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Passionate Hiking Fan or Loving Parent? How Personalized Self-Presentation in the Media Affects the Perception of Female and Male Politicians

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Even though studies have intensively investigated personalization in the media, little is known about the effects of personal information on the perception of politicians (privatization). Especially if politicians share information about their private life, gender might play an important role. To test this assumption, we conducted two experiments (2×3 between-subjects design, $N_{study1} = 472$; $N_{study2} = 739$) varying gender of a politician (male/female) and the disclosure of personal information (no information/hobby/family) in a fictitious news interview. Results show that gender can play a crucial role depending on the form of privatization. While we see no significant changes in the politician's perception when they are mentioning their hobby, we find that, for a male politician, sharing information about family life in a traditional manner leads to a decline in trust and reduces perceptions of warmth. For a female politician, the different kinds of self-presentation do not affect image perception and voting outcomes.

Keywords: personalization, privatization, political communication, gender roles, experimental research

There is widespread agreement in political communication that not only the professional role of politicians but also their private role matters (Holtz-Bacha, Langer, & Merkle, 2014; Poguntke & Webb, 2005). In this context, personalization has become an important keyword in recent years. The concept refers to a "heightened concentration on the individual" (Blick & Jones, 2010, p. 33) and therefore a focus shift from issues to people (Kaase, 1994; Karvonen, 2010) and from parties toward individual political leaders (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012). In an increasingly personalized

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political arena, candidates deploy personal information about themselves to convey a positive image, and voters rely on evaluations of candidates' personal characteristics in their vote decisions (Campbell & Cowley, 2018b).

A plethora of studies document a growing importance of political personalization (e.g., Balmas, Rahat, Sheaffer, & Shenhav, 2014; Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013; Cross, Katz, & Pruysers, 2018) and the impact of personalization on candidates' evaluations and/or voting behavior (e.g., Bittner, 2018; Kaase, 1994). So far, only few researchers have experimentally tested the effects of information regarding a politician's personal life on the perception of politicians from a personalization perspective (e.g., McGregor, 2018; Otto & Maier, 2016, as exceptions).

One person-related factor that plays a crucial role in the evaluation process of political candidates is their gender (Bauer, 2020; Thomas, 2018). Gender stereotypes and gender beliefs are crucial for the presentation of politicians and the effects of personal information on the perception of politicians (e.g., Bauer, 2020; Sanbonmatsu 2002; Thomas, 2018), since gender interacts with the perceptions of competence and warmth (e.g., Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, & Sczesny, 2020; Hentschel, Heilman, & Peus, 2019), the most fundamental dimensions of person perception (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007).

Extant studies suggest that female politicians may face a disadvantage because common gender stereotypes consider men to perform better in leadership positions (Bauer, 2015; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Simultaneously, signs of femininity, including women's roles as mothers and wives, lead to negative consequences in the political environment (Deason, Greenlee, & Langner, 2015). Research indicates that emphasizing traits typically associated with masculinity increase perceived competence of women at cost of sympathy (Dolan, 2016; Niven & Zilber, 2010).

In the present study, we investigate how sharing different kinds of personal information affects the perceptions of competence and warmth of a politician as well as voting intention. Additionally, we also focus on perceptions of the politician's trustworthiness, which studies have shown to affect voting decisions (Otto & Maier, 2016). Based on previous research, we assume that the effects will be different for female and male politicians. Thereby, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of gendered personalization and personalism (Thomas, 2018) as well as gender roles in political communication and campaigning strategies.

The Concept of Personalization

Personalization "refers to changing electoral, societal and political norms in which the centrality of individual actors has increased" (Pruysers, Cross, & Katz, 2018, p. 5). While researchers have argued that leaders are becoming increasingly important to voters (Poguntke & Webb, 2005) and can mostly agree on the factors explaining personalization of politics (i.e., decreasing importance of partisanship, changes in the media environment, and erosion of traditional political cleavages; Adam & Maier, 2010; Pruysers et al., 2018), the conceptualization of personalization still lacks clarity. Personalization itself implies a change over time, and some researchers find evidence of an increase of personalization (e.g., Kaase, 1994; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Rahat & Shaefer, 2007), while others do not (e.g., Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, 2012). Moreover,

scholars have proposed the term *personalism* (i.e., the extent to which politics is personalized) to point out that long-term changes are not always at the center of interest (Pruysers et al., 2018) and that it has always been there (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014).

Furthermore, researchers have pointed out that personalization also refers to the increased focus on politicians' character and their personal lives. Today's media environment has arguably increased the emphasis on personality, families, and lifestyles (McGregor, Lawrence, & Cardona, 2017; Otto, Glogger, & Maier, 2019), and voter evaluations of politicians increasingly focus on personal traits (McGregor, 2018). To match these observations, Van Aelst and colleagues (2012) posit that personalization consists of two dimensions: individualization and privatization. While individualization describes how individuals have become a central focus of media coverage, and institutions and organizations have become less relevant, privatization refers to the presentation of people in high-level positions as ordinary persons (e.g., the presentation of a party leader as a nature lover) and so far, has rarely been investigated (Pruysers et al., 2018). However, there is research investigating concepts that can be placed within privatization without explicitly mentioning it and their effects on the perception of politicians and/or voting behavior—for example, parenthood (Campbell & Cowley, 2018b; Stalsburg, 2010), marital status (Bell & Kaufmann, 2015), sexual orientation (Loepp & Redman, 2020), or occupation and wealth (Campbell & Cowley, 2018a).

Privatization as a Subdimension of Personalization

Privatization involves a shift either toward individuals' personal traits (nonpolitical traits) or the personal life of politicians (private life and personal interests; Smith, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2012). While studies have shown the importance and effects of personality traits—for example, integrity or reliability, on voting behavior (e.g., Bauer, 2020; Takens, Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, & Van Atteveldt, 2015), research on the influence of a politician's personal life is still scarce.

Yet the personal life of politicians is strategically used by both the media and politicians themselves (Langer, 2010). On the one hand, the media emphasize personal narratives to make political coverage more appealing (Langer, 2007; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). On the other hand, politicians not only adapt but also actively engage in this trend (Langer, 2010; McGregor, 2018; Pruyssers et al., 2018). They increasingly use aspects of their personal lives in their campaigns to "mould their public image" (Smith, 2018, p. 196) and to "offer a 'human' persona" (Langer, 2010, p. 61). Emphasizing the personal can help to reach potential voters who are less interested in formal politics (Langer, 2010), suggest proximity to them—as politicians are portrayed as persons who know and understand the needs of the average citizen (Holtz-Bacha, 2004), and trigger emotionalization which ensures that voters are emotionally attached to a politician (Langer, 2010).

