

Why women shade away from politics? Opening the black box of the gendered psyche

Marta Fraile CSIC (IPP) & Dani Marinova (UAB)

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Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the literature studying the persistent gap in internal political efficacy despite the significant gains in women's employment, education, and economic status. It examines how women's gender appropriate roles – a slow-moving force constrained by processes of gendered socialization – interact with the political realm to shape women's perceived capacity to take part therein. We draw on both observational and experimental data from an original survey fielded in Spain and show that while politics is generally associated with competition, power-seeking and assertiveness, women identify with such traits to a lower extent than men. Due to this mismatch, women are less likely to feel they have the qualities needed to take part in politics. What is more, we show that framing politics as a public service to others, rather than as a competitive sport, leads women to perceive themselves just as qualified to take part in politics as men, making vanish the gender gap in internal political efficacy.

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The gender gaps in politics are numerous. From running for office, contacting a politician, working for a political party to simply taking interest in politics, women are systematically less likely to become politically involved (Quaranta and Sani 2018; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Lawness and Fox 2010). At the root of these multiple gender gaps is the persistent gap in internal political efficacy: namely, women are systematically less likely to feel that they have the competences and skills needed to participate fully in the political sphere.¹

A number of explanations have been offered for this gender imbalance, including differences between men and women in socioeconomic resources, in the distribution of care work in the family, and in level of self-confidence (Gidengil et al. 2008; Thomas 2012; Wolak 2020). There is also evidence showing that the gender gap in internal political efficacy in the United States declines as women's descriptive representation increases (Wolak 2018). Even with these important advances in understanding the nature of such gender gap, a remaining puzzle in the literature is to explain its persistence despite the significant gains in women's employment, education, and economic status. We point to gendered socialization as one possible explanation to this puzzle. We examine how women's gender appropriate roles – a slow-moving force constrained by processes of gendered socialization – interact with the political realm to shape women's perceived capacity to take part therein.

The gender appropriate traits that women acquire through childhood socialization (Diekmann and Eagly, 2008) are hardly a match to the traits typically associated to the political realm. We show that while politics is generally associated with competition, power-seeking and assertiveness, women identify only weakly with such traits. Due to this mismatch, women are less likely to feel they possess the qualities needed to take part in politics. To what extent is women's relationship to the political realm malleable? We show further that this relationship is not set in stone but is context dependent. Framing politics as a public service to others, rather than as a competitive sport, leads women to perceive themselves just as qualified to take part in politics as men, making vanish the gender gap in internal political efficacy.

We draw on both observational and experimental data from an original survey fielded in Spain and offer evidence in line with the expected mismatch between (a) the traits ascribed to women and that women ascribe to themselves, and (b) the traits associated with politics and politicians. Traits ascribed to women, we show, align on the communal dimension of the social role model while traits ascribed to politics and politicians align on the agentic dimension of the model (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Further, we demonstrate that this mismatch carries implications for internal political efficacy. Women express overall lower levels of self-efficacy, and this is both moderated and mediated by their self-placement on the communal-

¹ The gender gap in internal political efficacy is systematic across the United States (Wolak 2018 and 2020), Canada (Thomas 2012), Europe (Fraile and De Miguel 2021) and Latin America (Borowski et al 2011).

agentic dimension. Women who identify strongly with traits on the agentic dimension express levels of self-efficacy comparable to men. Likewise, we show that the size of the gender gap in internal political efficacy would decrease around 39 percentage points if women would be as attached to agentic traits as men do.

Furthermore, we offer an experimental test of the argument that the gender gap in political self-efficacy is context dependent. We embed an experiment in a representative survey of the Spanish population to test how variation in the *nature* of the political realm affects women's self-efficacy. We present respondents with a pair of interviews with politicians who describe their motivation to work in politics: in one case, self-promotion and power, and in the second case, public service and helping others. The gender gap in internal political efficacy vanishes in the latter experimental treatment where politics emphasizes cooperation and aligns more closely with women's gender appropriate roles.

