The Social Policy Gender Gap among Political Elites:
Testing Attitudinal Explanations

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Abstract. Scholars of political elite behavior have documented a strong link between gender and social policy focus among politicians. In the electoral, legislative, and governmental arena, female politicians give higher priority to social policy matters. While this gender gap is well-documented, it is less well understood. Using measures of campaign issue emphasis as a dependent variable, this paper tests three attitudinal explanations: issue salience, ideology, and partisanship. Surprisingly, none of these predictors reduces the gender gap in campaign emphasis. These results suggest that there may be little attitudinal basis for the behavioral gender gap on social policy among political elites.

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Introduction

Empirical research has demonstrated a strong correlation between gender and social policy focus among political elites. In the electoral arena, women candidates regularly emphasize welfare state issues more than men. In the legislative arena, women are more likely to sponsor bills and give speeches on social policy. Also, female legislators are less underrepresented on committees dealing with social policy than in other areas. In the governmental arena, ministerial appointments display a similar gender skew. Portfolios such as social affairs, family affairs, or health care are much more likely to be held by women politicians than most other departments. In addition, there is an extensive literature showing that stronger female political representation is correlated with higher social expenditures and greater welfare generosity.

While this gender gap in the behavior of political elites is well-documented, it is less well understood. This paper tests three attitudinal explanations: First, women politicians may simply view social policy matters as intrinsically more important than their male colleagues, therefore giving higher priority to welfare-related issues in their political work. Second, women politicians may be more left-leaning on socio-economic matters than their male counterparts, which may cause them to pursue a more redistributionist agenda in campaigns, legislatures and governments. Third, women are more likely to self-select into parties of the left. These parties are likely to instill in its members and activists norms and values that lead to greater attention to welfare state issues.

These three explanations – issue salience, ideology, and partisanship – are tested with data from a survey of parliamentary candidates in Austria. The analysis reveals a stark gender gap in the candidates’ campaign behavior: Women are more likely than men to emphasize welfare state issues. Yet, as a series of nested regression models shows, none of the three key independent variables can account for these gender differences. Attitudinal differences between men and women (which do exist in the data) thus offer no explanation for the observed behavioral gender gap. The conclusion to this paper discusses limits to the generalizability of the findings and sketches alternative explanations for the gender gap in social policy focus, such as instrumental motivations for individual politicians (vote-seeking and office-seeking) as well as the role of the ‘gender system’ (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999).
The gender gap in social policy

Gender is a structural force that pervades all organizations (Acker 1990; Britton and Logan 2008), including political institutions, be they legislatures, governments, parties or interest groups (Bolzendahl 2014; Caul 2001; Kirsch and Blaschke 2014; Reynolds 1999). The gendered nature of political institutions produces, and is perpetuated by, a specific division of labor between male and female politicians (Brush 2003). While women have made great advances in terms of quantitative political representation (Paxton, Kunovich, and Hughes 2007), this division of labor continues to enforce qualitative gender inequalities in terms of status and power.

One of the domains where these gendered patterns of policy specialization have become most clearly visible is the welfare state. As this section argues in greater detail below, gender and social policy are inextricably linked across many political arenas, from the electoral stage and the legislative process to ministerial appointments and policy making (Sainsbury 1994, 1999). Issues relating to the welfare state are more central to the work of female politicians than to that of their male counterparts. This social policy gender gap in political elite behavior has been documented by a wealth of research from multiple cultural and political contexts.1

Campaign communication

A number of studies on elections in the United States have identified a gender gap in campaign issue emphasis. Kahn (1993, 1996) finds that campaign ads by female candidates for the U.S. Senate are much more likely to feature references to social policy. The same gender difference has been reported for candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives (Dabelko and Herrnson 1997), and for sub-national races in the U.S. (Larson 2001). Other research has identified similar patterns, but only for Democratic candidates (Schaffner 2005). What is more, targeting social issues may be a winning strategy for female politicians. Herrnson et al. (2003), for instance, report that women candidates who emphasized stereotypically ‘female’ issues and targeted women’s groups in their campaigns gained an electoral advantage from this strategy.

