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Framing symbolic representation: exploring how women's political presence shapes citizens' political attitudes

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Abstract

Research on whether descriptive representation enhances the legitimacy of, closeness to and satisfaction with political institutions as well as levels of political engagement has produced mixed results. This may be caused by the empirical and methodological challenges underpinning this inquiry, like reversed causation and endogeneity. To overcome such constraints, we use a framing experiment embedded in nationally-representative online surveys in Spain and Portugal. We show that symbolic effects on women's political engagement and system evaluation are fundamentally driven by perceptions on a heightened gender balance in political institutions, even when barriers to access on equal terms or gendered portrayals of women politicians' competency are presented to respondents. Male citizens also evaluate the system more positively with frames referencing a more level political field, even when women politicians are depicted as not sufficiently prepared. Raising awareness on gains made in women's descriptive representation is thus instrumental to positive symbolic effects.

Keywords:

Symbolic representation; Descriptive representation; Political attitudes; Survey experiments; Framing; Gendered mediation.

Introduction

The normative case for women's descriptive (numerical) representation is often made in terms of its symbolic effects. Women's political presence is considered to instill a role model effect that stirs female citizens' political engagement. In addition, by signaling the inclusiveness of political institutions, the legitimacy of the political system is likely to increase for all social groups (Mansbridge, 1999). Thus, engendering political institutions is expected to engender politics at the mass level (cf. Barnes and Burchard, 2013: 785). Yet, research on whether women's political presence enhances citizens' political attitudes on the legitimacy of, closeness to and satisfaction with institutions, as well as levels of political engagement still presents several empirical and methodological challenges (Espírito-Santo and Verge, 2017). These include difficulties in establishing causal effects, issues of spuriousness, reversed causation and endogeneity.

We seek to contribute to alleviating these challenges by using a framing experiment. For one thing, the symbolic impact of female politicians does not happen in a vacuum; rather, attitudinal, cultural or behavioural shifts may largely depend on how citizens *observe* and *react* to elected women (Franceschet et al., 2012: 239–42). Indeed, citizens are frequently exposed to images of and discourses about female politicians provided by the media (García-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013; Ross, 2003). Secondly, women politicians are often subject to a gendered mediation through which their presence or performance is omitted, trivialised – by either depicting them as tokens or by emphasising more what they look like than what they do – or even harshly criticised in a sexist manner (see, among others, Mavin et al. 2010; Murray 2010; Norris 1997; Verge and Pastor, 2018). We thus examine whether exposure to distinct frames about greater women's descriptive representation has an impact on citizens' political engagement and on their evaluation of the political system. We implemented such framing experiment in nationally-representative online surveys in two countries, Spain and Portugal. While these third-wave democracies share similar socioeconomic and cultural characteristics and have long applied electoral gender quotas, they differ with regards to the degree of institutionalisation of quotas and the share of women representatives (Verge and Espírito-Santo, 2016).

Our article contributes to the literature on symbolic representation in important ways. First, we expand the study of the impact of frames in mediating the influence of women's descriptive representation on political attitudes, using both positive and

negative frames. While most works have examined either political engagement or system evaluation in this research we look at both. Second, our results show that symbolic effects on citizens' political attitudes are fundamentally driven by perceptions on improvement in the gender balance of political institutions, even when barriers to access political institutions on equal terms or gendered portrayals of politicians' competency are presented to respondents. The positive role model effect on political engagement identified among female respondents and the positive effect on system evaluation observed among both female and male respondents may thus depend on raising awareness of equitable gains in descriptive representation.

The article proceeds with the discussion of our theoretical expectations, followed by an outline of the experimental design, a description of the data and the discussion of the empirical results. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our main findings.

Studying the symbolic impact of descriptive representation on political attitudes

Hitherto, scholars have provided mixed results for the existence of symbolic effects. While a positive relationship has been found between the presence of women politicians and female citizens' levels of political discussion and ambition, results for other indicators of political engagement, such as increases in women's interest in electoral campaigns, internal political efficacy or convincing others to vote for a specific party, are less clear. Various scholars have confirmed the existence of a positive relationship (Barnes and Burchard, 2013; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 2001; Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006; Desposato and Norrander, 2009; Koning, 2009; Norris and Krook, 2009; Mariani et al., 2015; Reingold and Harrell, 2010; Sapiro and Conover, 1997; Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007; Verge, 2012) while others have discovered only a very weak link or no relationship at all (Atkeson, 2003; Karp and Banducci, 2008; Lawless, 2004; Zetterberg, 2009, 2012; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010; Clayton, 2015). Similarly, the few studies examining such symbolic effects on the evaluation of the political system report higher levels of satisfaction with democracy (Karp and Banducci, 2008), perception of democratic legitimacy (Clayton et al., 2018), confidence in the lower house (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005) and external political efficacy (Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007), but they cannot trace effects for either trust in government (Lawless, 2004) or in politicians (Zetterberg, 2009).

Most of the refereed publications draw on observational data which are fraught with both empirical and methodological challenges. Firstly, to adequately establish the causal effects of women's numerical presence on citizens' political attitudes, a clear cut-off time period is required to segment the analysis into one in which political representation was strongly skewed towards men (t) and another one in which proportions become more equilibrated ($t+1$). This is of paramount importance since symbolic effects have been found to be nonlinear, accelerating as the percentage of women MPs increases (Gilardi, 2015; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005). However, in countries where women's representation has followed a gradual increase, no clear cut-off point exists. And even when two clear periods can be distinguished, we risk attributing changes in citizens' attitudes and behaviour to increases in women's representation at the expense of competing explanations derived from broader nationwide attitudinal or cultural shifts (Clayton, 2015: 343). Spuriousness is then a strong concern since unobserved factors might facilitate both greater women's descriptive representation and citizens' political involvement (Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007: 927). Secondly, it is theoretically and empirically plausible that reversed causation exists (Stockemer and Byrne, 2012). Changes in the share of women MPs and changes in female citizens' beliefs in their ability to govern may be part of a virtuous cycle where both variables integrate 'a reciprocal system of mutually reinforcing empowerments' (Alexander, 2012: 446; see also York and Bell, 2014: 58). And, thirdly, public opinion surveys rarely include any or enough questions to allow linking the presence of women in politics to citizens' attitudes.