The study unpacks one of the psychological mechanisms through which women become marginalized from politics despite their mass entry into the labor force and education system. We contrast the nature of politics with 'women's traditional roles' and show that the mismatch helps explain why many women do not feel competent to take part in politics. The implications of these results are two-fold. On one hand, results are in line with prior scholarship on gendered political socialization and gender's salience in the way citizens think of themselves and of the political realm (e.g., Bos et al. 2021). We offer further evidence that linking politics to men's typical traits has negative repercussions on women's political self-efficacy, an important precursor of political participation and the representation of women in politics. On the other hand, results also offer hope that girls' and women's relationship to the political realm is not set in stone but is malleable to both how women view themselves and how the political realm is portrayed. The gender gap in political self-efficacy can be shortened when politics is a welcoming space to women's gender appropriate roles or when women see themselves as confident, assertive and ambitious.

Social role theory and the gender gap in internal political efficacy

Children learn gender appropriate roles during early socialization (Leaper and Farkas 2015). Through daily interaction with parents, peers and teachers, children acquire expectations about the abilities, traits and roles traditionally associated to each gender (Lytton and Romney 1991). Parents contribute to reproducing gendered roles and behaviors through occupational disparities between the parents or the household's division of labor, for example. Children also form ideas about adequate roles for men and women as they observe these gendered patterns inside and outside the home (Parks-Stamm et al 2020). For example, the predominance of female teachers in kindergartens and primary schools sends a clear signal that caring is a woman's role. Evidence from social psychology suggests that children use gender as a heuristic to evaluate themselves and others, to select groups of friends, and to foster their interests choosing those that

are socially attached to their corresponding gender roles (Bian et al. 2017; Liberman et al. 2017).

Among the effects of gendered socialization is the ascription of different personality traits to men and women. Traits typically ascribed to women include compassion, affection and collaboration while men are typically ascribed traits of autonomy, self-confidence and assertiveness. Gender appropriate traits persist through the life course because the men and women who adopt them are socially rewarded while those who do not, penalized (Eagly and Wood 2012).

In parallel to gendered socialization, a process of gendered *political* socialization unfolds at early ages (Bos et al. 2021). School curricula depict political processes as conflictive and competitive by focusing on wars and elections (Cassese & Holman 2018; Oliver and Conroy 2020), highlight the contribution of male leaders to social and political achievements (Lay et al. 2021; Schocker & Woynshner 2013), and depict good political leadership through stereotypically male traits, such as being assertive and being a strong leader (Bauer 2020; Holman et al. 2021; Koenig et al. 2011). The notion that politics is a men's world is rooted in a long history of male domination of the political culture (Lawless and Fox 2010) and of formal and informal institutions (Waylen 2014). Mass media contribute to perpetuating the idea of politics as conflictive and competitive by using analogies from war and competitive sports (Carroll and Fox 2018), and by portraying politics as an exercise of power seeking, conflict, dominance and competition rather than as collaboration, cooperation or problems solving focus (Eagly and Karau 2002).

A recent study of school-aged children in the United States offers evidence of gendered political socialization. When asked to draw a politician, 47 percent of girls and 75 percent of boys, at age six, drew *male* political figures (Bos et al. 2021). For girls, this tendency becomes more pronounced at older ages; at age twelve, 75 percent of girls draw *male* political figures. Through early socialization, boys and girls have the often unconscious impression that the political world is defined in masculine terms (Schneider et al. 2016). This process manifests itself as men and women come into contact with the political realm as adults and men express significantly higher levels of political interest, knowledge, and ambition than do women (Fraile and Sanchez-Vitores 2020; Fortin-Rittberger 2016; Crowder-Meyer 2018;).

The association of politics to conflict, competition or power-seeking is likely to make this domain particularly unappealing to women. We expect this to manifest in women's levels of *internal political efficacy*, or their perceived capacity to understand political processes and to take part therein (Almond & Verba 1965). Political self-efficacy may be defined as the subjective assessment of one's skills and competencies to participate in politics, a leading precursor to turning out to vote and taking part in many types of political activities (e.g., Condon & Holleque 2013; Gallego & Oberski 2012). We expect that women's relationship to the political realm carries implications for women's political self-efficacy. As politics

generally aligns with typically masculine roles of competition, conflict and power seeking and as women on average align on the communal dimension of the social role model, we expect a relevant *mismatch* between the characteristics of the political realm and the traits typically attributed to women's role in society. According to the role congruity model, such mismatch should reduce women's motivation to take part in the political realm. This is because women's innate skills and aspirations are incongruent with the political arena. Over the life course, this mismatch produces missed opportunities for women to engage in sociopolitical learning processes that boost internal political efficacy, including engaging in political discourse or being politically active in their communities (Beaumont 2011). As a result, women are less likely to feel they possess the competences to understand political affairs or the skills necessary to fully participate in politics. If this theoretical mechanism holds, we ought to find empirical evidence for three basic expectations:

Women are more likely to identify with traits on the communal dimension of the social role model than men, all else equal (H1).

