains, until this very day, a 'highly selective' procedure (Vos, 2014). Every day, significant events take place, and news organizations do not have the time and resources to cover all these affairs in the same depth (Kahn, 1994). Politicians must vie for the attention of editors, journalists, and readers in an already immensely competitive news environment (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999).

Nowadays, both the political sphere and the media sphere are 'intertwined' and have to depend on each other to survive (Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). Modern media need stories, and politicians need publicity, making them highly dependent on one another. Therefore, the 'construction' of political news has become a 'co-production' between journalists and political actors instead of a one-way street (Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006).

### **(Adverse) Effects of Underrepresentation in the Media**

Gendered news can generate two effects. First and foremost, both numerical and substantive media underrepresentation of women can harm the evaluation of female officeholders and candidates and, by extension, their chances of election victory or the preservation of their elected office (Wauters, Weekers, and Maddens, 2010; Goodyear-Grant, 2013). Edie Goldenberg and Michael Traugott (1987) showed, for example, how the more often a politician makes headlines, the greater the voters' ability to recognise him or her. If female candidates receive more attention in the media, voters may have an easier time sympathizing with these nominees or thinking of them when they have to choose during elections. This 'hypothesised advantage in recognition' may be a crucial resource for female candidates since voters will rarely support a contender they do not recognise (Goldenberg and Traugott, 1984).

After recognition has been achieved, a candidate still needs to be positively evaluated if he or she wants to get (re-)elected. If the modern media differentiate between how they report on male and female politicians, these differences may influence voters' judgment of candidates (Kahn, 1994). It has already been shown, for example, that the substantive focus on gender, appearance, and marital status in press articles can be detrimental to female politicians as they could support already existing gender stereotypes among voters (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, and Robertson, 2004; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). Such representations may seem harmless. However, they are anything but. By emphasizing such aspects, women are placed within the private or domestic sphere. This may lead to the outdated idea that

women do not belong in the public or political sphere and cause fewer votes for female politicians (D'Heer, 2018).

Press coverage of female politicians is often biased and stereotypical. Nonetheless, the primary consequence of this is not what most people would think: 'that should a woman run, the press would make it less likely for her to win. The most important consequence is that press coverage makes women less likely to run' (Falk, 2010).

As reported by Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant (2013), gendered news coverage creates an 'important socialization effect' on the future generation of citizens as it may 'implicitly discourage' young women from contemplating the possibility of a political career when they grow up. It creates a shortage of women on the supply side and guarantees an underrepresentation in political offices for years to come. The main reason for this phenomenon is how media, as seen in the previous paragraphs, are 'highly instrumental in shaping public perceptions' (Hooghe, Jacobs and Claes, 2015). A lack of media attention for women in the political field fuels the idea that the democratic system is not 'open for everyone' (Hooghe, Jacobs and Claes, 2015).

The more female politicians are made visible through media coverage, the more likely young women are to show their intention to become politically active as they become more engaged with political topics. Even the simple presence of female role models in political roles makes adolescent girls more likely to 'pay attention to and discuss politics' with their peers (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006).

It leads girls to have more confidence and interest in political institutions. As 'fellow women' are involved in politics, teenage girls have the feeling that political institutions are more 'responsive to their concerns' (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001) and, therefore, 'worthy of their trust' (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). Consequently, the likelihood of girls engaging in conversations about politics will increase sufficiently. By contributing to the daily political discussions, they get more familiar and at ease with politics and political ideas, which leads to more anticipated political involvement (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006).

### **Possible Explanations for Media Underrepresentation**

The lasting interest of academics to analyse the nature of political communication and representation continues to evoke active discussions about who is responsible for 'the moveable feast of the news agenda' – journalists, editors, or politicians (Ross and Comrie, 2012). Several explanations are provided when looking at previous literature, two of which we will discuss in more depth throughout this paper.

## **Journalist Bias**

Researchers within feminist media studies mainly hold the dominance of men on the news production side responsible for the inequality in representation. A male-dominated editorial would supposedly lead to a male-dominated newspaper (D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). This proposition contains the idea that male journalists report differently than their female colleagues, including about women and specifically female politicians.

When David Hugh Weaver and Cleveland Wilhoit (1996) analysed journalists' self-selected samples of their 'best work,' they found that female journalists cited, on average, more female sources than did their male colleagues. The same results can be found in a content analysis of three southern USA newspapers (Zoch and Turk, 1998).

If we look at research from the past decades, we see that James Devitt (2002) also noticed a correlation between the reporting of male journalists and the stereotypical representation of female politicians, something that was not found among female reporters. This is because journalists tend to quote or select sources that are most like themselves (Zoch and Turk, 1998). He concluded that female journalists place the same emphasis on personal elements among male and female politicians. Male reporters, on the other hand, focus more on the personal lives of women (Devitt, 2002).