When analyzing potential effects of privatization in a political context, especially about marital status and parenthood, we need to take gender into account (Smith, 2018; Thomas, 2018). Personalization and especially privatization literature rarely focuses explicitly on gender (McGregor, 2018), even if there is reason to believe that gender may explain, for example, different personalizing communication styles (Lawrence, McGregor, Cardona, & Mourão, 2016; Meeks, 2012). Extant research suggests that women may be punished for presenting certain kinds of information (Thomas & Bittner,

2017) and that women face mostly negative stereotypes, particularly about their competence. For example, they are perceived as less knowledgeable (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007) and less competent about certain issues (Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009).

Gender Stereotypes and the Evaluation of Politicians

Voters use gender stereotypes when evaluating political candidates because they can be used as information shortcuts in complex political environments (Bell & Kaufmann, 2015). For example, they allow making inferences about candidates' positions on issues or performance in office (Dolan, 2004; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). For women in politics, these stereotypes create challenges. Female politicians may face disadvantages, since female stereotypes—which consider women to be warm, gentle, and emotional—contradict the role of a suitable political leader. Conversely, typical masculine traits that include being tough, ambitious, and dominant match with expectations of leadership roles (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Consequently, conforming to leadership expectations inhibits femininity while playing to expected gender roles inhibits the ability to embody leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because of the perception that female politicians are inferior when it comes to leadership qualities, voters may still assume that women lack abilities for political success, because stereotypes endure (Bauer, 2015; McGregor, 2018).

Politicians can strategically use beneficial stereotypes while counteracting potentially damaging gender stereotypes (McGregor, 2018). Therefore, female politicians can focus on addressing feminine issues (Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003), to explicitly include their role as wife, mother, or social figure (Deason et al., 2015). Another strategy for female politicians is to emphasize counterstereotypic traits and present themselves like male politicians do (Dolan, 2016; Niven & Zilber, 2010). When it comes to effects of counterstereotypic strategies, results are mixed. On the one hand, female politicians can benefit from the perception that they can also handle issues associated with masculine traits (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993) and this way increase their competence ratings (Bauer, 2017; Schneider, 2014). On the other hand, this strategy can backfire because demonstrating male characteristics, such as ambition or dominance, produces lower perceptions of sympathy and communality that also negatively affects voting preferences ("competent but cold effect"; Bligh, Schlehofer, Casad, & Gaffney, 2012, p. 560).

Several studies show that being a parent (and emphasizing this as a form of privatization) has different effects for men and women (Thomas & Bittner, 2017). For example, Sacco (2007) as well as Morin and Taylor (2008) found that mothers receive lower evaluations compared with fathers or childless candidates. This is supported by Bell and Kaufmann (2015), who demonstrate that female candidates who violate gender norms for marriage and motherhood receive lower evaluations, especially from voters who hold conservative beliefs about the proper role of women. Therefore, men have a gender advantage in politics (Stalsburg, 2010), while women often face negative effects when they are mothers. However, other findings revealed a preference for candidates who are parents, but no punishment effect for female politicians with children (Campbell & Cowley, 2018b). These studies suggest that it is not gender alone that affects evaluations but other factors as well, like demeanor (i.e., a rather male appearance) and family status (i.e., being a mother). In fact, political scholars argue that voters often do not engage in direct bias against female candidates and that they are not systematically attracted to or repelled by them simply because of their gender (Bell & Kaufmann, 2015; Schwarz & Coppock, 2021).

Consequently, the direct influence of gender stereotypes is possibly low. Yet we find support for indirect effects of gender stereotypes as well as other factors that might indirectly influence the effect of gender on candidate's evaluations and voting intention, like being a parent (Bell & Kaufmann, 2015; Campbell & Cowley, 2018b; Stalsburg, 2010). Other studies have also looked at the interaction of gender stereotypes and party affiliation (e.g., Deason et al., 2015; McGregor, 2018; Morin & Taylor, 2008; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009) or the interaction of gender stereotypes and political issues (i.e., Bauer, 2020).

Gendered Effects of Privatization on Politicians' Evaluations

Based on previous arguments, we assume that private information about politicians positively affects their perception, and that female and male politicians are evaluated differently regarding personal information, such as marital status and parenthood, they share in a political context. We expand existing research in two ways. First, since many studies come from a U.S. context, we are adding another context by including a German perspective. Second, we experimentally test different forms of privatization since there are not many experiments with an explicit theoretical focus on privatization.

Competence and warmth are the most fundamental dimensions of person perception (Fiske et al., 2007). In the present study, we aim to investigate to what extent politicians might benefit from personalization/personalism in mediated self-presentation and how female politicians might overcome the dilemma of being perceived as either competent or likeable (Bligh et al., 2012; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). When political candidates talk about their personal lives, it can make policy seem more human (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; McGregor et al., 2017), which may allow the public to identify more easily with candidates (Meeks, 2012).

To disentangle different forms of privatization and to compare family life with another form of personal information, we also investigate the effects of information about hobbies and leisure time on the perception of a politician (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010; Van Zoonen & Holtz-Bacha, 2000). We therefore state the following:

H1: Sharing personalized information positively affects the perception of (a) warmth and (b) competence of politicians.

Studies on personalization often do not take gender into account (Thomas, 2018), even if there is evidence that it influences the perception of politicians regarding their private life. Female candidates with children are often evaluated more negatively than male candidates with children (Bell & Kaufmann, 2015; Campbell & Cowley, 2018b; Stalsburg, 2010). Women, and especially mothers, might be perceived as too feminine or soft for a political job, and therefore less qualified or competent. Voters might worry about a mother's ability to balance a demanding political career with family obligations or penalize her for trying to do so (Deason et al., 2015; Stalsburg, 2010). However, an emphasis on family might also enhance the perception of a female leader in an overall professional context (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). Deason and colleagues (2015) argue that female politicians may be seen as power seeking and self-promoting at baseline and that they consequently need to counter those rather agentic qualities with communal traits,

because they are at risk of experiencing backlash. Presenting herself as a mother might therefore be a possibility to offset backlash. Since previous findings are inconclusive when it comes to the relevance of personalized information, we pose the following question:

RQ1: How does gender interact with different forms of personalized information about the perception of (a) warmth and (b) competence?

