

**Media discrimination and gender differences in political ambition in a laboratory experiment**

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**Abstract**

Very little research has considered how media discrimination could impact men and women's political ambition. Yet, media discrimination could impact both beliefs about gender roles and political competence, and beliefs about voter bias, both of which could decrease women's political ambition and increase men's. Alternatively, media discrimination could lead women to react against discrimination and be motivated politically. This study tests how political ambition of men and women is impacted by media discrimination in a campaign and election lab experiment. Media discrimination in this experiment under-reports on women and uses traditional, stereotypical depictions of men and women. The results suggest that in certain conditions, media discrimination in political news may lead to a reactance or positive challenge effect for women, increasing their political ambition. Men, instead, may feel an aversion to entering politics, lowering their political ambition.

### **Introduction**

Women in politics are often shown via a gendered lens in media; for example, female politicians are underreported on and are more likely to have their political abilities questioned (Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020). Some literature suggests this gendered coverage will impact how voters evaluate women in politics and therefore decrease the demand for female politicians (Bauer 2015; Heldman and Wade 2011; Kahn 1992). The results are ambiguous as other studies find demand is not impacted by media (Dolan 2014; Hayes 2011). Yet, almost no studies have considered whether media depiction of women could impact the supply side of women's political representation.

It is well established that a gender gap in political ambition is one significant cause of women's lower political representation (Kanthak and Woon 2015; Lawless and Fox 2010; Moore 2005). Political ambition refers to the initial interest an individual has in pursuing a political career (nascent political ambition), which may or may not eventually lead to taking steps to enter political competition (expressive political ambition) (Lawless and Fox 2010). The idea that women's lower political ambition compared to men's is caused by their own deficiencies in confidence or skills has been recently criticised as a misinterpretation of the political ambition gender gap (Piscopo 2019). Following this line of thinking, this study investigates whether there is an influence of media discrimination on men and women's political ambition, which could impact the gender gap. Media discrimination is here defined as the unequal media depiction of individuals based on (perceived) group belonging.

Some political ambition experts have suggested that media's depiction of women could play a role in the gender gap in political ambition (Lawless 2009; Pruyssers and Blais 2017), but only one study has tested this relationship directly: Pruyssers, Thomas and Blais (2020) test how gendered media coverage impacts men and women's political ambition in an online experiment, finding that exposure to media that sexualises female candidates or over-

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emphasises female candidates' family role does not impact women's political ambition, but men's political ambition is sufficiently decreased by sexualised portrayal of male candidates to close the gender gap in this condition.

However, other studies provide evidence that suggests media discrimination could impact women's political ambition, positively or negatively. Simon and Hoyt (2013) find that exposure to gender stereotypical media images makes women have negative self-perception of their leadership ability, in turn causing them to have lower leadership aspirations, while Haraldsson and Wängnerud (2019) find that the underrepresentation of women in news media correlates with women's lower political ambition in the following election. Yet, survey data of political activists by Moore (2005) finds that women who have personally experienced sex discrimination have higher political ambition than women who have not.

In this study, competing hypotheses for how media discrimination may impact the gender gap in political ambition through differentially affecting men and women are tested in a lab experiment among young people in Italy. Italy is a novel case to study political ambition, and contributes to the literature not only by expanding the geographic knowledge of the political ambition gender gap but also due to the unique interactions of gender, media and politics in the country. Italy has experienced a complicated legacy of Berlusconi, gender bias and corruption in media and politics (Belluati 2020; Durante et al. 2019), but also a recent surge in the number of women in political representation from 21% in 2008 to 36% in 2018 (IPU 2021a). As noted by Pfanzelt and Spies (2019), political participation gender gap studies are highly concentrated in North America and among adult populations, despite the fact that the gender gaps emerge at young ages and may exist also in country contexts where women have a higher share of political representation. This study thereby contributes to the lack of studies on media discrimination and political ambition generally, while also presenting a novel context to study the political ambition gender gap.

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The results provide support for the notion that women may become mobilised by exposure to media discrimination, increasing their political ambition. Men, instead, may become more politically averse following media discrimination. The difference in results for nascent and expressive political ambition, and the social relevance of the results, are discussed.

### **Political ambition gender gap**

The literature has considered many factors that lead to the gender gap in political ambition. Gender socialisation makes men more likely to consider politics a viable career choice, for example because parents discuss politics more with boys than girls (Lawless and Fox 2013). Women are more likely to believe they do not have political qualifications or competence, and this gender gap is not responsive to women's increased educational and professional attainments (Thomas 2012). Women often have greater care and family responsibilities than men, making it more difficult to invest time in entering politics (Silbermann 2015). Moreover, women often have less money, which is needed to launch a campaign (Williams 2008). However, even studies considering political gender gaps at young ages in relatively gender egalitarian societies like Denmark and Germany (Dahl and Nyrup 2021; Pfanzelt and Spies 2019) – where gender socialisation is less severe and before such familial and economic gender differences emerge – find that political gender gaps are significant.

The importance of media to the political ambition gender gap is suggested in the literature firstly due to studies finding that the gap is impacted by stereotyping. Although there are feminine and masculine aspects of political stereotypes, masculine stereotypes are seen as more valuable (Bauer 2017). Pruyzers and Blais (2017) find that priming participants with the message that women are less capable in politics decreases women's political ambition. Holman and Schneider (2018) consider how race and gender interact to create

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different expectations of being stereotyped in politics, finding that framing women's political underrepresentation as due to women's unwillingness to enter politics decreases Asian and White women's political ambition, while framing it as due to voter bias decreases Black women's political ambition.