Some authors argue that because of their gender socialization, female reporters use a different value pattern, leading to greater diversity in their choice of topics and news sources. In this case, we speak of a gender model, in which women are socialised differently in the editorial staff and, therefore, use different working methods (Rodgers and Thorson, 2003).

In recent years, the number of female journalists has risen steadily in many western countries. In some, they even reached a 'critical mass' (Byerly, 2013; Franks, 2013). However, this does not necessarily mean that the work environment is changing as well. This has to do with several structural obstacles (D'Heer, Vergotte, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2019). Vertical gender segregation, for example, makes it more difficult for women to establish a management position where they can introduce change regarding the news agenda (Krijnen and Van Bauwel, 2015). Horizontal segregation, on the other hand, ensures that male journalists are more often responsible for hard news topics such as politics, while their female colleagues write about subjects such as health and social issues (GMMP, 2015).

However, other researchers are not convinced of the gender model but assume a job model instead. Men and women would not use any other news values because they have the same organizational experience. Both are socialised within the newsroom and equally adopt existing value patterns (Rodgers and Thorson, 2003). Male and female journalists mainly use the same selection criteria. Therefore, more female reporters would contribute little to the number of female news sources (Vos, 2012).

The second argument put forward to contradict the gender model are the organizational factors of the newsroom (van Zoonen, 1998). According to Liesbet van Zoonen (1998), team efforts play a much more important role than individual endeavours. It is 'systemic constraints and other influential factors' that shape news items, 'beyond the worldview of the people directly involved' (Dimmick and Coit, 1982).

Other studies indicate that gender does influence the news but in the opposite direction. Kim Fridkin Kahn and Edie Goldenberg (1991), for example, found an uneven representation of female politicians, with female journalists more often using stereotypical female characteristics to describe female candidates than their male colleagues.

### **Political Bias and Characteristics of the Politician**

It is also possible that the supply side explains the underrepresentation of female politicians in the news. Politicians want to be featured, but not all are equally successful.

Whether someone is mentioned in the media often depends on his or her news value, which can be influenced by different personal and political characteristics of a politician. If this is the case, female media underrepresentation is simply a consequence of a certain political bias and the media do not shape the political agenda, but merely reflect it (Wauters, Weekers, and Maddens, 2010).

When journalists select their stories, the power of a politician plays an important role. In Flanders, this power is largely determined by the political party to which a politician belongs. Here, too, gender bias can raise its head. In the original work of Galtung and Ruge (1965), a person's power determines how relevant he or she is. The more power a certain politician has, the more influence his or her actions have, and, therefore, the more relevant he or she is (Schoenbach, De Ridder, and Lauf, 2001). This power is generally determined by a politician's position. Political leaders commit concrete actions and often possess exclusive information, which makes them newsworthy sources (Midtbø, 2011). Ministers, party leaders, and heads of government belong to this powerful political elite and are therefore receiving more attention. In this paper, we partially control for this factor by only looking at the media representation of female and male ministers. Thus, all nine politicians have already acquired a certain position of power in the Flemish political landscape.

Another political characteristic associated with a politician's power and relevance is their experience in politics, also known as seniority. Politicians who have been in the business for some time increase their news value in two ways. First, they have better contacts with journalists and better understand the media logic that determines news selection (Van Aelst, Sehata, and Van Dalen, 2010). Secondly, journalists attach more importance to experienced politicians because those politicians can leave a bigger mark on policy and are, therefore, seen as more important than their newer colleagues (Tresch, 2009). Research shows that established politicians do indeed get

more media exposure but, according to Midtbø (2011), this attention often turns out to be more negative and critical than articles about less experienced politicians.

## **Women's Representation in the Media**

### **Numerical Representation**

Kahn (1994) was one of the first to analyse gender bias and concluded that women receive less coverage than their male contenders. More recent studies validate her verdict.

A study on television news, for instance, leading up to the 1997 British general election, discovered how women accounted for only 5% of national politicians appearing in the traditional media. Even though women, at the time, were responsible for 9% of the members of British Parliament (Gallagher, 2001). The same pattern is visible in a study on the media coverage of the 1999 South African elections. In this African country, 9% of news sources were female. If we compare this with only 1% during the 1994 elections, it seems to be an immense improvement. However, given the high percentage of women who hold political office in the country, the result remains meager (Gallagher, 2001).

Nonetheless, the intention to repeat the results does not always present the same outcomes (Smith, 1997; Aday and Devitt, 2001; Gidengil and Everitt, 2003; Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008; Atkeson and Krebs, 2008). On the contrary, studies on the representation of female politicians in the United States of America show several inconsistencies (D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). Kevin B. Smith (1997), for example, discovered how female candidates received more attention than their male opponents during the 1994 governor elections. It is the opposite of what Kahn (1994) mentioned when discussing the 1988 governor elections. Smith (1997) attributes his findings to a so-called 'novelty effect.'. As the election of governors has always been strongly male-dominated, the considerable presence of women was seen as something new and, thus, more newsworthy. This 'novelty effect' has also been cited in other studies as a possible reason for a (temporarily) better representation of female politicians in the media (Bystrom, 2006; Atkeson and Krebs, 2008).

