

## Media-based mechanisms of gendered evaluations of politicians (Dissertation Summary)

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### Abstract

This dissertation addresses the enduring underrepresentation of women in political decision-making and its multi-faceted causes. It focuses on the media's pivotal role in perpetuating and shaping gender inequalities within politics. The dissertation's objective is to illuminate the influence of media coverage on voters' perceptions of male and female politicians. Revisiting interdisciplinary literature, it first proposes a theoretical causal framework of media-based gendered candidate evaluations. Through a series of four empirical articles and eight data collections, employing diverse methods like meta-analysis, mixed methods think aloud paradigms, and survey experiments, the research challenges conventional wisdom of ubiquitous gender biases. Contrary to expectations, media coverage generally does not systematically distort gender-based voter evaluations. Rather, it tends to create gender similarities, influencing both male and female politicians similarly. Notably, when distinctions emerge, they often favor women. The findings suggest that women in politics can gain by emphasizing expertise over conforming to gender norms. However, the study cautions that subtle biases may persist within intricate political and media systems. In summary, this dissertation uncovers the nuanced dynamics of media, gender, and voter responses, advancing our comprehension of gender biases in political communication and offering insights for promoting more equitable political representation.

### Keywords

political communication, gender, candidate evaluation, mixed methods, media effects, political psychology

## 1 Introduction

The political landscape is masculine. As of January 2023, there is one woman for every three men elected in parliament across the globe. Women's representation exceeds the fifty percent mark in six national parliaments. Although these recent numbers indicate an upward trajectory in women's political representation (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2022), change is slow, incremental, and nonlinear (Inglehart et al., 2017). Women's underrepresentation in positions of political decision-making not only violates core values of democracy and human rights conventions but also relegates their interests to the margins of political agendas (Celis & Childs, 2020; Gidengil & Everitt, 1999, 2000). More-

over, these matters extend beyond women's lives, as gender inequality in politics is linked to slowed economic growth (Bandiera & Natraj, 2013), certain forms of corruption (Pereira & Fernandez-Vazquez, 2023), and the escalation of political conflicts and breakouts of war (Cohen & Karim, 2022).

Decades of scientific inquiry into its roots and causes indicate an interplay of political structures, gender perceptions, and the media as multicausal drivers of gender biases in the political realm (Bos et al., 2022; Fox & Lawless, 2011). Media are at the very nexus of this "game of three sides" (Ross, 2017, p. 3). Media coverage mirrors and reinforces existing gender biases in the political world by under- and misrepresenting women politicians (Bauer, 2015; Gidengil & Everitt, 1999;



Van Der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). As few people encounter politicians in person, media coverage constitutes the main source of information about politicians (Kahn, 1994). In other words, politicians' messages seldom reach the electorate directly but through the lens of the media. What and how people think about women and men politicians – and, crucially, whether they vote for them at the ballot box – is thus heavily influenced by the amount and content of media coverage that they consume.

The role of media coverage in the way voters evaluate politicians is a crucial but underexplored piece in the puzzle of women's persisting underrepresentation. Recent research has demonstrated that voters display little overt bias against women politicians, all else equal (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Schwarz & Coppock, 2022). The crux of real-world voter evaluations of politicians is, however, that all is not equal. Media portrayals of politicians include a range of contextual cues that combine with politicians' gender in multiple ways that condition voter responses (Bauer, 2015; Rohrbach et al., 2020; Van Der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Yet, understanding the conditionality of the interaction between media and gender cues remains a major gap in current research (Bauer, 2015). This need for inquiry into media-based drivers of gendered evaluations is most tellingly evidenced by the mixed findings of state of research. On the one hand, past research has routinely linked gender cues to more disadvantageous evaluation outcomes for women candidates (e.g., Bauer, 2020; Gidengil & Everitt, 2000). On the other hand, some studies also illustrate ways in which women can benefit from certain forms of media portrayals (e.g., Brooks & Hayes, 2019), whereas others underline the overall limited impact of gender on voters' global evaluation of candidates (Brooks, 2013; Hayes & Lawless, 2015).