Secondly, as media affects perceptions of social groups' relative status (Carter and Steiner 2004), media should also matter for the political ambition gender gap due to how perception of voter gender bias impacts political ambition. Women often have the perception that there are barriers to entry that make it more difficult for women to enter politics than for men, as found for example in a study on political ambition in Pakistan (Rincker, Aslam and Isani 2017). Women also perceive electoral risk to be higher than men (Sweet-Cushman 2014). These perception problems are persistent: in their Swiss study, Foos and Gilardi (2020) show that in-person exposure to female politicians does not increase young women's political ambition. There is evidence also to suggest that both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical female political role models can increase women's political ambition (Sweet-Cushman 2019), suggesting women are susceptible to cues about how their gender might impact how they would be perceived in politics.

While the political ambition gender gap literature therefore points to the potential role of media, this role has seldom been studied. Yet the importance of stereotypes and gender bias perceptions suggest media could influence men and women's political ambition via expectations of a) their own suitability to the political domain and b) voter bias. Combining insights from social and political psychology, leadership studies, media studies and sociology, this study tests how media may impact the political ambition gender gap, for different reasons depending on gender salience.

### **Gender salience**

Gender salience, or the observability of gender as a categorisation dimension (Bigler and Liben 2007), is relevant to the political ambition gender gap for two reasons. Firstly, when gender is salient, the competitiveness gender gap may increase. Several studies argue that women are more competition averse than men, and because politics is highly competitive by nature, women have lower political ambition (Kanthak and Woon 2015; Preece and Stoddard 2015; Schneider et al. 2016). When gender is salient, expectations of acceptable behaviour for men and women become part of the ‘rules of the game’, and lead to behaving in gender consistent ways (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Brandts, Gërkhani and Schram (2020) find that while women’s preference for status ranking (a defining characteristic of competition) is unchanged regardless of whether the person ranking them is male or female, men’s preference is higher if the person ranking them is male. In elections, then, competition might both decrease women’s and increase men’s political ambition.

Secondly, gender salience matters because political ambition may be impacted by the expectation of gender bias. Women’s leadership ambition is decreased when women expect gendered sanctions in the leadership domain (Fisk and Overton 2019), and the perception that gender bias in the political system limits women’s chances of success is widespread (Dolan and Hansen 2018), with women believing their chances are low even in egalitarian countries like Denmark (Dahl and Nystrup 2021). Only when gender is observable would women expect others may be biased against them due to their gender, and therefore women’s political ambition may be lower because of gender salience. Potential media effects on political ambition may, then, be more easily studied when considering gender salience, because exposure to discriminatory media could impact men and women’s own beliefs about gender as well as their expectations of gender bias.

### **Media discrimination**

Media discrimination against women includes being ignored or underrepresented (GMMP 2015), portrayed stereotypically (Simon and Hoyt 2013) and objectified (Funk and Coker 2016). In European countries in 2021, the share of women with seats in parliament is 30.5% (IPU 2021b). This underrepresentation in politics is mirrored in media, with the European media monitoring project WIME (Ross and Padovani 2016) finding that just 16% of politicians portrayed in non-fiction media were women, making ‘politician’ the role that women are least likely to be shown in. Yet, media is not only mirroring women’s low political representation but also under-reporting on women (Shor, van de Rijt and Fotouhi 2019), as well as creating stereotypical portrayals.

Content analyses of media provide evidence of the patterns of gender discrimination. Studying media depiction of female prime ministerial candidates in Canada, New Zealand and Australia has shown that media highlights female candidates’ gender when discussing their flaws; that their family status and appearance are a focus; and that narratives around female candidates often invoke melodramatic fable undertones that deride female candidates for their gender non-conforming traits (Trimble 2017). The media moreover frames female politicians as lacking stamina and strength, and has a tendency of widely circulating gendered criticisms male candidates make against female candidates (Conroy 2018). Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) compare media coverage of women across electoral systems and find that PR systems in particular underreport on women, and although tone of coverage is equally positive, female candidates’ viability is questioned more than men’s and women are less likely to be quoted.

However, there are studies in both Europe and North America finding that media coverage is not discriminatory (Murphy and Rek 2019; Lavery 2013) or that primarily female candidates from racial minority groups are discriminated against (Gershon 2012). Other



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research suggests party bias, more than media bias, is responsible for biased coverage (Lühiste and Banducci 2016). The majority of studies investigating gender discrimination in political news coverage focuses on the period just before an election. Global (GMMP 2015) and European (Ross and Padovani 2016) analyses that are not focused on election-time coverage find the same patterns of media discrimination that have been commonplace in the literature. Therefore, it is likely that media discrimination against women in politics continues to be prevalent, but may be less frequent in the weeks preceding an election due to the growing professionalization of campaign media (Iyengar 2015). Yet, potential media effects on political ambition are not restricted to campaign coverage. Political news media at any time may contribute to individuals' understanding of politics, and whether they could see themselves stepping into the political domain. Three competing hypotheses on how media discrimination may impact the political ambition gender gap are presented.

### ***Political competence and suitability beliefs***

First-order beliefs are a person's own judgements about competence (Correll et al. 2017), in this context: their belief about their own potential ability in politics. Exposure to gender discrimination in media can impact views of appropriate gender roles (Gallagher 2014). In particular, media discrimination may increase role incongruity of women with the political role, or the feeling that the social roles appropriate for women are not congruent with high status, traditionally male roles (Eagly and Karau 2002).

Through these processes, media discrimination may lead women to be less likely to believe they would be competent in politics, reducing women's internal political efficacy (Lawless and Fox 2010) and, thereby, their ambition. Through the same processes, men might instead see media discrimination against women as a sign of their own suitability, increasing men's political ambition. For example, Correll (2004) exposes men to the belief that men are better at a task, and finds that this makes men more likely to say they are

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interested in careers that require high skills in this task than if they were told gender did not predict task ability.