An important nuance, however, is that these studies are all conducted within the USA. Conflicting results seem limited to the election of governors. Therefore, generalizations to all elections within US territory or the representation of female politicians in other countries would be unjustified (Meeks, 2012; GMMP, 2015; Lühiste and Banducci, 2016; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019).

Mixed findings are not surprising considering the number of studies on the topic, each with a different focus, methodology, and context. Several studies have shown that it is important to consider both the subject (the politician) and the context of coverage (the news medium or country) when discussing female media underrepresentation (Vos, 2014; D'Heer, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2021). For Flanders specifically, no equal representation of male and female politicians



has yet been found. Wauters et al. (2010) showed how, all things being equal, a male candidate will be mentioned in 7,46 more newspaper articles than female candidates. Flemish studies, however, focus mainly on election news (D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019; D'Heer, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2021).

Furthermore, despite the increasing equal numerical representation some studies detect, they always emphasise the fact that the representation is not equal in terms of content and, more specifically, stereotypical depictions (D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019).

### **Substantive Representation**

Although some discussion occurs regarding the quantity of news coverage female politicians receive, most researchers are in unison that the kind of coverage they do obtain differs from that of their male counterparts (Vos, 2013). This pattern is even noticeable in countries with a strong tradition of equal representation in political offices such as Norway (Skjeie, 1994), Sweden (Börjesson, 1995), and Finland (Gallagher, 2001).

As a result, many studies have been conducted within feminist media studies into the substantive media representation of women (Mendes and Carter, 2008; Vos, 2013; Vos, 2014; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019; Van der Pas and Aaldering, 2020; D'Heer, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2021).

In the case of female politicians, journalists tend to highlight the personal more than for male politicians by focussing on women's marital status, appearance, attire, lifestyle, and whether they have children or not. In contrast, when writing about men, the media focus more on the professional such as their positions on certain issues, their accomplishments, and featuring their overall experience (Aday and Devitt, 2001).

One of the primary findings is the disproportionate attention to the **private lives** of female politicians by mentioning, for example, their children and marital status (Walsh, 2001; Adcock, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen and Ye, 2015; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). This unconsciously refers to the predated distinction in which women belonged to the private sphere, while men entered the public sphere. It implies the idea that women do not 'belong' in politics as it is an integral part of the public sphere in our contemporary society (Wahl- Jorgensen and Ye, 2015; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019).

While certain types of media seem to stress the family relationships of both male and female politicians, they are not always presented similarly. Liesbet van Zoonen (2002), for instance, discovered how the Dutch gossip press showed the families of male politicians as 'a source of support,' while it was portrayed as a 'source of conflict' for women in pursuit of a political career (Gallagher, 2001). Other studies confirm these findings. While the father role of male politicians is shown in a positive light, references to the mother role often emphasise the split responsibility between the public and the private sphere. Journalists often wonder how female politicians will combine their careers with their family life, a way of reporting that minimises their credibility

(Muir, 2005). The father role of male representatives, on the other hand, serves their agenda, as it illustrates their reliability and empathy (van Zoonen, 1998).

Another way to highlight the difference between the private life of male and female politicians is, in the case of women, by focussing on certain characteristics that are considered necessary for the role of mother or wife such as warmth, compassion, honesty, kindness, care, and softness (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Wahl-Jorgensen and Ye, 2015; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019).

Some of these **personality traits** are equally attributed to men and women in media reports (Schneider and Bos, 2013). Yet, male politicians seem to benefit more often from these features than their female counterparts. As a result, male politicians take advantage of both female and male gender stereotypes, such as competence, assertiveness, and self-confidence. This is in large contrast to female politicians who cannot enjoy female gender stereotypes and are rejected when showing signs of typical male personality traits (Banwart, 2010). In this context, reference is regularly made to the 'double bind' women experience (Jamieson, 1995; Carlin and Wingrey, 2009; Banwart, 2010; Curnalia and Mermer, 2014; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). People link femininity to incompetence, while competence is seen as a non-feminine trait (Jamieson, 1995). Thus, a female politician who wants to be successful must have stereotypically masculine characteristics, but not to such a degree that her personality deviates too much from the classic expectations of femininity (Banwart, 2010; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). Women must, therefore, walk a thin line if they are not to be subject to disapproving news reports.

Not only family life and personality traits receive more attention. Liesbet van Zoonen (1998) notes that **gender** itself is also receiving more attention in current news reporting. Female politicians are still given the prefix 'woman' or are mentioned as 'leading lady,' which marks them out as 'different to the traditional (male) politician' (Ross and Comrie, 2012). This, too, is considered a consequence of the personalization of politicians and is confirmed, among other things, in the tendency of news reports to emphasise the gender of female politicians as something special (Ross and Comrie, 2012).