Politics is more likely to evoke traits that align with the agentic dimension of the social role model, including competition and power seeking (H2).

Women likely express lower levels of internal political efficacy than men, all else equal (H3).

Building on these baseline expectations, we wish to consider further the role of *within-group variation* in adherence to typical gender roles. While on average we expect women to align more strongly with the communal dimension of the social role model (H1), variation between women in their adherence to typical women's roles likely moderates the impact of gender on levels of self-efficacy. Women who identify more strongly with traditional male traits ought to express higher levels of self-efficacy in a masculine realm like politics. Hence, level of adherence to typical gender personality traits should moderate the association of gender and internal political efficacy:

Women who align strongly on the agentic dimension should express overall higher levels of internal political efficacy than women who align weakly on the agentic dimension (H4).

In addition, we test the possibility that part of the persistent gender gap in internal political efficacy is due to the fact that women identifies more weakly with traditional male traits. Hence, level of adherence to typical gender personality traits should also mediate the association of gender and internal political efficacy

Part of the gender disparities in internal political efficacy are mediated by the level of alignment to the agentic dimension (H5).

Finally, we posit that *variation in the political context* also matters for how women relate to the political realm. While politics generally evokes competition, power and conflict, lower levels of office, such as school boards and local politics, carry connotations of public service and cooperation. Indeed women are still a minority in pipeline careers to politics, but school boards and many state legislatures now have a higher proportion of serving women than men (Center for American Women & Politics, 2018; Holman, 2017; Sweet-Cushman, 2018). If the social role model has any explanatory power in how women relate to the political realm, then one implication of our theoretical argument is that the extent to which the political context evokes communal vis-à-vis agentic traits will moderate women's level of self-efficacy therein. Our expectation is that women express systematically stronger levels of self-efficacy in political contexts that emphasize helping and working with citizens than in contexts that prime electoral competition, office for power-seeking and personal promotion and political conflict more broadly:

Women likely express higher levels of internal political efficacy when politics is framed as a public service rather than as competitive and power-seeking (H6).

Prior explanations about the existence of the gender gap in internal political efficacy has focused on differences between men and women in socioeconomic resources, in the distribution of care work in the family and in feelings of self-confidence (Gidengil et al. 2008; Thomas 2012; Wolak 2020). Yet despite significant gains in employment, education, and economic status across advanced industrial democracies, women continue to express systematically lower levels of self-efficacy in politics. We contribute to this literature by testing how slow-moving forces related to gendered socialization may help explain the gender gap in internal political efficacy (H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5). We posit further that women's relationship to the political realm is not set in stone but that the *nature* of the political realm may condition the gender gap in internal political efficacy (H6). Putting the last three hypotheses (H4, H5, and H6) to empirical testing will help us assess the degree to which the relationship between gender roles and internal political efficacy is malleable, and it would also help us understand the variation in women's participation levels across political settings.

Research Design

To understand how perceptions of the political realm affect the gender gap in internal political efficacy, we designed two online surveys fielded in 2020 ²

² We relied on an opt-in access panel of the commercial firm Netquest which economically compensates all participants with vouchers that can be used later to purchase goods at Netquest's online store. Study 1 was fielded between the 15th and 22nd of December 2020 and study 2 between the 1st and the 10th of June 2020. A total of 1,209 individuals (for Study 1) and 1,506 individuals (for Study 2) were recruited from Netquest representative web panel, with quota sampling on gender, education, age and region (50.7% female, aged between 18 and 91 years).

to a representative sample of the Spanish population.³ The first survey offers observational evidence on (i) men and women's alignment on the social role model, (ii) perceptions of the political realm, and (iii) levels of internal political efficacy, and allows us to test H1-H5. The second survey offers an experimental test of H6 by framing the motivation to exercise political office as either a public service or as seeking political power.

Study 1

We contend that the existence of the gender gap in internal political efficacy is related to stereotypical perceptions about the nature of politics: women tend to perceive politics as a realm that is inhospitable to their personal qualities. To test this expectation, we follow a three-step empirical strategy.

