

**CORRUPTION, OPPORTUNITY NETWORKS, AND GENDER: STEREOTYPES
ON FEMALE POLITICIANS' CORRUPTIBILITY**

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Abstract. Women are typically considered as being more ethical than men. Given this prescriptive gender stereotype, we expect people to assess female politicians as being less corruptible, but that information about access to networks suggesting opportunities to engage in unethical behavior will counter this perception. Using a conjoint analysis in a nationally representative survey in Spain, a country shaken by corruption scandals, we asked respondents to identify the more corruptible politician between two hypothetical local councilors by imagining an investor willing to offer a bribe to advance business interests. Our results indicate that female politicians do symbolically stand for honesty. However, this assessment is offset by embeddedness cues signalling a woman politician's access to opportunity networks. We discuss our findings in the light of instrumentalist arguments for an increase of women in politics as a means to combat corruption.

Across the world, women politicians are considered less corrupt than their male counterparts and are preferred among citizens valuing honesty in government (McDermott 1998). It is thus unsurprising that larger proportions of women in public office have been found to decrease perceptions of corruption (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2018; Jha and Sarangi 2018). Nonetheless, the microfoundations underlying the gender gap in perceptions of corruptibility and gendered expectations of politicians' behaviour in office remain unclear. While the notion of women's virtuosity builds upon an essentialist understanding of women (Goetz 2007) and is rooted in pervasive gender stereotypes, such evaluations of female officeholders may be inhibited when their presence becomes normalized. Understanding this relationship is crucial to avoid mistaking the promotion of women's representation as a means to fight corruption, and thus as a means to preserve the legitimacy of the political system.

Using a conjoint experiment we test the symbolic association of women with probity and whether system embeddedness like long tenure in public office or access to business networks, carries signals of opportunity to engage in unethical behavior that offset stereotypical assessments of female politicians. We implemented our experiment in an online survey in Spain, a country with a high level of women's political representation but strong concerns about corruption. Prompting respondents to identify the more corruptible politician between two hypothetical local councilors enables us to isolate the impact of gender and to assess its interaction with attributes that signal system embeddedness. Our results evidence the symbolic function of gender, with female politicians clearly standing for honesty. Yet, women with connections in the "right" places are seen just as corruptible as their male counterparts.

Gender, Opportunity and Perceptions of Corruptibility

The evocative function of symbols as recipients of feelings, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions makes citizens largely rely on emotional responses when evaluating representatives – i.e. the

agent (Pitkin 1967). The construction of symbols relies on unconscious “schemata of interpretation” (Goffmann 1974, 21), with gender being one of the main frames underpinning the affective evaluation of politicians. As research on vote choice shows, candidates’ gender serves to tacitly infer not only beliefs and issue positions but also traits (Sanbonmatsu 2002). Attention must then be paid to how the characteristics ascribed to men and women “extend that particular meaning to men and women as symbols in politics” (Lombardo and Meier 2014, 15).

For example, men are seen as more agentic and self-centered, while women are perceived as more community-centered and care-oriented (Dolan 2004). Men are also associated with physical strength and toughness, which may lead voters to lean more on male politicians in the aftermath of terrorist attacks (Lawless 2004). Contrary, women politicians are associated with probity (Fridkin, Kenney, and Woodall 2009), a trait typically attributed to women (Prentice and Carranza 2002). Women’s involvement in politics not only increases the awareness and salience of corruption (Alexander and Bågenholm 2018); their portrayal as ‘political cleaners’ constructs them as symbols of honesty (Goetz 2007), even leading some political parties to appoint more women to public office after the eruption of corruption scandals (Johnson, Einarsdóttir, and Pétursdóttir 2013).

To be sure, we do not claim that women are intrinsically less corrupt than men are. We argue that the symbolic properties ascribed to women can induce responses based on instinctive forms of fast-track cognitive processing rather than on rational judgement, that is, individuals are assigned characteristics according to generic presuppositions about the groups they belong to (Foley 2013). Such implicit attitudes facilitate the heuristic assessment of social contexts (Devine 1989) and are activated automatically (Mo 2015). Gender stereotypes in particular are highly prescriptive and stable over time as they are deeply ingrained in social norms (Prentice and Carranza 2002). Seeing a woman in a masculinized field such as politics may therefore activate implicit attitudes that assess officeholders according to gender-based presuppositions

about which sex is more honest.¹ Consequently, our main hypothesis (*gender-cue hypothesis*) posits that because women stand for honesty, *female politicians will be perceived as less corruptible than male politicians* (H1).