Current literature on media and gendered voter responses faces three key gaps. First, it lacks clarity on the specific types of media coverage influencing evaluations of women and men politicians, with existing studies often focusing on isolated aspects (for a review, see van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Second, there is a dearth of standardized measurements, hindering systematic understanding of which evaluation outcomes are

subject to gendered voter responses (Bauer, 2013; Brooks, 2013). Finally, a gap exists in understanding the causal mechanisms between media cues, gender cues, and voters' information processing, as theoretical accounts often focus narrowly on specific types of media coverage or outcomes. Few studies have developed, and even fewer have tested, causal relationships for the more general mechanisms in which media coverage influences voters' evaluations of women and men politicians. All three gaps thwart more definitive conclusions regarding the role of media coverage in reinforcing or potentially mitigating women's underrepresentation in politics. Moreover, each gap reflects one key component – (1) the *type of media coverage*, (2) the *evaluation outcome*, and (3) the *causal mechanism* – that is integral to the understanding of the conditional influence of media coverage on voter evaluations. This dissertation tackles these gaps by formulating the following overarching research questions addressing each of the three components:

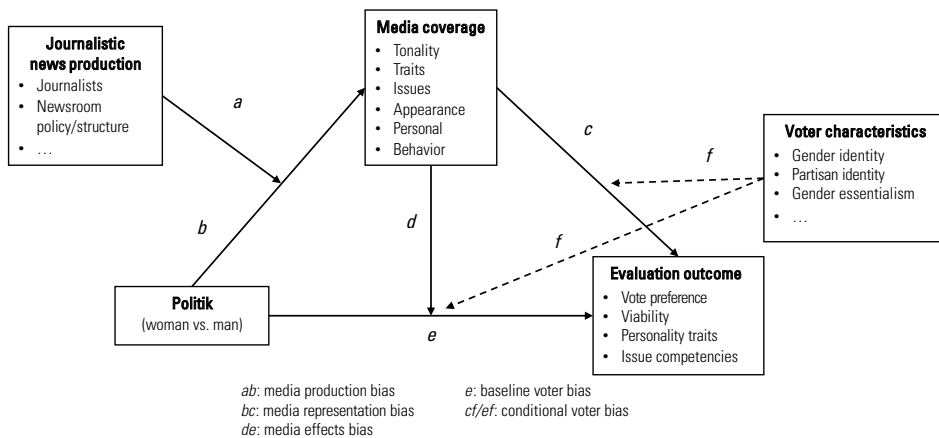
- (1) Which types of media coverage result in gender-differentiated evaluations of politicians?
- (2) On which outcomes do voters evaluate women and men politicians differently?
- (3) What are the causal mechanisms through which media coverage affects voters' evaluations of women and men politicians?

The empirical research conducted as part of this dissertation approaches these research questions in three steps. Paper I aims to *synthesize* existing research on these three components by means of a meta-analytic review of the field. Paper II and Paper III *explore* the relationships of the three components by combining think-aloud and thought-listing techniques. Building on the previous three studies, Paper IV then *tests* key expectations in a series of five survey experiments.

## 2 Theoretical background: Gender biases in the mediation of politics

The study of gender, media, and politics has a long history of theoretical and empirical research from scholars of communication, po-

Figure 1: A conceptual framework of biases in the gendered mediation of politics



litical science, gender studies, and psychology. Though the occasional early academic inquiry into the intersection of these fields provided the foundational work (Jamieson, 1995; Kahn, 1994), a conceptual framework on the various interrelations was absent until Gidengil and Everitt's (1999, 2000) "gendered mediation thesis." At its core, gendered mediation posits that political reporting mirrors and exacerbates the masculinized norm of politics, thereby creating a media landscape in which women struggle to find their place. A plethora of studies have since built on this core notion and detailed the manifold ways in which journalistic and political processes interlock with gender expectations. The recent definition by Ette (2020) more generally construes gendered mediation as "a journalistic practice that reinforces the femininity and masculinity binary in media discourses," which "magnifies real and perceived gender differences irrespective of their relevance and context in media reports" (p. 1). Because gendered reporting carries (and activates) expectations of masculine leadership, it exacerbates women politicians' double-bind situation: they are presented as either lacking the necessary (masculine) grit to prevail in a political landscape or as betraying the (feminine) prescriptions of care, cooperation, and wholesomeness (see Jamieson, 1995).