First, to allow for an empirical test of H1, we ask respondents to evaluate their own personalities on agentic and communal traits using a reduced version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory-BSRI. Following prior studies (Auster and Ohm, 2000; Hentschel et al 2019), we include six masculine attributes: ambitious, competitive, self-confidence, strong personality, and tolerance towards both conflict and risk, whereas the stereotypical feminine traits are: affectionate, attentive, compassionate, empathic, kind, and warm.⁴ We also include an additional question asking participants to consider if beyond their perceptions of their own personality traits each of these twelve traits can be generally considered as more typical of men, women or both in their society.

Second, we are interested in understanding how citizens perceive the political realm (H2). Is politics perceived as aligned with the qualities and abilities that are stereotypically linked with the agentic (masculine) model, as the scarce previous literature has showed in the US case (Eagly et al. 2020; Schneider et al., 2016)? We use the following two survey items to tap into perceptions of politics: First, "to what extent do you identify each of the following words with the political realm? Fighting for power, getting agreements, personal promotion, solving citizens' problems, competition, and service to citizenship". And second, "in general, to what extent would you say that politicians aim the following? Getting power, personal promotion, service to citizenship, getting rich, solving citizens' problems, and contributing improve the world we live in".⁵

Finally, we test if alignment on the agentic/masculine pole moderates and/or mediates the relationship between gender and self-efficacy (H4 and H5). We

³ Respondents were selected through quota-sampling within the Netquest panel using quotas for sex, education, age and region. These quotas ensured that the final sample matched these characteristics in the Spanish population aged between 18 and 80.

⁴ The exact wording is: "Now think about the following traits that contribute defining people's personality. To what extent each of them contribute defining your own personality. Please provide a number from 0 (I am not like that at all) to 10 (I am totally like that)."

⁵ For both survey items, the response categories offered were Very much, Much, Few, and Not at all. Word order was randomized.

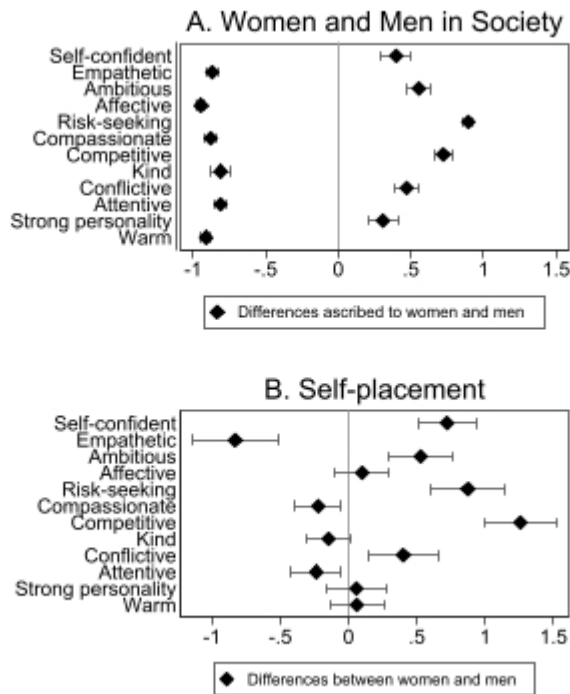
gauge levels of political efficacy with agreement on a battery of items: (i) “I feel capable of taking an active role in a group involved with political issues” (ii) “I feel confident in my own ability to participate in politics”, and (3) “Often I have the feeling that politics is so complicated that I can’t really understand what is going on” (reversed). Responses range from 0 = not at all to 4 = completely able. In our analysis, we sum responses to the three items to form a continuous additive scale, ranging from 0 to 12, rescaled from 0 to 11 given the very few observations in the 12th category. These three items tap citizens’ beliefs about their competence/abilities to play an active role in politics as well as citizens’ beliefs about their competence to understand the political realm, covering the main two substantive dimensions of internal political efficacy (Niemi et al. 1991). This provides a first test of the argument that women see politics as involving burdens entailing abilities and characteristics that are stereotypically linked with the agentic (masculine) model.

Results

Figure 1 (panel A) plots the mean differences in the ascription of each trait to men and to women, respectively (with 95% confidence intervals). Negative values indicate that the trait is more likely to be ascribed to women while positive values indicate that the trait is more likely to be ascribed to men. For each trait, we find statistically significant differences ($p < 0,05$) in the expected direction. Being empathetic, kind, warm, attentive, compassionate and affective are traits more often ascribed to women than to men. In contrast, respondents were more likely to describe men as self-confident, risk-seeking, ambitious, conflictual, competitive, and having a strong personality. This suggests that despite women’s mass entry in the labor market and in higher education and despite women’s increasing representation at top levels of Spanish government, individuals continue to ascribe to traditional gender appropriate traits.