The potential effect of media discrimination on political competence and suitability beliefs is unrelated to gender salience. What matters is how men and women's own beliefs are impacted by media discrimination, rather than how they anticipate voter's evaluation of them due to their gender. Therefore, if individuals' own beliefs are impacted, media discrimination will increase the political ambition gap regardless of gender salience.

**H1:** Media discrimination decreases women's political ambition and increases men's political ambition, regardless of gender salience.

### *Voter gender bias beliefs*

Yet, media discrimination could also impact third-order inferences, or how a person believes most other people evaluate groups' competence (Correll et al. 2017). Women's anticipation of how their gender will impact others' evaluations of them becomes more relevant to their decision-making as a result of media discrimination (Conroy et al. 2015). Media discrimination informs (and reminds) women of the stereotypes held against them. This in turn impacts their perception of how effective they could be in politics, not because they believe they are not competent, but because they believe others will not recognise their competence, and a feeling of stereotype threat reduces their motivation to engage in the domain (politics) where they expect others will evaluate them negatively due to their gender (Steele 1997).

Women who believe their gender is a barrier to them due to media discrimination may therefore be less likely to act on political ambition than in an environment free of media discrimination. Moreover, when media has discriminated according to stereotypes portraying men as more competent in politics than women, men may expect voters to prefer male candidates. In this way, expectation of voter gender bias should lead men to expect an

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electoral advantage and women a disadvantage, increasing the gender gap in political ambition. Gender salience is central to these beliefs, as only when gender is observable will men and women expect their gender to impact voter evaluations.

**H2:** Media discrimination decreases women's political ambition and increases men's political ambition, only if gender is salient.

### *Positive challenge and reactance effects*

Although the literature overall finds women's motivation is negatively impacted by gender discrimination, there are exceptions. For example, discrimination increasing women's intention to engage in collective action (Becker and Wright 2011), their leadership ambition (Fedi and Rollero 2016) and even some women's political ambition (Holman and Schneider 2018).

Stereotype reactance and positive challenge effects following gender discrimination can cause women to perform better and be more engaged in gender incongruent roles. Hoyt et al. (2010) find that women in their experiment on leadership self-appraisal could overcome a single stereotype threat activation via experiencing reactance, or a desire to prove the stereotype wrong. Derks et al. (2011) show that when women are faced with a negative stereotype about women and then asked to perform in a stereotype-relevant domain, women are positively challenged to perform well rather than disengaging due to threat. Even losing an election and determining that this is due to external forces can motivate women to run again, in the face of sometimes very difficult campaign environments (Dolan and Shah 2020). Similarly, Campbell and Wolbrecht (2020) find that young Democratic women, following the sexist coverage of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, were more disillusioned with politics but had stronger intentions to engage in political protest: "grievance can be the spark that helps ignite the flame of political engagement" (p.22).

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Reactance and positive challenge effects relate to both first-order (internal motivation) and third-order (proving others wrong) inferences, and therefore may occur both when gender is salient and not salient. However, both effects rely on membership in the group that is discriminated against, as only then will you be motivated to prove that you (as a member of the group) do not conform to stereotypes or feel motivated to act on behalf of your group. Therefore, men will not experience reactance or positive challenge.

**H3:** Media discrimination increases women's political ambition but does not impact men's political ambition, regardless of gender salience.

### ***Media counter-discrimination***

Some media are making conscious efforts to reduce and condemn discrimination and have gender equity in coverage (Edström and Mølster 2014). Counter-discrimination in media might weaken traditional gender roles, thereby allowing both women and men to pursue career options outside of traditionally female or male domains (i.e., while women might be encouraged towards politics, men might forgo politics in favour of female-coded roles). Moreover, media counter-discrimination might reduce women's belief that women will garner less votes in elections and make men less concerned about avoiding female-coded roles out of fear of backlash.

**H4:** Media counter-discrimination increases women's political ambition and decreases men's political ambition, regardless of gender salience.

### **The Italian case**

As in North America, politics is highly masculinised in Italy (Belluati, Piccio and Sampugnaro 2020; Campus 2010). No previous studies on the political ambition gender gap have been conducted in the Italian context (to the author's knowledge). However, Stefani et al. (2021) found that, as in the literature at large, Italian women are less likely to participate in traditional forms of political engagement than men, but more likely to engage in online

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participation. Sartori, Tuorto and Ghigi (2017) moreover found firstly that the gender gap in participation (e.g. attending political meetings) was similar in Italy to the literature, and secondly that marriage, children and division of domestic duties impacted the Italian gender gap as expected by the North American-dominated literature. Quaranta's (2016) study focusing on changing gender roles throughout the life-cycle likewise found that the Italian case confirms the structural and cultural barriers to women's political participation.

Italy does, however, have some unique characteristics. After the 2013 election, when one party adopted an effective gender quota (Pansardi and Vercesi 2017), Italy disrupted a legacy of machismo by adopting national gender quotas for party lists, dramatically increasing the share of women elected in a short period of time (IPU 2021a). However, media coverage of political women continues to undermine their capabilities (Belluati 2020). The increase in women's electoral presence has therefore largely failed to neutralise political masculinisation (Belluati et al. 2020), suggesting the hostile environment for women remains despite the increase in women elected. How men and women's political ambition may be impacted by media in Italy can therefore shed light on how individuals relate to politics in contexts where the relationship between politics and gender are in flux.