In its current form, gendered mediation has two shortcomings. First, it has mainly investigated media representation and focused

on the unidirectional transformation process from political into mediated reality. Yet gendered mediation has paid far less attention to media effects – that is, the reverse process of how gendered media coverage feeds back into politicians' lived experiences by shaping voter evaluations and cultivating gendered perceptions of the political sphere. Second, there is currently no conceptual framework for the different ways in which gender affects the mediation processes, for example, through media representation or through media effects. Without a holistic overview of different gender biases, gendered mediation theory has missed out on its potential to combine and integrate different research fields. So far, gendered mediation has been primarily acknowledged and cited by studies on media representation despite its relevance for research on, for example, media effects or media production. These gaps in gendered mediation theory not only allow for ambiguity in the terminological understanding of gender bias itself but also potentially obscure how different gender biases can coexist, cumulate, and condition each other.

This dissertation addresses these theoretical gaps by extending and sharpening the gendered mediation thesis into a more general framework of biases in the gendered mediation of politics depicted in Figure 1. The framework consists of the same three components that are implicit or explicit in existing accounts of gendered mediation:

(1) real-world women and men politicians, (2) political media coverage providing a mediated (mis-)representation of those politicians, and (3) voters who draw from actual and mediated candidate information to form evaluations and, ultimately, cast their vote. It also includes journalistic news production and voter characteristics as additional conditioning influences. Taken together, the different path combinations between components represent a typology of biases in gendered mediation. It identifies three biases in the gender-politics-media relationship: *media production bias* (*ab*), *media representation bias* (*bc*), and *media effects bias* (*de*).

The dissertation focuses on the last type of bias. Biases in media effects are a part of political audiences' information processing; they assume that voters form different evaluations of candidates because mediated information about women and men candidates is processed differently. An important implication of this is that gender-differentiated outcomes can persist in the absence of gender differences in all other processes of gendered mediation. Thus, even if women and men receive the same treatment by the media (e.g., focus on personality traits), voters may process this information in gendered ways, resulting in biased evaluation outcomes. For example, framing a candidate's gender a certain way (e.g., foregrounding family life or physical appearance) can elicit gender-differentiated responses in voters who would, under neutral "unmediated" conditions, not show any signs of discrimination.

Investigating media-based mechanisms of gendered evaluation of political candidates thus necessitates a conceptual framework that causally links three key components of mediated electoral communication: Gender cues in media coverage, underlying mechanisms, and voters' evaluation outcomes of candidates.

The first component in the framework is *gender media cues*. In a more abstract sense, gender media cues are snapshots of the mediated reality of women and men politicians. More concretely, they can be defined as textual, visual, or audiovisual information about politicians' gender in the form of fictitious or actual media coverage. As discussed in the literature on media representation, gendered

aspects of coverage include, most notably, information regarding candidates' personality traits, political issues, viability, appearance, personal life, and the overall amount and tone of coverage (for an overview and recent meta-analysis, see van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Yet existing studies tend to "focus either on the media or the voters and then assume transmission of information from the former to the latter" (Hayes & Lawless, 2015, p. 98). It is crucial, however, to understand *which* aspects of media coverage lead to differential evaluation outcomes and what aspects remain inconsequential.

