

More Than Just Gender: Exploring Contextual Influences on Media Bias of Political Candidates

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Tobias Rohrbach¹ , Stephanie Fiechtner¹,
Philomen Schönhagen¹, and Manuel Puppis¹

Abstract

Gender bias in the media coverage of political elections has long been theorized as a major obstacle to women's success in elections and their institutional representation. However, this view of persistent media bias against women politicians is increasingly subject to pressure by inconsistent evidence of size and patterns of gender bias. This paper argues that some of these inconsistencies derive from a lack of attention to contextual influences of electoral coverage. This study analyzes gender bias in the amount and content of media coverage in the run-up to Swiss federal elections in 2015 by means of a quantitative content analysis. Drawing on an extensive sample of print, online and audiovisual election coverage from the most important tabloid and broadsheet media of three different language regions, the results reveal mixed evidence of gender bias: On the one hand, women candidates remain underrepresented in Swiss media. On the other hand, however, once they are covered by the media, candidates are overwhelmingly presented in a gender-neutral way. Several differences emerge between language regions and media type. Extending the traditional gender bias hypothesis to account for contextual influences, the study illustrates that the geo-cultural and media-specific contextual influences of election coverage impinge on the gendered mediation of candidates together with known drivers of political communication, such as incumbency, the electoral system, and party ideology.

Keywords

election campaign, gender, media bias, news reporting

¹University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

Corresponding Author:

Tobias Rohrbach, Department of Communication and Media Research, University of Fribourg,
Bd. de Pérolles 90, 1700 Fribourg, Switzerland.

Email: tobiasrohrbach@hotmail.com

Gender bias in the media coverage of political elections has long been theorized as an obstacle to women's electoral success and institutional representation. However, despite more than three decades of research tracking gender differences in political media coverage, surprisingly little is known about their underlying patterns. Size and nature of gender bias are rarely consistent across time, country, and election context, with current literature supporting claims of gender bias in some cases but not in others. Regardless of their accuracy, Brooks and Hayes (2019) recently demonstrate that claims of gender bias, while potentially increasing voter support for women candidates, harm their perceived electoral confidence. One conclusion prompted by this inconsistency is that gender bias is contingent upon the specific study context. So far, greater attention to the context of election coverage has been routinely demanded (Brooks 2013; Dan and Iorgoveanu 2013), but rarely delivered (see Fowler and Lawless 2009). Especially little is known about contextual influences on gendered representations of political candidates beyond the "usual suspects" of national electoral politics (e.g., party landscape, level of office, electoral system). Understanding the role of context sheds light on the elusive sources and patterns of gender bias and provides knowledge needed for potential corrective actions.

This paper analyzes potential gender bias in media representations of candidates in the four weeks prior to the Swiss federal elections in 2015 (election of the national parliament) by a quantitative content analysis of the most important legacy and online media. Following the traditional gender bias hypothesis of systematic bias against women candidates, the study first investigates bias in the amount of coverage as well as three dimensions of media content (personality traits, political issues, and personalization). In doing so, it offers an examination of the gender bias hypothesis by fueling current research with fresh insights in times of rapidly changing gender norms. Since the last comprehensive studies on elections in 2003 (Hardmeier and Klöti 2004), Switzerland—like most other parts of the world—has seen the advance of numerous gender equality policies with the goal of promoting women in elected offices (Krook and Norris 2014). In 2010, for the first time, more women than men held office in the Federal Council (the Swiss government). Second, the study extends current research on gender differences in media coverage by departing from the traditional hypothesis of gender-driven bias to explore contextual influences of gendered election coverage. As a (semi-)direct democracy in the center of Europe and at the crossroad of three language regions with distinct media markets and journalistic cultures, the Swiss case is particularly interesting for the investigation of contextual influences as it allows for an intercultural comparison of gender bias within the framework of a single federal election. Examining these contextual contingencies of gender bias may ultimately help to disentangle the seemingly conflicting findings of past research and shed light on gendered patterns of bias.

Gender, Context, and Bias in Election Coverage

The awareness that politics, news, and gender are interconnected in a complex "game of three sides" (Ross 2017: 3) lies at the core of the gendered mediation of politics.

Despite women's progress in politics over recent decades, terms like "boyzone" (Ross 2017: 31) and "masculinized domain" (Meeks 2012: 175) attest to the pervasiveness of masculine norms in politics. Through this male-as-norm lens, the media's "application of conventional political frames to women politicians can result in subtle and insidious forms of gender bias" (Gidengil and Everitt 1999: 49). The following two sections first review the traditional gender bias hypothesis, which construes bias as a series of systematic, gender-driven differences in the amount and content of political media coverage that disadvantage women politicians (e.g., Hooghe et al. 2015). Then, the role of context in the gendered mediation process of Swiss election is discussed in more detail.

(Under)Representation of Women in Election Coverage

At the level of individual candidates, quantitative representation in media coverage during election campaigns is crucial for voters' recognition and viability assessments of candidates (Kahn 1994). At the societal level, the underrepresentation of female politicians in the media may reinforce gendered (mis)perceptions about the appropriateness of specific professional positions (Eagly et al. 1992). Following this line of argument, Niven (1998: 63) suggests that by re-balancing the slanted quantitative representation of male and female politicians, "opposition to women will wane, making it progressively easier for women to pursue political office."

