# *Think female leader, think…? An examination of the stereotypes of male and female politicians*

L. Aaldering, University of Vienna

D.J. van der Pas, University of Amsterdam

**Abstract:**

What do people think male and female politicians are stereotypically like? This study tests whether 'regular' gender stereotypes are applied in our thinking about political actors, or whether we rely on different, more specific gender stereotypes for political actors. Regular, everyday gender stereotypes might be detrimental to women's political opportunities, as they link women to non-agentic traits. This study examines gendered political stereotypes in three ways: 1) asking respondents to list the traits they believe are widely associated with a specific social group; 2) asking which traits they *themselves* associate with a particular group; and 3) asking the same as 2 but in an innovative application of a list-experiment which allows respondents to mask socially undesirable answers.

**Gender stereotypes in the political context:**

Women are almost universally underrepresented in politics. Although the norm of gender equality has been widely supported in Western societies for decades, this has not yet translated into gender-equal politics: while there has been a wide range of female governors, legislators, (prime-)ministers and party leaders, a large majority of the higher offices and governing positions are still filled by men. Conventional wisdom as well as scholarly theories often point to gender stereotypes as the underlying cause of this phenomenon (e.g., Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Kahn, 1994). Stereotypes imply that identical characteristics are assigned to all members of a group, irrespective of the differences in characteristics within the group (Aronson, 2004). Gender stereotypes, thus, refer to a set of characteristics generally associated with men or women (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). For instance, men are assumed to have 'agentic' qualities like assertiveness, ambitiousness, dominance, confidence and competitiveness, while women are assumed to possess 'communal' characteristics like warmth, compassion, sensitivity, emotionality and honest (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). These stereotypes could be disadvantageous for women in politics, as most of the qualities sought for in political leaders are stereotypically associated with men, but not with women (J. Dolan, Deckman, & Swers, 2017; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Therefore, women might be assumed –by voters, party gatekeepers and journalists alike- to have fewer of the characteristics and competencies needed in the political arena (see Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2018).

Even though many scholars assume that people apply these general gender stereotypes to politicians, it remains an unanswered question whether this is actually happening, as recent studies show that feminine traits are not per se ascribed to female politicians (Brooks, 2013; K. Dolan, 2010). In other words, people do not seem to think of female politicians in stereotypically female terms. Brooks (2013) calls this the '*Leaders, not Ladies'* theory and argues that female politicians are being evaluated on entirely different standards than ordinary women. In line with this, social psychology scholarship has shown that stereotypes are not always applied to every member of the overall group and that 'subtypes' can exist, which are liked to very different

characteristics (Richards & Hewstone, 2001). For example, businesswomen are a subtype of women, and people associate a certain set of traits with them, such as stern and hard-working, that differs sharply from the set of traits associated with women in general (Clifton, McGrath, & Wick, 1976). Recent research in the US suggests that female politicians might indeed form a subtype, as respondents do not at all associate stereotypically female traits, such as compassion and emotionality, with female politicians (Schneider & Bos, 2014). Interestingly, there is no agreement whatsoever on which traits female politicians *do* possess. As the authors write, the female politician stereotype is 'nebulous and lacks clarity' (Schneider & Bos, 2014, p. 261). Male politicians, by contrast, do have a clear stereotype, that overlaps largely with the stereotype of men and that of politicians.

While this research is a useful first step to understanding how people think about women in politics, it is limited in two important ways. First, it was conducted on a rather small, non-representative sample: the group identifying which trait belong to female politicians consist of only 51 college students in the US. Therefore, we do not know whether the conclusions are valid for the wider American society, let alone for other countries. Second, the researchers measured *knowledge* of cultural stereotypes, and not whether respondents actually adhered to the stereotypes themselves. The reason for this is that it is hard to directly gauge stereotypes due to social desirability bias. To circumvent this, Schneider and Bos (2014) asked respondents to report the characteristics that 'people in general' think describe a particular social group. It is very well possible that respondents know which traits belong to a certain stereotype, while they do not agree with the stereotype at all. Thus, the stereotype of female politicians should be measured reflecting the respondents' own beliefs, while at the same time overcoming social desirability bias.

**Aims and contributions:**

This project aims to answer the important question which gender stereotypes people hold for politicians, overcoming the limitations in current scholarship on this topic. More specifically, this project asks: (1) what are

the stereotypes people apply to male and female politicians; (2) how do the stereotypes of male and female politicians relate to general stereotypes of men, women and politicians; and (3) how can we measure gender stereotypes of politicians while avoiding social desirability bias.