In addition to a greater focus on family life, marital status, gender, personality traits, and feminine issues, female politicians are also confronted with a larger spotlight on their **appearance** (Devitt, 1999; Aday and Devitt, 2001; Devitt, 2002; Baird, 2004; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). This was strongly reflected in the coverage of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton during the 2008 presidential campaign (Carlin and Winfrey, 2009). Palin was 'sexy' and a 'past beauty contestant' while Clinton's suits were described as 'not feminine enough' (D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019).

### **Election Time: An Exceptional Period?**

The research on political news and media representation has traditionally concentrated on election campaign periods. This narrow focus is a direct outcome of the first scholars' interest in the potential

impact of the news media on voters (Van Aelst and De Swert, 2009). In the following decades, election campaigns, and the media's role in them, has become a strong research domain in Western countries (Semetko, 1996). As these studies are widely cited, the question of generalization comes to mind. Can we put an election campaign on par with other political periods? Or, can we consider it as an irregular episode in the way the media view political actors and issues? If election periods are different in the way reporters represent politics and politicians, this can have a critical consequence on the generalization of campaign studies as they give us necessary, but only partial information on how politicians are represented in the (written) news (Van Aelst and De Swert, 2019).

According to Van Aelst and De Swert (2009), campaign periods do, indeed, greatly influence the amount, style, and actors of the political news in the case of Belgium. During an election, journalists work under different conditions and are confronted with politicians (and parties) that are more active than ever. Aaldering and Van der Pas (2020) explain how there is a distinct focus on the norms of fair and balanced reporting. The same is also apparent from previous studies on television news in Flanders. At the time of the elections in 2003 and 2006, there were considerably more female politicians in the news. This effect disappeared in the post-election formation period (Van Aelst and De Swert, 2009).

Secondly, studying all political periods instead of focusing on campaigns is crucial, as voters' perceptions of politicians are often based on media coverage during times of routine politics. Many citizens have already decided whom to vote for long before an election campaign (Jennings and Wlezien, 2016; Aaldering and Van der Pas, 2020).

## **Data and Methodology**

According to our literature research, we can distinguish two gendered patterns in the (written) news. Women are often underrepresented, and if they are present in the media, they are mostly described stereotypically.

This study aims to contribute to the existing research by examining whether this is also the case in the Flemish press. More specifically, concerning the ministers of the Flemish Government. Does the gender bias disappear when female politicians have achieved a certain status or higher position? And can we notice a disparity in female media representation between different periods of the political cycle? This can be translated into three concrete research questions:

- (1) Do we notice a gender bias in the Flemish written media?
- (2) Is there a difference in gender bias depending on the period of the legislative cycle?
- (3) Can the gender of a journalist or a political bias explain the (non-)existence of a gender bias?

Following previous research on the topic, we will use in-depth quantitative content analysis to answer these three questions (Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Kahn, 1992; van Zoonen, 1998, D'Heer,

Vergotte, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven; D'Heer, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2021). We used a registration form and a codebook. The registration form was created using the trial-and-error method. The codebook, on the other hand, explains the operationalization of the concepts from our registration form. This assures uniformity in the way our articles are coded and makes sure that external analysts can replicate the research (Hansen, 2009). Both were drawn up based on insights from our literature research and supplemented with variables that proved interesting during our data collection.

Aside from the numerical representation, we examine references to the private sphere of men and women, their gender, appearance, and the personality traits of politicians (van Zoonen, 1998; Aday and Devitt, 2001; Adcock, 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen and Ye, 2015; D'Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). In addition to these variables, based on previous research, we added two other variables to expand the existing research field. In addition to the number of mentions for the numerical representation, we will also look at the number of references in the title. The title is, in fact, the most striking aspect of an article. The more often a politician's name appears in the headline, the more visibility he or she will have. The substantive media representation is supplemented by the variable 'age' as this is often associated with a woman's appearance.

We based our content analysis on the five most important Dutch-language newspapers in Flanders: *De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *De Tijd*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *Het Nieuwsblad*. Together, these newspapers reach over 5,339,600 readers per day. By including a mix of newspapers in terms of type and media house, we try to facilitate the principle of objectivity as much as possible.

The media content is studied for a period of nine months in total: the election period (26/02/2019 – 26/05/2019), after the formation of a new coalition (01/10/2019 – 31/12/2019), and three months during a regular political year (15/08/2021 – 15/11/2021). 3,528 articles were collected. Several of those mentioned multiple politicians. This brings us to a total of 4,298 individual cases. It is these individual entries that we use as our unit of analysis throughout the paper. Of the 4,298 cases collected, 906 came from *De Morgen*, 753 from *De Tijd*, 994 from *De Standaard*, 656 from *Het Nieuwsblad*, and 989 from *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Although the focus of this research is mainly on female politicians, the articles on male representatives have also been recorded and coded. This is necessary to draw meaningful conclusions about women in politics, but it can reveal possible stereotypes in the representation of male politicians as well. Articles from regional newspapers and supplements were not included in the dataset.