Past research on gender differences in the amount of candidate coverage during elections reveals disparate findings. Initial studies on U.S. elections in the 1980s demonstrated a stark underrepresentation of women candidates in newspaper coverage (e.g., Kahn 1994). However, descriptive research from the last two decades has observed a remarkable shift toward a more gender-balanced representation in terms of volume of coverage (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; but see Heldman et al. 2005). A line of research using regression models mostly supports this general narrative of women's quantitative progress in media coverage while holding contextual factors of electoral politics constant (Bode and Hennings 2012; Hayes and Lawless 2015).

The picture in Western Europe is more ambivalent. In their pan-European study on the coverage of the 2009 European Parliament election, Lühiste and Banducci (2016) find varying degrees of underrepresentation of women candidates in most of the twenty-seven EU member. European studies on national elections show evidence of persisting gaps in the amount of coverage of women candidates, including elections in the United Kingdom (Ross et al. 2013), Italy (Sensales and Areni 2017), Belgium (Hooghe et al. 2015), Romania (Dan and Iorgoveanu 2013), and to some extent in Germany (Semetko and Boomgaarden 2007). Yet a meta-analysis of fifty-two studies shows that women candidates are on average only 3.6 percentage points less visible than men candidates—although with great variation across studies (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020).

In Switzerland, past studies found a continuous underrepresentation of women candidates on television, radio, and in newspapers. Compared with the 35 percent share of women on electoral lists, women candidates consistently received only 25 percent of

election coverage (Hardmeier and Klöti 2004; Nyffeler 2001). Recently, Gilardi and Wüest (2017) used automated content analysis to count the number of candidate mentions in the 2015 German-language election coverage. From their regression analysis, the authors conclude that gender explains the amount of media mentions only in interaction with incumbency and party affiliation. However, the study does not cover the French- and Italian-speaking regions and is limited to newspaper coverage. Despite the changing—and for women improving—dynamics of the Swiss political landscape, the first hypothesis follows past evidence:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Women candidates are underrepresented in preelection media coverage compared with men candidates and relative to their share on electoral lists.

Gendered Content in Election Coverage

In addition to asking whether and to what extent women candidates are covered in the media, research on gender bias is also concerned with how they are portrayed. Even if quantitative underrepresentation of women candidates in the media seems to disappear in some countries and under certain circumstances, this does not necessarily translate into a gender-neutral coverage. In fact, many studies cited above indicate a discrepancy between gender-equal amounts and gendered patterns in candidate coverage (e.g., Bode and Hennings 2012; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008). As Ross (2017) underlines, there are persisting “issues of tone/support/hostility and, potentially, bias” as well as “more subtle and therefore more pernicious elements of gendered media coverage that reinforce normative renditions” (p. 62.)

Differential media coverage of candidates’ *personality traits* reflects pervasive gender stereotypes, which describe women as more communal and warm but men as more agentic and competent (Abele and Wojciszke 2014). On this basis, past research has differentiated between “masculine” and “feminine” traits. The so-called masculine traits include, for example, strong, competitive, effective, tough, intelligent, and aggressive; so-called female traits are compassionate, honest, congenial, emotional, etc. (see, for example, Meeks 2012). Unlike feminine traits, masculine traits are congruent not only with the masculine norms that dominate politics but also with voters’ expectations of how ideal politicians should be. This incongruence may then result in poorer evaluations of women candidates on masculine trait dimensions (Kahn 1994; Schneider and Bos 2014). Past research generally finds higher trait coverage for women candidates and a gender-stereotypical emphasis of candidates’ personality traits by the media (Dunaway et al. 2013; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Meeks 2012; Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). While no previous study on election coverage in Switzerland has analyzed personality traits, the second hypothesis posits that Swiss preelection coverage follows the generally assumed pattern of gendered trait attributions:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Preelection coverage of personality traits is higher for women than for men candidates.

Gender bias may also manifest in the way the media associate candidates with *political issues*. Two interlinked problems arise from issue coverage: First, women candidates tend to receive less issue coverage overall, with the media paying more attention to their personal background and appearance (Kahn 1994). This entails reduced opportunities for women to inform audiences about their positions, qualifications, and expertise (Dunaway et al. 2013). For example, the British press covered policy positions of women candidates only in 5 percent of the articles as opposed to staggering 85 percent for men candidates (Ross et al. 2013). Second, gender influences the specific issues that the media associate with candidates. Rooted in the same dual structure of gender stereotypes outlined above, hard political issues, such as the economy, the military, defense, and international affairs, are subsumed as traditionally “masculine,” whereas softer issues like education, welfare, health, and child-care policy are construed as “feminine” (Heldman et al. 2005; Meeks 2012). Moreover, the meta-analysis finds marginal but inconclusive evidence for gender differences in issue coverage (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). In Switzerland, past studies found media coverage to associate women candidates mostly with social, educational, and cultural policy and men with security, and economic policy (Hardmeier and Klöti 2004; Nyffeler 2001). Although these differences are small overall and lack statistical controls, a continuation of gendered issue coverage is expected:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Preelection coverage of political issues is lower for women than for men candidates.