In addition to competence and warmth we focus on trust as another key variable when evaluating politicians (Otto & Maier, 2016). We assume that sharing private information demonstrates proximity to voters (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Langer, 2010) since politicians appear beyond their political role as a normal person on par with the ordinary audience member, as a human like you and me. This perception could reduce skepticism and thus increase trust in politicians (Holtz-Bacha, 2004). Therefore, we pose the following hypotheses:

H2: Sharing personalized information positively affects the perception of trust in politicians.

Concerning the role of gender, to our knowledge, no previous studies address the interaction with personalized information for trust. We therefore ask the following:

RQ2: Are there differences in the perception of trust between female and male politicians about different forms of personalized information?

Since the aim of politicians' self-presentation strategies is getting people to vote for them, we also examine how sharing personalized information is related to voting intention. Previous research generally suggests positive effects of personalizing for candidates (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013; Lee & Oh, 2012; Meeks, 2012). However, it has not been investigated so far how sharing different personalized information is related to intentions to vote for male and female candidates. Thus, we state and ask, respectively:

H3: Sharing personalized information positively affects voting intention for politicians.

RQ3: How does the gender of a politician interact with effects of sharing personalized information compared with no personalized information regarding voting intention?

To test our hypotheses and answer our research questions, we conducted two experiments.

Study 1

Method

For Study 1, we recruited 472 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 46.86$; $SD = 16.06$; 57% female) via the SoSci online panel (Leiner, 2016). A post hoc power analysis revealed that this sample afforded 98% power to detect an effect of $f = 0.2$ (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Even though age and gender have a

similar distribution as in the general population in Germany, the sample has a higher formal education. Sixty-two percent of the participants hold at least a bachelor's degree. We also measured gender stereotypes since preferring or rejecting traditional ideas of women might also be relevant to interpret the findings of our study. We find that the agreement with traditional gender stereotypes is very low in our sample ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 0.68$; 5-point-scale adapted from GESIS, 2013).

We conducted an experiment with a 2 (gender: female vs. male) \times 3 (information about the private life: no information vs. information about hobbies vs. information about family life) between-subjects design in Germany. Thereby, we can investigate the effectiveness of personalization (by comparing means between the no information condition and the conditions providing information about either hobbies or family), the potentials of different types of personalization, and investigate the moderating role of gender. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six versions of a fictitious news article. They read an interview with a mayor that mainly addressed a review of the past year and plans for the community with four questions. The mayor was either female or male (first factor). In Germany, female mayors are not uncommon (Lukoschat & Belschner, 2014). For the second factor, we manipulated the fourth question asking the mayor about ways to relax in the demanding job. We included two variations of personal information, hobbies and family life, and a control group with no private information.

Besides the varying answer of the mayor to the last question and the mayor's gender, the interview was the same in all conditions. Moreover, all details of the article that are mentioned in the answers or questions were made up. We did not include partisanship, since it is less relevant in local politics in Germany (Lukoschat & Belschner, 2014). The support of a party can be relevant, but on a local level only 55% of the elected mayors are party members, 26% are independent, 15% are part of voters' associations, and 3% are part of/supported by an electoral alliance of several parties (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008).

Before being confronted with the interview, the participants of the study were instructed to carefully read the article they were about see. At the end of the study, we provided an extensive debriefing.

Measures

The exact wording of all measures can be found in the online appendix.¹ We measured trust in the mayor using seven items relying on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., "the statements of the mayor are reliable," "the statements of the mayor contain all necessary information"; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Otto & Maier, 2016), which were summarized to form an index ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .73$, $\alpha = .88$).

For warmth, we used seven 5-point semantic differential scales (e.g., cold-hearted—warm-hearted, unfriendly—friendly; Denner, Viererbl, & Koch, 2019; Koch, Denner, Viererbl, & Himmelreich, 2019) and created an index ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .62$, $\alpha = .90$). We measured competence using six 5-point semantic differential scales (e.g., incompetent—competent, unprofessional—professional; Denner et al., 2019; Koch et al., 2019) and formed an index ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .62$, $\alpha = .88$).

¹ <https://osf.io/fzywq>

Regarding voting intention, we were not only interested in the voting intention of the participants itself but also in behaviors that are likely to influence voting intention of others. Since political campaigns and interpersonal communication play an important role for voting decisions (Kingdon, 1970), we also included items asking for these behaviors as indicators for voting intention in our survey. Participants had to indicate (on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *I totally disagree* to 5 = *I fully agree*) if they would vote for the mayor, speak positively about the mayor with others, and support the mayor during the campaigning phase. Answers for all three statements were used to form an index ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .92$, $\alpha = .89$).

Treatment Check

We checked whether our manipulation of both independent variables was successful. For gender, we asked participants whether the mayor presented in the interview was male or female. Ninety-nine percent of the participants answered correctly. For private life, we asked whether hobbies or the family of the mayor were addressed. Here, 81% of all participants answered correctly. Overall, we concluded that our manipulation was successful and did not exclude any participants.

Results

All analyses are based on two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The data, our analysis script, inferential statistics, and post hoc test (Tables 1, 3–6) can be found in the online appendix on OSF. There were no significant differences among the experimental groups regarding the gender of the participants, $\chi^2(5) = 10.27$, *ns*.

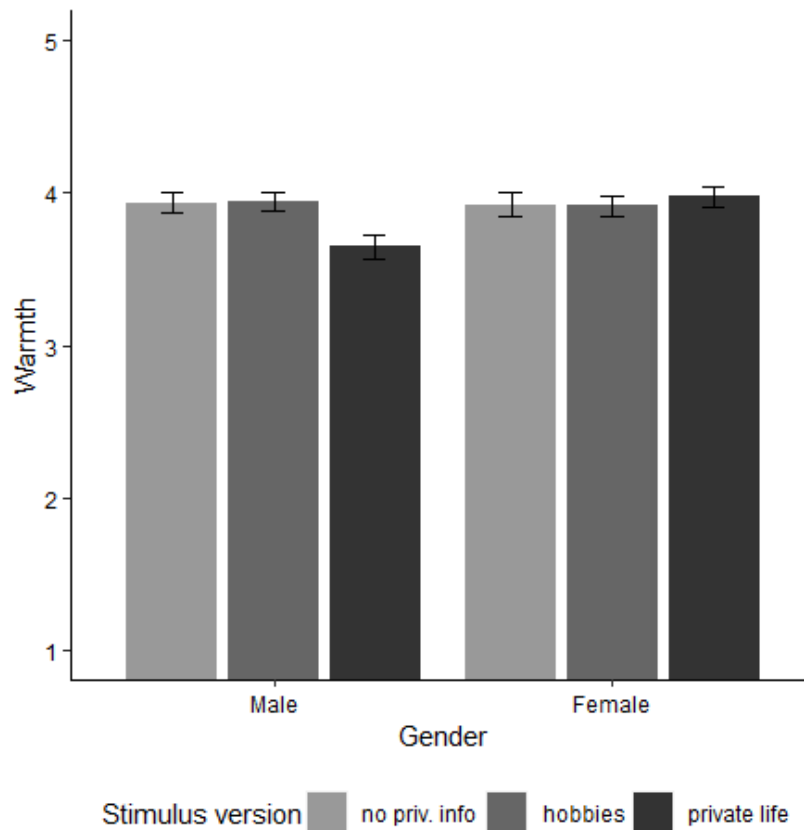


Figure 1. Effects on warmth of the political leader (Study 1). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