While studies of American elections dominate this field, the gender gap in campaign emphasis is not limited to the United States. Similar differences in the campaign communication of male and female candidates have been found in places as different as
Northern Europe (Bjarnegård, Coffé, and Zetterberg 2015), Austria (Ennser-Jedenastik 2017a), and Hong Kong (Lee 2007). What is more, a comparable mechanism is at work at the party level, where greater intra-party representation of women leads to a stronger emphasis on social justice and the welfare state (Kittilson 2011).

**Ministerial appointments**

The gender typing of policy areas is not limited to issue emphasis, though. Research has also found a stark functional gender segregation in the policy specialization of political elites. Strong evidence for this comes from studies on the allocation of ministerial portfolios. Davis (1997) finds that portfolios such as social welfare, health, family, and youth are much more likely to be filled with female appointees than ministries of finance, defense, justice, or interior. Reynolds (1999, 564) concludes that the link between appointee gender and policy focus holds across continents: ‘Whether in Europe, Africa, or Asia, there remain only a handful of women across the continent in the four key ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finance, Home Affairs, and Defense’ (see also Siaroff 2000, endnote 15). This pattern also extends to the cabinets of U.S. presidents, where women are often appointed as Secretaries of Health, Welfare, or Education (Borrelli 2002), and Latin America, where women are less underrepresented in portfolios dealing with health, welfare, education, the environment, and family policy (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005).

**Legislative behavior**

With regard to the legislative arena, multiple studies have shown that committees dealing with social policy have a less skewed gender balance than those dedicated to other policy areas (Coffé and Schnellecke 2013; Diaz 2005; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Pansardi and Vercesi 2017; Yule 2000). Importantly, self-selection rather than open discrimination appears to primarily drive this pattern (Bækgaard and Kjaer 2012; Thomas 1994).

Furthermore, Bäck et al.’s (2014) analysis of parliamentary speeches given in the Swedish Riksdag finds a considerable gender gap on issues such as macroeconomics, finance, or transportation. Yet male and female members of parliament take the floor at equal rates on health, welfare, and education. In a similar vein, Schwindt-Bayer’s (2006) study of Latin America shows that women legislators are more likely to initiate bills dealing with children and family issues, education, health, and women’s issues. These findings concur with results
from a number of studies of the U.S. congress (Swers 2002; Thomas 1994; for an overview, see Wängnerud 2009). Legislatures thus remain strongly gendered institutions, with a marked division of labor between men and women politicians that becomes especially visible in the realm of social policy (Bolzendahl 2014).

**Policy making**

In addition to the evidence for the social policy gender gap coming from studies of campaigning, portfolio allocation, and legislative behavior, there is an extensive literature covering the influence that female political representation has on social policy outputs. Arguing that better descriptive representation leads to more substantive representation, the (sometimes misunderstood) ‘critical mass’ concept (Childs and Krook 2008; Dahlerup 1988; Kanter 1977a, b) holds that legislatures with a higher proportion of female members should produce more women-friendly policy output.

Importantly, much of the evidence in favor of the ‘critical mass’ proposition comes from research on social policy making, be it child care provision in Norwegian and Swedish municipalities (Bratton and Ray 2002; Svaleryd 2009), policies towards the elderly in the U.S. states (Giles-Sims, Green, and Lockhart 2012), child health outcomes in developing countries (Swiss, Fallon, and Burgos 2012), or family leave and child benefit policies in developed nations (Bonoli and Reber 2010; Ennser-Jedenastik 2017b; Kittilson 2008). Some of the strongest results for the importance of gender in social policy have been reported by Catherine Bolzendahl who shows that welfare spending and benefit generosity are systematically related to the political representation of women (Bolzendahl 2009, 2010, 2011; Bolzendahl and Brooks 2007).