Next, we test the extent to which women and men in our survey place themselves on each trait. Figure 1 (panel B) shows mean differences in self-placement on each trait by gender. Women are still more likely to self-place as empathetic, attentive and compassionate ($p < 0.05$) while men are more likely to describe themselves as self-confident, risk-seeking, ambitious, competitive, and conflictive ($p < 0.05$). For four traits - kind, warm, affective and having a strong personality - we did not find statistically significant differences in self-placement based on gender. In line with the social role model, women were more likely to self-place on traits oriented toward others and their comfort while men tend to place themselves on traits that guide the self and one’s own command and that aim for accomplishment. Comparing panels A and B of Figure 1 suggests that while gender stereotypes are alive and well, there is considerable within-group variation in how men and women, respectively, place themselves on the social role model

Figure 1. Mean gender differences in traits ascribed to A. Women and Men in Society and B. Self-placement (with 95% confidence intervals)

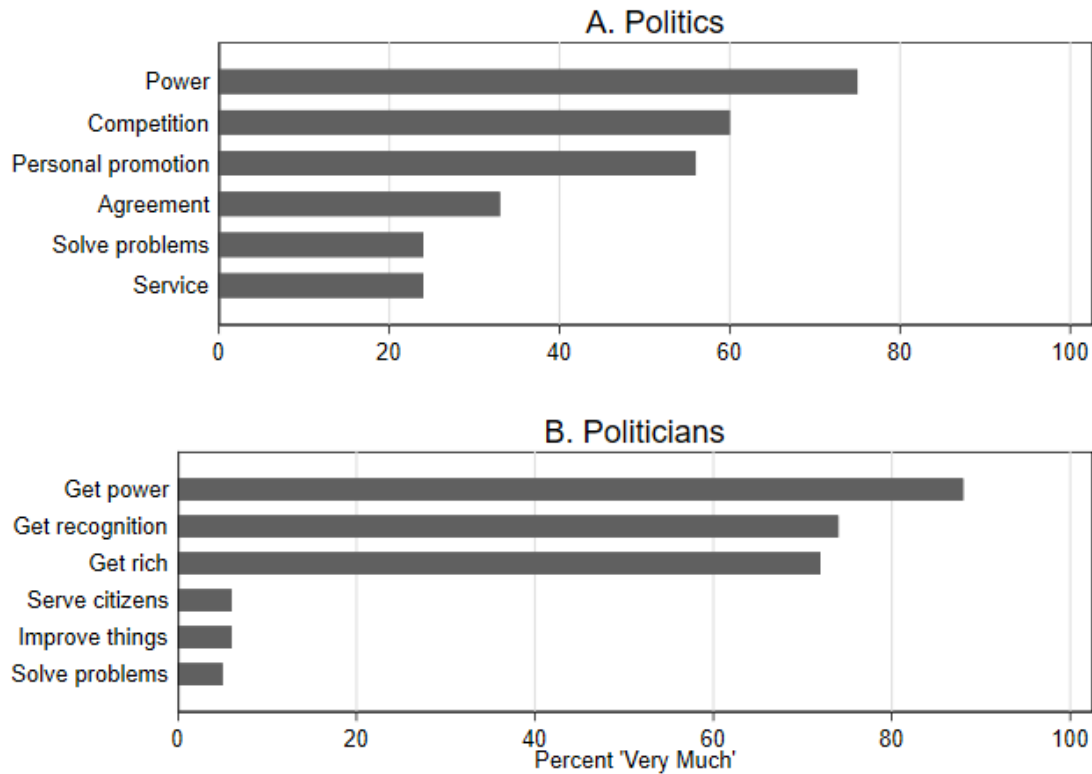


Source: Study 1, December 2020

Figure 2 offers evidence consistent with H2: politics and motivation to run for office aligns more strongly with qualities and abilities stereotypically linked with the agentic dimension of the social role model (Eagly et al. 2020; Schneider et al., 2016). A majority of respondents associated politics with power (75%), competition (60%) and personal promotion (56%) and only a minority with seeking agreement (33%), solving problems (24%) or serving citizens (24%). These trends are more pronounced when it came to identifying politicians' motivation. Most respondents associated politicians with the motivation to get power (88%), recognition (74%), or become rich (72%) while only a very small percentage identified serving citizens, solving problems or improving things as the motivation driving politicians (5%).⁶

⁶ There were no gender differences in the distribution of these responses except for the case of competition where women present greater percentages of response ($p= 0.001$).