Yet, such a stereotypical assessment may be mitigated by perceptions of politicians' embeddedness in opportunity structures. The perception of female candidates as "honest outsiders" is notably relevant when voters are looking for an alternative to the status quo (Morgan and Buice 2013). Indeed, power sites where corruption practices are set have traditionally been highly masculinized (e.g. Bjarnegård 2013). However, when women politicians gain access to opportunity structures, gender differences in corruptibility may diminish (Franceschet and Piscopo 2014). Hence, we argue that when judging corruptibility, citizens will take into consideration information that signals the extent to which a politician has noteworthy connections that may facilitate or constrain corrupt behavior (see also Barnes and Beaulieu 2019). We thus expect that the gender stereotype of probity will hold for female politicians with an outsider status; otherwise, the stereotypical assessment of women politicians as more honest should be inhibited. Correspondingly, our second hypothesis (*embeddedness-cue hypothesis*) posits that *access to networks and power structures will decrease differences in corruption perceptions of female and male politicians* (H2).

Data and Methods

To test our expectations, we use a conjoint experiment embedded in an online survey in Spain. This allows us to randomize multiple politicians' attributes, thereby obtaining simultaneously

¹ The perception of women's higher level of risk aversion, supposedly making them less prone to engage in corruption (e.g. Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2018), is also riddled with gender stereotypes (Booth and Nolen 2012).

information on respondents' preferences over a particular attribute of interest and the relative importance given to different attributes while reducing respondents' inclination to provide socially desirable answers (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Besides their strong statistical power, conjoint analyses also enhance external validity, as they focus on various dimensions at once. Fielded February 3-15, 2016, our sample included 350 respondents, recruited from a commercial, by invitation only on-line pool of respondents aged 18-65 (see online appendix for details).² Sex, age, education and habitat quotas were used.

Spain constitutes an ideal setting, as concerns about political corruption are very high in a country shaken by scandals. With a score of 58 on a scale of 0 ('highly corrupt') to 100 ('very clean'), Transparency International rankings (2019) on perceived level of public sector corruption have placed Spain at position 26 out of the 34 OECD countries during the past few years. Indeed, 84 percent of Spanish citizens believe that the abuse of power for personal gain is widespread in political parties and 72 percent indicate that this also affects politicians more broadly (European Commission 2014). Most corruption cases in Spain have occurred at the local level and involved bribes received in exchange for amendments to land use plans or for construction contracts (Villoria and Jiménez 2012). These scandals have affected politicians from statewide and regional traditional ruling parties, leading to the breakthrough of new political parties that have campaigned strongly on anti-corruption platforms.

In addition, the legislative gender quota adopted in 2007 (establishing a minimum of 40 percent of positions in party lists for either sex) consolidated the increasing trend in the

² We used the provider Netquest, who implemented this study in compliance with the ISO 26362: 2009 quality standard for the management of research panels. This covers, among other things, the invitation and the questionnaire used, sample design, the field period, data validation methods, and the participation rate and its calculation method.

presence of women in politics at both the national and the local level initiated in the 1990s thanks to the use of voluntary quotas by left-wing parties. In 2016, women represented 35.6 percent of local councilors, as compared to an average of 32.2 percent in the EU-28 and to 25.5 percent in the pre-quota elections. In 2019 this share had risen to 40.8 percent, as compared to an average of 32.6 percent in the EU-28.³ Yet, at the time of the survey Spanish citizens had also witnessed several high-ranked female politicians tainted by corruption scandals (El País 2014, 2016).

Placing our conjoint experiment at the local level, where most corruption scandals have occurred, maximizes external validity as our scenario corresponds to citizen experience of sociotropic political corruption, that is, corruption occurring at the societal level but not entailing personal victimization. Our experimental design is thus sensitive to the corruption signals that are common in the respondents' environment, prompting participants to indicate which politician they thought would be approached by an investor willing to offer a bribe to advance her business. Put differently, respondents were asked to identify the more corruptible politician between two hypothetical local councilors from their hometown (see online appendix for an example). Given that Spanish voters have doubtlessly had to consider corruption allegations against politicians in recent elections, a task that involves identifying a corruptible councilor is not implausible. This choice indication serves as our dependent variable (see Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

³ Women's representation in the Spanish lower house reached 40 percent in 2016. In November 2019 it stood at 43.4 percent, compared to the EU-28 average of 32 percent (European Institute for Gender Equality 2019).