To overcome these challenges recent scholarship has resorted to quasi-natural experiments (see Beaman et al., 2009; Bhavnani, 2009; Clayton, 2015) or specifically designed experiments. Certainly, the use of experiments in the field of women's political representation has increased during the past few years, particularly for measuring stereotypes of female politicians and the effect of candidate gender on vote choice (see, among many others, Bauer, 2019; Schneider and Bos, 2014; Streb et al., 2008), albeit yielding mixed results. Wolak's (2015) web-based experiments, for instance, apply priming to test the effect of candidate gender on voters' desire to engage in politics, with no association whatsoever being identified. Using survey data from a randomised policy experiment, Clayton (2015) finds that having a quota-mandated female representative either has no effect or even decreases women's self-reported political engagement.

Yet, using framing via embedding vignettes in a survey experiment, Clayton et al. (2019) show that gender balance legitimises decision-making processes and affords institutional trust for both men and women (for similar results using a factorial survey experiment, see Arnesen and Peters, 2018). And Holman and Scheider (2018) demonstrate in an experimental survey that framing women's underrepresentation as a demand- or as a supply-side problem does shape women's political ambition. Framing happens when the way in which an issue is defined and presented in the media influences how an individual *thinks* or *feels* about an issue. Due to the pervasive use of gender schemes in the evaluation of female politicians, citizens' beliefs may thus be affected by whether women are presented as undeserving tokens or meritocratic nominees (Franceschet et al., 2012: 239), or, conversely, as competent and engaged politicians. It is precisely framing effects that we delve into in this article to explore the symbolic effects of women representation, paying attention to political engagement and system evaluation.

Political engagement

Being part of a traditionally excluded group implies carrying 'the historically embedded meaning "persons with these characteristics do not rule", with the possible implication "persons with these characteristics are not able to (fit to) rule"' (Mansbridge, 1999: 648–49; see also Burrell, 1996: 151). Symbolic effects then tend to be expected only for the underrepresented group. Women may internalise the idea that politics is a 'man's game', thereby developing a much weaker interest in politics and feeling less politically efficacious. The feminisation of institutions may therefore boost female citizens' political engagement via perceptions of *procedural legitimacy* (Clayton et al., 2019). Gender-balanced decision-making processes and institutions might be seen as fairer (Arnesen and Peters, 2018), leading to a higher engagement of those having suffered from a historical marginalisation in politics, as is the case of women. Recent research has found that when lack of parity is framed as a demand-side problem (gatekeepers' discrimination) rather than a supply-side problem (shortage of female candidates), levels of political engagement increase in women of colour (Holman and Schneider, 2018) as does women's performance on political knowledge (Thomas et al., 2015).

The symbolic effects on female citizens' political attitudes may therefore stem from perceptions of how gender-balanced and barrier-free political institutions are. We

believe that women's political engagement could plummet when pinpointing that access to politics is still more difficult to women due to the gendered barriers underpinning recruitment processes. The message sent is that women are not welcome, which may deactivate them and make them feel less politically efficacious. Since women have been found to be more sensitive to issues of under-representation (Dolan and Sanbonmatsu, 2009: 412) and the broader literature suggests that political inclusion is particularly meaningful for the historically excluded group (Clayton et al., 2019: 115; Barnes and Burchard, 2013: 785), our first hypothesis states:

H1.1: When women's presence in politics is framed as the result of an increasingly level political field, female citizens will respond with feeling more politically engaged, whereas frames referencing existing difficulties for women's political access will make female citizens feel less engaged.

Although the mere presence of female politicians may stir women's political engagement through a role model effect (Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007; Karp and Banducci, 2008; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010), as has been pointed out, the influx of women in politics hardly occurs in a vacuum and the increase of descriptive representation does not go by unperceived and uncommented. Thus, the way in which the competencies of the very same women elected are evaluated may shape feelings of political efficacy. As a matter of fact, preparedness is often questioned for female politicians, who also tend to be more scrutinized. As remarked by Murray (2014: 522), whereas '[men's] existing presence in politics is taken as sufficient evidence of their ability to serve as representatives (...) [women] do not benefit from the same presumption of competence and indeed may find themselves having to disprove gendered preconceptions of inadequacy'.

In contrast, the saliency of women's qualities as good political leaders might contribute to decreasing feelings of inadequacy, which are likely to be felt by female citizens due to women's under-representation. If the perception is installed that women are as able to perform effectively in politics as men, female citizens may see their political engagement increased (Burrell, 1996; Mansbridge, 1999). Telling respondents that women are competent (incompetent) should increase (lower) their political engagement. Hence, our second hypothesis posits:

H1.2: When women politicians are framed as being as competent as their male peers, female citizens will respond with feeling more politically engaged, whereas framing women politicians as unprepared will make female citizens feel less engaged.

System evaluation

As Burrell (1996: 151) points out '[w]omen in public office stand as symbols for other women, both enhancing their identification with the system and their ability to have influence within it'. Thus, women's numerical representation is expected to shape not only women citizens' levels of political engagement but also their evaluation of the political system. If female citizens perceive that women politicians face significant barriers to participate in political institutions, negative evaluations of the system may be stirred. Contrarily, if the political system is assessed as being open to both men and women it may receive a positive evaluation, particularly by those who have been traditionally excluded.

As already expected for political engagement, this feeling might be driven by changing perceptions of *procedural legitimacy* (Clayton et al., 2019), given that more gender-balanced institutions may signal higher inclusiveness. Contrary to political engagement, however, we can expect the perception of heightened inclusiveness of political institutions to boost a positive perception of the political system for all social groups (Mansbridge, 1999). In this vein, men may also be positively influenced by the feminisation of institutions, as enhanced representational justice may improve all citizens' feelings of system legitimacy and thus of better representation for all (Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007: 95-96). Likewise, another disposition where both men and women seem to react positively to women's numerical representation is political trust (High-Pippert and Comer, 1998: 61). Thus, we expect that engendering political institutions will lead to a more positive assessment of the political system for both male and female citizens.