The degree to which media content focuses on aspects of candidates’ *personal life* is another potential source of gender bias. Drawing on literature on the personalization of political communication (Gattermann 2018; Langer 2010), personalized (or privatized) coverage can be described as a “politicization of private persona” (Langer 2010: 61) through increased media attention to politicians’ nonpolitical traits, private life, and personal interests. This may distract from candidates’ political profile and thus obscure voters’ evaluation of their electoral viability (Gattermann 2018). Although the personalization literature casts this shift as a general trend in political communication, previous research on gender bias demonstrates that female politicians are affected in different, and often more negative ways, than male politicians (Meeks 2017; Van Zoonen 2006). For instance, candidate coverage more prominently discussed women’s civil status, parenthood, and partnership for some elections in the United States (Heldman et al. 2005) and Europe (Dan and Iorgoveanu 2013; Ross et al., 2013; see also Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). Trimble et al. (2013) conclude from their longitudinal analysis of political news coverage from 1975 to 2012 that “the amount of personalized reporting in Canadian newspaper accounts of leadership contenders was largely determined by their gender” (p. 475). Interestingly, past results for Switzerland do not show this gendered pattern of personalization (Hardmeier and Klöti 2004; Nyffeler 2001). The fourth hypothesis tests whether the international trend of personalization also manifests in Swiss preelection coverage twelve years after the last studies:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Preelection coverage of women candidates includes more references to their personal life than coverage of men candidates.

Contextualizing Bias: The Swiss Case

So far this paper has theorized gender bias in a kind of conceptual vacuum where the sole driver of gender differences in media coverage is candidates' gender. However, Brooks (2013: 3) highlights that the ability to "draw meaningful conclusions about the role of candidates' gender" is severely constrained by the complexity of actual election coverage, which constitutes the composite result of journalistic and political communication processes (Eberl et al. 2017). As such, election coverage—and gender bias in it—is subject to contextual influences from both politics and the media, each realm constrained by specific cultural configurations. The following discussion of the contextually rich Swiss elections extends the traditional gender bias hypothesis to include contextual influences from politics, media, and across language regions.

Swiss federal elections constitute a rich source of at least three aspects of political context. First, Switzerland's bicameral legislature is elected every four years. Even though both chambers have equal rights, their *electoral systems* differ. The National Council has two hundred members (30 percent women before the 2015 elections) and is elected by a system of proportional representation. The Council of States is composed of forty-six members (17.5 percent women), who are generally elected by a two-round majority vote. While election campaigns of the former tend to focus on national party politics, the latter tend to emphasize the much more localized role of individual politicians (Bochsler et al. 2016). In their meta-analysis, Van der Pas and Aaldering (2019) conclude that gender bias is stronger for media coverage of elections with proportional representation systems, as opposed to majoritarian systems. Second, and unlike the well-studied two-party system of U.S. politics, the Swiss party landscape is diverse with nine major parties occupying a wide range of ideological positions (Bochsler et al. 2015). Party ideology is also linked to the "ownership" of political issues (Hänggeli and Kriesi 2010; Tresch and Feddersen 2019), which, in turn, may help as a heuristic for political journalists. Third, *incumbent* and well-known politicians have been shown to benefit from greater media visibility in the Swiss media (Gilardi and Wüest 2017; Tresch 2009).

Media-related aspects represent a second source of contextual influence. The Swiss media landscape is characterized by its small and linguistically fragmented media markets, high media concentration, a relatively strong public service broadcasting company (SRG SSR Idée Suisse), and its emphasis on decentralized, regional media production with at least one major broadsheet and tabloid daily newspaper per language region. These not only follow different commercial logics but are also associated with distinct *journalistic orientations*. Tabloid journalism tends to emphasize personalization and human-interest stories, whereas broadsheet journalism is considered more analytical and oriented toward elites and their issue-agenda (e.g., Skovsgaard 2014). For instance, Dan and Iorgoveanu (2013) observe that women candidates are covered more prominently by Romanian tabloid media than men candidates. Similarly,

Humprecht and Esser (2017) suggest that *offline* patterns of gender bias in women's underrepresentation also hold true for *online* political coverage in some countries, including Switzerland, whereas Engelmann and Etzrodt (2014) find few gender differences in German newspapers' online content. Although research comparing gender bias across different types of media coverage is scarce, the recent meta-analysis further suggests that gender differences are greater in audiovisual TV coverage than in newspaper coverage (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020).

The language regions themselves mark a final source of geo-cultural context. The German-speaking area constitutes the largest region (66 percent of population), followed by the French-speaking (24 percent) and Italian-speaking (9 percent) region (Federal Statistical Office 2018). Although these regions are not separate cultural spheres, they constitute the broad geo-cultural frame in which additional political and media-related contextual influences are embedded. Bochsler et al. (2016) explain the territorial variance in election results by regional differences in parties' size, positions, campaign advertisements and expenditures, and issue agendas. For example, the regionally coordinated campaign advertisements focused much more on migration issues in the French- and Italian-speaking regions, whereas German-language political ads were concerned with economy policy. Furthermore, the media production in the three regions is marked by their "giant next-door neighbors" Germany, France, and Italy (Künzler 2009: 67) that also shape journalistic style, reporting, and professional role performance. For instance, Bonin et al. (2017) find that French-speaking journalists in Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland endorse a more politicized role with a somewhat more critical stance toward the political elite than majority-language peers.

Although the gender bias hypothesis tested in H1 to H4 construes women candidates as systematically disadvantaged in election coverage, predictions about the interactions of context with candidate gender are less straightforward. Do contextual influences attenuate or reinforce gender bias or both? Given the wide range of potential contextual influences and the lacunae in the current state of research, the research question explores the role of context in very broad strokes:

Research Question 1: How do aspects of political, media-related, and geo-cultural context affect the preelection coverage of candidates?