Figure 2. Percent who identify each word with A. Politics and B. Politicians



Source: Study 1, December 2020

Next we test the association of gender with levels of internal political efficacy and the extent to which agentic and communal traits moderates and/or mediates this relationship (H3 to H5). To do so, and following prior research (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2021; McDermott 2016), we created an agentic index that ranges from 0 to 18 with a mean at 15.38 (17.15 for men and 13.72 for women, $p < 0.001$).⁷ We also created an index of communal traits following the same strategy.⁸ Its mean value is 15.77 (16.43 for women and 15.07 for men, $p < 0.001$).⁹

Table 1 offers coefficient estimates from a set of OLS regression on internal political efficacy. It includes three estimated equations: Model 1 is the baseline (containing gender and some socio-demographics); Model 2 adds both the agentic

⁷ We summed responses to the six items to form a continuous additive scale, ranging from 0 to 60, rescaled from 0 to 33 given the very few observations in the extreme values of the index (from 0 to 18 and from 47 to 60, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$).

⁸ Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$

⁹ The operationalization of the two indexes is also in line with a factor analysis including the 6 traits in each of the scales.

and communal indexes (testing H3), and Model 3 includes an interaction term between the agentic index and gender (testing H4).

Model 1 offers empirical support for the gender gap in internal political efficacy (H3). On average, women express lower levels of internal political efficacy: -0.71 (see the coefficient corresponding to women in equation 0 in Table 1), implying a substantive gender difference of 6,5 percent of total variation in internal political efficacy (ranging from 0 to 11). Model 2 shows that self-perceptions of traits linked to the agentic model are positively associated to feelings of internal political efficacy. More precisely, a one unit increase in the agentic index (ranging from 0 to 33) is associated with an average increase in internal political efficacy (ranging from 0 to 11) of 0.08 (see Model 2 in Table 1). This implies a maximum of 2.5 units in the value of internal political efficacy, around 23 percentage points of total variation of internal political efficacy if we compare someone with the lowest level with someone with the highest level of agentic traits. The size of the coefficient is therefore substantial and comparable to other correlates of efficacy, such as education. In contrast, we find no evidence of empirical association between the communality index and internal political efficacy.

Table 1. Estimation of Internal political efficacy

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Women	-0.71***	-0.41**	-1.12***
	0.15	0.15	0.33
Agentic index		0.08***	0.06***
		0.01	0.01
Communality index		-0.01	-0.01
		0.01	0.01
Women*Agentic			0.05*
			0.02
Education	0.37***	0.36***	0.36***
	0.06	0.06	0.06
Age	0.01	0.01*	0.01*
	0.01	0.01	0.01
Having kids	0.18	0.05	0.05
	0.18	0.17	0.17
Intercept	4.91***	3.58***	3.93***
	0.30	0.35	0.38
N	1310	1,289	1,289
R ²	0.06	0.11	0.12