**Explaining the gender gap on social policy**

While the evidence discussed above documents a strong correlation between gender and social policy focus in political elite behavior, the causes for these patterns are not very well understood. This section proposes three attitudinal hypotheses to explain this phenomenon: (1) women politicians view social policy as more important (*issue salience*), (2) women politicians are more left-wing on socio-economic matters (*ideology*), and (3) women politicians are more likely to self-select into parties of the left which put greater emphasis on
welfare state issues (*partisanship*). In statistical terms, the expectation is that these three variables mediate the effect of gender on social policy focus.

**Issue salience**

The most straightforward hypothesis for explaining why women focus more on social policy in their political work is that female politicians simply view this policy area as intrinsically more salient. After all, many of the works on legislative behavior (and others) suggest as much (Bækgaard and Kjaer 2012; Coffé and Schnellecke 2013; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Swers 2002; Thomas 1994). However, these findings in and of themselves do not present evidence that the behavioral gender gap is rooted in attitudinal gender differences regarding the importance of social policy issues.

Some elite studies, however, have directly examined the impact of gender on perceived issue importance. Wängnerud (2000, 83), for instance, reports massive gender differences in social policy salience among members of the Swedish *Riksdag*. Asked which issues they are personally most interested in, half of all female respondents mentioned welfare issues, whereas only one in six male MPs did so. Schwindt-Bayer (2006) also reports gender gaps in issue salience from a survey of legislators in Latin America. She finds that women legislators rate children’s and family issues as more important than men (the same is not true for health care, though). Based on these findings, the first hypothesis posits that the social policy gender gap is a result of gender differences in perceived issue importance.

**H1 (issue salience):** Female politicians focus on social policy more than their male colleagues because they perceive social policy matters to be more important.

Empirically, this hypothesis implies that the social policy gender gap in political behavior diminishes after controlling for the individual-level salience of welfare issues.

**Ideology**

It has long been observed that, at the mass level, women’s preferences are somewhat further to the left than men’s. Not only do women in the United States and Europe vote for left-wing parties in greater numbers (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2004; Edlund and Pande 2002; Giger 2009; Inglehart and Norris 2003), they also prefer a more expansive welfare state
and higher levels of redistribution (Edlund, Haider, and Pande 2005; Finseraas, Jakobsson, and Kotsadam 2012; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006).

There are good reasons to assume that this gender gap in political preferences may also hold among political elites. After all, women’s movements and organizations were instrumental not only in the political empowerment of women, but also in pushing for the implementation of redistributive policies (Bertone 2003; Hobson and Lindholm 1997; Lewis and Åström 1992). Furthermore, the ‘politics of presence’ argument (Phillips 1995) implies that, female politicians represent women’s collective interests, thus advocating for, *inter alia*, welfare policies that increase women’s autonomy. Indeed, a number of studies show that female politicians are ideologically more left-wing on socio-economic issues (Erickson 1997; Poggione 2004), although with significant variation by party (Lloren and Rosset forthcoming). While it is thus important to note that such ideological differences are not universally found (e.g. Lovenduski and Norris 2003), the literature clearly supports the hypothesis that behavioral gender differences may be a result of a gender gap in ideology.

The mechanism by which such differences in attitudes feed into differences in campaign behavior has been suggested by the saliency theory of party competition. Politicians should emphasize those issues on which their preferred course of action is popular (Budge and Farlie 1983; Budge et al. 2001). Given the continued popularity of redistributive policy (Jæger 2006, 163), it is rational for politicians with a pro-welfare agenda to talk more about social policy in election campaigns. Empirically, this implies a correlation between leftist preferences and a greater focus on welfare state issues.

**H2 (ideology):** Female politicians focus on social policy more than their male colleagues because they are more left-wing on socio-economic matters.

This hypothesis suggests that the behavioral gender gap in relation to social policy matters shrinks once we control for socio-economic attitudes.

**Partisanship**

Clearly, the entry of women into the political sphere has been mediated by parties. Their organizational and ideological makeup is a crucial determinant of female political representation (Caul 1999, 2001). Yet parties do not simply recruit individuals to pursue
political careers, they also provide an environment that socializes people into internalizing the norms and values that are central to the party.