### **Method**

In order to study the impact of media on political ambition, a 2x3 factorial design experiment was used. Participants (interacting anonymously) are asked to imagine they are in a hypothetical community that will soon have an election. Before choosing what role to take in the election, participants read media articles to learn about the community. Youth unemployment policy is chosen as the topic of the election, as it contains masculine and feminine associations: youth and social policy is feminine coded while employment policy is masculine coded (Huddy and Terkilsen 1993). Context is given by calling the group task a campaign and election, where voting will occur to elect a politician. Alekseev, Charness and

Gneezy (2017) review experiments with and without context, finding that when context is not given, participants are likely to infer their own assumptions. Moreover, they recommend context be used when this is important theoretically; when domain stereotypes are under study, context cues are therefore useful.

### *Participants*

The experiment was run in the BLESS laboratory at Bologna University in May 2019. 26 sessions were run with fifteen participants per session. There were 388 observations<sup>1</sup>. Participants were students at Bologna University recruited by the lab on a voluntary basis. About 70% of Italian legislators have a university degree (Merlo et al. 2009), so although a student population is not representative of the general population, it is appropriate for a study about emerging political ambition. Equally many men and women were recruited from any department. The average age of participants was 23.4 years. The experiment was designed using oTree (Chen, Schonger and Wickens 2016). Participants read and signed a consent form, thereafter instructions were read out loud and on participants' computer screens. The average earnings were €13.75, including €5 show-up fee. Participation took an average of 1 hour 20 minutes.

### *Treatments*

Randomisation occurred at the session level: each group of 15 was randomly assigned a treatment condition. The first treatment is gender salience, as voter bias beliefs (H2) are hypothesised to only impact political ambition when gender is salient. Gender salience is varied by including a treatment such that half of participants are in groups where everyone is made aware of the gender of their group members and know that their group members will know their gender, while the other half are in groups where gender is entirely unknown.

The second treatment is media exposure. In all media treatments, participants are shown five news articles of 150-200 words, c.15 minutes of media exposure. This set-up was

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chosen to be similar to other media exposure experiments (e.g. Halliwell, Malson and Tischner 2011; Simon and Hoyt 2013). The exposure was designed as an online newspaper, and includes images with vague captions (the captions do not change between treatments, though the images do).

Treatment criteria was created in a similar fashion as the formative study by Kahn (1992), where prototypic articles are created, identifying information is removed, and then versions of the articles are altered to fit common patterns in media discrimination discussed in the theory section. I used articles from the most widely read online newspapers in the UK (The Sun) and Sweden (Aftonbladet), edited them to the desired length and removed national identifiers such as names, with the goal of creating realistic articles that nevertheless would have no previous connotations for the participants.

There are three media conditions. In the ‘discriminatory’ condition, there is an under-representation of women as experts and politicians. Each news article and image fulfils at least one (and does not contradict any) of the following:

- Men in political roles are made to seem competent. For example: political men are looked to as experts.
- Women in political roles are made to seem incompetent. For example: political women are sexualised, addressed by first name or Miss/Mrs, mocked, the ideas or opinions of political women are questioned.
- The articles and images show stereotypical representations of men and women both within and outside the political role.

In the ‘counter-discriminatory’ condition, there is a slight over-representation of women as experts and politicians. Each news article and image fulfils at least one (and does not contradict any) of the following:

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- Gender discrimination is called out and positive developments relating to gender equality highlighted.
- The articles and images show counter-stereotypical, non-traditional representations of men and women both within and outside the political role.

In the ‘neutral’ condition, men and women are not discussed, nor are men and women shown in images. Obviously gendered messages and images are not included. Just as the ‘gender unknown’ treatment does not reflect a natural electoral environment, the neutral media treatment is not meant to reflect media in the real world (which is not neutral), but is a benchmark to isolate how media discrimination and counter-discrimination impacted political ambition in the study. Pre-testing was conducted to determine that the media treatments were sufficiently different, by showing coders a random selection of articles and asking them to classify which of the treatments they believe each article fit into. An example of the media exposure can be seen in the online appendix.

### *Detailed run-through of experiment*

First, participants are asked to answer demographic questions in order to collect participants’ gender. Immediately following the demographic questions, participants in the ‘gender known’ treatment are asked to pick a name that will be used to identify them in the upcoming group task. They do this by picking a name out of three options given; female participants are given a list of three female names and male participants a list of three male names. These are chosen from the list of 50 most common male and female names in Italy (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2018) and pre-testing confirmed that the Italian names were immediately recognisable as male or female by five Italian coders. Participants in the ‘gender unknown’ treatment are not asked to pick a name to be identified by, and instead move directly from the demographic questions to the next stage.



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In the media stage (stage 2), participants are asked to read and answer questions about five news articles on the subject of unemployment: the media treatment. Participants know that they will earn money for correctly answering the questions about the media, as an incentive to pay attention.

Next, participants were asked to choose whether they want to be a social expert, economic expert or politician (stage 3) in a group task called a 'campaign'. Social experts receive statements expressing ordinary citizens' opinions about youth unemployment and summarise these in a text. Economic experts receive statistics on youth unemployment and analyse these in a text. One text from a social expert and one from an economic expert is chosen randomly by the computer programme to be shown to politicians. Politicians are asked to use the information to write an election promise. The campaign (stage 4) is therefore designed to be a group task with one feminine coded role (social expert), one masculine coded role (economic expert) and the political role, which is the role of interest for political ambition.

To make sure that participants do not pick a role based on monetary incentives instead of ambition, each role has equal pay-off opportunity. In each session of fifteen participants, the programme uses participants' ranking of preference for roles to assign five participants in each role. One participant in each role earns a bonus. For the social and economic experts, the bonus goes to the experts who are randomly chosen to have their texts shown. For the politicians, the bonus goes to the politician who gains most votes in the election. Politicians' payment is therefore based on the election, so that political ambition is not simply a measure of political interest but also willingness to compete in elections, an integral part of politics.