H2.1: When women's presence in politics is framed as the result of an increasingly level political field, both female and male citizens will evaluate the political system more positively, whereas frames referencing existing difficulties for women's political access will make female and male citizens evaluate the political system more negatively.

In addition, perceptions of *substantive legitimacy* (Clayton et al., 2019) will impact on system evaluation because female politicians are expected to ‘act for’ women citizens by engendering policy debates and legislation. A greater presence of women occupying public office might suggest to female citizens that political institutions will produce more women-friendly policies (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 2001: 352), as women politicians have long been perceived as agents of change (Carroll, 1994; Norris, 1997), positively influencing their evaluation of the political system.

Thus, female politicians are often associated with more inclusive and participatory democracy (Thomas and Adams 2010), with decisions being regarded as more responsive when parity prevails in decision-making positions (Arnesen and Peters, 2018). Likewise, positive presentations of women politicians’ capacity may increase women’s legitimacy as political actors, boosting confidence levels in institutions and the outputs they produce (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005). In contrast, citizens’ beliefs may be negatively affected when women are seen as undeserving tokens, non-meritocratic nominees (Clayton, 2015: 356; Franceschet et al., 2012: 239). Therefore, we posit that:

H2.2: When women politicians are framed as being as competent as their male peers, female and male citizens will evaluate the political system more positively, whereas frames referencing women politicians’ unpreparedness will make female and male citizens evaluate the political system more negatively.

Research design

Rather than being interested in comparing symbolic effects under low levels versus high levels of women’s representation scenarios, our interest lies in unfolding the causal mechanisms stirring symbolic effects. Framing experiments are particularly well suited for this purpose; by emphasising specific considerations, individuals are led to focus on these particular considerations when forming their opinion (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Scheufele, 1999). Framing effects have been found to be ubiquitous and can be reproduced in questions, vignettes or artificial news stories to influence citizens’ attitudes (see Druckman, 2001; Jacoby, 2000). Thus, we are using frames to make citizens think of the impact of women in politics in a particular way.

In light of our theoretical discussions, we devised two distinct frames aimed at examining whether citizens' political engagement and their evaluation of the political system is affected by exposure to the way in which the influx of women in politics is framed. To test our hypotheses, we develop both a positive and a negative vignette of each frame, as Table 1 shows.¹ Thus, the first frame focused on (i) *barriers to accessing politics*. While the positive vignette (A1) highlighted that the political field has been levelled for women thereby renewing the political landscape, the negative vignette (A2) reflects the idea that, despite greater women's political presence, women still face higher barriers to access politics. Our second frame revolved around (ii) *women politicians' competency*. The positive vignette (B1) pointed out that female politicians are just as competent as their male peers and present similar levels of political initiative and engagement, whereas B2 suggested that the former have lower levels of initiative, competency and engagement. Since the experiment used deception, upon completion of the survey respondents were debriefed about the experimental character of the study, clarifying that the 'editorial' text was fake and that, while there has in fact been an increase in women's political presence, statements suggesting women politicians are less prepared than men politicians reflected stereotypes or prejudices that have been debunked by several studies.²

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Our experiments were implemented in nationally-representative surveys with samples selected from a commercial, by invitation only on-line pool of respondents (Netquest, ISO 26362 certified) aged 18-65, that were stratified using sex, age, education and size of habitat quotas. The identical surveys were administered to 777 Spanish and 764 Portuguese respondents in May 2015. Online-administered surveys allow avoiding social desirability problems, a major concern when examining gender issues (Streb et al., 2008). In both Spain and Portugal party gender quotas were adopted in the late 1980s and since the mid-2000s legislated gender quotas have been applied. However, in Spain party quotas present a higher level of institutionalisation, with some parties even using zipping in candidate tickets, and legislated quotas mandate a larger minimum proportion for the underrepresented sex, leading to more feminised political institutions in the former (Verge and Espírito-Santo, 2016: 434).³ Accordingly, while both countries have long ranked well above the worldwide average of women MPs,

Spain has systematically presented a significantly larger share of women MPs than Portugal. Finally, the Portuguese gender regime has been characterised as being slightly more conservative than the Spanish one (see Lépinard and Rubio-Marín, 2018). Therefore, conducting the experiment in two similar countries that differ in important ways enhances the external validity of the findings.

Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of the four treatment conditions or a pure control group (no treatment).⁴ The pre-treatment survey included several socio-economic and attitudinal questions, that also included items related to women representation. To prevent that participants would identify the survey with gender issues, gender-related items were presented in blocks together with other gender-neutral political or social items. In addition, to avoid any spillover effect (Gaines et al., 2007), for distraction purposes respondents had to complete two tasks of unscrambling sentences that did not contain any gender-related concepts before continuing to the vignettes.⁵

All treatment groups received a common introduction. To increase the credibility of the frame's source (Druckman, 2001: 1042), the layout of the vignettes simulated the appearance of an excerpt of a domestic newspaper editorial that allegedly relied on parliamentary sources to reflect on the increase in women's representation and the effects observed in national politics. However, the source of this editorial was kept neutral, that is, no specific media outlet was identified to avoid any interference (on the effects on source cues, see Hartman and Weber, 2009). A timer, invisible to respondents, ensured that participants stayed on the screen presenting the vignette for at least forty seconds.

As we can only simulate a small effect of what we expect to occur repeatedly over time in the real world, respondents answered the corresponding questions in the survey immediately after having been exposed to the vignettes, so that the treatment would be fresh and no interference occurred (see Mutz, 2011: 90). The mean response time of the survey was 14 minutes and 23 seconds.⁶ We exclude from the analysis respondents who were either below or above one standard deviation of duration time (8 minutes and 47 seconds), i.e. who either rushed through the survey or who seemed to be distracted in the meantime, since in both cases we cannot be sure that they concentrated on the task at hand. The same applies to those respondents who logged on several times to complete the survey. This leaves us with a total of 1,271 observations – between 238 and 266 respondents per group (see the supplementary online appendix).