The second component focuses on the underlying *mechanisms* that relate gender cues in media to different evaluation outcomes. In other words, they can be construed as the theoretical and empirical vectors that transport gender effects to voters' evaluations of candidates. Research on these mechanisms should allow for a better understanding of *how* different circumstances and contexts affect gender effects in a complex information environment (see, e.g., Bauer, 2015). Research on gender and candidate evaluations invariably invokes gender stereotypes as an explanatory mechanism of a whole plethora of gendered political judgments. Yet the theoretical and empirical accounts of gender stereotypes vary greatly between studies; they range from discussions of general study background (Fox & Lawless, 2011) to more analytical applications (Holman, 2023; Laustsen & Bor, 2017; Schneider & Bos, 2014). Specific discussions of mechanisms that connect mediated gender stereotypes to gendered candidate evaluations are still missing (but see Bauer, 2015).

As a third component, *evaluation outcomes* describe the actual *effect* (or area of influence) of gender cues on voters' appraisal of candidates. The current literature provides (at least) three clusters of commonly used evaluation outcomes, although most studies combine measures from multiple clusters (for an overview, see Bauer, 2013; Brooks, 2013; Holman, 2023). The first cluster includes measures of perceived candidate *issue competence*, that is, how well candidates are thought to be able to handle specific political issues (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Measures of candidates' inferred *personality traits* constitute a second cluster with outcomes such as

perceived (trait) competence, warmth, honesty, likeability, compassion, trustworthiness, etc. (Schneider & Bos, 2014). The last cluster focuses on actual or perceived performance and includes different measures of *vote preference* (Bauer, 2020; Laustsen & Bor, 2017) and perceived *viability* (Bauer, 2015; Brooks, 2013).

### 3 Methods and empirical strategy

#### 3.1 Overview of research

The first paper conducts a systematic review and meta-analysis of research on media-based candidate evaluations of women and men politicians in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021). By means of a systematic review ( $N_{studies} = 50$ ), the paper revisits and reorganizes key concepts in the literature and develops the notion of media-moderated candidate evaluations as an integrative conceptual framework connecting a multidisciplinary and heterogeneous field. Moreover, the review takes inventory of the types of media coverage and the evaluation outcomes that existing research has linked to gendered candidate evaluations ( $N_{outcomes} = 671$ ,  $N_{participants} = 23\,000$ ). A Bayesian meta-analysis then statistically synthesizes available evidence of the moderating impact of different types of media coverage on voters' gendered evaluations.

The second paper explores the role of gender in the candidate evaluation process from two different perspectives. The first perspective construes candidate gender as a heuristic cue that implicitly affects – and biases – voters' mostly implicit information processing. The second perspective approaches gender as a way in which voters explicitly make sense of the candidate-related information and rationalize their evaluations. The paper also investigates how mediated information affects the role(s) of gender in candidate evaluations. Empirically, the paper relies on a two-task think-aloud design as the basis of a mixed methods analysis of voters' thoughts during their candidate evaluations ( $N_{participants} = 72$ ,  $N_{evaluations} = 342$ ).

The third paper explores the role of negativity in gendered candidate evaluations.

It conceptually distinguishes between a reinforcing, equalizing, and protective effect of negativity in media portrayals of women politicians. In a first study, the paper investigates the intersection between gender and negativity by means of a subset of the think-aloud design used in Paper II ( $N_{participants} = 72$ ,  $N_{evaluations} = 288$ ). In a second study, the paper internally replicates the design of the first study as a thought-listing survey experiment ( $N_{participants} = 142$ ,  $N_{evaluations} = 456$ ).

The fourth paper theoretically revisits and empirically tests core assumptions of stereotype incongruity as a driver of gender biases in political communication. Theoretically, the paper proposes a novel reconceptualization of stereotype incongruity as three different role incongruity effects in the candidate evaluation process – namely, in candidate trait perception, trait inference, and trait evaluation. It then empirically examines the extent of gender bias in all three types of stereotype incongruity in a series of five original survey experiments ( $N_{participants} = 5\,284$ ).