Effects on Warmth of the Political Leader

A first two-way ANOVA showed no significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 466) = 2.78, ns$, or information about the private life, $F(2, 466) = 1.82, ns$, on warmth of the mayor. Therefore, we must reject H1a. However, a significant interaction emerged, $F(2, 466) = 4.22, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02, [0.001, 0.045]$. A male mayor speaking about his family is perceived significantly less likeable ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.65, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.67$) compared with a female mayor ($M_{\text{female}} = 3.98, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.60, p < .05$) and compared with the control ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.94, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.63, p < .05$) and hobby condition ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.94, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.53, p < .05$; see also Figure 1). Regarding RQ1a, gender does have an influence but only in the family condition where a male mayor is evaluated more negatively regarding warmth.

Effects on Competence of the Political Leader

A two-way ANOVA showed no significant main effect of information about the private life, $F(2, 466) = 0.21, ns$, on the cognitive image of the mayor. Therefore, we must reject H1b. However, we found a

significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 466) = 16.28, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03, [0.000, 0.040]$, and a significant interaction effect, $F(2, 466) = 5.86, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02, [0.001, 0.046]$. A female mayor was perceived as more competent compared with a male mayor ($M_{\text{female}} = 4.02, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.59; M_{\text{male}} = 3.79, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.63$). A male mayor speaking about his family was perceived significantly more incompetent ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.68, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.61$) than a female mayor speaking about her family ($M_{\text{female}} = 4.16, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.50, p < .001$) or not speaking about private matters ($M_{\text{female}} = 4.16, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.50, p < .05$). A female mayor speaking about her family was also perceived as significantly more competent than a male mayor speaking about his hobby ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.87, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.57, p < .05$) or not speaking about private matters ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.82, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.70, p < .01$; see also Figure 2). Regarding RQ1b, revealing information about the private life makes a difference for male and female political actors for the perception of their competence, especially in the family condition.

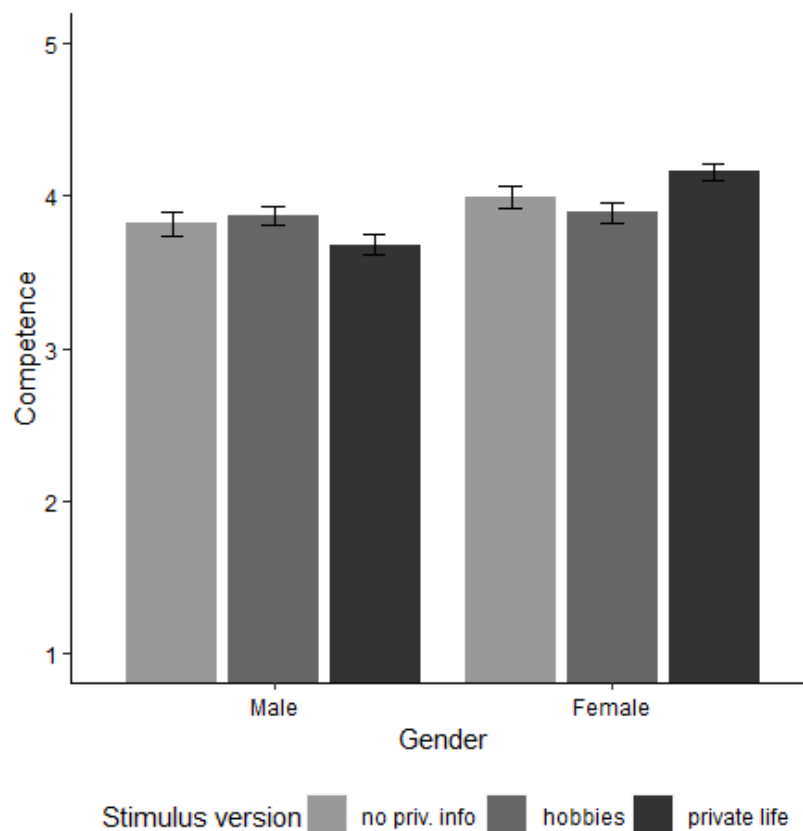


Figure 2. Effects on competence of the political leader (Study 1). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

Effects on Trust in the Political Leader

A two-way ANOVA reveals a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 466) = 4.28, p < .05, \eta^2 = .001, [0.000, 0.033]$, and of information about the private life, $F(2, 466) = 3.67, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02,$

[0.000,0.042], on trust in the political leader. The female mayor was trusted more than the male mayor ($M_{\text{female}} = 3.64$, $SD_{\text{female}} = 0.74$; $M_{\text{male}} = 3.50$, $SD_{\text{male}} = 0.72$) and a post hoc test (Bonferroni) revealed a significant difference between no private information and hobbies ($M_{\text{no info}} = 3.69$, $SD_{\text{no info}} = 0.74$; $M_{\text{hobbies}} = 3.48$, $SD_{\text{hobbies}} = 0.71$, $p < .05$). We still must reject H2 because in the two privatization conditions, the mayor is trusted less than in the control condition.