To test the impact of the different scenarios of our framing experiment on respondents' political attitudes we use various dependent variables:⁷

- Political engagement:
 - *Internal political efficacy*: 'Generally, politics seems so complicated that a person like me cannot understand what is going on'. Strongly agree (1), Agree (2), Disagree (3), Strongly disagree (4).
 - *Political interest*: 'How interested would you say you are in politics?'. Not at all interested (1), Hardly interested (2), Quite interested (3), Very interested (4).

- Evaluation of the political system:
 - *System responsiveness*: 'The interests of all social groups are well reflected in the legislation and policies that are adopted'. Does not apply at all (1), Applies a little, (2) Applies a lot (3), Totally applies (4).
 - *Political inclusiveness*: 'Women citizens feel excluded from politics'. Totally applies (1), Applies a lot (2) Applies a little (3), Does not apply at all (4).

We have run balance checks using demographic variables, attitudinal questions such as gender equality beliefs, respondents' ideological self-placement, and a variable that measures the deviation between respondents' reported proportion of women deputies in their national parliament and the actual share⁸ (see Table A.2. in the appendix). As our tests indicate that randomization was successful, we proceed without covariates (Mutz, Penmantele, and Pham 2019).⁹

Empirical results

We begin our analyses by presenting within condition differences among female and male respondents to provide a descriptive baseline before moving to testing differences across control and treatment conditions. Cell entries in Table 2 show the means for men (listed first) and women (listed second) within each condition (control or treatment) and for each of our dependent variables for political engagement and system evaluation. On the one hand, with means of 2.97 and 2.85 respectively, both male and female respondents in the control group report similar levels of *political efficacy*. Male and

female respondents also appear to react in a similar way across all treatments, and we find larger means indicating higher levels of efficacy as a response to positive frames and smaller means as a response to negative frames. However, women experience a larger drop in reaction to frames referencing existing difficulties for women's political access (A2), leading to a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.1$, two-tailed t -test) across gender.

Results for *political interest*, on the other hand, indicate a significant lower level for female respondents compared to male respondents in the control group (mean of 2.35 vs. mean of 2.68, $p < 0.01$). Interestingly, in this case female and male citizens react in opposite ways towards the framing of the influx of women in politics. Regardless of framing the presence of women in a positive or negative light, across treatment groups women appear to show heightened levels of political interest. However, men's mean level of political interest seems to increase only when female politicians are framed as being as competent as male politicians (B1), resulting in a significant difference between genders in this treatment group ($p < 0.05$).

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

We also find a significant difference in the control group when it comes to *system responsiveness*. Compared to male respondents, women tend to disagree more with the statement that the interests of all social groups are well reflected in the legislation and policies that are adopted ($p < 0.01$). Once more, regardless of framing, female citizens in all treatment groups appear to report more positive evaluations of system responsiveness. While the means of male respondents also increase when frames reference the removal of barriers (A1) and women politicians' competence (B1), men judge system responsiveness more negatively when difficulties for women's political access are emphasized (A2). In these instances, we do not observe a within condition gap in evaluation across gender, while framing women politicians as unprepared (B2) leads to a significant difference in system evaluation ($p < 0.01$).

Lastly, male and female respondents in the control group share a similar view (mean of 2.52 and a mean of 2.47, respectively) when it comes to the evaluation of the *inclusiveness of the political system*. While women respondents also evaluate political inclusion more positively when an increasingly level political field is highlighted (A1), male respondents react particularly strongly in this case, leading to a significant

difference between the groups' means ($p < 0.05$). Yet, when emphasis is put on the existence of barriers (A2), women respondents' level of system evaluation appears to be dampened, resulting in a significant within condition difference ($p < 0.01$) between male and female respondents. As in the case of system responsiveness, both genders report greater mean levels of system inclusiveness regardless of whether the women politicians making up the increase in descriptive representation are framed as competent (B1) or unprepared (B2).

The previous discussion has highlighted some interesting differences within conditions, while allowing us to observe tendencies across treatments. However, to test our hypotheses directly, Table 3 provides across condition tests, that is, it reports OLS regression results using interaction terms between gender and the dummy variables for the individual vignettes to estimate respondents' level of political engagement and system evaluation.¹⁰ To assess the effects between female respondents in the control group and female respondents in the treatment groups, in the bottom panel of the table we present the corresponding average difference-in-differences. These auxiliary quantities show the results of having been exposed to information about the influx of women in politics in the form of positive or negative vignettes of our two frames – *barriers to access* and *women politicians' competency* (H1.1, H1.2, H2.1, and H2.2) compared to not having been exposed to any frame. The effects of the frames on male respondents vis-à-vis men in the control group to test H2.1 and H2.2, on the other hand, can be read off the results directly from the coefficients for male respondents. To visualize these results further, Figures 1 and 2 show difference-in-difference estimates by sex exemplarily for political interest and political inclusion highlighting whether men and women differ in how they react to the treatments relative to the control group.¹¹

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The first two columns in Table 3 indicate that women in the control group report lower levels of political engagement. This is particularly the case for political interest as indicated by the statistically significant and negative coefficient of the variable *women*. The difference-in-difference effects shown in the lower panel reveal that no difference among women in the control and the treatment groups emerges for political efficacy (column 1). However, female respondents having been reminded of the influx of

women in politics, be it with the *barriers to access politics* frame or the *competency* frame, show significantly higher levels of political interest (column 2). This holds even for the negative versions, pointing towards a strong role model effect derived from observing an increase in descriptive representation, regardless of how this influx is framed. Conversely, as expected for the overrepresented portion of the population, men receiving any of the treatments in the form of a positive or negative vignette do not show significantly different levels of political engagement than their male counterparts in the control group. This effect becomes more apparent in Figure 1. With the exception of the positive vignette of the *competency* frame (B1), the results even indicate a weak downward slope between men in the control group and men in the treatment groups. Yet, it should be highlighted that while we observed a substantial and significant gap regarding political interest between women and men in the control group this gap is closed in the treatment groups.

[FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

The last two columns of Table 3 indicate that women in the control group also show lower levels of system evaluation, particularly regarding system responsiveness (column 3). Again, difference-in-difference effects provided in the lower panel confirm the presence of an impact of women's descriptive representation. Women in the positive and negative treatment groups of the *barriers to access politics* frame tend to agree more with the statement that the interests of all social groups are well reflected in the legislation and policies that are adopted. While this also holds for the positive version of the *competency* frame (B1), emphasising women politician's unpreparedness (B2) does not reveal any significant difference in system responsiveness between female respondents in the control and treatment groups.

We do not find either any significant effect for the difference-in-difference results for system inclusiveness (column 4) between female respondent groups across conditions. On their part, male respondents react positively regarding system inclusiveness, particularly when the influx of women in politics is framed in terms of an increasingly level political field (A1). Somewhat surprisingly, male respondents also evaluate the system more positively when women politicians are depicted as being less prepared than their male counterparts (B2). Figure 2 visualizes these positive effects for male respondents. It also reveals that female respondents largely react in a similar way

as men in the same treatment groups, with one exception. The frame referencing existing difficulties for women's access to politics (A2) leads to a significant gap between male and female respondents' level of system evaluation when it comes to inclusiveness.

Summing up, we expected that female citizens should experience an increase in political engagement, particularly when women's access to politics and women politicians themselves are framed in a positive way, while frames referencing the influx of women in politics in a negative light should dampen it (H1.1 and H1.2). We find, however, that both the *barriers to access politics* frame and the *competency* frame in their positive and negative versions stir significantly higher levels of political interest among women across our treatment groups. This points towards the existence of a strong role model effect in which the mere increase in women's descriptive representation impacts on the levels of political engagement of the traditionally underrepresented group.

Similarly, we had stipulated that system evaluation by female and male citizens should be more positive when women's access to politics and women politicians themselves are framed in a positive way, whereas frames referencing the influx of women in politics in a negative light should lead to a more negative evaluation (H2.1 and H2.2). In the case of system responsiveness, our results show that symbolic effects on female citizens' political attitudes are fundamentally driven by the increasing gender balance of political institutions, despite remaining gendered barriers to access political institutions and, to a lesser extent, competency issues. Male respondents react particularly strongly with regards to the evaluation of system inclusiveness. While the strongest impact is found when the frame highlights the removal of barriers, a positive effect occurs as well when frames reference women politicians' unpreparedness.¹²

Conclusions

Based on a unique experimental design embedded in original surveys, we find support for framing effects on women's descriptive representation affecting citizens' political attitudes. The external validity achieved by administering our experiment in two different countries, Spain and Portugal, to stratified nationally-representative samples raises our confidence in the results obtained. We thus believe that experimental designs are a fertile approach to address some of the empirical and methodological challenges

that make the study of symbolic representation and the causal inference of symbolic effects highly problematic with observational data.

Substantively, we show that respondents do adjust their political attitudes in response to the information provided by vignettes highlighting greater women's representation. Particularly, we find evidence for a generalised role model effect on female respondents for political interest. Across all vignettes, women in our treatment groups show higher levels of political interest vis-à-vis women in the control group. Similarly, in the case of system responsiveness female respondents give more positive evaluations when institutions are framed as having been feminised. This suggests that numerical increases of women MPs send a strong signal to female citizens, even when presented in a rather negative light in terms of extant barriers to access political office or competency issues. Male citizens also assess the system more positively as regards its inclusiveness when reminded of increasingly gender-balanced institutions, even when women politicians are depicted as not well prepared. The fact that female and male respondents react heterogeneously to framing cues opens an important avenue for future research, with symbolic effects on men remaining under studied. Future research should thus further theorize the expected impact of symbolic effects on male citizens, that is, on the group who is seeing its over-representation gradually reduced. We also call on scholars to explore in their empirical analyses various indicators for multidimensional concepts such as political engagement and system evaluation.

Lastly, although framing effects might well disappear a few days after the experiment has been administered (see Gaines et al., 2007), the results of our study have implications for how the politics of presence is exposed to citizens. Whereas gendered media frames building on the fallacy of merits may be increasingly dismissed by citizens, as suggested by our results, low media coverage of female politicians and a trivialisation of their breakthroughs in traditionally masculinised political offices might well entail a 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman, 1978; see also Verge and Pastor, 2018) for both female and male citizens, which may prevent the feminisation of political institutions from engendering politics at the mass level. To put it in more positive terms, since a more equitable political field boosts citizens' political engagement among women and system evaluation for both men and women, news outlets and political institutions have the responsibility to raise awareness on gains made in descriptive representation

Endnotes

1. See also Chong and Druckman (2007) on the fundamental premise in framing is that the same issue can be portrayed in different ways.
2. The online appendix provides the debriefing text.
3. The Portuguese quota law (2006) was revised in 2019 to establish a minimum percentage for either sex of 40 per cent, the same proportion instituted by the Spanish equality law in 2007.
4. See Table A.1. in the online appendix for information on the social composition of each group.
5. These tasks were presented to participants as a way of testing reading and writing skills.
6. The survey included a few more questions – after having performed the experiment – that are not used in this article.
7. All questions offered a ‘Don’t know’ category. These values were excluded from the empirical analyses, leading to slightly different numbers of observations across the models.
8. We find that the share of women MPs is underestimate. Respondents reported an average of 32 per cent women MPs in Spain and 24 per cent in Portugal, far below the level as of May 2015, which was 41 per cent and 31 per cent, respectively (IPU, 2015).
9. Randomisation makes it impossible that covariates have a confounding relationship with the outcome of interest and the treatment. Thus, causal estimates and inferences do not require the use of covariates.
10. Although the dependent variables are ordinal, the use of OLS is appropriate, since OLS and nonlinear marginal effects estimates for this kind of variables are very similar and computing nonlinear models is more complex (Angrist and Pischke, 2009: 107; see also Samii and Aronow, 2012).
11. Due to space restrictions, the corresponding figures for political efficacy and political inclusion can be found in the supplementary online appendix (Figures A.1 and A.2).
12. Running the models for each country separately shows that the results for women are more consistent and homogeneous across countries than those for men (see the supplementary online appendix).