One of the advantages of this study is that the data set contains every article written on the male and female politicians of the Flemish government during the nine months examined. We find it necessary to involve all articles to make sure we can form a broad and complete picture of news reporting in the chosen time frame. Subsequently, no problems should arise concerning legitimacy and representativeness. This research has, therefore, a solid foundation in terms of objectivity and validity (Van Thiel, 2015).

The quantitative data is put into an Excel spreadsheet and analysed by using the statistical program SPSS Statistics 28. We use frequency tables for the descriptive analysis. For all other analyses,

we opt for a Chi-squared test with a recommended reliability level of 95%. This is in line with previous research, which helps us to compare our results to other relevant studies.

To increase the reliability of the process, which only used one coder, we opt for an extra measurement. Five percent of the articles ( $n = 177$ ), chosen at random, was reregistered and recoded one month after the initial registration. The Kappa values of each variable were then calculated via SPSS.

## Results

### Numerical Representation

Of the 4,298 specific mentions, 2,533 concern male politicians (58,9%) and 1,765 relate to women (41,1%). However, if we compare these numbers with the gender division within the Flemish government, the underrepresentation does not persist. The Flemish government consists of six men (66%) and three women (33%). If we take this as a measure of how often women should appear in the media, there is no deficit at the cost of female representatives. On the contrary, when we look at the average number of mentions per person, we can clearly see an overrepresentation of women. This overrepresentation is mainly visible during the election period and the regular political year. We notice an equal representation just after the formation of a new Flemish government.

Table 1: Individual Mentions

	<i><b>Election</b></i>	<i><b>Coalition</b></i>	<i><b>Regular</b></i>	<i><b>Total</b></i>
<i><b>Male</b></i>	476	1,133	924	<b>2,533</b>
<i><b>Female</b></i>	457	558	750	<b>1,765</b>
<i><b>Total</b></i>	<b>933</b>	<b>1,691</b>	<b>1,674</b>	<b>4,298</b>

Table 2: Individual Mentions – Average per Person

	<i><b>Election</b></i>	<i><b>Coalition</b></i>	<i><b>Regular</b></i>	<i><b>Total</b></i>
<i><b>Male</b></i>	79,3	188,8	154	<b>422,7</b>
<i><b>Female</b></i>	152,3	186	250	<b>588,3</b>
<i><b>Total</b></i>	<b>103,7</b>	<b>187,9</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>477,5</b>

There are many references to Zuhail Demir during the regular political year. This can be linked to her role as Minister for Environment. Due to the 3M scandal and the holding of the Glasgow Climate Change Conference (COP26), she featured remarkably more frequently in the media ( $n = 410$ ) during the last weeks of October and early November. A similar remark can be made about the nomination of

Hilde Crevits as the figurehead of the CD&V campaign during the elections. Her media presence declined remarkably in the following months. Both cases could (partly) explain the overrepresentation of women during the election period and the regular political year.

However, this is not enough to solidify the hypothesis that female politicians are less likely to be covered in the media than their male counterparts. Therefore, contradicting the literature, this study does not report a numerical media underrepresentation of female representatives (Niven, 2005; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson, 2005; Semetko and Boomgaarden, 2007; Adcock, 2010; Vos, 2013; Vos, 2014; D’Heer and Van Leuven, 2019; Van der Pas and Aaldering, 2020; D’Heer, De Vuyst, and Van Leuven, 2021).

The most noticeable part of a newspaper article is the title. Anyone browsing a newspaper will hardly be able to overlook this part. That is why we pay attention to how often a particular politician is mentioned in the headline of an article. We see a clear difference between female and male politicians during two specific periods. After the coalition formation, female politicians are mentioned 34 times in the title of a newspaper article. Male ministers are referred to in 115 titles. Despite that, we can observe the opposite during the regular political year with 73 female title mentions relative to 61 male mentions. The large amount of male title referrals after the coalition formation could be the effect of Jan Jambon’s designation as Minister-President of Flanders. The discrepancy in title mentions during the regular political year can again be explained by the Demir effect.

If we look at the total of articles, there is no statistically significant effect. With these findings, we cannot cement the presence of an unequal numerical media representation for female politicians. Therefore, we must reject the hypothesis that female ministers are less visible in the Flemish written press than their male counterparts.