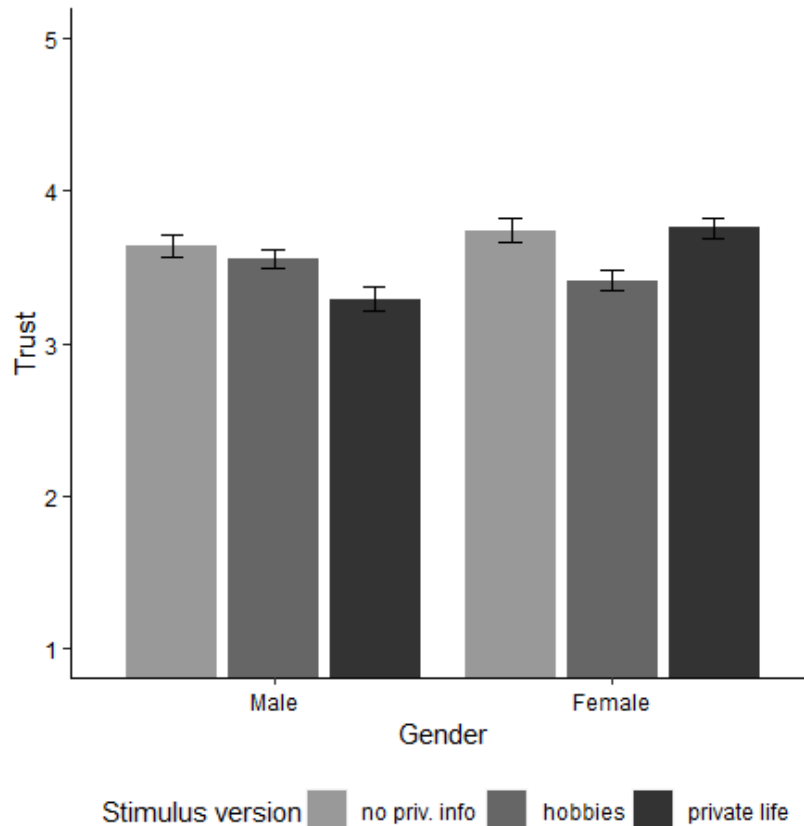


Figure 3. Effects on trust of the political leader (Study 1). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

Additionally, we find an interaction effect, $F(2, 466) = 7.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$, [0.005,0.063]. A male mayor speaking about his family was significantly trusted less ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.29$, $SD_{\text{male}} = 0.69$) than a male mayor not speaking about private matters ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.64$, $SD_{\text{male}} = 0.77$) or a female mayor speaking about the family ($M_{\text{female}} = 3.76$, $SD_{\text{female}} = 0.69$, $p < .001$), or not speaking about her private life ($M_{\text{female}} = 3.74$, $SD_{\text{female}} = 0.71$, $p < .01$). A female mayor talking about her family was also perceived as significantly more trustworthy than a male mayor talking about his hobby ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.56$, $SD_{\text{male}} = 0.67$, $p < .01$; see also Figure 3). Regarding RQ2, we see an effect of private information on perceived trust. While a male politician is perceived as more trustworthy when he mentions his hobby and less trustworthy when he mentions his family, the opposite is true for a female politician.

Effects on Voting Intention

The analysis did not show significant main effects of gender, $F(1, 466) = 1.78$, *ns*, or information about the private life, $F(2, 466) = 0.56$, *ns*, on voting intention. Therefore, we must reject H3. However, we found a significant interaction effect, $F(2, 466) = 5.42$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$, [0.002,0.053]. A male ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.06$, $SD_{\text{male}} = 0.95$) relative to a female mayor ($M_{\text{female}} = 3.54$, $SD_{\text{female}} = 0.86$) speaking about his family made participants significantly less enthusiastic to vote for the candidate ($p < .05$). This can be inferred from Figure 4. Regarding RQ3, we see that mentioning family life has different consequences regarding voting intention for male and female mayors.

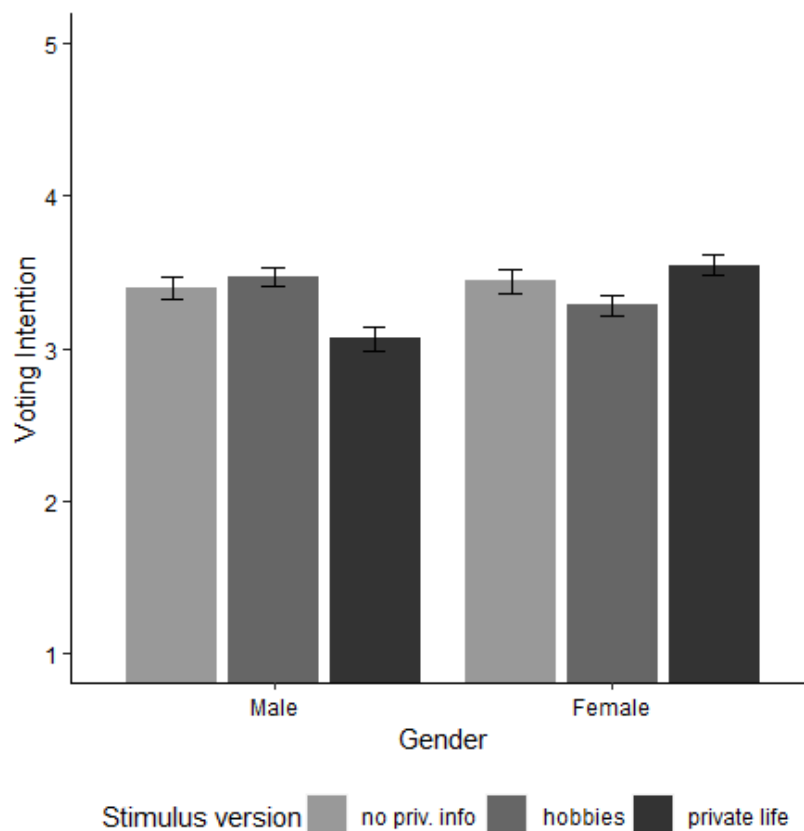


Figure 4. Effects on voting intention (Study 1). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

Discussion

Since little is known about effects of privatized self-presentation of politicians, we conducted an experiment investigating effects of mentioning hobbies or the family life in a newspaper interview. Moreover, we explored whether effects depend on politicians' gender. Our findings show that privatization can have an

effect, mainly concerning men talking about family life. A male politician mentioning that he only took a short parental leave and that his partner is the main caregiver is perceived as less warm, less competent, and less trustworthy compared with the female candidate. Also, his chances to get votes decline. For the female politician, values for these variables stay on a similar level between all conditions. Based on these findings, we draw two main conclusions. First, for female politicians, we cannot confirm the “competent but cold” effect (Bligh et al., 2012, p. 560). Even if they prioritize their work over family, they are still perceived as an equally warm political leader that can be trusted and that people would vote for. Second, for male politicians the same scenario of being a working parent seems to backfire. While female politicians break with traditional gender roles and show a progressive behavior, male politicians reinforce traditional structures in this scenario. This might lower sympathy for the candidate and the perception of him being a capable political candidate.