To answer these questions, we run three studies in the Sosci panel. Study A is a replication of the Schneider and Bos (2014) experiment in the Dutch context, assessing what respondents believe people in general think the character traits are of five social groups: men, women, politicians, male politicians and female politicians (see Appendix 1). Study B uses a modification of the Schneider and Bos (2014) questionnaire and assess which character traits respondents themselves indicate to associate with the aforementioned five social groups (see Appendix 2). Study C uses a novel experimental setup, leveraging the logic of a list-experiment (see the next section for a detailed explanation). We measure which character traits respondents associate with the five social groups, not by asking them directly to choose all relevant traits from a list (as in Study B), but by letting them indicate how many out of five randomly selected traits they associate with the group (see Appendix 3). As respondents only have to indicate the number of traits and not which traits specifically, social desirability is much less likely to be a factor in measuring the stereotypes.

Based on study C, we can detect which stereotypes people hold about male and female politicians and how these differ from the stereotypes we apply to men, women and politicians in general. However, the findings allow for more interesting comparisons. First, by replicating the study of Schneider and Bos (2014) in study A, we can test whether their findings hold to the Dutch context, with a completely different political system. Second, by comparing the findings of study A and B, we can detect the difference between the *knowledge* on gender stereotypes for politicians in society and individual *believe* in stereotypes. Third, the comparison of the findings of study B and C shows to what extent people adjust their answers when directly asked about gender stereotypes because of social desirability bias.

This project on gender stereotypes of politicians makes relevant contributions both to society and to academia. First and foremost, the proposed project answers the important question: what stereotypes to people apply to male and female politicians? Stereotyping is a crucial aspect of widespread female

underrepresentation in politics, as it affects voters, party gatekeepers, newsmakers, and prospective candidates. By consequence, understanding these stereotypes can help locate opportunities for the improvement of female political representation, for example informing strategies how women in politics can position themselves. This substantive contribution is of interest to political parties, prospective candidates, political reporters, and feminists, and within academia to scholars of stereotypes, gender and politics, and political psychology. Methodologically, this project develops an innovative application of list experiments. List experiments are traditionally used to avoid social desirability bias, but they suffer from another source of bias, coming from satisficing. We propose an adjustment that overcomes this bias, while allowing us to measure beliefs about many traits at once.

## Methods

Part A replicates the study Schneider and Bos (2014) conducted on US college students, allowing for an exact comparison between our study and this earlier work. Respondents are randomly divided into five groups, and each experimental group is directed to a question on one of the five social groups of interest: men, women, politicians, male politicians, and female politicians. They are asked to indicate from a list of 99 traits which character traits they believe are widely associated with the social group they are assigned to (see Appendix 1 for the example of the questionnaire). Such adjective checklists have been used extensively to measure the content of stereotypes since the first application on racial stereotypes by Katz and Braly (Correll, Judd, Park, & Wittenbrink, 2010, p. 52; Katz & Braly, 1933). However, because respondents are asked about what is *generally thought* in society, this question is more a measure of knowledge of stereotypes than a measure of the actual endorsement of stereotypes by respondents. Therefore, Part B mirrors Part A, except it asks for the respondent's *own* trait associations with one of the five social groups, instead of what they believe *others* generally think.

As indicated above, asking respondents directly to indicate their perceptions of stereotypes of social groups has the risk of inducing answers that are modified because of social desirability. In particular, respondents may not be willing to indicate that they associate a social group with a negative characteristic. Therefore, Part C aims to determine which traits belong to the stereotypes of these five social groups, but does not directly asks respondents to indicate traits but applies the logic of a list experiment. List experiments can be used to measure sensitive items, by relying on aggregated data instead of individual responses. Normally, respondents are randomly assigned to the control group or to the experimental group and indicate from a list how many items apply to them. The control group receives a list of non-sensitive items (for instance 4) and the experimental group choses from a list with the same non-sensitive items plus the sensitive item that is the focus of the study (in the example 5 items). Comparing the number of items that respondents choose between the two groups, tells us the extent to which respondents choose the sensitive item (see e.g., Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010; Streb, Burrell, Frederick, & Genovese, 2008).