Next, all participants vote for the election promise they like best (stage 5), and those who voted for the politician with most votes get an additional bonus payment (to ensure

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voting is not done randomly). Finally, participants answer some questions in a post-experimental survey (stage 6) before being individually paid as they leave the computer lab.

**Nascent political ambition:** Participants are asked to indicate, for each of the three roles, how interested they are in each role on a scale from 0 to 10. Their interest in the political role determines nascent political ambition. In logit models, nascent political ambition is coded as a binary variable, where 0 means the participant indicated their interest was below or equal to the midpoint of the scale, and 1 means the participant indicated their interest was above the midpoint of the scale.

**Expressive political ambition:** In the group task, participants chose whether to be politicians, social experts or economic experts by ranking their preference for each role (1, 2 or 3)<sup>2</sup>: this is the expressive political ambition measure, as participants know that the ranking will be used to allocate them a role. This reflects the real-life costs of entering politics as much as possible, since the politician task means having to be judged against political opponents and having to reveal your personal beliefs in the election promise – competition and discomfort with the personal and self-promoting nature of campaigning are among the gendered costs of elections (Pate and Fox 2018; Conroy and Green 2020). Therefore, while the study certainly is not wholly realistic to real-world elections, the main task includes some of the most important gendered aspects of real elections. Expressive political ambition is recoded in the analysis so that 1 represents low ambition and 3 represents high ambition, so that higher values of both measures mean higher political ambition. In logit models, expressive political ambition is coded as 0 if the participant's first choice was not the political role, and 1 if the participant's first choice was the political role.

Other variables are collected as controls in the post-experimental survey, shown in the online appendix.

## **Results**

### ***Summary of data***

Results were analysed using the programme R (R Core Team 2013; Hlavac 2018; Kassambara 2019). Table 1 in the online appendix shows the mean and standard deviation of age, education and gender in each treatment group. The average age was significantly higher in one treatment group due to two outliers. Robustness checks, found in the online appendix, were made with these two observations removed. No significant differences in results emerged.

Table 2 in the online appendix provides a summary of the main variables. As the variables are not normally distributed and participant numbers per treatment not balanced, the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used for significance testing. Binary versions of the dependent variables were also modelled in logistic regression, to more easily show whether media effects occurred and differed by gender, controlling for whether participants recognised media discrimination or not, and whether the participant studies politics or not. The online appendix includes ordered logit models for the original coding of variables. The results in ordered logit models were consistent with the results presented here.

### ***Competing media discrimination hypotheses***

#### **Competence and suitability beliefs**

Did men and women's political ambition respond to media discrimination in a manner that indicates their competence and suitability beliefs were affected? H1 predicted a negative effect of the media discrimination treatment for women and a positive effect for men, regardless of gender salience. H1 will be supported if the gender gap in political ambition was larger in the media discrimination condition than the neutral condition.

Figure 1 shows the mean political ambition by media treatment, with p-values at the top of bar charts representing the gender gap within media treatment, including error bars

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denoting 95% confidence intervals. Underneath the figure, p-values within gender, between media treatments, are reported. When a significant difference between media treatments is found, post-hoc Dunn tests are conducted to determine which groups significantly differ. These Dunn tests are summarised in the online appendix.

*[Figure 1 about here]*

In the neutral and counter-discrimination media treatments, men's nascent and expressive political ambition was significantly higher than women's. However, in the media discrimination treatment, the gender gap was not significant. Women's nascent political ambition was not significantly impacted by media treatment (p-value=0.171), but women's expressive political ambition was significantly impacted (p-value=0.018), which Dunn tests confirm is due to the difference between neutral and discrimination treatments. Men's nascent (p-value=0.033) and expressive (p-value=0.034) political ambition were both impacted by media, however this was due to the difference between discrimination and counter-discrimination treatments. H1 is therefore not supported: not only did the gender gap in both political ambition measures close in the media discrimination condition compared to the neutral condition, but women's expressive political ambition significantly increased.

### **Voter gender bias beliefs**

H2 predicted media discrimination would have a negative effect on women and positive effect on men only if gender of group members was known. H2 will be supported if media discrimination had no effect on political ambition when gender of group members was unknown, but effects in the expected direction when gender was known.

Figure 2 shows the coefficient plots corresponding to binary logit models in Table 3 in the online appendix, first for nascent and then expressive political ambition. Coefficients in blue represent models for participants whose gender was not known to their group members,

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while coefficients in pink represent participants whose gender was known. Confidence intervals reflect two standard deviations.

[Figure 2 about here]

Men's nascent political ambition was negatively impacted by the media discrimination treatment only if their gender was unknown. When their group knew their gender, men's nascent political ambition was unaltered between the neutral and media discrimination conditions. Rather than a *positive* effect of media discrimination only if gender was known, men's nascent political ambition exhibited a *negative* effect only if gender was unknown. Media discrimination had no effect on men's expressive political ambition regardless of gender salience. Moreover, women were not negatively impacted by media discrimination, either when gender was known or unknown. Neither nascent nor expressive political ambition exhibited a negative interaction between participant gender and the media discrimination treatment in any models. Therefore, the data do not provide evidence for H1 or H2: media discrimination did not lead to women feeling less and men feeling more competent in the political domain, nor to women expecting more voter bias and men more voter support.

### **Positive challenge and reactance**

H3 predicted a positive effect of media discrimination on women's political ambition and no effect on men, regardless of gender salience. H3 will be supported if the gender gap in political ambition decreases in the media discrimination condition, and if this change is caused by an increase in women's political ambition. H3 is supported by the data, with some limitations.