Participants were shown 12 pairs of candidate profiles, resulting in 8,400 profile evaluations for analysis.⁴ We defined the seven different attributes of the two randomly generated councilor profiles (see Table 1 for details) following theoretical expectations. *Gender* allows us to examine our main gender-cue hypothesis. To test our embeddedness-cue hypothesis, we include two different attributes. *Tenure* accounts for a weak version of embeddedness by highlighting whether a councilor is a newcomer serving her first term in office or a more experienced politician (either four or ten years of public office seniority). It thus signals potential for access, with a longer experience evoking more opportunities for illicit behavior. The attribute *networks* constitutes a stronger version of embeddedness, as it emphasizes either access to local businesses, entrenchment with local NGOs, or an outsider position with no noteworthy ties. The type of connections should tap into different qualities associated with these actors. For instance, 69 percent of Spaniards believe that corruption is widespread among businesspersons, while only 28 percent suspect NGOs to be corrupt (CIS 2011).

Age and *previous profession* are included as controls for socio-economic characteristics and a politician's *track record* accounts for a councilor's competence, as voters may exonerate corrupt politicians who deliver (Muñoz, Anduiza and Gallego, 2016). Lastly, we provided respondents with information on the type of *political party* a councilor belongs to, namely traditional vs. new party, capturing the momentum the latter have gained campaigning on anti-corruption platforms. Conversely, specific partisan cues were avoided because voters tend to turn a blind eye to corruption when it affects their preferred political party (Anduiza, Gallego

⁴ Bansak et al. (2017a, 2017b) do not find survey satisficing related to the number of choice tasks or attributes.

and Muñoz 2013). Not providing a specific party cue also helps us to keep the focus on the individual politician, a strategy recommended when examining how gender role beliefs shape voters' view of public officers (McDermott 1998).

To avoid profile order effects, all attributes were presented in a random order. We did impose, however, some restrictions. A local councilor with no previous experience in office could only have a track record of either being a neighborhood association leader or a political party official. Likewise, only a candidate who had held office before could be linked to either good or poor performance in office. Affiliation to a new party was only compatible with having never held office before (although we acknowledge that party switching sometimes occurs), while being a relatively young contender (i.e. being 32 years old) could only have been a local councilor during the past four years or have no experience in public office whatsoever.

Results

Following Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014), we calculate the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE) of each attribute on the probability that a respondent considered a particular councillor corruptible.⁵ Figure 1 shows that, as expected, women politicians are perceived as being less corruptible than men politicians: the probability of being perceived as bribable decreases by 6 percent even in scandal-ridden Spain, underlining that gender beliefs often fail to be modified in response to single events (Fridkin, Kenney and Woodall 2009). We can thus accept our gender-cue hypothesis (H1). Only being of a more advanced age, 63 years old, has a larger magnitude and reduces concerns of unethical behavior by 7 percent, while

⁵ For the restrictions applied we implement the corresponding corrections. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

belonging to a new party or performing well in office decrease the probability of being perceived as corruptible by 4 percent.⁶

Figure 1 also provides strong evidence for the importance of embeddedness. Political experience in public office makes a councilor a good candidate for being approached by a willing investor: 4 years in office increases the probability of being perceived as open to accepting a bribe by about 6 percent, while 10 years in office accounts for a 12 percent increase. The most important attribute for a councilor to be deemed bribable, however, is maintaining close ties to local entrepreneurs, which increases the probability of being perceived as corruptible by 24 percent. Conversely, having ties to local NGOs decreases perceptions of corruptibility by 4 percent.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Do respondents judge these attributes similarly across councilors' gender? Figure 2 contrasts the relative importance of all attributes for female and male councilors and highlights that overall male and female politicians are not evaluated that differently. The "right" attributes make a politician an attractive target for an investor willing to go the extra mile, regardless of gender. Nevertheless, a longer tenure in office yields a larger impact for a male politician, increasing perceptions of being bribable by 14 percent, while the impact for women politicians is 8 percent. Similarly, involvement in networks appears to have a slightly dissimilar impact. Female councilors are deemed more corruptible when maintaining close ties to local entrepreneurs, while ties to local NGOs dampen corruption perceptions especially for male

⁶ While probity is also an age-related stereotype, more inherent contradictions are found in age stereotypes than in gender stereotypes.

councilors.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

To further explore our embeddedness-cue hypothesis (H2), we test the two attributes that signal access to networks and power (i.e. *tenure* and *networks*) conditional on gender. The left-hand pane of Figure 3 provides some support for the weak version of the embeddedness. Women councilors who are newcomers to politics are indeed considered less bribable than inexperienced male officeholders. Yet, note that this difference also holds across length of tenure, with the impact being the strongest for 10 years in office. Tenure alone may thus be a too diffuse indicator to inhibit the gender stereotype of probity, since voters may still perceive women politicians as marginalized within institutions and therefore lacking access to formal and informal political networks that facilitate corruption opportunities (see Barnes and Beaulieu 2019).