#### 3.2 Methodological innovations

The methodological framework of this dissertation includes three features that go beyond current established practice in the field of gender and politics. First, existing research on gender and candidate evaluations has predominantly employed single methodological approaches, lacking dedicated multimethod designs (but see Bauer, 2015; Holman, 2023). In contrast, this thesis employs a diverse set of methodological approaches, including meta-analytic techniques, quantitative survey experiments, and mixed methods think-aloud designs. These approaches serve distinct research goals (synthesis, exploration, testing) and sequentially build upon each other. For instance, the conceptual groundwork from the systematic review (Paper I) informs the think-aloud studies (Paper II, Paper III), exploring the moderating influence of mediated candidate information. Complementary methods provide a triangulation of strengths and weaknesses (Fearon & Laitin, 2013), including the combination of quantitative meta-analysis and survey experiments for confirmatory results, complemented and contrasted by qualitative insights from the think-aloud paradigm. This triangulation en-

hances holistic inferences about the role of media coverage in voters' gendered evaluation of politicians.

Second, all statistical analyses conducted in this dissertation rely on Bayesian inference. Unlike traditional frequentist frameworks, which generate only evidence against the null hypothesis, Bayesian approaches allow for assessing evidence in favor *and* against the null hypothesis. A one-sided focus on “difference” is highly problematic in the context of gender in politics (and elsewhere, see Esarey & Wu, 2016), as it falsely inflates and essentializes gender differences while neglecting the many commonalities (see Hyde, 2014 for a critique of a gender difference model). By consistently using a Bayesian framework, this dissertation can, for the first time in this field, quantify under what circumstances women's and men's evaluations by voters are different and when they are similar. Paper I delineates the advantages of a gender similarities approach in more detail. Moreover, Bayesian methods enable intuitive inferences without implicit (and unrealistic) assumptions about sampling conditions, offering a coherent framework rooted in probability theory (Jeffreys, 1998). Finally, Bayesian inference necessitates transparency by requiring researchers to specify prior beliefs, making the impact of researchers' decisions explicit through standard sensitivity analyses (Depaoli & Van de Schoot, 2017). All papers in this thesis include comprehensive sensitivity analyses in their respective appendices.

Third, this dissertation follows calls in communication research to commit to transparency and openness in research, aligning with the ethical principles of science as a societal endeavor (Bakker et al., 2021). Except in a few documented instances, all research in this dissertation (1) clearly distinguishes exploratory from confirmatory analyses, (2) pre-registered hypotheses, study materials, and all codes for statistical analysis before data collection, (3) renders all used materials available for replication and future research.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4 Main findings, contributions, and implications

Rather than a paper-by-paper discussion of key findings, Table 1 below presents an overview of core conclusions drawn from the totality of the conducted dissertation research. The findings are grouped along the key components of the dissertation's research question, asking how (*mechanism*) which type of media coverage (*gender media cues*) affects which voters' candidate evaluations (*outcomes*). As space is limited, this section focuses on three main findings.

##### *1a: Media coverage moderates voter evaluations (as part of gendered mediation)*

This dissertation assumed that media coverage shapes candidate evaluation by emphasizing certain candidate aspects and providing contextual information. Building on gendered mediation literature and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), Paper I formally introduced the concept of *media-moderated candidate evaluations*, suggesting that media coverage indirectly influences evaluations by reinforcing or mitigating gender-stereotypical attributes. Meta-analytic evidence revealed substantial heterogeneity in gender differences across different media coverage types ( $\tau = 0.15$ , 95%CrI = 0.10–0.22). For example, coverage of political scandals or campaign attacks results in more favorable evaluations for women candidates, while reporting on candidates' appearance and personal life tends to lead to less favorable assessments compared to men. Papers II and III explored voters' responses to different media framings, providing additional qualitative insights into how voters interpret contextual information differently for women and men candidates. For instance, voters attributed mediated displays of anger to the harsh political environment for women but believed it to be part of an aggressive personality structure for men.

These conceptual developments encourage future theorizing to adopt a more pluralistic view and consider biases in media representation, media effects, and media production. Furthermore, the notion of media moderation underlines the importance of journalists as key intermediary vectors of

<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, two dissertation chapters are still under review at scientific journals; its materials will be published after their publication.