Figure 1 showed that the gender gap in both nascent and expressive political ambition closed in the media discrimination condition. As the Kruskal-Wallis tests showed, without taking gender salience into account, men's political ambition was unchanged between the

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neutral and media discrimination conditions but only women's expressive political ambition was overall significantly higher in the media discrimination condition.

Figure 2, which separately modelled political ambition among participants whose gender was known and unknown, showed the somewhat complicated relationship between media discrimination and women's political ambition. Media discrimination had a positive effect on women's nascent political ambition only if their gender was *unknown* to their group, and had a positive effect on women's expressive political ambition only if their gender was *known* to their group. Therefore, women's political ambition was increased by the media discrimination treatment both when gender was known and unknown, though effects varied by political ambition measure. In the ordered logit models, Table 4 in the online appendix, women's expressive political ambition was increased in the media discrimination treatment both when gender was known and unknown. This result suggests that even if women whose gender was unknown to their group did not select the political role as their first choice more often in the media discrimination treatment (as suggested by the binary logit models), they may still have been more likely to select the political role as their second choice (as suggested by the ordered logit models and the means presented in Figure 1).

H3 is therefore supported by the data. Women, and only women, appeared to experience a positive challenge or reactance effect. Still, media discrimination did not always increase women's political ambition. Moreover, H3 did not predict the negative effect of media discrimination on men's nascent political ambition if their gender was unknown.

### *Media counter-discrimination*

H4 predicted that media counter-discrimination would increase women's political ambition and decrease men's political ambition, regardless of gender salience. H4 will be supported if the gender gap decreased in the counter-discrimination condition compared to the neutral media condition, due to both men's decreased ambition and women's increased.

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The gender gap, as seen in Figure 1 and the Kruskal-Wallis tests, remained unchanged between neutral and counter-discrimination conditions. Moreover, the models suggest that counter-discriminatory media had no significant effect compared to neutral media on men or women either overall, among participants whose gender was known to group members, or among participants whose gender was unknown. H4 is therefore not supported. That men's political ambition was significantly higher in the counter-discrimination treatment compared to the discrimination treatment, as revealed by Figure 1, was entirely unpredicted by the hypotheses.

### **Discussion**

In this experiment, women became more motivated to be a politician in the experimental task when they had been exposed to media discrimination, supporting literature that has shown a potential for gender discrimination to ignite women's political ambition (Moore 2005). However, this was only significant overall for the expressive political ambition measure (behavioural measure of choosing the political role), as nascent ambition (interest in the political role) was only increased when gender was not salient. The reactance and positive challenge effects may therefore have impacted these two different forms of political ambition for different reasons. While only internal motivation to change the political status quo appeared to affect the earliest stage of ambition, both this internal motivation and a desire to prove women's capabilities appeared influential in making women actually choose to become a candidate in the election task. As discussed by Piscopo (2019), women are acutely aware of the barriers that face them should they enter politics, making low political ambition a rational response to understanding the masculinised system of politics. The low political ambition of women in the neutral media conditions may reflect the baseline level of misgivings women have about how their gender impedes them in politics. When media discrimination had occurred and gender was salient, however, it is possible that women self-

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sacrificed by entering politics despite these misgivings, as they felt a need to act on behalf of women, or to prove women's value. In other words, women's reactance or positive challenge effects may have been driven partially out of motivation to prove women's ability, despite women's nascent interest in entering politics not increasing in this condition.

Men, on the other hand, were negatively impacted by media discrimination, which was not predicted. Pruysers and Blais (2017) find that both men and women have lower political ambition when exposed to stereotype threat than in the no-threat condition, despite the stereotype threat in their experiment being a text summarising research that women are less capable in politics. They theorise that this is due to an "overall dampening effect", resulting from the threat condition making both men and women feel that politics is a negative domain and therefore making them averse to politics. Fox and Lawless (2011) show that when a person's level of political cynicism increases, their political ambition decreases, further supporting the idea of a dampening effect. Instead of taking media discrimination as a sign of men's competence in politics, media discrimination in this experiment may have led to negative feelings surrounding politics and a sense that men would not like to engage in this domain – supported by the fact that men's nascent ambition, relating more to internal motivation than rational choice, was more strongly affected by media discrimination than expressive ambition. Participants were able to explain in their own words why they did or did not choose the political role in the post experiment survey. The following examples from male participants in the media discrimination treatment as to why they did not choose the political role support the dampening effect:

- "I did not choose the task of the politician just because often being political requires moral and social compromises that I would probably not want to go down"
- "I do not like politics in general and in particular the figure of today's politician"



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The results relating to the media counter-discrimination treatment showed that political ambition gender gaps were not lessened in this condition compared to neutral media. Perhaps rather than motivating women, the counter-discrimination media portrayed women as so competent, that female participants felt they were not good enough in comparison: the upward social comparison effect (Hoyt and Simon 2011). The following examples of women in the media counter-discrimination treatment resemble upward social comparison:

- “I do not feel I have particular oratory skills or charisma”
- “I am particularly insecure, I am afraid of others' opinions, so I often prefer not to express myself for fear of being judged”

Women in other media treatments also expressed concerns about their ability. Indeed, regardless of treatment, women in this experiment believed that gender barriers in the political domain are stacked against them. In the post-experiment survey, 76% of women agreed that ‘most people are less likely to vote for women than men’, and 72% of women agreed that ‘most people don’t think women are equally competent in high power positions like politics’. Media treatment had no impact on women’s agreement with either statement (voting:  $p$ -value=0.189; competency:  $p$ -value=0.686). Participants in this study therefore reflect the gender bias perceptions of women in other European (Dahl and Nystrup 2021; Foos and Gilardi 2020) and American (Dolan and Hansen 2018) studies. Clearly, then, women’s beliefs about voter gender bias were strong even when media discrimination had not occurred, and counter-discriminatory media did not encourage women to engage in politics.