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The right-hand pane of Figure 3 shows clear support for the strong version of the embeddedness-cue hypothesis. Women councilors with a clear outsider status, that is, with no ties in the local community, are less likely to be regarded as a worthy target of bribery. The effect also holds for female officeholders with ties to local NGOs, although the impact is weaker. Conversely, having ties to local entrepreneurs appears to signal being open to illicit behavior for both female and male politicians. All combined, we can partially accept H2.

Involvement in networks and access to power counteract perceptions of probity, while the gender cue holds for female politicians with an outsider status.⁷

How, then, does a corruptible politician look like? We first created profiles that correspond to the 1st, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 99th percentile of distribution for estimated corruptibility for the subsample of male councilors. We can then contrast these predicted probabilities to those for our subsample of female politicians with the same characteristics. Taking male councilors as benchmark, Figure 4 illustrates that women councilors systematically have a lower predicted probability of being perceived as corruptible across otherwise identical profiles. The gap widens for the profiles suggesting disconnection from power sites that may facilitate corrupt behavior, such as having ties to local NGOs or no noteworthy ties in the community, and it closes when ties to local entrepreneurs come into play. These results confirm that attributes that signal access to opportunity structures counter the gender cue of honesty.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Conclusions

Using a unique conjoint analysis embedded in an original nationally-representative survey in Spain, our study pinpoints that gender constitutes a powerful and pervasive honesty shortcut. Despite some culprits involved in corruption scandals having been women, the stereotype effect endures, confirming that inferences based on gender override more rational judgments

⁷ As robustness check for the universalism of stereotypes, we rerun our analyses across respondents' sex. Contrary to Barnes and Beaulieu (2019), we find no heterogeneous perception of female politicians' probity (see online appendix).

(Mo 2015). However, we also find that respondents take into account connections that signal access to the inner circles of power, with the gender gap closing when women and men politicians are thought to have similar opportunities to engage in corruption.

While the gendered honesty cue might not have direct implications for vote choice as other considerations might well override this effect, our results raise serious concerns about the instrumentalist arguments linking increases in women's representation with lower corruption levels put forth by international institutions like the World Bank (Goetz 2007) or Transparency International (2014). This promises a relatively easy fix to a problem that calls for much deeper reforms tackling the causes and opportunities for illicit behavior (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer 2018), while it puts an enormous onus on women to regenerate politics, a strategy that may easily backfire if and when gendered expectations are not met. While equal gender representation and fighting corruption are both desirable and feasible goals, they require different recipes – and good doses of political will.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at Public Opinion Quarterly online.

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Figures

Figure 1. Effects of councilors' attributes on being perceived as corruptible. Bars indicate 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