**Table 1: Overview of main findings of the dissertation**

	Main findings	Support
1	Gender media cues	
a	Media coverage moderates voter evaluations (as part of gendered mediation)	I, II, III, S*
b	Trait but not issue coverage results in gender-differentiated evaluations	I, II, IV
c	Negativity in media cues is interpreted more critically for men than women candidates	I, II, III, IV
d	Saliency of gender media cues affects evaluations, but weakly so	I, IV
.....		
2	Mechanisms	
a	Role congruity predicts voter responses to communal but not agentic traits	IV
b	Dominant gender norms drive how voters rationalize their vote for women candidates	II, III
.....		
3	Evaluation outcomes	
a	Ceteris paribus, voters have a small baseline preference for women candidates	I, II, IV
b	Voters are most likely to discriminate against women candidates by evaluating them as less viable than men	I, II, IV
c	Women lose little on agentic but win on communal trait evaluations.	I, II, IV
.....		
4	Umbrella analysis	
a	Gender similarities are the default; gender differences are the exception	I, II, III, IV, S*

Note: Roman numerals refer to the corresponding dissertation paper; \*S=Synopsis.

campaign communication Feld (for a conceptualization of this intermediary role (for a conceptualization of this intermediary role see Baumgartner et al., 2021). How they transform candidate messages into news stories – that is, what traits, qualifications, and behaviors they report on and how – has consequences for the extent of gender bias in voter evaluations. Consequently, journalists represent important stakeholders that political communication practitioners need to incorporate in their strategic frame-building (Hänggli & Kriesi, 2010).

### *3c: Women lose little on agentic but win on communal trait evaluations*

Paper I and studies 1 and 2 of Paper II provide some evidence that voters evaluate women candidates as less agentic (e.g., assertive, competent, decisive) than men (standardized effect sizes between  $g = -0.16$  and  $-0.06$ ). In

contrast, however, voters rather consistently associate women with more communal traits (e.g., caring, cooperative, trustworthy) throughout all empirical analyses (median effect size  $g = 0.21$ ). Moreover, the think-aloud paradigms showed that voters have more – and more positive – thoughts about women’s communality than men. Traditionally, such a “feminine advantage” on communal traits was considered as part of women’s double-bind (Jamieson, 1995; Bauer, 2020). Yet both quantitative and qualitative evidence shows that voters reward women for communal communication strategies while punishing men for a lack thereof.

In summary, these findings align with more general trends in gender stereotype beliefs that show a shrinking agency gap but an increasing communality gap between women and men (Eagly et al., 2020). Women politicians may benefit electorally from their

advantage on communal traits as voters tend to rely more heavily on warmth than competence assessment in their candidate evaluations (Laustsen & Bor, 2017), thus also explaining why women tend to fair better across a range of evaluation outcomes (see also 3a; Schwarz & Coppock, 2022; Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). An underexplored but possible theoretical link between women's advantage on communal traits is voters' authenticity perceptions. As a "prominent narrative of modern political communication" (Luebke, 2021, p. 636), authenticity is in higher demand than ever, especially in an era frequently termed as "post-truth politics" (Hannan, 2018). Communality overlaps with authenticity on traits like honesty and transparency – attributes that voters deem lacking in "stereotyped 'career [i. e., men] politicians'" (Stiers et al., 2021, p. 1200). A practical implication is that women candidates have much to gain and little to lose when embracing more communal messages throughout their campaigns – for example, in terms of the issues or personality traits they emphasize or whether they appear in more informal contexts and grant insight into their personal lives.

*4a: Gender similarities are the default; gender differences are the exception*

The use of a common Bayesian framework in all parts of this dissertation allows for an umbrella analysis of the cumulative evidence across all eight data collections, consisting of 140 gender comparisons across eight types of evaluation outcomes and 28 media cues (see Figure 3.4 and Table 3.3 in the dissertation for a detailed breakdown of the evidence). Across all gender comparisons, 30.7% of tests supported the *presence* of gender differences, whereas 48.5% of tests indicated an *absence* of gender differences, excluding cases with only anecdotal evidence (20.8%).