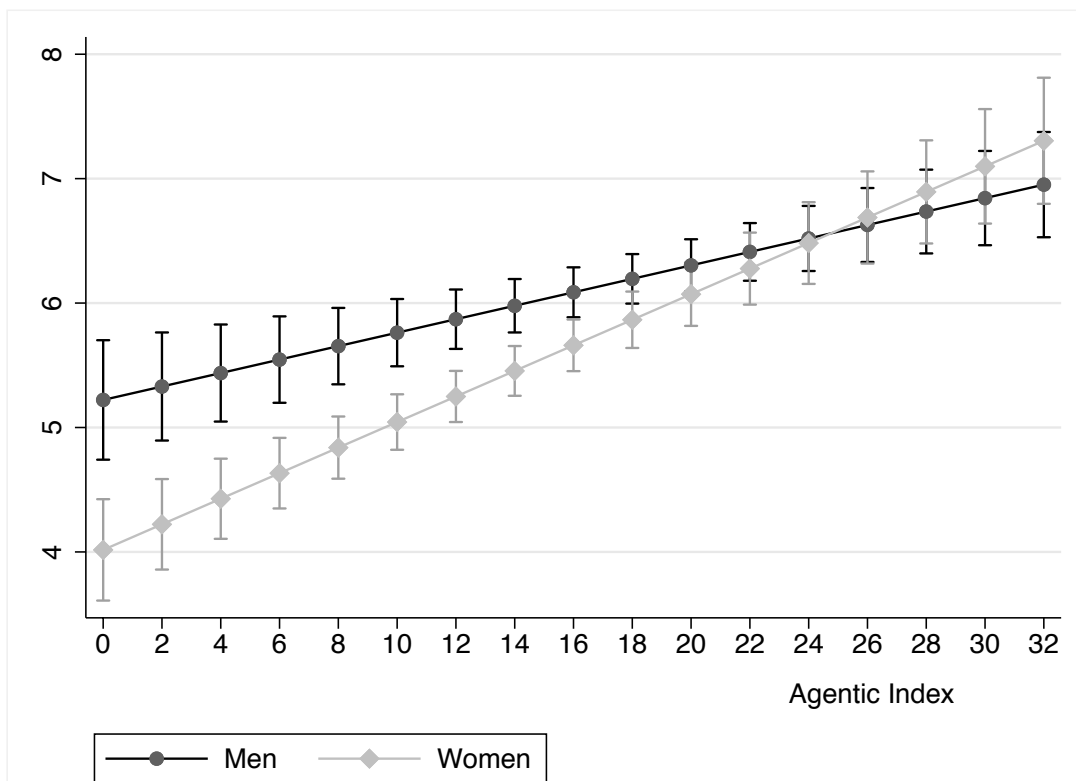
Source: Study 1. December 2020.

Unstandardized OLS coefficients with their associated SE.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

We contend that women present lower levels of political efficacy because they perceive politics as a realm that is inhospitable to their personal qualities. One implication of this argument is that women who adhere more strongly to agentic traits should feel more politically efficacious than women who do not (H4). We therefore tests for within-group variation with an interaction term between gender and self-placement on the agentic index in Model 3. The coefficient estimate corresponding to the interaction term is statistically significant and positively signed, suggesting that women who align more closely on the agentic model are more likely to express internal political efficacy. Figure 2 plots predicted internal efficacy based on Model 3 as a function of gender and level of adherence to the agentic index. When men and women place at mid- to high-range on the agentic model, the gender gap in internal political efficacy disappears. That is to say: gender differences are not statistically different from zero for values above the mean of agentic index (15.38).

Figure 2. Predicted internal political efficacy for women and men by Agentic Index



Source: Study 1. December 2020. Predicted values based on Equation 2 in Table 2.

There is, however a second way through which we can test the extent to which the masculine nature of politics might distance women from it, namely through a mediation. We have previously seen that the mean value of the agentic index is on average around 4 points greater for men than for women. Since women declare

less attachment to agentic traits than men, and politics is perceived by respondents as an agentic realm, part of the gender imbalance in political efficacy might be due to the mediation (rather than moderation) of respondents' attachment to agentic traits.

We test this last possibility (H5) using mediation analysis. There are two conditions needed for mediation analysis. First, mean values of agentic index should be greater for men than for women; and second, values on agentic index (the mediator) should be associated with stronger feelings of internal political efficacy (controlling for gender). If these conditions are met, then we should observe that the size of the association between gender and internal political efficacy decreases when agentic index is included in the estimation of internal political efficacy. This last step implies that a percentage of the total association between gender and internal political efficacy is due to the mediation of the agentic index. Table A3 in the appendix supports both the first and the second mediation condition.¹⁰

In order to properly test the mediation, we use Imai et al (2011)'s approach to partition the share of the association between gender and political efficacy that is conveyed through attachment to agentic abilities. In particular, we decompose the total effect of gender on internal political efficacy into direct and indirect effects—the average direct effect (ADE) and the average causal mediation effect (ACME), respectively. This provides a substantive measure of the magnitude of this mediation, and shows that the mediation is statistically significant

Table 2 summarizes the findings of the mediation estimation. In addition to the average direct effect-ADE ($b=-0.332$) that denotes the effects of gender on internal political efficacy after controlling for the contribution of link to agentic traits, there is an indirect effect mediated through respondents' attachment to agentic traits ($b=-0.212$, $p<0.05$), which captures the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME), representing the magnitude and significance of the gender differences in efficacy via people's connection to agentic traits. What is more, the percentage of total effect mediated is 39%, and indicates how much the total effect of gender on internal political efficacy is mediated by attachment to agentic traits.