Data and Method

Sample and Data Collection

The aim of this paper is to investigate gender bias in the amount and content of candidate coverage of the 2015 Swiss federal elections by means of a quantitative content analysis of texts, audio-/video files, and photographs. The sample consisted of the election coverage by media outlets from the three main language regions (German, French, and Italian-speaking). For each language region, the sample included (1) the broadsheet and tabloid newspapers with the highest circulation (print version), (2) the most popular online news portal, and (3) the Swiss public broadcaster's (SRG SSR) online offer (text plus

embedded audio-/video files; see Table A1 in the Supplementary Information File). Although most past studies focused on only one type of media at a time, the goal of this comprehensive sample was to reflect the diversity of people's news consumption in everyday life. Preelection coverage was defined as the last four weeks prior to the election day in October 2015 (see Hayes and Lawless 2015). This corresponds to the period when Swiss voters receive the election material (party brochures, candidate lists, ballot cards) and potentially turn to media coverage as source of inspiration when filling out their ballot cards, which they can submit per post or in person. Data collection consisted of daily screenings of media outlets using a combination of key words (elec* or cand*) in the three languages. Then, all mentioned candidates in the screened articles were looked up individually on the official electoral lists. Only articles mentioning at least one of 3,788 running candidates (34.5 percent women) were retained for subsequent coding. The final sample consisted of 905 written news stories (print and online) with 351 photographs and 146 embedded audio-/video files.

The individual candidate presentation represented the unit of analysis. To keep data collection manageable, only the first four mentioned candidates were coded. On average, 2.4 candidates were coded per news story. Each candidate covered in each news story was treated as a separate observation. As opposed to analyses at the level of news stories, candidate-based analyses have the advantage of accounting for a variety of candidate characteristics, such as party affiliation and incumbency (Lühiste and Banducci 2016). The final data set contained 1,516 text, 204 audio-/video, and 337 photograph candidate presentations.

Coding and Measures

All coding was conducted by eight coders after extensive training. Four dependent measures of candidate coverage were coded.¹ First, the *amount of media coverage* was operationalized as the number of candidates' total mentions, with each candidate in a news story counting as one mention (i.e., max one mention per news story; $M = 12.71$, $SD = 14.64$; intercoder reliability for the decision to code a candidate mention Krippendorff's $\alpha = .97$). Second, *trait coverage* was measured as the sum of personality traits per candidate coding ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.68$, $\alpha = .69$). *Personality traits* were operationalized as fourteen semantic fields with a positive and negative valence dimension where words or short phrases with similar semantic meaning were also coded. For instance, the comment "she went to almost every press conference last week" was considered to capture an "active" personality trait (see Magin and Stark 2010 for a discussion). Third, *issue coverage* was measured as the sum of eight different political issues that could be linked to a candidate in a news story ($M = 0.57$, $SD = 0.91$, $\alpha = .77$). This could either take the form of candidates' own quotes or journalists' thematic association of an issue with a candidate. Fourth, *personalization coverage* was measured as the sum of references to candidates' personal life per news story, including mentions of candidates' age, civil status, sexual orientation, (non-)parenthood, and (non-)partnership ($M = 0.43$, $SD = 0.72$; $\alpha = .82$). All dependent measures follow a negative binomial distribution with for count data typical overdispersion.

The main independent measure is candidate gender (1 = women candidates), which was determined by analyzing the use of gender-specific personal pronouns or forms of address. Furthermore, various measures of context were coded. Measures of political context included candidate *incumbency* (1 = incumbent) and the *electoral system* of the office that they are running for—that is, either for the Council of States with a majoritarian election system (=0) or for the National Council with a proportional representation system (=1). In addition, standardized *party ideology* was measured as a pseudo-metric proxy for party affiliation (see discussion above). This was done by ordering all nine major parties from 1 (left-wing and progressive) to 9 (right-wing and conservative) based on their ideological position (Bochsler et al. 2015) and then standardizing scores. Furthermore, the reverse coded and standardized *position on electoral lists* from 0 (least competitive position) to 1 (most competitive position) was used as a control variable. The media-related context measures are the *type of media* of candidate coverage (text, audiovisual, or photographs),² whether the coverage was published *offline* (=0) or *online* (=1), and the *journalistic orientation* of the news outlet, that is, either broadsheet (=0) or tabloid journalism (=1). Finally, the geo-cultural context was captured by dummy variables indicating whether coverage was published in the German-, French-, or Italian-speaking *language region*.

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows a combined descriptive and explanatory approach. On the one hand, descriptive cross-tabulations compare the shares of coverage measure between men and women candidates and provide a general test of gender differences, first assessing the overall association between the two variables and then testing for differences at the level of the individual item. On the other hand, a series of negative binomial regression models on all dependent measures are run to explain the amount and content of preelection coverage and provide a first exploration of contextual influences. To identify more subtle gender differences, trait and issue coverage are further investigated by running separate models for negative and positive traits and feminine and masculine issues, respectively (see Tables A6–A9 in the Supplementary Information File for full results).

Results

Gender Bias in the Amount of Media Coverage

Large absolute gender differences emerged in the quantitative representation of candidates in all language regions. Men candidates consistently outnumbered women candidates in written news stories (print and online), audio and video coverage, and in photographs. As shown in Table 1, men candidates accounted for roughly 76 percent of total candidate coverage, whereas women candidates constituted 24 percent of the total coverage. However, the shares of coverage did not significantly differ from the shares of the gender split on electoral lists, $\chi^2(3) = 7.51, p = .057$, Cramér's $V = .016$, thus only partially supporting H1.

Table 1. Chi-Square Test of Significance for Observed versus Expected Shares of Candidate Mentions for Women and Men Candidates in Swiss Preelection Coverage.