The notion of gender similarities as a default expectation holds several implications for studying gender in political communication. The difference model tends to reify traditional gender norms by engaging in a circular logic that treats gender stereotypes as both the explanation, process, and result (Hyde, 2005, 2014). Paradoxically, the expectation of similarities can direct attention to more contextu-

alized theories of gender difference. Existing theories of gender differences in political communication often refer to gender stereotypes as drivers of differences (Bauer, 2020). As stereotypes change over time, the assumption of difference as a default becomes decreasingly tenable, yet the conclusion of a lack of difference appears premature. More recent conceptual work has focused on the more subtle ways in which gender biases persist, such as research on the qualification gap (Bauer, 2020), the link between public perception of women in politics and political efficacy beliefs (Stauffer, 2021), or research on strategic discrimination (Bateson, 2020). As Hyde (2005, 2014) has argued in her calls for a gender similarities approach in psychological research, "[i]dentifying contexts in which gender differences appear or disappear will continue to be an important strategy" (2014, p. 394) to capture the lived experience of women and men in politics.

Methodologically, conditional theories of gender might imply a shift away from testing main effects or incorporating conditioning factors into study designs. The dissertation demonstrates the advantages of mixed methods analysis. Using a Bayesian framework for investigating gender effects, this dissertation has, for the first time, quantified evidence of both gender difference and similarity. Practically, adopting a gender similarities approach addresses concerns about overinflated claims of gender differences in voter attitudes toward women, which may deter women from running for office (Fox & Lawless, 2011). A focus on gender differences upholds notions of masculinity and femininity as separate and competing concepts in the sphere of leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). De-emphasizing gender difference would also, according to Lorber (2000), "degenderize the best – and the worst – qualities of people" (p. 90) for political leadership. In the short term, such a "degendering" of politics implies that candidates would need to worry less about incongruity between leadership and gender traits. In the long run, a decoupling of gender and political spheres would alter and equalize gendered political socialization (Bos et al., 2022).



## 5 Concluding remarks

The aim of this dissertation was to assess how different types of media coverage influence the way women and men politicians are evaluated by the public. The main findings discussed above come with at least four main caveats, discussed at length in the dissertation: (1) a narrow definition of gender that reduces candidates' gendered experiences to a binary sex category; (2) a collapse of political context that ignores the influence of political cues related to partisanship and electoral systems; (3) a focus on mainstream media coverage that does not account for any forms of direct communication and self-presentation by candidates, notably on social media; and (4) a reliance on self-report measures that thwart more definitive inferences of underlying cognitive and physiological mechanisms.

Distilling this dissertation into a single story about gender bias in political communication is anything but straightforward. The findings allow for cautious optimism in that media coverage does not systematically distort voter evaluations of politicians along gendered lines. In fact, the lack of gender difference – that is, gender similarities – appears to be the emerging default in voter attitudes towards candidates in the contemporary political environment. And when media do result in gender-differentiated voter responses, it is more often to women's benefit than detriment. In some ways, these results can be interpreted in light of changing gender norms and eroding actual or perceived power differentials between women and men (Eagly et al., 2020).

Yet change is never linear. For one, the disappearance of blatant gender biases may conceal persisting biases interwoven in the complex fabric of political and media institutions. Achieving lasting gender equality requires anchoring it in policy and structural change (Celis & Childs, 2020). This responsibility does not fall solely on women politicians; it's a collective effort encompassing key actors and gatekeepers of the political mediation process: from party leaders to political campaigners, from political journalists to lifestyle reporters interested in powerful women,

from running to elected men politicians, and to scholars of media, politics, and gender. The tide for women in politics has been rising and will continue to rise (Inglehart et al., 2017). Let us make the best of it.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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