Table 3: Mentioned in the Title

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>P-value</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	25	31	0.325
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	115	34	0.006**
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	61	73	0.019*
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>201</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>0.889</b>

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

Table 4: Mentioned in the Title – Average per Person

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	4,2	10,3
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	19,2	11,3
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	10,1	24,3
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>33,5</b>	<b>46</b>

### Substantive Representation

Any reference to the marital status, (grand)children and work-family balance is interpreted as an indication of the **private sphere**. If this occurs more often in the case of female politicians, this subconsciously refers to the old-fashioned distinction in which women belong to the private sphere and men to the public sphere. It implies the idea that women do not ‘belong’ in politics as it is an integral part of the public realm (Wahl-Jorgensen and Ye, 2015; D’Heer and Van Leuven, 2019).

Table 5: Private Sphere

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>P-value</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	10	9	0.887
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	16	8	0.972
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	4	5	0.515
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>30</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>0.855</b>

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

Table 6: Private Sphere – Average per Person

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	1,7	3
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	2,7	2,6
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	0,7	1,6
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7,3</b>

Such a reference is found in 52 cases. 22 of these refer to the private life of a female politician and 30 to that of a male representative. The private lives of male politicians are mentioned more often. However, the difference is only minor and can be explained by the press attention for the resignation of Benjamin Dalle’s wife, Maïté Piessen, as a newscaster at Radio 1.

This contradicts the existing literature as no statistically significant differences based on gender were noted (van Zoonen, 1998; Wahl-Jorgensen and Ye, 2015; D’Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). This remains true when looking at the average number of entries per person. The hypothesis ‘the private sphere is mentioned more often in articles about female politicians than those about male politicians’ is therefore rejected.

Remarkably, we do find evidence that women’s private lives are more often cited as a ‘source of conflict,’ while men’s family life is more commonly viewed as a ‘source of support’ (Gallagher, 2001). The children of Matthias Diependaele and Benjamin Dalle are usually mentioned as an extra motivational factor. Hilde Crevits, on the other hand, is asked several times about how she combines her life as a mother with her political life. One journalist, for example, points out that the marriage of her son coincided with the landing phase of the new Flemish Government while he emphasises the waving daughter of Matthias Diependaele when he took the oath as minister. Both Benjamin Dalle and Hilde Crevits, however, indicate that their family always comes first and that they do not experience the shared responsibility between the public and private sphere as something difficult.

The explicit mention of a politician’s **gender** includes words such as ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ References to male and female politicians via mergers with these words are also included in our analysis. Such referrals were found in 73 items. The vast majority of references to both male and female ministers are based on compositions such as ‘leading lady’ in the case of Hilde Crevits or ‘green lady’ concerning Zuhal Demir. Jan Jambon, on the other hand, is often addressed as ‘statesman’ and ‘action man’ while Benjamin Dalle is praised as the ‘coming man’ and a ‘poster boy.’ Such references evoke associations with the American press and, according to Joke D’Heer and Sarah Van Leuven (2019), result in more popularizing and trivializing reporting.

*Table 7: Focus on Gender*

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>P-value</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	4	42	0.000***
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	2	15	0.000***
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	1	9	0.004***
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>7</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>0.000***</b>

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001



Table 8: Focus on Gender – Average per Person

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	0,7	14
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	0,3	5
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	0,17	3
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>1,17</b>	<b>22</b>

According to our previous literature research, female legislators are often given the prefix ‘woman’ to mark them out as ‘different to the traditional (male) politician’ (Ross and Comrie, 2012). Something similar happens in the Flemish press when journalists focus on the possible appointment of Hilde Crevits as Minister-President of Flanders. She would have been the very first female Minister-President in the history of the Government of Flanders<sup>1</sup>. This is discussed at length in articles published before the election. It provides an explanation for the higher number of gender-focused articles during the election period compared to the coalition formation and the regular political year. Nevertheless, we can note a large statistically significant difference across all three periods. The hypothesis ‘the gender of female politicians is mentioned more often in the media’ is thus accepted.

Table 9: Focus on Appearance

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>P-value</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	6	15	0.037*
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	5	5	0.251
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	0	1	0.267
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>11</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>0.005**</b>

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

Table 10: Focus on Appearance – Average per Person

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	1	5
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	0,8	1,7
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	0	0,3
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>1,8</b>	<b>7</b>

<sup>1</sup> Liesbeth Homans was Minister-President of Flanders between July 2019 and October 2019. The Homans Government was however only an intermediate government in attendance of a new Flemish Government and was replaced in October 2019 by the Jambon Government.

In 32 instances, media referred to **external features**. This includes a politician's clothing, make-up, facial features, and hairstyle. A politician's origin and physical attitude were not included in the dataset. 21 of those references were about the appearance of a female politician, while 11 of them are related to the image of a male representative.