	Women Candidates (n = 500)	Men Candidates (n = 1,557)	List Difference (34.5% Women)	χ^2	p	Cramér's V
Text (n = 1,516)	23.0	77.0	-11.5	2.69	.61	.07
Audio/video (n = 204)	26.0	74.0	-8.5	1.23	.99	.04
Photos (n = 335)	28.8	71.2	-5.7	0.51	.99	.03
All (n = 2,057)	24.3	75.7	-10.2	2.03	.91	.07

Note. $\chi^2(3) = 1.03$, $p = .781$, Cramér's $V = .02$. Bonferroni correction was applied to all pairwise post hoc comparisons.

Crucially, the quantitative gender bias persisted even after accounting for contextual influences, as illustrated by the negative marginal effect for women candidates depicted in Figure 1 ($B = -1.09$, $SE = 0.07$, $Z = -7.81$). In line with previous studies (Gilardi and Wüest 2017; Tresch 2009), incumbent candidates received more media coverage ($B = 1.06$, $SE = 0.06$, $Z = 18.56$); unlike Gilardi and Wüest (2017), however, this study found no positive interaction between gender and incumbency ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.17$, $Z = .55$). Also, media coverage tended to focus less on candidates running for the National Council with its proportional representation system (PR-System) compared with those running for the Council of States ($B = -0.93$, $SE = 0.06$, $Z = -14.25$). Yet the positive interaction term between the electoral system and gender indicates that women partially resisted the attentional pull of majoritarian election campaigns ($B = 0.85$, $SE = 0.15$, $Z = 5.83$). Irrespective of gender, candidates of right-wing parties were mentioned more in the media than those of left-wing parties ($B = -0.48$, $SE = 0.09$, $Z = -5.03$).

In sum, the political context neither harmed nor substantially boosted women's media visibility. The media-related context, however, appeared to be more disadvantageous for women candidates. The type of media mattered: Audiovisual coverage, as opposed to newspaper text, was associated with higher shares of coverage overall ($B = 0.71$, $SE = 0.07$, $Z = 9.58$). The significant interaction with gender shows that bias was further amplified in audiovisual coverage ($B = -1.33$, $SE = 0.24$, $Z = -5.60$), supporting recent meta-analytics findings (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). Finally, differences in women's quantitative representation emerged between language regions. Although media in the French-language region reported less on the elections ($B = -0.21$, $SE = 0.07$, $Z = -3.20$), their coverage was slightly more favorable for women candidates ($B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.13$, $Z = 2.50$).

Gender Bias in the Content of Media Coverage

Although the absolute underrepresentation of women candidates persisted, there is little evidence of gender bias in the content of coverage. Coverage on candidates'

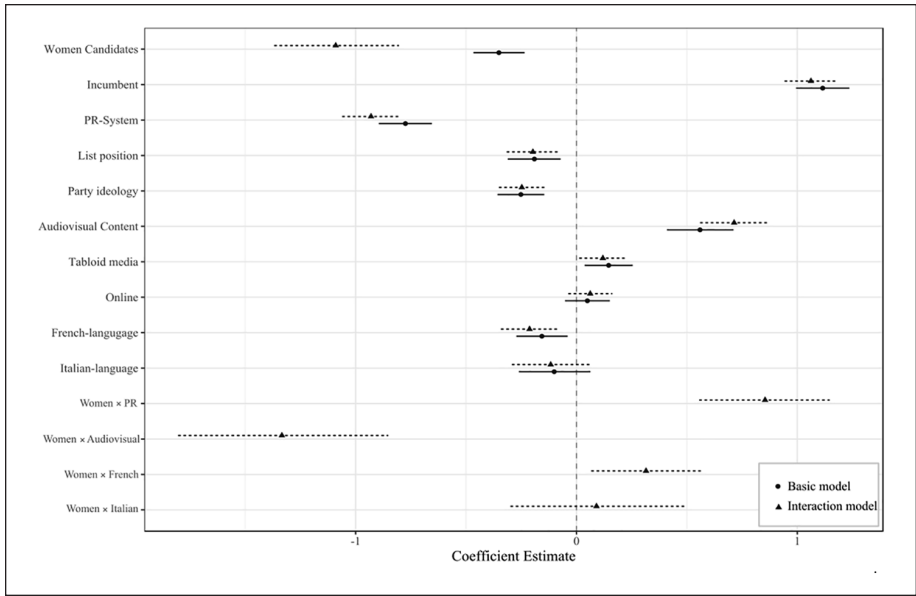


Figure 1. Predicting the amount of media coverage for candidates in the Swiss federal elections 2015 using negative binomial regression models.
Note. Dots represent average marginal effect estimates and spikes for 95 percent CI. CI = confidence interval.

personality traits, political issues, and personal lives revealed little or no systematic differences along the gender lines.

No clear gendered patterns emerged in the way the media ascribe *personality traits* to candidates. In line with other studies (Dunaway et al., 2013; Magin and Stark 2010), the attention given to personality traits in the media coverage of candidates was rather low (see Table A3 in the Supplementary Information File). The five most commonly used personality traits (strong, rational, active, authentic, and successful) all have positive connotations and reflect agentic personality traits (apart from authentic), which are perceived as being more descriptive of male politicians (Schneider and Bos 2014).³ Although prior research observed increased trait coverage for women candidates (Meeks 2012), no such association emerged in this study ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.07$, $Z = 1.41$; see Figure 2). Moreover, context only marginally affected trait coverage, with incumbency negatively ($B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.07$, $Z = -3.41$) and Italian-language media positively ($B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.09$, $Z = 3.43$) predicting the amount of trait coverage in media content. Separate models for positive and negative trait coverage show no gendered differences (see left panel of Figure 3). However, the reporting of Italian-language media made more frequent use of positive traits ($B = 0.42$, $SE = 0.10$, $Z = 4.14$), which were more often applied to parties from the political right ($B = 0.43$, $SE = 0.13$, $Z = 3.32$). H2 cannot be confirmed: Coverage of personality traits did not significantly differ between men and women candidates.