Study 2

Method

We recruited 739 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 47.87$, $SD = 15.67$, 56% female),² via the SoSci online panel (Leiner, 2016). Sixty percent hold at least a bachelor’s degree. We again find that the agreement with gender stereotypes is very low in our sample ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.68$). We conducted an experiment with a 2 (gender: female vs. male) \times 3 (information about the private life: no information vs. information about family with a long parental leave vs. information about family with a short parental leave) between-subjects design in Germany. The stimulus and the procedure of the study was the same as in Study 1, and therefore the mayor was either female or male (first factor). For the second factor, we again manipulated the fourth and last question of the interview asking the mayor about ways to relax in the demanding job. We included two different variations of family-related information as well as a control group with no private information. The mayor either took a long parental leave and needs to juggle a demanding job and family responsibilities or the mayor took a short parental leave, and the partner is mostly taking care of their daughter. Again, all materials can be found in the online appendix.

We used the same measures as in Study 1: trust ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .71$, $\alpha = .86$), warmth ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .72$, $\alpha = .92$), competence ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .67$, $\alpha = .88$), and voting intention ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .95$, $\alpha = .89$). Again, we checked whether our manipulation was successful. For gender, we asked participants whether the mayor presented in the interview was male or female. Ninety-six percent of the participants answered correctly. For private life, we asked whether the family of the mayor were addressed. Here, 91% of all participants answered correctly. Additionally, we asked whether the mayor is the primary caregiver of the daughter on a 5-point Likert scale. An ANOVA showed significant differences among the groups, $F(2, 736) = 35.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. A post hoc test (Bonferroni) shows that all three groups differ significantly ($p < .05$). The groups with no information ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1 .59$) or information about the mayor with short parental leave ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 1 .06$) rather disagreed, while the groups with

² An a priori power analysis with G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for an ANOVA ($df = 2$, 6 groups) with a small effect size ($f = 0.15$), a power of 95%, and $\alpha = 0.05$ revealed a required sample size of $N = 690$. Effect size was based on Study 1.

information about the family life with long parental leave ($M = 2.63, SD = 1.29$) rather agreed. Overall, we concluded that our manipulation was successful and did not exclude any participants.

Results

All analyses are based on two-way ANOVAs. Again, the data and analysis script as well as inferential statistics and post hoc test (Tables 2, 7–10) can be found in the online Appendix. There were no significant differences among the experimental groups regarding the gender of the participants, $\chi^2(5) = 9.13, ns$.

Effects on Warmth of the Political Leader

A first two-way ANOVA showed a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 733) = 14.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02, [0.004, 0.043]$, and information about the private life, $F(2, 733) = 6.24, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02, [0.002, 0.038]$, on warmth of the mayor, but no interaction effect, $F(2, 733) = 1.32, ns$. A female mayor ($M_{\text{female}} = 4.01, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.68$) is perceived warmer than a male mayor ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.81, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.74$). If a mayor is revealing information about family life and had a long parental leave ($M = 4.03, SD = 0.74$), they are perceived as warmer compared with no private information ($M = 3.88, SD = 0.69, p < .05$) and information about family life with a short parental leave ($M = 3.81, SD = 0.70, p < .01$; see Figure 5). Since only the condition with a long parental leave differs significantly from the control condition, we must (partially) reject H1a. Regarding RQ1a, looking at the mean differences in Figure 5, we see a short parental leave for the male candidate decreases values for warmth compared with the longer parental leave and compared with the female candidate in this condition.

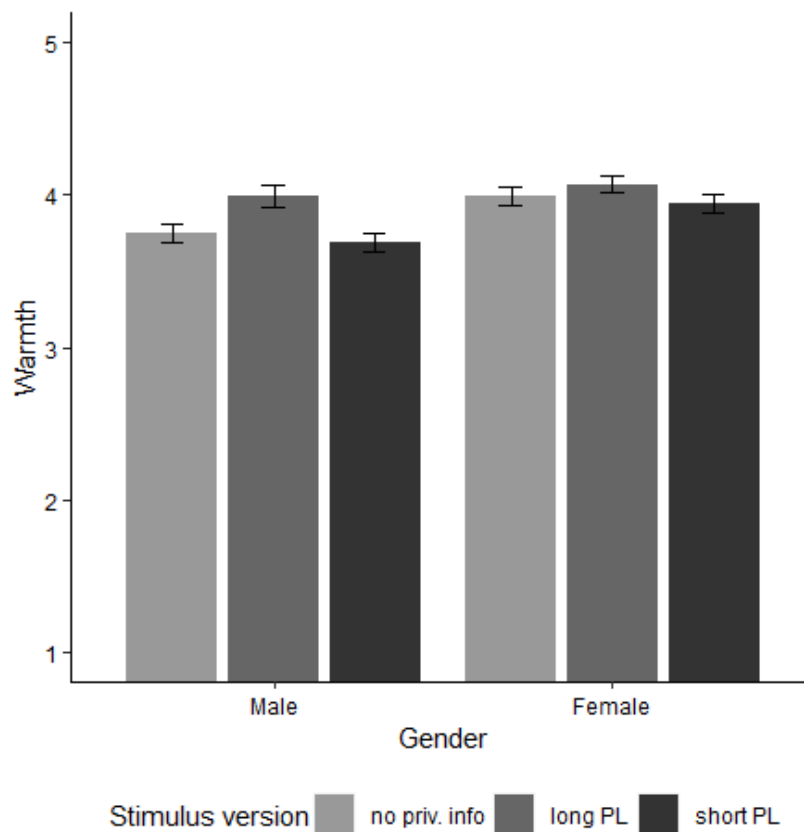


Figure 5. Effects on warmth of the political leader (Study 2). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

Effects on Competence of the Political Leader

A two-way ANOVA showed a significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 733) = 8.72, p < .01, \eta^2 = .01$ [0.001, 0.032], and information about the private life, $F(2, 733) = 3.88, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$, [0.000, 0.028], on the cognitive image of the mayor. We did not find an interaction effect, $F(2, 733) = 0.02, ns$. A female mayor ($M_{\text{female}} = 4.01, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.68$) is perceived more competent than a male mayor ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.86, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.65$). A mayor revealing information about family life and that had a short parental leave ($M = 4.03, SD = 0.59$) was perceived as more competent compared with one revealing no private information ($M = 3.86, SD = 0.70, p < .05$; see also Figure 6). Since only the condition with a short parental leave differs significantly from the control condition, we must (partially) reject H1b. Regarding RQ1b, the direction of effects is the same for male and female politicians: They are perceived as more competent when they had a short parental leave.