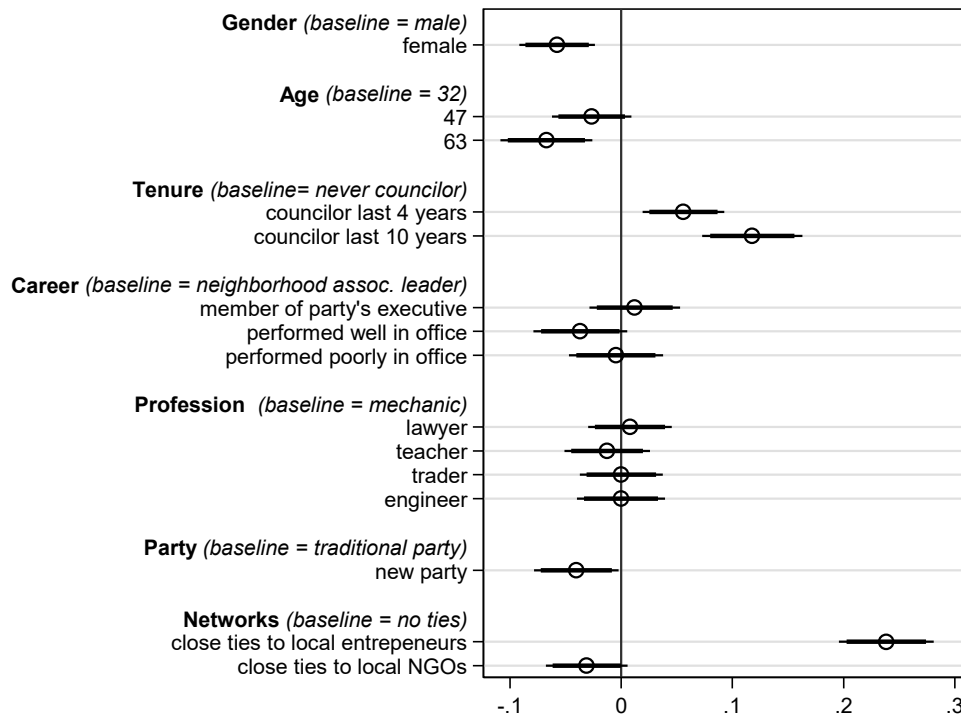


Figure 2. Effects of female and male councilors' attributes on being perceived as corruptible. Bars indicate 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

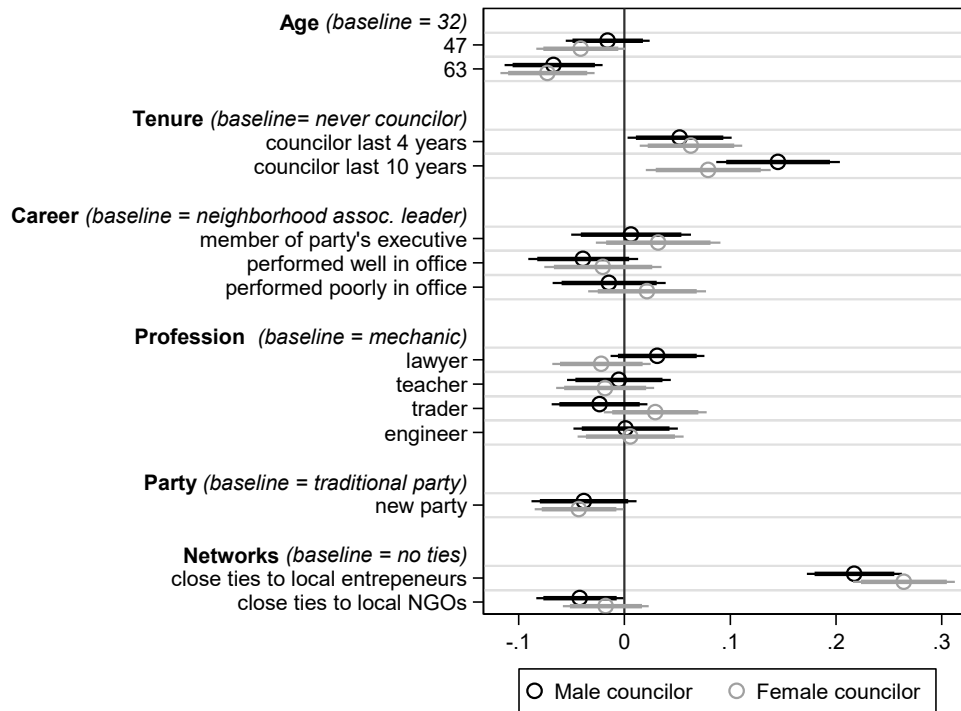


Figure 3. Effects of councilors' gender on being perceived as corruptible, tenure and networks. Bars indicate 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