The third hypothesis is based on the premise that women are more likely than men to identify with parties of the left, and therefore also more likely to pursue a political career through leftist parties which are usually viewed as owning the issue of the welfare state (Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004). Since women have made much greater strides in leftist parties that typically put stronger emphasis on welfare state issues, the observation that gender and social policy focus among politicians correlate may be explained by the fact that women politicians are more likely to come from parties of the left.

H3 (partisanship): Female politicians focus on social policy more than their male colleagues because they are more strongly represented in parties of the left.

For this hypothesis to hold we would expect the behavioral gender gap in social policy focus to shrink when taking party affiliation into account. To be sure, partisanship is not (primarily) an attitudinal indicator, since people joining parties is a basic form of political behavior. Yet, the partisan environment that people operate in instills in them values and norms about which issues to prioritize in their political work, above and beyond what an individual’s ideology or issue salience prescribes.

**Case selection, method, and data**

The three hypotheses outlined above will be tested on data from a survey of parliamentary candidates conducted as part of the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES) in the aftermath of the 2013 general election (Müller, Eder, and Jenny 2016). In terms of institutions, Austria is a fairly typical case among West European parliamentary democracies. Its proportional electoral system enables multi-party competition and thus typically produces coalition governments.

Despite the presence of weak preferential voting, candidates’ chances of entering parliament are almost completely determined by their rank on the party list. While parties and party leaders are thus the main actors in elections, the large overall number of candidates (almost 4,000 in 2013) limits the extent to which campaign strategies can be centralized. As a
result, personalized campaign efforts are a common occurrence (Eder, Jenny, and Müller 2015), with candidates tailoring campaign messages to their own or their constituents’ preferences. Importantly for the purpose of this paper, this implies that the party in central office has only limited sway over the campaign agendas of individual candidates.

The survey data on which the analysis is based were compiled through a mail questionnaire sent in late 2013 to all 3,959 candidates listed in any of the three tiers (regional, Land, or national) of the Austrian electoral system. A total of 1,079 responses were returned, which represents a response rate of 27 percent. The resulting sample is slightly biased towards older and well-educated candidates, but matches the gender makeup of the candidate population very well. It also has Freedom Party (FPÖ) candidates somewhat underrepresented, whereas the opposite is true of Green party candidates. Yet, along a number of socio-demographic characteristics the overall makeup of the sample closely mirrors the candidate population (for details, see appendix in Eder, Jenny, and Müller 2017).

### Table 1  Campaign emphasis by gender (column percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue emphasis</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social policy &amp; families</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a little</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fairly much</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a lot</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>1,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; social care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a little</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fairly much</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a lot</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>1,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensions &amp; old-age provisions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not at all</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a little</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fairly much</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a lot</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>1,045</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages do not always sum to 100 due to rounding.

The sample thus also covers much of the geographic, socio-demographic and ideological diversity that exists within parties. Importantly, a sizeable subset of respondents (about one in
five) can be considered professional politicians, that is, they hold (or have held) elected or party office at the Land, the national, or the European level, or have worked as a political aide to a politician at one of those levels. A substantial proportion (60 percent) have experience working as deputies in a municipal council. Most respondents are thus people who strongly identify with their party and invest considerable energy and time into their political activity.

As a dependent variable the analysis will use responses to a question about campaign behavior: ‘How much did you emphasize the following issues in the campaign?’ Three of the 25 listed items are relevant for the present purpose: social policy and families, health and social care, and pensions and old-age provisions. Responses were recorded on an ordinal scale: ‘not at all’, ‘a little’, ‘fairly much’, ‘a lot’.

As Table 1 demonstrates, this measure of campaign issue emphasis yields the expected differences by gender. In particular, female candidates are much more likely to have emphasized social policy issues ‘a lot’. Calculating Cramér’s $V$ for the cross-tabs between gender and the three ordinal issue emphasis variables results in values of 0.18 for social policy and families ($p < 0.001$, $N = 1,050$), 0.20 for health and social care ($p < 0.001$, $N = 1,047$), and 0.09 for pensions and old-age provisions ($p = 0.048$, $N = 1,045$).