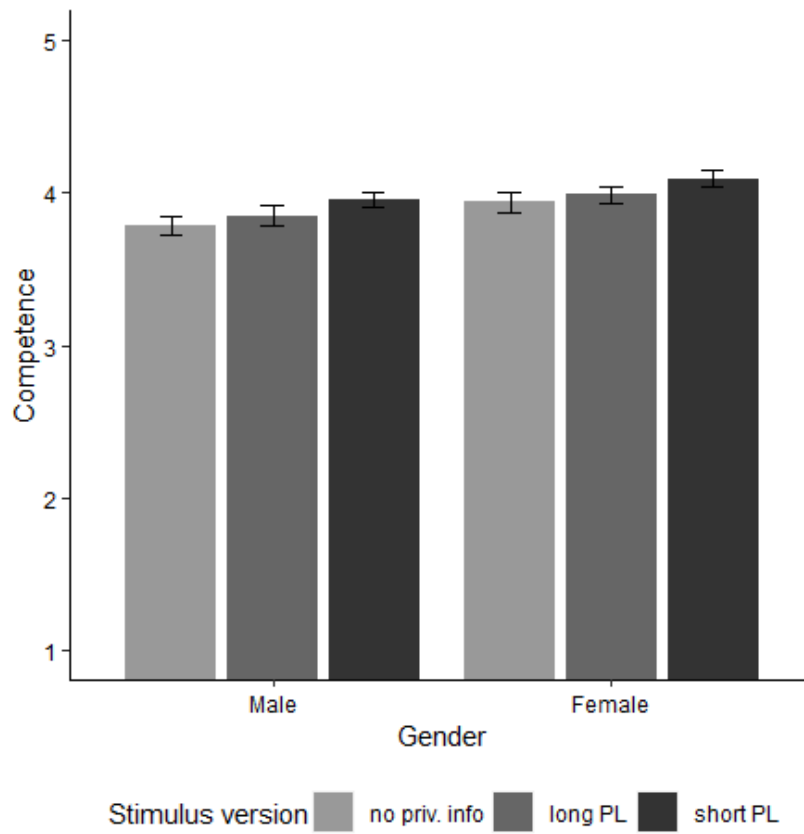


Figure 6. Effects on competence of the political leader (Study 2). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

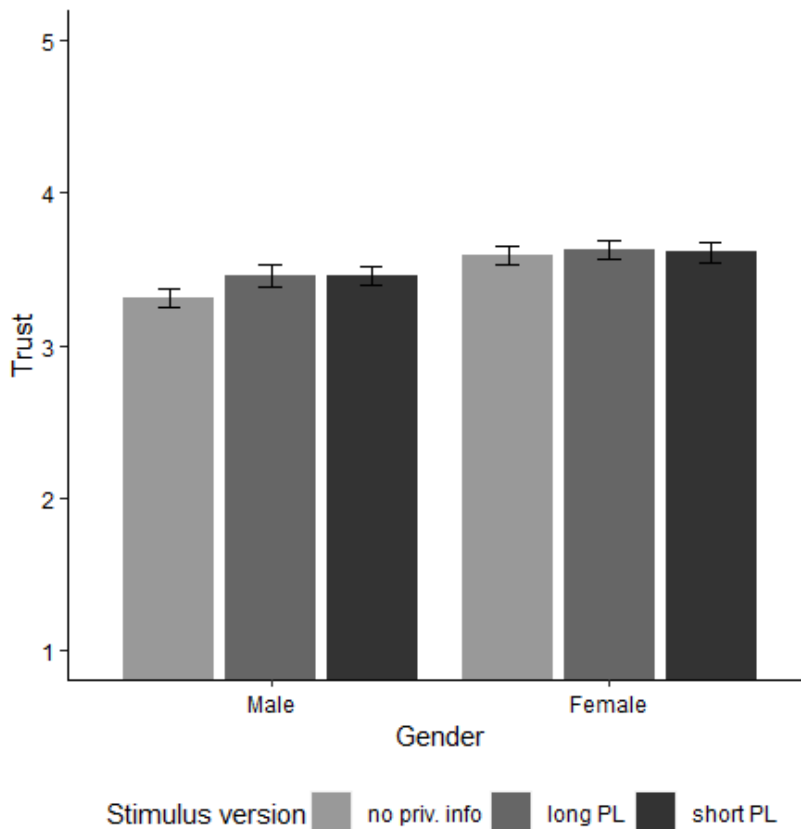
Effects on Trust in the Political Leader

Figure 7. Effects on trust of the political leader (Study 2). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

A two-way ANOVA reveals a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 733) = 15.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$ [0.005, 0.044], but no effect of information about the private life, $F(2, 733) = 1.30, ns$, and no interaction effect, $F(2, 733) = 0.57, ns$. We therefore must reject H2. A female mayor ($M_{\text{female}} = 3.61, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.70$) is perceived as being more trustworthy than a male mayor ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.41, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.70$; see Figure 7). Regarding RQ2, we see that all mean values in Figure 7 are very similar and do not differ between the different combinations of gender and the family conditions, and therefore there are no differences of the effects of private information on trust between female and male politicians.

Effects on Voting Intention

The analysis for voting intention also showed a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 733) = 16.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$, [0.006, 0.047]. Again, we did not find an effect of information about the private life,

$F(2, 733) = 2.52, ns$, or an interaction effect, $F(2, 733) = 2.32, ns$. We therefore reject H3. A female mayor ($M_{\text{female}} = 3.55, SD_{\text{female}} = 0.94$) received higher voting intention than a male mayor ($M_{\text{male}} = 3.27, SD_{\text{male}} = 0.93$; see Figure 8). Regarding RQ3, we see that even though the overall interaction effect is not significant, there are some significant group differences. For the female candidate, there are no significant differences regarding the three conditions. However, for the male candidate mentioning a short parental leave decreases voting intention, while mentioning a long parental leave increases voting intention.