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Table 1. Framing symbolic effects

<i>(i) Barriers to accessing politics</i>	
<p>(A1) More women, new politics Women’s presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade. <i>At least, barriers to women’s political access have been removed.</i> Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>It is worth noting that nowadays politics has a significant number of female role models and, as pointed out by parliamentary sources, the way of doing politics has changed.</i></p>	<p>(A2) More women, same politics Although women’s presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade, <i>access to politics is still much more difficult for women.</i> There are still fewer women than men in political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. Likewise, most candidate lists are headed by men among all political parties. <i>It is worth noting that most role models in politics continue to be men and, as pointed out by parliamentary sources, the way of doing politics has not changed.</i></p>
<i>(ii) Women politicians’ competency</i>	
<p>(B1) More women and well prepared Women’s presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade. Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>It is worth noting that, as pointed out by parliamentary sources, women politicians are equally or more prepared than their male peers and have the same level of initiative, competency and engagement.</i></p>	<p>(B2) More women but less prepared Women’s presence in politics has largely increased in Spain (Portugal) in the past decade. Women are found in all political posts, be them deputies, ministers or mayors. The number of women as heads of candidate lists has also increased among all political parties. <i>However, as pointed out by parliamentary sources, it is worth noting that women politicians are often less prepared than their male peers and have lower levels of initiative, competency and engagement.</i></p>

Note: The original vignettes did not include italics but are used here to highlight the differences between the two frames.

Table 2. Within condition differences among men and women

	Political efficacy	Political interest	Responsiveness	Political inclusion
Control group	[2.97, 2.85]	[2.68, 2.35]***	[1.73, 1.48]***	[2.52, 2.47]
A1	[3.00, 2.80]	[2.62, 2.52]	[1.83, 1.85]	[2.87, 2.68]**
A2	[2.91, 2.72]*	[2.60, 2.42]	[1.61, 1.51]	[2.54, 2.26]***
B1	[2.93, 2.77]	[2.76, 2.50]**	[1.77, 1.71]	[2.70, 2.66]
B2	[3.00, 2.90]	[2.58, 2.45]	[1.84, 1.53]***	[2.73, 2.57]

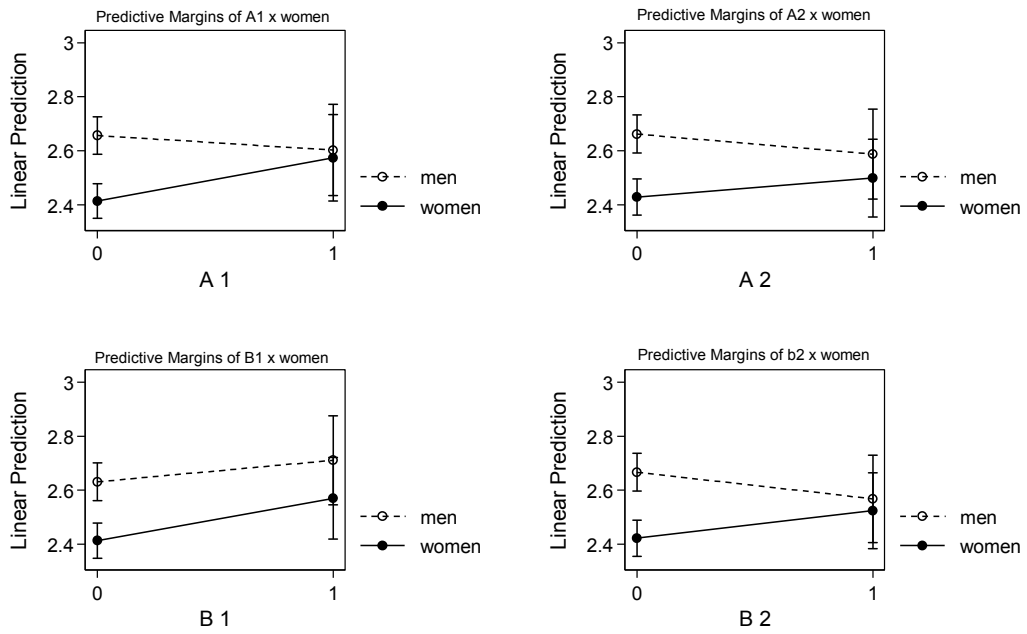
Note: Cell entries indicate the within condition means first for men, second for women. Higher means indicate more positive outcomes. Two-tailed t-tests.: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 3. Symbolic effects on political engagement and system evaluation, conditional on sex