To operationalize H1 (issue salience), two dichotomous indicators are used. The first captures whether candidates named any social policy-related issue as one of the three most important problems (MIP) facing the country in an open-ended question (these responses were coded into a fine-grained scheme of categories by trained coders, see Dolezal et al. 2016), and thus represents a straightforward measure of (socio-tropic) issue salience at the individual level. The second indicator identifies all respondents who mentioned welfare state-related concepts in an open-ended question about the meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’. This variable is uncorrelated with the MIP indicator ($r = -0.012$).

H2 (ideology) is captured using a measure of ideology on socio-economic matters, constructed from six closed-ended questions. These six variables were aggregated through a principal component analysis with varimax rotation, using the first factor (Eigenvalue of 3.1, capturing 51 percent of the variance) as the ideology measure. Lower values indicate a more interventionist stance, whereas higher values indicate stronger economic liberalism.

H3 (partisanship) is operationalized with a set of party indicators, using the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) as a reference group, and aggregating four very small parties (the Christian Party of Austria, the Pirate Party, the Men’s Party, and the EU Exit Party) with a total of 30 respondents into a residual category (‘other’).
A number of control variables will also be specified: age, levels of formal education, union membership, religiosity, occupation (distinguishing between self-employed, workers, and public sector employees), and status as professional politician (i.e. having worked in Land, national, or European politics).

Table 2  Descriptive statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female = 1)</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.341</td>
<td>0.474</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue salience (MIP)</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.461</td>
<td>0.499</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue salience (left–right)</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.267</td>
<td>0.443</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>1,048</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-1.788</td>
<td>2.355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party: ÖVP</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.179</td>
<td>0.383</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party: FPÖ</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.124</td>
<td>0.330</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party: BZÖ</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>0.256</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party: Greens</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.281</td>
<td>0.450</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party: KPÖ</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.058</td>
<td>0.235</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party: NEOS</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.182</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party: Team Stronach</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.220</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party: other</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.164</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>47.867</td>
<td>13.102</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.396</td>
<td>0.489</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school degree</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.288</td>
<td>0.453</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional politician</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.412</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union member</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>0.365</td>
<td>0.482</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>1,053</td>
<td>2.837</td>
<td>0.897</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>1,060</td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>0.432</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker</td>
<td>1,060</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.212</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector employee</td>
<td>1,060</td>
<td>0.158</td>
<td>0.365</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Originally, there were 213 missing cases for the union membership variable. This number was reduced to 119 by imputing a zero value for respondents of the following professions: self-employed, farmers, students, conscripts, those on alternative civilian service (Zivildienst) or working in the household. Using the original variable does not substantively alter any of the results below.

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for all independent variables used in the models. Social policy features quite prominently in the issue salience indicators. Almost half of all respondents (46 percent) mention an issue related to the welfare state in their answer to the MIP question. Just over a quarter (27 percent) refer to social policy issues in the description of what ‘left’ and ‘right’ means to them. To be sure, there is not much of a gender gap for these two variables. Male and female candidates are never more than four percentage points apart.
The same is not true of the ideology predictor, though (which is standardized to mean = 0 and SD = 1). Men report a mean position slightly right of center (0.07), whereas women’s average position is considerably further to the left (-0.15). Of course, this is partly due to the fact that women, at around 40 percent of respondents, are a much stronger presence in parties of the left (SPÖ, Greens, Communist Party) than in all other parties (27 percent).