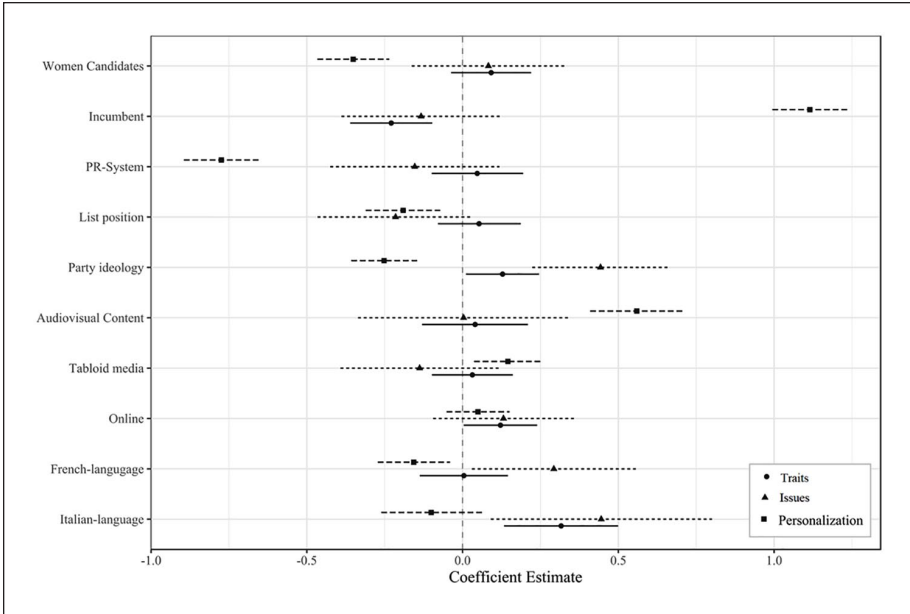


Figure 2. Predicting content of media coverage for candidates in the Swiss federal elections 2015 using negative binomial regression models.

Note. Dots represent average marginal effect estimates with spikes for 95 percent CI. Models are shown without interactions because they did not significantly increase the fit. CI = confidence interval.

In contrast to the existing research (Kittilson and Fridkin 2008; Meeks 2012), this study found no evidence of gender-stereotypical association of *political issues* to candidates, $\chi^2(7) = 0.523, p = .47$, Cramér's $V = .024$ (see Table A4 in the Supplementary Information File). The distribution of soft and hard political issues was balanced between male and female politicians, with immigration policy being the most prominent issue for both. Moreover, context, not gender, predicted the coverage of political issues. Parties from the political right received more issue coverage compared with more leftist parties ($B = 0.85, SE = 0.21, Z = 3.94$; see Figure 2) and both French- and Italian-language media put more emphasis on politicians' issues as compared with German-language media ($B = 0.30, SE = 0.13, Z = 2.22$ and $B = 0.44, SE = 0.18, Z = 2.49$). As depicted in the right panel of Figure 3, the same pattern holds true for the coverage of masculine but not feminine issues. The results point to a rejection of H3: Preelection coverage of political issues did not vary between gender groups. However, there is some gendered evidence manifests in the form of context-driven masculine issues—and in particular immigration policy—emerging as drivers of the media's issue agenda.

Finally, media coverage, at first glance, included higher shares of references to women candidates' *personal life* compared with men candidates, although the overall association of personalization coverage and gender does not reach statistical

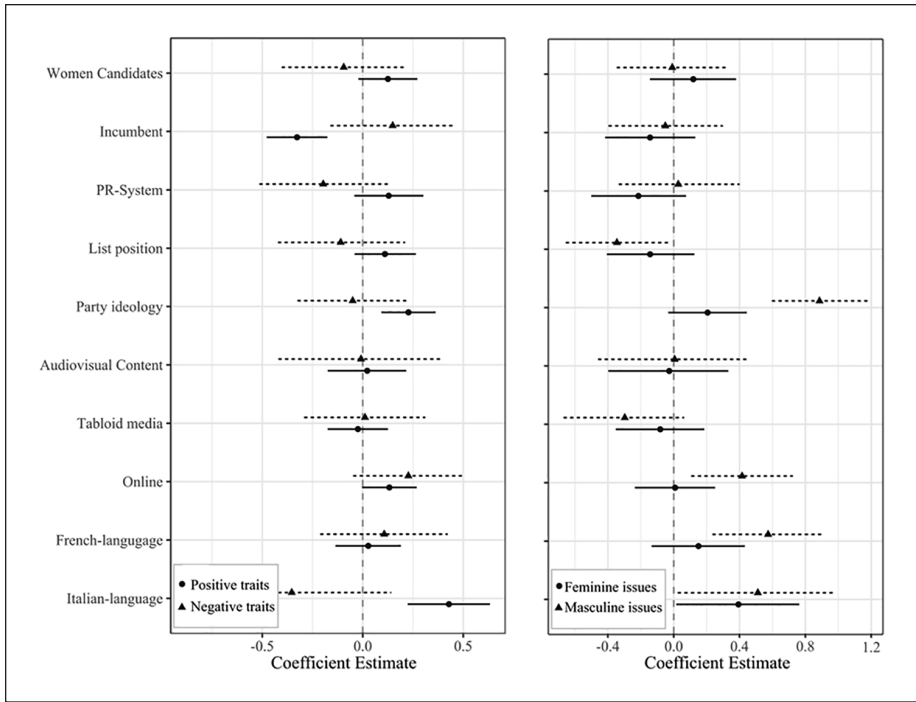


Figure 3. Predicting negative and positive trait coverage (left panel) and feminine and masculine issue coverage (right panel) for candidates in the Swiss federal elections 2015 using negative binomial regression models.