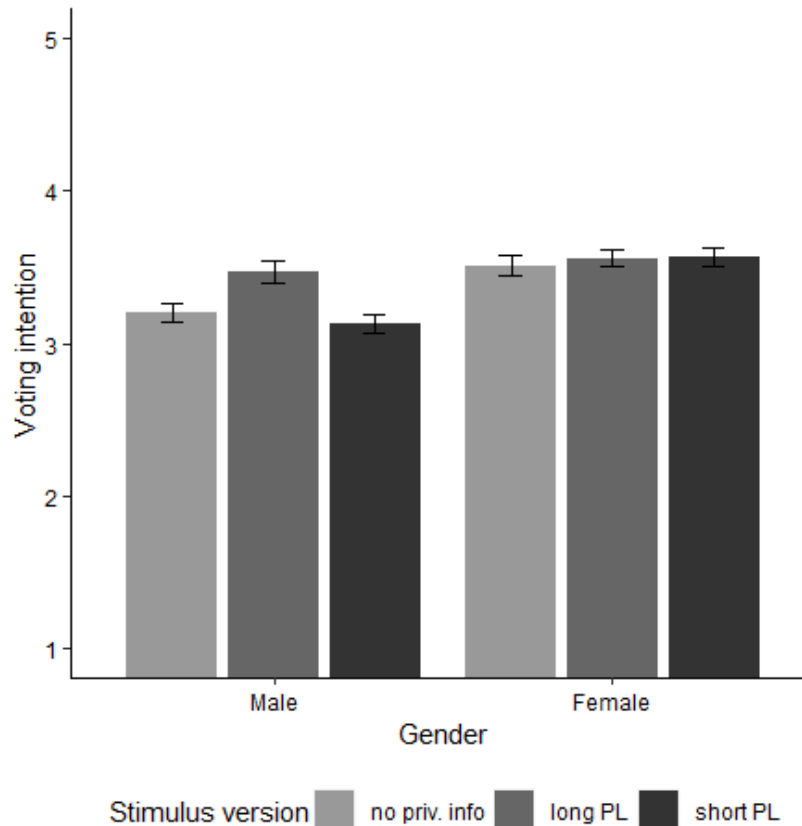


Figure 8. Effects on voting intention (Study 2). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

Overall Discussion

The present experiments support the assumption that personal information as a form of privatization can influence the perception of a political leader. However, effects of personal information depend on the type of information and the gender of the politician. Strategies that are promising for female candidates are not necessarily promising for men. For female politicians, we found no significant differences between job-related information (nonprivate information), hobbies, and their family life in both studies. Trust, competence, and warmth ratings were similar between the groups and tended to be slightly more positive when family life was brought up. Thus, we cannot confirm that perceptions of warmth of female

politicians suffer when they focus on job-related information in their self-presentation strategy (Bligh et al., 2012; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010). Nor can we confirm that refraining from sharing private information increases competence ratings, which has been a finding in previous studies (Bauer, 2017; Schneider, 2014). Based on our findings, female politicians can mention private matters in an overall professional setting and will likely not have to face negative outcomes. Even exhibiting a modern family concept, in which the woman is the breadwinner and the man is taking care of domestic duties, does not damage their image nor does it decrease voting intention.

Another conclusion is related to the societal perception and evaluation of females in leading position who choose a life that is not in line with traditional gender role expectations. Instead of rejecting the decision that a woman is not the main caretaker of a child, people seem to respect it. However, this finding may be due to the present sample, which was quite educated and scored low on agreement with (explicit) gender stereotypes.

Nevertheless, strategic self-presentations that seem to work for female might backfire for male politicians. Specifically, mentioning details of family life adhering to a traditional division of labor has almost only negative consequences for the male mayor. In the first study, the results show that trust, warmth, and competence perceptions as well as voting intention decrease if it is mentioned that the partner of the politician is taking care of their child. In the second study, we also find that warmth and voting intention decline compared with the female candidate. However, male mayors mentioning a longer parental leave are perceived positively: Their role in the family seems to be related to their perception as a political figure. If they present themselves in a traditional role, in which their partner is mainly responsible for their child, it has rather negative consequences. Even if group differences are small and cannot be replicated for all the dependent variables in Study 2, the findings for both experiments generally show these tendencies. Therefore, male political leaders should be aware of potential negative effects when mentioning private information that is in line with traditional family roles. If they are involved in the care work, however, mentioning their family life could even have positive effects. This might be especially relevant because studies on privatization indicate that the media discuss personal information of political candidates which can then, in turn, become important for the success or failure of a political campaign.

Overall, the participants of our study seem to have different expectations for male and female political candidates. While they do not care if the woman has a traditional family life, they punish and to some extent also reward the way the male mayor presents himself. It might be up to male leading figures to make a societal difference by taking family duties more seriously, even if this may have drawbacks in their career. By breaking with traditional roles, they set a positive example. An explanation why differences only appear for male and not for female political candidates could be that men still hold a great majority of powerful positions. Therefore, their ability to make a change is still more far-reaching compared with women. Given this context, there may be different expectations for men and women as political office holders.

This study is not without limitation. In our sample, age and gender were representative of German society, but people with a high level of education were overrepresented. Since people with a higher level of education are less conservative and tend to reject traditional gender stereotypes (Becher & El-Menouar,

2014), which is also the case for our sample, this might explain the present findings to some degree, and the well-functioning strategies found here may not be applicable in a different context. It is unclear whether a sample in which education varies more would lead to similar results. Thus, future research should replicate the study with a sample that is more diverse than in the present experiment. Another limitation of our sample is that we looked at mayors and a local context. Whether the present findings generalize to other political levels (i.e., a national or even European level) remains an open question.

We used a fictitious medium and a fictitious leader, which also limits our findings. Thus, the recipients in the experiment did not have any preexisting attitudes toward the candidates. However, different characters are likely to evoke different public perceptions that interact with the effects of personalized statements. Therefore, it is questionable whether campaign strategies that are successful in an experimental setting can also be applied to politicians who are well known. If voters have preexisting attitudes toward candidates and can infer candidate's gender role attitudes, single messages are unlikely to change that image. Another limitation about our stimulus is that the mayor was going to run for reelection and had already proven her- or himself. Future research could investigate whether there are greater differences about the evaluation of a politician depending on the gender if she or he is a first-time candidate and there are no clues about performance in office.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides important findings for both research on gender stereotypes in politics and personalization, bringing together two lines of research that can highly benefit from each other. Furthermore, findings also provide insights for effective political campaigning, which might help to reduce the still existing gap between men and women in politics. It can be concluded that research on effects of personalization should take politician's gender into account. This holds especially true if family life and parenthood is brought up. Moreover, the study also provides important insights into the role of female leaders in society. Even if it is against traditional gender roles, a female politician mentioning that she prioritized her job while her partner is taking care of the tasks at home received strong support. Neither being female nor being a mother seems to raise any doubts in the confidence that the female candidate is promising for a leading role. In line with other research (Bell & Kaufmann, 2015; Schwarz & Coppock, 2021), women do not necessarily have a disadvantage to men. This should encourage more women to run for political offices, but also for other higher positions in society.

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