**Analysis**

The dependent variables are measured on a four-point ordinal scale, which would usually dictate the use of ordinal logistic regression. However, several independent variables violate the parallel regression assumption required for ordered logit models. The analysis therefore collapses the four-category dependent variable into a dichotomy (with categories ‘not at all’ and ‘a little’ coded 0, and categories ‘fairly much’ and ‘a lot’ coded 1) and estimates binary logistic models. Yet, since Table 1 displays the largest gender gaps in the selection of the highest category (‘a lot’), results from an alternative dichotomization of the dependent variables (recoding the three lower categories to 0 and only the highest to 1) are reported in the appendix (Table A4 and Figure A1). The findings from these alternative specifications are similar to or even stronger than the ones presented below.

The regression models focus on the degree to which the inclusion of the key independent variables (those operationalizing H1, H2, and H3) reduces the impact of gender on the dependent variables. The baseline specification (‘controls only’) therefore simply regresses campaign issue emphasis on gender and all control variables (age, education, professionalism, union membership, religiosity, and occupation). The next three models introduce the independent variables related to the hypotheses, one at a time. Finally, a full model incorporating all predictors is estimated.

The main purpose of the analysis is to observe the changes of the gender coefficient across models (rather than the direct impact of the independent variables on campaign issue emphasis). In order for the hypotheses to be confirmed, the impact of gender on campaign emphasis should weaken as the hypothesized mediating variables (issue salience, ideology, and partisanship) are added to the models.

However, in contrast to linear models, logit and probit models do not allow us to simply compare coefficients across nested models to estimate the impact of the mediating
variables on the gender effect. This is because adding new covariates to a logit model typically alters its error variance and error distribution. Changes in coefficients across models may therefore be due to such rescaling as well as mediating effects (Breen, Karlson, and Holm 2013; Karlson, Holm, and Breen 2012). To make the gender effects comparable across models, the analysis employs the \textit{khb} user routine implemented in Stata (Kohler, Karlson, and Holm 2011). This command implements Karlson et al.’s (2012) method of making coefficients from nested models comparable. It calculates coefficients and marginal effects net of the changes that result from rescaling. It also computes the percentage change in a coefficient that is due to mediation by third variables (the so-called mediating or confounding percentage, see below).

Figure 1 displays how the average marginal effects (AMEs) for the gender variable change across the models (all regressions are reported in the appendix). While a standard average marginal effect is reported for the ‘controls only’ models, the other four AMEs are calculated net of the rescaling effects resulting from adding the mediating variables. They are thus comparable to the AMEs from the ‘controls only’ models.

\textbf{Figure 1} \hspace{1cm} \textbf{Average marginal effects of the gender variable across models}
Note: Average marginal effects with 95 percent confidence intervals for the gender variable (male = 0, female = 1) from binary logistic regression models. All models except the ‘controls only’ specification correct for rescaling, such that marginal effects become comparable across models (Karlson, Holm, and Breen 2012; Kohler, Karlson, and Holm 2011). N between 820 and 1,050. Control variables are: age, education, professionalism, union membership, religiosity, occupation.

As Figure 1 shows, women are generally more likely to emphasize social policy. All marginal effects are positive, and all are statistically significant at $p = 0.076$ or lower. The predicted probability of emphasizing social policy and family issues is about five to six percentage points higher for women. The increase for health and social care is between 16 and 18 percentage points, whereas it is between five and seven percentage points for pensions and old-age provisions.

Yet, Figure 1 also illustrates very clearly that, for all three dependent variables, the presumed mediators (issue salience, ideology, and partisanship) hardly affect the size of the gender coefficient across model specifications. The gender effects are thus effectively unchanged after the inclusion of the key independent variables.

This conclusion is corroborated when examining the ‘mediating percentages’ (or ‘confounding percentages’) for the gender coefficients (see Table 3). These figures represent the percentage change in a coefficient that is due to mediation by one or more third variables (Karlson, Holm, and Breen 2012, 294). For example, 15 percent of the gender effect on emphasizing social policy and families in the ‘controls only’ model is mediated by socio-economic ideology.