Benjamin Dalle is described multiple times as CD&V's new 'poster boy' for his 'good looks' and journalists refer to Jan Jambon's 'literal and figurative big shoes to fill.' However, it is the appearance of both Hilde Crevits and Zuhal Demir that cannot escape reviews. Journalists talk about Crevits her 'beautiful eyes,' but also the dark circles around them. A few reporters comment on her 'Hillary Clinton-coupe.' The pink jacket she wore during the election period was talk of the town and seen as a strong wardrobe statement. It was mentioned multiple times during campaign coverage. When talking about Zuhal Demir's appearance, the focus is mainly on her stiletto heels and short-skirted appearance. In addition, she is described several times as a 'babe' and a 'handsome' or 'beautiful' woman.

A statistically significant difference is noted. This is largely because of articles published during the election period. No statistically significant differences were observed for the coalition formation and the regular political year. We can, however, accept the hypothesis that the appearance of women is emphasised more often than the looks of their male counterparts in modern media.

Table 11: Focus on Age

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>P-value</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	3	4	0.665
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	17	6	0.478
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	0	0	– <sup>2</sup>
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>0.388</b>

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

Table 12: Focus on Age – Average per Person

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	1	1,33
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	2,8	2
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	0	0
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>3,3</b>	<b>3,3</b>

<sup>2</sup> No statistics are computed because the variable age is a constant.

Conclusions can also be drawn about the references to politicians' **age**, which often also indirectly says something about their appearance. Apart from the numerical indication of age, this study also examined implicit references such as 'young' and 'old.' Of the 4,298 cases, 30 refer to the age of the subject. Of these, 20 are related to male politicians and 10 to female ministers.

More than half of those references were about Benjamin Dalle's age. However, at 39, he is only 3 years younger than Matthias Diependaele and only 2 years younger than Zuhail Demir. Journalists talk about his 'fresh face' and describe him as a 'young talent' or someone who 'brings rejuvenation to the government.' One explanation we can give for this is his relative obscurity and status as a political novice. Indeed, most of these comments were made after the formation of the new coalition and his new appointment as Flemish Minister for Brussels, Media, and Youth. Despite being head of his party's political research department since 2016, this minister post is the first political mandate he has taken on. The focus on his age lapsed during the regular political years.

No statistically significant difference was noted between men or women. The hypothesis that the age of female politicians is emphasised more often than the age of their male colleagues is therefore rejected.

Table 13: Focus on Personality Traits

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>P-value</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	25	28	0.564
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	32	7	0.043*
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	10	14	0.179
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>67</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>0.794</b>

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

Table 14: Focus on Personality Traits – Average per Person

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<b><i>Election</i></b>	4,7	9,3
<b><i>Coalition</i></b>	5,3	2,3
<b><i>Regular</i></b>	1,7	4,7
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>11,2</b>	<b>16,3</b>

In 116 cases, there is a reference made to the **personality** of a politician. 67 of these concern articles about male politicians. In 49 cases do journalists refer to a personality trait of a female minister. According to our analysis, the difference in representation is only statistically significant during the coalition period with 32 cases for male politicians against 7 mentions for female representatives.

Literature states that ‘female’ characteristics, such as compassion and fairness, are equally common among male and female politicians. Yet, male representatives seem to benefit more often from these attributes than their female colleagues. As a result, male politicians take advantage of both ‘female’ and ‘male’ gender stereotypes such as competence, assertiveness, and self-confidence (Schneider and Bos, 2013). These ‘male’ personality traits are rarely attributed to women. If this does happen, these politicians are often perceived negatively by the media and their readers (Banwart, 2010).

In the articles analysed, typical ‘feminine’ traits are indeed attributed to both female and male politicians. Jan Jambon, for instance, is seen as ‘hardworking,’ but ‘vulnerable,’ and Bart Somers is praised for his ‘ability to compromise.’

Yet, female politicians are mainly fitted with stereotypical traits, and male representatives are linked to typically male personality traits. Hilde Crevits, Zuhal Demir, and Lydia Peeters, for example, are described as ‘human,’ ‘sweet,’ ‘cautious,’ ‘compassionate,’ and ‘caring,’ while male politicians have a ‘strong personality’ and show signs of ‘leadership’ and ‘managerialism.’ In addition, men are also considered ‘ambitious,’ ‘articulate,’ ‘intelligent,’ and ‘competent’ (Rosenwasser and Dean, 1989; Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Kahn, 1994; Huddy and Capelos, 2002). Most of the stereotypical ‘masculine’ characteristics and the stereotypical ‘feminine’ features are regarded as positive or neutral. None of the personality traits receive a clear negative connotation.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study monitored female and male candidates’ numerical and substantive media representation in the Flemish written press during three distinct periods. In general, the underrepresentation of female politicians is less evident than in previous research. Of the 4,298 specific mentions, 2,533 concern male politicians (58,9%) and 1,765 relate to women (41,1%). There is only a small difference between periods. Nevertheless, the Flemish government consists of six men and three women. If we take the average mentions per person as a measure of how often women should appear in the media, there is no deficit at the cost of female representatives. On the contrary, when we look at the average number of mentions per person, we can clearly see an overrepresentation of women.