	<i>Political engagement</i>		<i>System evaluation</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Pol. efficacy	Pol. interest	Responsiveness	Pol. inclusion
A1 (men)	0.03 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.12)	0.10 (0.10)	0.35*** (0.11)
women	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.33*** (0.11)	-0.25*** (0.09)	-0.05 (0.11)
A1 x women	-0.08 (0.17)	0.21 (0.16)	0.27** (0.14)	-0.14 (0.15)
A2 (men)	-0.06 (0.11)	-0.07 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.09)	0.03 (0.11)
A2 x women	-0.07 (0.16)	0.14 (0.16)	0.22* (0.12)	-0.23 (0.15)
B1 (men)	-0.04 (0.12)	0.08 (0.11)	0.04 (0.10)	0.19 (0.12)
B 1 x women	-0.05 (0.17)	0.08 (0.16)	0.19 (0.13)	0.01 (0.16)
B 2 (men)	0.03 (0.12)	-0.10 (0.11)	0.11 (0.10)	0.21** (0.11)
B 2 women	0.02 (0.17)	0.20 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.13)	-0.11 (0.15)
Constant	2.97*** (0.08)	2.68*** (0.08)	1.73*** (0.07)	2.52*** (0.08)
Women A1 – Women control	0.04 (0.26)	0.54** (0.25)	0.52** (0.21)	-0.08 (0.24)
Women A2 – Women control	0.05 (0.26)	0.47* (0.24)	0.48** (0.20)	-0.18 (0.24)
Women B1 – Women control	0.07 (0.26)	0.41* (0.24)	0.44** (0.21)	0.06 (0.25)
Women B2 – Women control	0.14 (0.26)	0.53** (0.24)	0.20 (0.20)	-0.06 (0.24)
Observations	1,226	1,269	1,210	1,206
R-squared	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.04

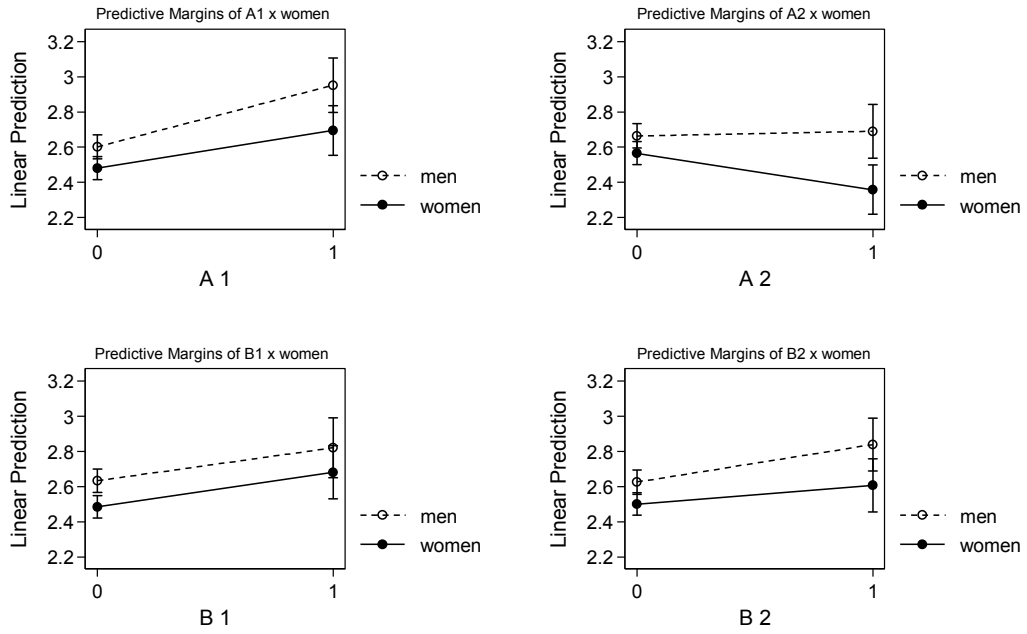
Robust standard errors in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Figure 1. Difference-in-difference: Political interest



90% Confidence Intervals

Figure 2. Difference-in-difference: Political inclusion



90% Confidence Intervals

SUPPLEMENTARY ONLINE APPENDIX

Tània Verge, Nina Wiesehomeier and Ana Espírito-Santo. Framing symbolic representation: exploring how women's political presence shapes citizens' political attitudes. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*.

Debriefing message

This is a study conducted by the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona) and the Instituto de Ciências Sociais de la Universidade de Lisboa on political representation and citizens' political attitudes. Sometimes such attitudes are activated when information is presented in a certain way. As you recall, this survey included a newspaper editorial. However, it does not belong to any news outlet and it is not based on parliamentary sources; it was made up specifically for this study.

For this reason, a clarification is due. Only a part of the information you were presented with are accurate: that is, the increase in women's political representation in the last decade in our country. The remainder of the editorial text contained some statements based on stereotypes that are sometimes heard in the streets, such as, for example, that women politicians are less prepared than men politicians, a claim that is not true, as shown by several studies. The inclusion of such texts in opinion polls is very common, especially in social science studies.

Thank you again for your participation.

Table A.1. Social composition of subgroups (number of respondents)

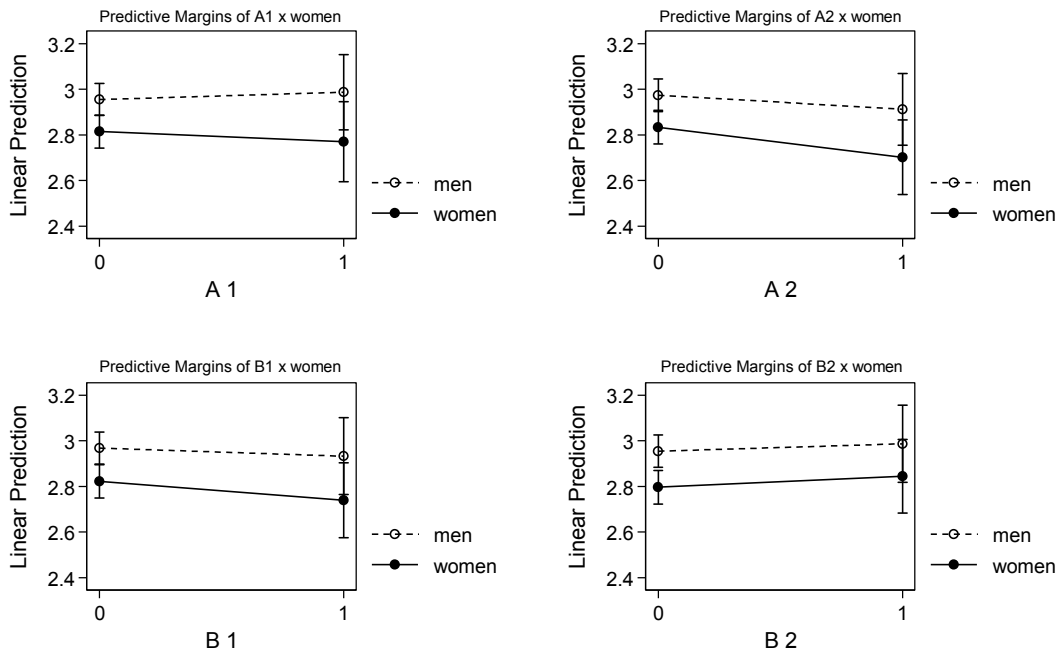
Treatment	Sex		Age					Total
	Men	Women	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-65	
A1	122	116	38	46	57	54	43	238
A2	136	130	37	55	63	59	52	266
B1	119	122	30	53	57	51	50	241
B2	121	140	37	63	65	50	46	261
Control	130	135	35	64	63	53	50	265
Total	628	643	177	281	305	267	241	1271