If the data were in line with the hypotheses, we would expect large positive mediating percentages, since much of the effect of gender should be captured by the predictors for the three key independent variables. Instead most figures in Table 3 are close to zero or even negative (indicating suppressor effects). The substantive conclusion from these results is therefore that the gender effect on issue emphasis is not affected by issue salience, ideology, or partisanship.\(^5\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Issue salience</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Partisanship</th>
<th>Full model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social policy &amp; families</td>
<td>-2.7%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>-18.0%</td>
<td>-9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; social care</td>
<td>-0.5%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensions &amp; old-age provisions</td>
<td>-3.4%</td>
<td>-27.4%</td>
<td>-18.2%</td>
<td>-17.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These percentages indicate how much of the gender effect in the ‘controls only’ specification is mediated by the key independent variables (issue salience, ideology, and partisanship).
Discussion and conclusion

The evidence that male and female politicians display different behaviors when it comes to social policy is overwhelming. Numerous studies show that women in political office focus more on issues related to the welfare state, be it in election campaigns, or in their work in the legislative and governmental arenas. The same gender differences emerge in the data examined in this paper. Women candidates report having emphasized social policy issues during the 2013 Austrian election campaign to a much higher degree than their male counterparts. Yet neither measures of individual issue salience or socio-economic ideology nor partisanship can account even for a moderate part of this gender gap. Nor can any of the control variables included in the regression models.

With none of the hypotheses confirmed, this study casts doubt on the proposition that there is an attitudinal gender gap underpinning the strong gender differences in political elite behavior regarding social policy. Before discussing alternative explanations, however, some caveats about the generalizability of these findings should be made. Most importantly, this is only a study of one country at one point in time, and it only examines campaign issue emphasis as a behavioral dependent variable. There are thus clear limitations to how far we can generalize from the results presented here. Two considerations should be pointed out in particular.

First, the case of Austria is certainly not completely untypical among the group of parliamentary democracies in (Western) Europe. However, several of its institutional and social peculiarities net to be taken into consideration before extrapolating to other political systems. One relevant factor is the electoral system, a proportional party list system with weak preferential voting (Müller 2005) which gives candidates some, albeit limited, incentives to invest in personal vote-seeking. Some women candidates may therefore choose to emphasize social policy issues for electoral reasons.⁶ What is more, Austria is a country with a legacy of very traditional gender roles (Böheim et al. 2013; Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann 2012), but also a place where public opinion on gender relations is strongly polarized and politicized along partisan lines (Hudde 2015).

Second, the dependent variables used for the analysis are limited to behavior during the election campaign. One might therefore object that it is unclear whether there is any relationship between campaign issue emphasis and policy specialization in other arenas. Yet, as reported by Ennser-Jedenastik (2017a, 10-11), there is a very strong correlation between
addressing social policy issues in the campaign and specializing on them as a government minister or legislator. This should give us some confidence that the results presented here may replicate to some extent in other political arenas. Indeed, the study by Ennser-Jedenastik (2017a) shows that the survey-based gender gaps reported here are also found in behavioral measures of campaign emphasis (putting out press releases), and it points to a non-attitudinal variable that may account for some of the gender gap in social policy emphasis: intra-party gender diversity. As pointed out already by Burns’ (2007), future research may thus find it fruitful to examine the interaction between gender at the individual and the aggregate level.

What other explanations should future research be looking at – assuming for the moment that there are, in fact, no marked attitudinal gender differences to account for behavioral outcomes such as the gender gap in social policy focus? Two potential explanations may be of particular interest for future research: instrumental motivations and gender as a structural force.

As to the first, while there may not necessarily be intrinsic causes for the gendered patterns we can observe in political elite behavior, there may well be instrumental ones. One obvious candidate is vote-seeking. Female politicians are usually viewed by voters as being better able to deal with issues relating to the welfare state, such as social security, health care, child care, and poverty (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Sanbonmatsu 2002). The prevalence of such gender stereotypes in the electorate provides strong incentives for strategic politicians to specialize in areas where they may enjoy a natural competence advantage. However, these incentives should be markedly stronger in candidate-centered than in party-centered systems.