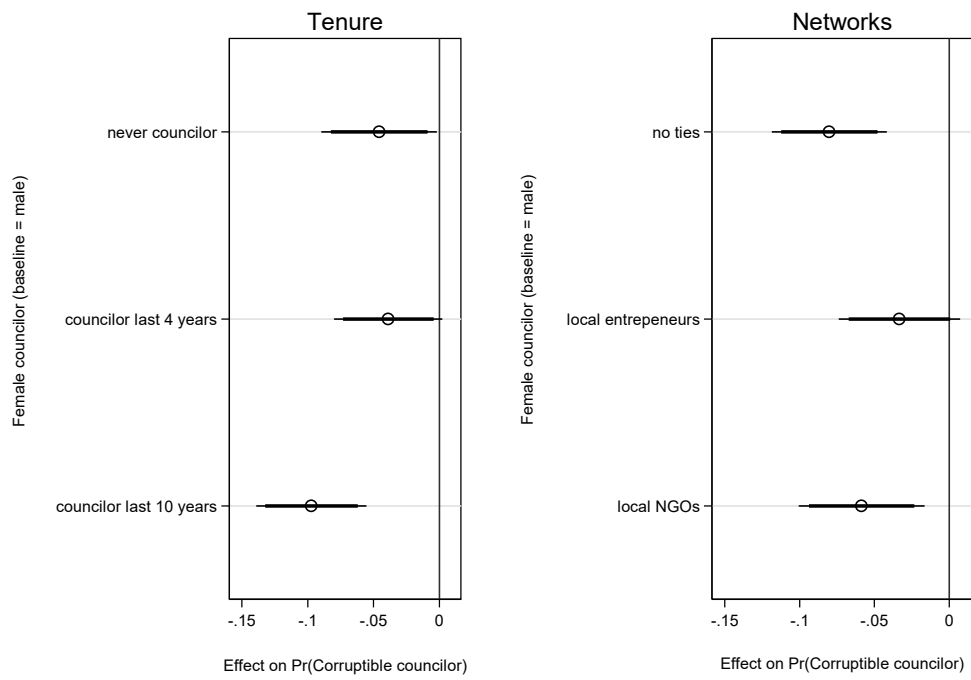
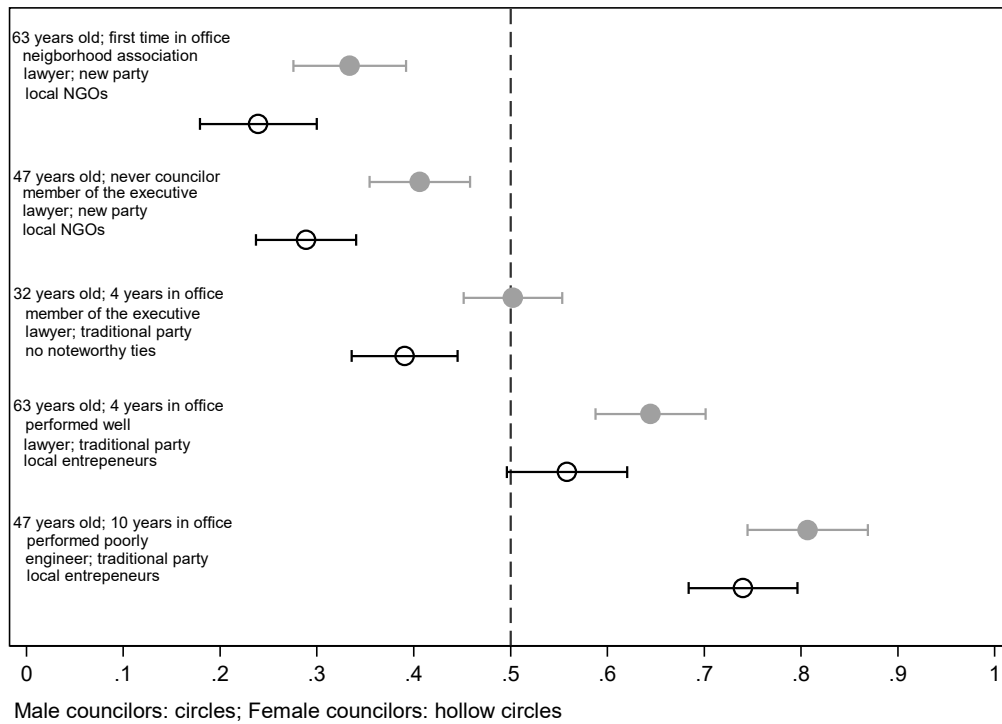


Figure 4. Probability of being perceived as corruptible, selected councilor profiles. The plot shows the estimated probability of being perceived as corruptible. The estimates are shown for selected councilors' profiles that refer to the 1st, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 99th percentiles of the distribution for *male* councilors as a benchmark against which female councilors are compared; bars represent 90 percent confidence intervals. The baseline probability of choosing a randomly drawn councilor profile is 0.5. Male councilors: grey filled circles; Female councilors: black hollow circles



Table

Attribute	Value
Gender	Male, Female
Age	32, 47, 63
Profession	Lawyer; Teacher; Trader; Engineer; Mechanic
Tenure	Has never been councilor; Has been councilor during the past four years; Has been councilor during the past ten years
Track record	Neighborhood association leader; Member of the party's executive; Good performance in office; Poor performance in office
Networks	Does not maintain any noteworthy ties with local NGOs or the business sector; Maintains close ties with local businesses; Maintains close ties with local NGOs
Political Party	Traditional party; New party

Table 1. Attributes used to randomly generate candidates' profiles