One problem with this method is satisficing (Krosnick, 1991). For list experiments, this indicates that respondents choose a number of items that they deem reasonable, without actually reading the items carefully and picking the correct number. As Kuhn and Vivyan (2018) have recently shown, this can lead to a systematic bias between the experimental and control group, as 'satisficers' on average choose a higher number in the experimental condition than in the control condition, simply because the list is longer. We leverage techniques recently made popular in conjoint experiments (see e.g., Hainmueller, Hopkins, & Yamamoto, 2014) to overcome this problem, which also allow us to gauge responses to many traits at once. Respondents will be presented with a list of five randomly drawn traits from the master list of 99 traits derived from Schneider and Bos (2014). They will be asked to indicate how many of the five traits they believe describe a social group (see Appendix 3 for the example of the questionnaire). Because respondents do not precisely specify which traits they believe to describe the groups but only indicate a number from the list of five, the question is less sensitive to social desirability bias. By comparing, in the aggregate, how 'popular' each item is for each social group, we can determine which stereotypes exist for each social group.

Study A and B are run in parallel fashion: half of the respondents (500) are directed to A and half (500) to B. Within each experiment, respondents are divided into five groups, corresponding to the five social groups we are interested in (men, women, male politicians, female politicians and politicians). This results in 100 respondents per condition for each of the two experiments, which is about two times as many as was used in the study by Schneider and Bos (2014). This increase in power is warranted given that we are interested in a more heterogenous population than fresh-man students of a single college, and responses to the question of respondents' own trait associations (Part B) can be expected to be less consistent between respondents. Subsequently, the respondents are directed to Study C, where they all answer thirteen randomly ordered list-questions, divided over the five social groups. To ascertain the number of respondents required to detect stereotypes with this novel method, we ran simulations of the data based on the effect sizes found by Schneider and Bos (2014). We varied the share of 'satisficers' among the respondents, which we modelled as giving a random answer. The statistical power to detect the top 25% of traits of a stereotype with an alpha of 0.05 and 1000 respondents is 0.83, 0.79 and 0.67 for a share of 5%, 15% and 25% satisficers respectively.

**Results**

Data is currently being collected.

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**Appendix 1: Questionnaire Experiment A**

(Based on Schneider and Bos, 2014; 50% of respondents)

Society is composed of many different groups about whom people in general have some knowledge. In fact, the ease with which people form relatively well-defined impressions about the individuals and social groups that surround them greatly simplifies their social life. On many occasions, either through hearsay or direct contact, we find out something about the impressions that people in general have about social groups. In this study, you will be asked to give your opinion about what people in general think about some social groups. Naturally, the impressions that people in general have about social groups may or may not reflect your personal beliefs. So, give your answers based on what you know to be the culturally shared beliefs people in general have about those social groups, whether or not you believe those ideas to be true.

1) Below is a checklist containing adjectives and traits that can be used to describe people. Place a checkmark in the box to the left of any adjective that people in general think best describe the following group: **Men/Women/Politicians/Male Politicians/Female Politicians.**

| | |
|---|---|
| | Active |
| | Adventurous |
| | Affectionate |
| | Aggressive |
| | Ambitious |
| | Analytical |
| | Arrogant |
| | Artistic |
| | Assertive |
| | Bitter |
| | Boastful |
| | Caring |
| | Cautious |
| | Charismatic |
| | Coarse |
| | Cold |
| | Commands respect |
| | Compassionate |
| | Competitive |
| | Complaining |
| | Confident |
| | Corrupt |
| | Creative |
| | Cynical |
| | Daring |
| | Decent |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Deceptive |
| | Dependent |
| | Determined |
| | Devious |
| | Dictatorial |
| | Dishonest |
| | Dominant |
| | Driven |
| | Educated |
| | Egotistical |
| | Emotional |
| | Ethical |
| | Fussy |
| | Gentle |
| | Gets things done |
| | Good at problem solving |
| | Good with numbers |
| | Greedy |
| | Gullible |
| | Hard nosed |
| | Hard working |
| | Honest |
| | Hostile |
| | Imaginative |
| | In touch with the people |
| | Independent |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Inspiring |
| | Intelligent |
| | Intuitive |
| | Knowledgeable |
| | Leader |
| | Liar |
| | Logical |
| | Loving |
| | Manipulative |
| | Moral |
| | Motherly |
| | Motivated |
| | Nagging |
| | Objective |
| | Organized |
| | Power hungry |
| | Powerful |
| | Quantitatively skilled |
| | Quarrelsome |
| | Rational |
| | Really cares about people like me |
| | Rugged |
| | Scheming |
| | Self- interested |
| | Selfish |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Sensitive |
| | Servile |
| | Sleazy |
| | Smart |
| | Sneaky |
| | Spineless |
| | Stern |
| | Strong |
| | Strong willed |
| | Subordinates self to others |
| | Sympathetic |
| | Talkative |
| | Tough |
| | Unable to separate feelings from ideas |
| | Unemotional |
| | Unprincipled |
| | Uptight |
| | Warm |
| | Weak |
| | Well educated |
| | Well spoken |
| | Whiny |