Whether reactance and positive challenge effects for women and a dampening effect for men are what caused the changes in political ambition or not, the result was to near eliminate the political ambition gender gap when media discrimination had occurred. Pruyssers, Thomas and Blais (2020) similarly find that the political ambition gender gap can be closed by media discrimination. In their case, this is because of men’s low political

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ambition when men have been discriminated against, while women's political ambition is not impacted. In the current experiment, it is instead a combination of men's low political ambition and women's high political ambition when women were discriminated against that closed the gap.

What do these results suggest regarding media discrimination and the political ambition gender gap outside of the experimental setting? Firstly, there is reason to believe the results could be driven by a short-term media effect that could be crowded out in the long-term. Gidengil and Everitt (2006) study how negative media coverage of Canada's 1993 female prime ministerial candidate impacted evaluations of her, and find that a negative effect only appeared after two or more days of consistent negative coverage. Moreover, Hoyt et al. (2010) find that stereotype reactance only occurs with a single stereotype threat, but that multiple threats take away the reactance effect. With sustained media discrimination over time, reactance or positive challenge may therefore be less likely. Efforts to engage women in politics may be most successful in the immediate aftermath of blatant discriminatory media (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2020), rather than media discrimination in the long-term being motivational.

Secondly, the results may be context-specific to the case studied: young people in Italy. As discussed, Italy has recently seen a dramatic rise in the number of women elected, yet media and political stereotypes continue to be heavily masculinised (IPU 2021a; Belluati 2020). Recent politically mobilising events such as the #MeToo movement (Castle et al. 2020) may contribute to making young people more aware of and averse to gender discrimination. It is therefore possible that young people in Italy today are particularly literate in de-constructing media discrimination due to its continued prevalence, and are galvanised by the political efforts to bring more women into political representation. Perhaps the results of this experiment reflect this cultural time of change.

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A limitation of the study is therefore the uncertainty of whether the effects found are context-specific and short-term. Another limitation is a relatively small sample size split into multiple treatment combinations. Though sample size was determined based on a power calculation, a larger sample would have allowed for additional analyses with more control variables included. Despite these limitations, the study provides evidence suggesting that the gender gap in political ambition exists among young people in Italy. Moreover, at least in the short-term and in the context under investigation, the political ambition gender gap can be closed by media discrimination, potentially due to women's reactance and men's aversion.

### **Conclusion**

This experiment provides some tentative reasons for expecting that women's initial interest and first steps towards political ambition may not be hampered by media discrimination. Instead, there could be circumstances under which women feel positively challenged to engage in politics or experience stereotype reactance in response to media discrimination, which could create particularly powerful moments for recruitment of female candidates. The results suggested that men, instead, may be less interested in entering politics when media discrimination reminds them of the negativity surrounding the political domain, even if this negativity targets women rather than men.

This experiment, among the small but growing number of political ambition gender gap studies in a European country, tentatively suggests that the political ambition gender gap in the European context might be similar to the gap studied extensively in the North American context, but the results regarding how media discrimination impacts this gap require further study. Similar to how female political role models can be both motivating and demotivating, and how stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical female role models may motivate women for different reasons (Sweet-Cushman 2019), it may be that media discrimination can lead to a variety of effects that positively or negatively impact women's

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political ambition and the political ambition gender gap. Further research is needed in particular to untangle when precisely one can expect women to react against media discrimination, and if some forms of media discrimination might instead lead to role incongruity and stereotype threat that decrease women's political ambition. Moreover, more research is needed to understand why nascent and expressive political ambition may respond differently to media discrimination, and whether internal motivation and voter bias perceptions are equally impacted by media. Finally, future studies might consider whether, even if women's political ambition is not negatively impacted, media discrimination might create problems for women's self-esteem, political efficacy and motivation to remain in politics.