Note. Dots represent average marginal effect estimates with spikes for 95 percent CI. Models are shown without interactions because they did not significantly increase the fit. CI = confidence interval.

significance, $\chi^2(4) = 5.16$, $p = .27$, Cramér's $V = .12$ (see Table A5 in the Supplementary Information File). The Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons of individual personalization items showed only significantly higher mentions of women candidates' age compared with men candidates, $\chi^2(1) = 83.42$, $p < .01$, Cramér's $V = .37$. Moreover, results of the regression analysis depicted in Figure 2 suggest that women are negatively associated with the amount of personalization coverage ($B = -0.36$; $SE = 0.06$, $Z = -6.30$); however, the overall low number of references to candidates' personal life—and for women in particular—calls for a careful interpretation of this result. The amount of personalization coverage was further affected by context. Incumbent candidates and those running for the Council of States both received more personalized coverage ($B = 1.12$, $SE = 0.06$, $Z = 19.29$ and $B = -0.77$, $SE = 0.06$, $Z = -13.07$). Similarly, personalization coverage was higher in tabloid media ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.05$, $Z = 2.68$) and in audiovisual content ($B = 0.56$, $SE = 0.07$, $Z = 7.82$)—both predictors for higher coverage in general (see Figure 1). In fact, candidates whose personal life was covered by the media tend to receive more

media coverage altogether (Pearson's $r = .29$, $p < .01$; see Table A2 in the Supplementary Information File). H4 is thus rejected as well: Media coverage did not include more references to women candidates' personal life and the degree of personalization was low overall.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper investigated gender bias in amount and content of candidate coverage as well as its contextual influences in the run up to the 2015 Swiss federal elections. The findings provide almost no support for any of the four tests of the traditional gender bias hypothesis. First, women candidates remain underrepresented across all types of media and all language regions compared with men candidates. The study thus adds Switzerland to the list of European countries with stagnating bias in the absolute amount of media coverage (Lühiste and Banducci 2016), which continues to be problematic because the lack of women's visibility in election coverage may slant voters' heuristic assessment of women candidates' viability and appropriateness for office (Niven 1998). However, this absolute bias was in line with women's relative underrepresentation on electoral lists; therefore, the media did not disproportionately underrepresent women. This lack of additional media bias against women suggests that female underrepresentation might disappear if more women ran for office (but see Lawless and Fox 2010 for an extensive discussion of barriers to women's decision to run for office). Second, the media's emphasis on masculine traits, while arguably further cementing the norms of masculinized politics (Meeks 2012; Schneider and Bos 2014), is dampened by the fact that journalists' attribution of traits is rare and gender-balanced overall. Third, women candidates neither receive less nor different coverage of political issues. The results suggest that key issues of an election campaign—that is, the masculine issue of immigration in the case of the federal elections in 2015—set the media's issue agenda irrespective of candidates' gender. Immigration policy has traditionally been “owned” by the Swiss People's Party from the political right (Tresch and Feddersen 2019). The increased issue coverage for parties of the political right thus supports the notion that the media tend to respect these ownership patterns and report accordingly (Hänggli and Kriesi 2010). Fourth, the study finds no support for the previously observed bias of more personalized media coverage for women (Dan and Iorgoveanu 2013; Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). Moreover, it is questionable whether the overall low amount of personalization coverage could significantly trivialize or slant readers' perception of women candidates. The results thus extend the growing body of empirical research demonstrating a lack of media personalization of politics (e.g., Gattermann 2018), challenging the often-theorized shift in politics toward the personal. Interestingly, the study observes similar empirical patterns for personalization and the amount of coverage, yet their (causal) relationship warrants further investigation. Does more coverage increase the probability that candidates' personal life is discussed? Or do candidates willingly divulge personal information and enter the “danse macabre” (Ross 2010: 272) with political journalists in search of newsworthy stories? In the first case, references to the personal are merely

side effects of increased media attention. The second case of candidates' intentional dissemination of personal information could present a promising strategy for candidates to boost their media visibility.

Furthermore, this study provides a first comprehensive empirical exploration of the notion that gender bias not only follows from candidates' gender alone but also emerges from an interplay of contextual aspects. The results suggest that political, media-related, and geo-cultural contexts indeed influence all investigated forms of gender bias, both augmenting and diminishing gender effects in election coverage. Aspects of *political context* are related to candidates' overall viability, as illustrated by the tendency of Swiss media to focus more—and in a more personalized manner—on high-profile candidates (i.e., incumbents and candidates running for the Council of States) of whom fewer are women. The advantage of incumbency does not interact with—and therefore does not protect women from—gender bias in media visibility (e.g., Gilardi and Wüest 2017); however, gender bias is reduced in the race for the National Council with proportional representation. This is surprising, as meta-analytic findings suggest that proportional representation systems tend to exacerbate, not attenuate, gender bias (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). One possible explanation might lie in the fact that both chambers are elected simultaneously in federal elections. This situation of dual campaigning increases candidates' competition for journalists' attention, who may regard the race for the Council of State, with a much smaller pool of high-profile candidates (Bochsler et al. 2016), as more newsworthy. It might therefore be advisable for women candidates to participate in both races given that a combined campaign strategy might yield more media opportunities. Nonetheless, it remains unclear what aspects of electoral systems drive coverage in which ways.