**Appendix 2: Questionnaire Experiment B**

(Adapted from Schneider and Bos, 2014; 50% of respondents)

Society is composed of many different groups about whom people in general have some knowledge. In fact, the ease with which people form relatively well-defined impressions about the individuals and social groups that surround them greatly simplifies their social life. On many occasions, either through hearsay or direct contact, we form impression of what the members of a social group are like. In this study, you will be asked to identify the characteristics that are typical of a particular social group.

1) Below is a checklist containing adjectives and traits that can be used to describe people. Place a checkmark in the box to the left of any adjective that you think if typical of the following group: **Men/Women/Politicians/Male Politicians/Female Politicians.**

| | |
|---|---|
| | Active |
| | Adventurous |
| | Affectionate |
| | Aggressive |
| | Ambitious |
| | Analytical |
| | Arrogant |
| | Artistic |
| | Assertive |
| | Bitter |
| | Boastful |
| | Caring |
| | Cautious |
| | Charismatic |
| | Coarse |
| | Cold |
| | Commands respect |
| | Compassionate |
| | Competitive |
| | Complaining |
| | Confident |
| | Corrupt |
| | Creative |
| | Cynical |
| | Daring |
| | Decent |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Deceptive |
| | Dependent |
| | Determined |
| | Devious |
| | Dictatorial |
| | Dishonest |
| | Dominant |
| | Driven |
| | Educated |
| | Egotistical |
| | Emotional |
| | Ethical |
| | Fussy |
| | Gentle |
| | Gets things done |
| | Good at problem solving |
| | Good with numbers |
| | Greedy |
| | Gullible |
| | Hard nosed |
| | Hard working |
| | Honest |
| | Hostile |
| | Imaginative |
| | In touch with the people |
| | Independent |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Inspiring |
| | Intelligent |
| | Intuitive |
| | Knowledgeable |
| | Leader |
| | Liar |
| | Logical |
| | Loving |
| | Manipulative |
| | Moral |
| | Motherly |
| | Motivated |
| | Nagging |
| | Objective |
| | Organized |
| | Power hungry |
| | Powerful |
| | Quantitatively skilled |
| | Quarrelsome |
| | Rational |
| | Really cares about people like me |
| | Rugged |
| | Scheming |
| | Self- interested |
| | Selfish |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Sensitive |
| | Servile |
| | Sleazy |
| | Smart |
| | Sneaky |
| | Spineless |
| | Stern |
| | Strong |
| | Strong willed |
| | Subordinates self to others |
| | Sympathetic |
| | Talkative |
| | Tough |
| | Unable to separate feelings from ideas |
| | Unemotional |
| | Unprincipled |
| | Uptight |
| | Warm |
| | Weak |
| | Well educated |
| | Well spoken |
| | Whiny |

**Appendix 3: Questionnaire Experiment C**

(All respondents; questions in random order; the five traits are randomly chosen from a list of 99 traits)

2) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Men.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Confident |
| Smart |
| Powerful |
| Emotional |
| Ambitious |

3) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Women.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Gets things done |
| Cold |
| Imaginative |
| Rugged |
| Stern |

4) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Male Politicians.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Organized |
| Assertive |
| Motivated |
| Sneaky |
| Charismatic |

5) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Female Politicians.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Confident |
| Dishonest |
| Sympathetic |
| Tough |
| Objective |

6) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Politicians.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Hard nosed |
| Charismatic |
| Gullible |
| Well educated |
| Sensitive |

7) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Men.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Affectionate |
| Dependent |
| Leader |
| Unemotional |
| Corrupt |

8) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Women.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Well spoken |
| Power hungry |
| Greedy |
| Gets things done |
| Fussy |

9) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Male Politicians.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Spineless |
| Cautious |
| Gentle |
| Rational |
| Hostile |

10) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Female Politicians.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Nagging |
| Devious |
| Determined |
| Good with numbers |
| Warm |

11) Below is list of five character traits that can be used to describe people. Please indicate exactly how many of these traits you think are typical of the following group: **Politicians.**

_____ traits

| |
|---|
| Coarse |
| Honest |
| Intuitive |
| Talkative |
| Driven |