Table A.2. Randomisation checks

	SPAIN				PORTUGAL			
	(1) A 1	(2) A 2	(3) B 1	(4) B 2	(1) A 1	(2) A 2	(3) B 1	(4) B 2
Women	-0.01 (0.28)	0.04 (0.29)	0.09 (0.29)	0.12 (0.28)	0.14 (0.34)	-0.12 (0.31)	0.29 (0.32)	0.45 (0.33)
University	-0.17 (0.31)	0.19 (0.32)	0.30 (0.31)	0.18 (0.30)	-0.40 (0.33)	-0.59* (0.30)	-0.73** (0.32)	-0.16 (0.32)
Misperception gender composition parliament	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Gender attitudes	0.01 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)	0.03 (0.07)	0.05 (0.06)	0.12 (0.08)	-0.00 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.08)
Political sophistication	-0.28 (0.30)	-0.09 (0.33)	-0.04 (0.33)	-0.04 (0.31)	-0.17 (0.36)	-0.04 (0.33)	-0.57* (0.34)	-0.57 (0.35)
Ideology	0.01 (0.06)	-0.11* (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.07)	0.05 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.07)
Age 25-34	-0.06 (0.49)	-0.43 (0.50)	-0.14 (0.51)	-0.13 (0.46)	-0.18 (0.55)	1.01* (0.58)	0.07 (0.54)	0.13 (0.54)
Age 35-44	0.50 (0.47)	0.04 (0.49)	0.37 (0.50)	0.12 (0.47)	-0.12 (0.53)	0.76 (0.57)	-0.25 (0.53)	0.28 (0.52)
Age 45-54	0.35 (0.49)	0.28 (0.50)	0.63 (0.51)	0.16 (0.48)	0.03 (0.54)	1.04* (0.57)	0.04 (0.53)	-0.28 (0.57)
Age 55-65	-0.08 (0.50)	0.12 (0.49)	0.38 (0.52)	-0.03 (0.48)	-0.26 (0.54)	0.36 (0.58)	-0.24 (0.52)	-0.15 (0.54)
Constant	0.91 (1.24)	0.61 (1.32)	-0.14 (1.33)	0.14 (1.26)	0.27 (1.39)	-0.26 (1.33)	2.14 (1.32)	1.99 (1.36)
N	532	532	532	532	456	456	456	456

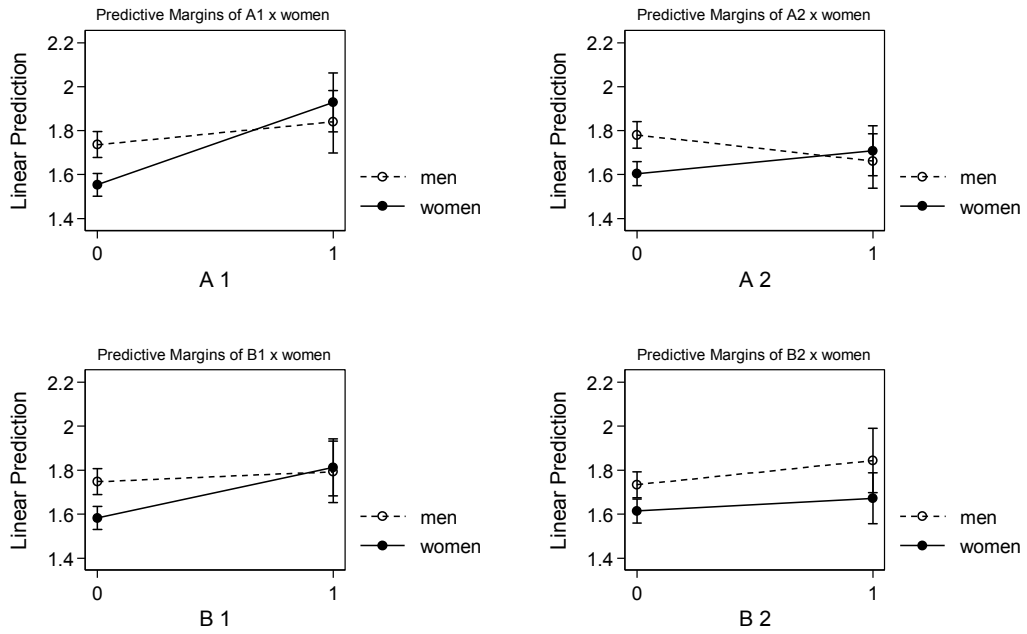
Robust standard errors in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. The comparison group for age is 18–24 years old. Gender attitudes is an index based on respondents' position on the statement 'both men and women should undertake domestic tasks' along with the widely used question on political gender bias, that is, the position on the statement 'men make better political leaders than women do'. Political sophistication is an additive index of weekly consumption of political news through television, radio and press, built upon three separate variables.

Figure A.1: Political efficacy (Spain and Portugal)



90% Confidence intervals

Figure A.2. System Responsiveness (Spain and Portugal)



90% Confidence Intervals