Beyond the “usual suspects” of political communication, the study shows that *media-related* and *geo-cultural contexts* are also part of the mediation process of election campaigns. Tabloid media dedicate more space to candidates in general and specifically to aspects of their personal life. This crossing of the personal with the popular is what Van Zoonen (2006) calls the advent of “celebrity politics” (p. 287). The extent to which this particular form of mediatized politics differs from the traditional media and party logic remains an open question. Moreover, because tabloid and broadsheet journalism cater to different audiences (Skovsgaard 2014), the potential effects of gendered media coverage may vary as well. With regard to the type of medium, women candidates' more pronounced underrepresentation in audiovisual coverage is critical, because audiovisual information constitutes a particularly rich source of political learning and candidate evaluation (Grabe and Bucy 2009). The results further highlight the fact that audiovisual coverage is more likely to discuss aspects of candidates' personal life. By adding a personal layer, audiovisual coverage potentially renders candidates more multidimensional and therefore potentially more relatable. Because (self-)personalizing women in an interactive online environment receive more favorable candidate evaluations than nonpersonalizing women—although to a lesser extent than personalizing men candidates (Meeks 2017)—their absence in audiovisual content may potentially deprive them of an effective way of connecting with the electorate.

Finally, the extent and form of gender bias varies across language regions. The discussion of the broader geo-cultural context can be broken down into three potential explanations of variation in election coverage. A linguistic explanation would attribute differences in media coverage to subtle differences in journalistic language use. For instance, the increased amount of trait coverage in Italian-language media can be seen as a result of differences in the linguistic representation of personality traits. In fact, recent psycholexical studies suggest that taxonomies of personality traits (such as the “Big Five” in the English language) contain language-specific semantic components which may vary in valence and frequency of use (De Raad et al. 2010). Geographical explanations would emphasize the relevance of local particularities for journalists’ judgments about what constitutes a newsworthy story. This is exemplified in the tendency of Italian- and French-language media to focus more on issues—and on immigration policy in particular. The long (and controversial) history of cross-border labor commuting in the Italian-speaking and in parts of the French-speaking region may have provided particularly fertile ground for electoral debates on immigration policy to thrive. From a structural perspective, an interplay of regional determinants of the media market, party landscape, and journalistic culture may constitute additional drivers of differences between language regions.

This study is not without limitations. Starting with these imperfect explanations of geo-cultural variance, it is beyond the scope of this study to confirm nor refute them; nonetheless, they mark a point of departure for future more fine-grained research on geo-cultural influences on electoral coverage in multilingual democracies. Similarly, the differences between type of media coverage warrant further investigation. Although this study neglects the content-dimension of visual election coverage, a more complete and explicit test of different coverage types is needed to tease out gendered differences. A drawback of this study’s focus on mass media election coverage is that it does not account for candidates’ own campaign communication, including on social media. It is, for example, likely that candidates that actively feed and participate in electoral discourses on social media are more easily attract the attention of traditional mass media. Lastly, post-2015 social movements like #metoo or “*Helvetia ruft!*”—a cross-partisan initiative by female parliamentarians to boost women’s representation in Swiss politics—have shifted the social and political landscape for women candidates and changed the contextual dynamics of their election campaigns.

The implication of the contextualized gendering of electoral coverage observed in this study is that current claims of gender bias in the media should be extended to claims of gender-context bias. This may not only soften the discouraging effect of the anticipated media hostility to women candidates (Brooks and Hayes 2019) but also more adequately reflects the societal dimension of the problem at hand. Gender bias in electoral politics is not limited to the work of insensitive journalists or a fuzzy heuristic but rather the product of a society that still makes it considerably more difficult for women than for men to ascend to political positions of power. Despite signs of improvement in media content, traces of gender bias persist—in political media coverage and in its contexts.

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ORCID iD

Tobias Rohrbach  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0151-1377>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Complete lists of items for each dependent variables are available in the Supplementary Information File.
2. Despite the rich literature on the interplay of verbal and visual components of news (Dan 2018; Grabe and Bucy 2009), this study considers each modality separately for coding and analysis as the goal is to tease out differences between them. Thus, the verbal-based coding of traits, issues, and personalization was not conducted for photographs because the image-specific operationalization of these measures would not be directly comparable with text and audiovisual data.
3. Given the low number of occurrences for each trait, no significance tests were run.

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Author Biographies

Tobias Rohrbach is a PhD teaching and research assistant at the University of Fribourg. His research focuses on gender effects in political communication, including representations, behavior, and evaluations of political candidates.

Stephanie Fiechtner is a PhD student at the University of Fribourg. Her research interests include the potential of knowledge relevant content in mass media, public service media, science communication, and gender representations.

Philomen Schönhagen is full professor of mass media and communication research at the University of Fribourg. She specializes in communication and media history, gender and media, theories of journalism and mass communication (as well as their history), and qualitative methods in mass media and communication research.

Manuel Puppis is full professor in media systems and media structures at the University of Fribourg. His research interests include media policy, media regulation and media governance, media systems in a comparative perspective, political communication, and organization theory.