When we look at the substantive media representation of female politicians, we see that their private lives, age, and personality traits are not referred to more often. These results hold up when we look at the average per politician. However, we do notice a strong focus on their gender. Such references are dangerous as they result in more trivializing reporting and can evoke stereotypes in the reader (D’Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). We also found a statistically significant difference in the focus on female external features during the election period.

Researchers within media studies mainly hold the dominance of men on the news production side responsible for the inequality in representation (D’Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). Several studies found a correlation between the reporting of male journalists and the stereotypical representation of

female politicians (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Zoch and Turk, 1998; Devitt, 2002). Nevertheless, not everyone is convinced of the gender model (Van Zoonen, 1998; Rodgers and Thorson, 2003; Vos, 2014).

In our case, there is a clear gender difference between the authors. Of the 4,298 mentions coded, 56,6% were written by a male journalist, while only 16,4% were written by a woman. About 2,2% were written by a mixed-gender editorial team, 24,8% had no known author. However, we see no statistically significant difference when we look at whom an author writes about ( $p = 0.811$ ). Male journalists write about both men and women and vice versa. Nor do we see any indications that the gender of an author affects stereotypical reporting.

A second explanation might be found in the characteristics of the politician him- or herself. Party leaders, Vice Minister-Presidents, and heads of government belong to a powerful political elite and are therefore receiving more attention. This is also evident from our results. 879 (20,5%) articles were written about the Flemish Minister-President, Jan Jambon. This gives him a good lead over the three Vice Minister-Presidents as 712 (16,6%) articles were written about Hilde Crevits, 373 (8,7%) about Ben Weyts, and only 318 (7,4%) about Bart Somers. Wouter Beke, who was party leader of CD&V until 08/10/2019, has 623 (14,5%) articles written about him. One of the biggest standouts is Zuhal Demir with 708 articles (16,5%). Due to the 3M scandal and the holding of the Glasgow Climate Change Conference, she featured remarkably more frequently in the media during the last weeks of October and early November. Benjamin Dalle's low number of references ( $n = 148$ ; 3,4%) is mainly due to the domains for which he is responsible. The Flemish minister of Brussels, Youth, and Media rarely receives much media attention.

Another political characteristic associated with a politician's power and relevance is their experience in politics, also known as seniority. Politicians who have been in the business for some time increase their news value through better contacts with journalists and a better understanding of the media logic that determines news selection (Van Aelst, Sehata, and Van Dalen, 2010). Looking at our data, there seems to be some truth to this statement. Yet, it does not apply in the case of Minister Peeters. Despite her extensive political experience of almost 20 years, only 344 articles (8%) were written about her.

This study contributes to the literature by expanding insights on politicians' gendered representations in Flanders, and by highlighting the importance of taking into account both the political characteristics of the candidate and the context of coverage, such as author and period. It provides several indications that gendered political coverage is declining (at least in the case of women in elite positions). This is reassuring because of the negative impact unequal representation has on the electoral prospects of female politicians, their credibility, and the political interest of young girls and women. We cannot detect major differences between periods. The more equal representation takes place both during the election period and other periods of the political cycle.

However, the study is not without its limitations. Extensive longitudinal research is needed to make a generalizable conclusion. Here it is also best to focus on several media channels instead

of just the written press. Such extensive research has not yet been done on the underrepresentation of female politicians in the Flemish press. It is also possible that other characteristics of politicians, which we did not test, contribute to a possible gender bias in the media. This study focused on the political and social backgrounds of politicians. Nonetheless, their perceived competence and efforts can increase their newsworthiness and visibility as well. To investigate this effect, we must shift attention to what politicians do instead of who they are (Midtbø, 2011).

From previous literature research, we know that many journalists are not aware of the way they construct frames. What we know even less about is how readers ‘deconstruct’ those frames (Zoch and Turk, 1998). An interesting angle to explore is, therefore, how readers speak about female politicians during online discussions that arise in the comment section of online articles on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. We can look at how the underrepresentation of female politicians manifests itself in different cultures and how we can link them to national media portrayals (Humprecht and Esser, 2017). This form of media is more topical than ever since political parties and individual politicians have never devoted more time to their social media presence. A second interesting line of research that we can link to this fact is how female politicians will present themselves on social media. Current European research focuses mainly on women as passive actors. This perspective puts female politicians in the market as active participants in the political world.

Finally, we should consider the dominant use of quantitative content analysis in studies on the representation of female politicians. Although quantitative analyses provide the necessary basis for determining whether an unequal media representation is present, the obtained results have rarely been discussed in greater depth (D’Heer and Van Leuven, 2019). Supplementing quantitative research with, for example, interviews or experiments can help us to better understand the problem. We can gain a better understanding of the attitudes of politicians towards the media and how they may differ between male and female (potential) representatives.

In short, the media underrepresentation of certain politicians is a broad research domain with countless possibilities that we should further investigate and keep exploring.

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