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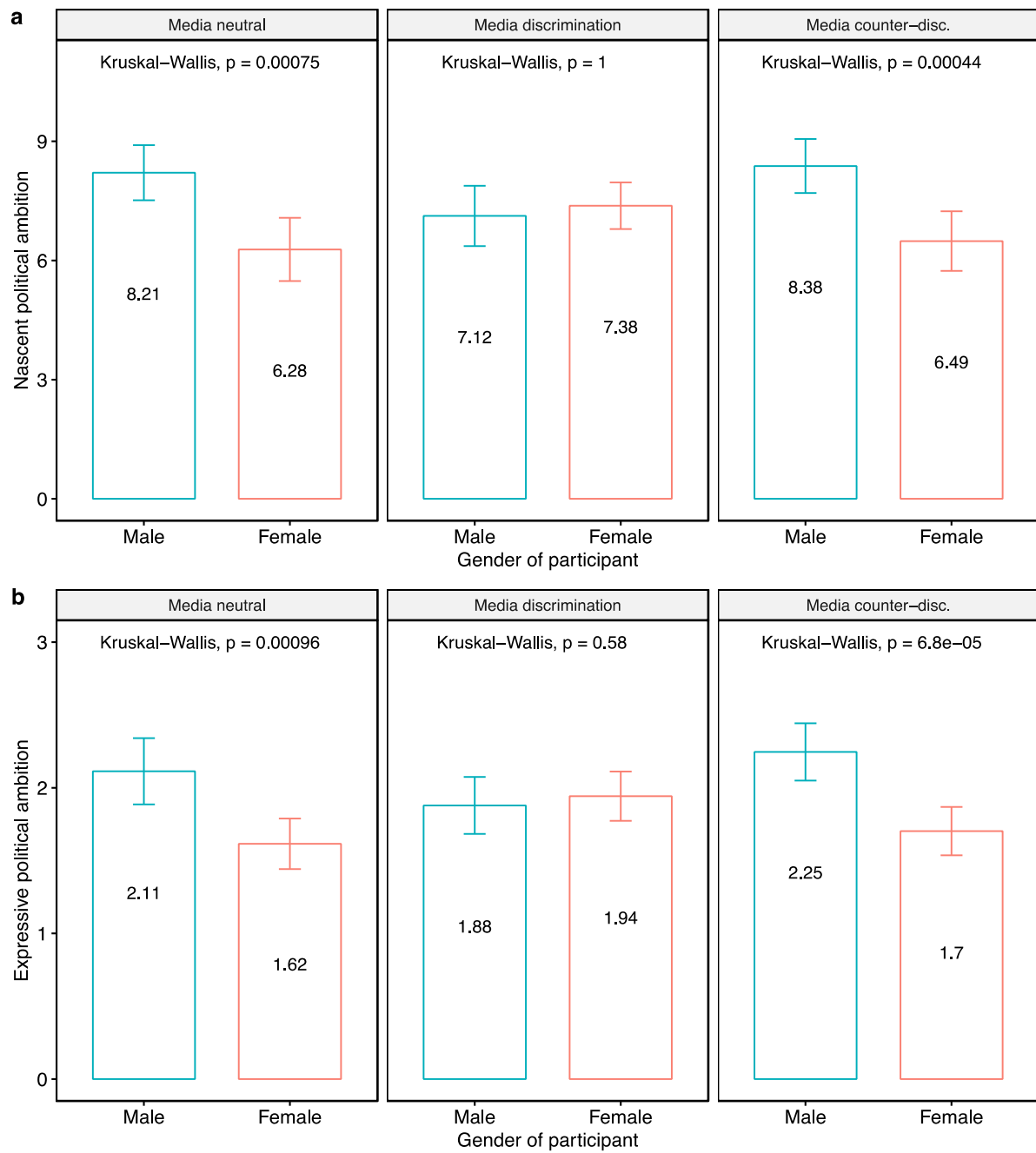
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# MEDIA DISCRIMINATION AND GENDER DIFFERENCES...



*Figure 1: Political ambition gender gaps within media treatment. Political ambition differences between media treatments, within gender: Women's nascent political ambition p-value=0.171. Women's expressive political ambition p-value=0.018. Men's nascent political ambition p-value=0.033. Men's expressive political ambition p-value=0.034.*



# MEDIA DISCRIMINATION AND GENDER DIFFERENCES...

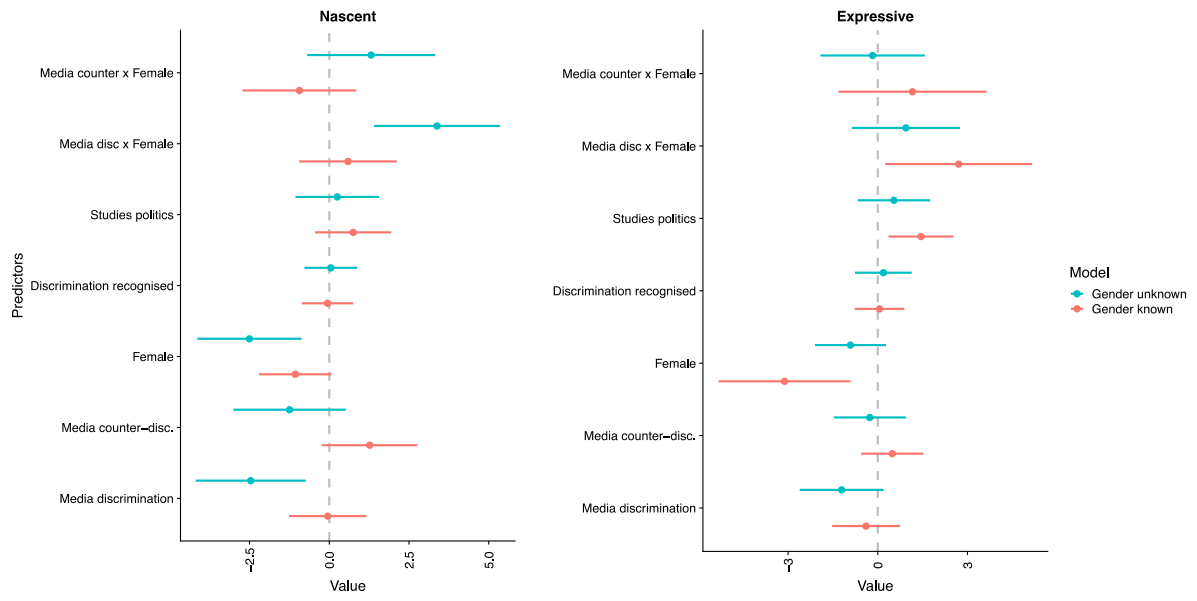


Figure 1: Gender difference in political ambition logit models, separate for gender known and unknown

<sup>1</sup> In one session, not enough participants showed up. Therefore, two experimenters artificially played as two group members and those two observations were removed before analysis, leading to 388 observations. This session was one where gender was unknown. Therefore, I do not expect the participants in this session to have been affected.

<sup>2</sup> Because there must be five participants per role, participants are not guaranteed their first role choice (as participants know).