Another possible explanation is office-seeking. Since gender stereotypes do not only beset voters but are also present among politicians and party operatives, women will often find it easier to specialize on social policy as a way to advance their political careers. This may be especially true in heavily male-dominated environments, where a skewed gender distribution pushes female politicians towards stereotype-conforming behavior (Bratton 2005).7 To be sure, male politicians invested in maintaining their traditionally powerful roles will likely do little to counter such trends (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005). However, as recent work by Wägnerud (2015) on the Swedish parliament shows, it is not impossible to forge broad cross-party consensus on the importance of equal representation for men and women. Such consensus makes not only the production of gender-sensitive
legislation more likely, it also fosters a political environment that reduces stereotypical policy specialization (Bolzendahl 2014).

A second set of potential explanations for the non-finding in this analysis may be found in the theoretical and empirical perspectives that conceptualize gender not only as an individual-level characteristic, but also as a feature of organizations, institutions, and social environments more generally (Acker 1990; Brush 2003; Ridgeway 2011). The assumption that gender is a structural force that pervades the political realm (Risman 2004) makes it easier to understand why gender inequalities in political elite behavior persist even in the absence of attitudinal differences at the individual level. One mechanism through which this happens is that power and status differences interact with gender and thus perpetuate the ‘gender system’ (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). This is not to deny the importance of individual agency in politics (Burns 2007). Yet individual-level political behavior never takes places in a vacuum, but is powerfully shaped by the gendered norms, values, and beliefs that have been enshrined in the formal and informal institutions structuring the political process (e.g. Bolzendahl 2014).

To be sure, tackling these alternative explanations for gender differences in political elite behavior is an immensely challenging task for empirical research, not least because they typically evade straightforward empirical operationalization and thus do not produce easily testable hypotheses. These challenges notwithstanding, designing research that sheds light on these questions is almost certain to move us towards a better understanding of the different roles that women and men occupy in the political realm.

References


Hudde, Ansgar. 2015. Fertility is low when there is no societal agreement on a specific gender role model. edited by Austrian Academy of Sciences (OeAW). Vienna.


For the purposes of this paper, the term ‘social policy’ refers to the policy core of the welfare state, including pensions, health & social care, unemployment insurance, active labor market policy, family benefits, child care, social assistance, and social housing. This is also the set of issues typically associated with the term ‘social policy’ in Austrian politics.

This indicator was constructed using the following search terms (or synonyms) on the text strings provided by the respondents: welfare state, welfare system, redistribution, welfare benefits, welfare, welfare expenditures, welfare retrenchment, social justice, social equality, social security/safety, social policy, solidarity, redistributive justice, poverty, poor, social assistance, health, care, pension.

Respondents were asked to record their (dis-)agreement to the following statements on a five-point scale: ‘The state should not interfere in the economy’, ‘Public debt must not increase further, even if this means cutting public services’, ‘Government should reduce differences between high and low incomes’, ‘Unemployment must be fought, even if this means high public debt’, ‘Taxes should be cut, even if that means lower social benefits’, and ‘The state should not own corporations’. Cronbach’s alpha for the six items is 0.81.

An alternative would be to estimate partial proportional odds models. However, several specifications of these models run with the gologit2 command in Stata did not converge. Also, the gologit2 command is not supported by the khb routine required to disentangle changes in the gender coefficient due to mediating/confounding from those due to rescaling (Kohler, Karlson, and Holm 2011).

Nor does any of the control variables mediate the gender effect on social policy focus, as the models reported in the appendix suggest. Other potential control variables were also tested, but had no mediating effect on the gender coefficient either: electoral tier (regional, Land, national), campaign focus (party vs. self), or the subjective evaluation of one’s chances to obtain a seat in parliament.

However, the data suggest that this is a limited phenomenon: Splitting the sample by campaign focus (party vs. self) yields a significant reduction in the gender effect only for emphasis on pensions.

For example, at the time of writing, the FPÖ had only seven women among its 38 national MPs (18.4 percent), yet the party filled five out of its six seats on the family affairs committee with female legislators.