Taken together, these results offer support for the hypothesized mismatch between the traits women typically align with (on the communal dimension) and the traits ascribed to the political realm and those who take part therein (on the agentic dimension). Moreover, we show that this mismatch is an important part of the story in the gender gap in internal political efficacy: women who align more strongly on the agentic dimension are equally likely as men to consider that they have the qualities it takes to take part in the political process. We complement this finding by showing that the size of the gender gap in internal political efficacy would decrease

¹⁰ Men feel more agentic than women by 3.36 on average, which implies around a 10.2% of total variation in agentic index (ranging from 0 to 33). In addition, the size of the gender gap in efficacy decreases when we include respondents' connection to agentic abilities in the estimation: from -0.55*** to -0.33***

around 39 percentage points if women would be as attached to agentic traits as men do. However, to what extent is the relationship between gender roles and internal political efficacy malleable? We offer an experimental test by framing political motivation as public service rather than the seeking of political power

Table 2. Mediation analysis of the effect of gender on internal political efficacy via attachment to agentic traits

	Estimate	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
ACME (indirect effect)	-0.212	-0.291	-0.145***
ADE (direct effect)	-0.332	-0.577	-0.099***
Total Effect	-0.544	-0.781	-0.309***
Proportion mediated	0.391	0.271	0.687***

Source: Study 1. December 2020.

Study 2

We now have evidence of weak alignment between the traits associated to the political realm and those linked to women. However, the association between self-perceived agentic personalities and internal political efficacy might not be set in stone. Can changing perceptions about the political realm reduce the gender gap in political self-efficacy?

In Study 2 we present a set of brief, fictitious interviews with politicians (number of words = 280) that respondents are asked to read. The format of the text as seen by participants on the screen imitates a typical interview with personalities that are included in the very last page of a hypothetical broadsheet Spanish newspaper.

To offer an experimental test of our final hypothesis, we vary the interviewees' personal motivation for entering politics. In Treatment 1, politics is framed as a competitive affair and as a struggle for power in which political opponents often launch personal attacks against the interviewee (power/agentic frame). The headline of the first interview read as follows: "To change things in politics, you need to be ready to compete and assume risks: that is the only way for the best ideas to triumph."¹¹ In Treatment 2, political motivation was framed as a public service where it is crucial to cooperate with other political actors in order to solve problems and improve the lives of citizens (cooperative/communal frame). The headline of the interview reads as follows: "Politics is a just service we all do in order to solve people's problems." A third group of respondents was randomly assigned to a control group where no interview was shown.

¹¹ Translation of the full text is available in the appendix.

We implement a number of manipulation checks of our treatment. First, we test the credibility of the interview by asking participants if they thought the politician interviewed could be considered a typical politician, and if they could identify the politician as a real political figure of the moment. Overall 61.4% thought this was a typical politician while another 23% judged the politician atypical but nevertheless could identify it with a real political figure; therefore, 84% of the sample found the interview credible.

Second, we include a factual question about the content of the interview. Respondents were asked to choose the topic not covered by the interview.¹² Up to 82% of total participants were able to provide a correct response. We limit the analysis to the sample of respondents who offered a correct answer on the topic of the interview (82%) and who took at least 40 seconds to read the interview. After these checks, we included a battery of questions about politics among which three items measuring internal political efficacy that are identical to those presented in Study 1. Again, we sum responses to the three items to form a continuous additive scale ranging from 0 to 11.

Finally, after the aforementioned battery of items, we include a substantive manipulation check consisting of three items asking respondents to associate the concept of politics that the politician in the interview adhere to¹³ with a pair of words on an 11-point scale: conflict versus agreements; power versus public service; and competition versus cooperation. Respondents in the power treatment were more likely to associate politics with conflict, power and competition, respectively; the differences in mean values between the two groups were substantial (ranging from 2.46 to 3.18 points) and statistically significant (in all cases, $p < 0.001$), showing that the experiment was efficient in transmitting to participants two clearly distinguished abstract concepts about the political realm. This last manipulation check was included immediately after the survey item about internal political efficacy to avoid that the response to the manipulation check could influence the answer to our dependent variable, increasing the internal validity of the experimental design.

Results

If our results are consistent with H6, we should observe a gender gap in Treatment 1 (power/agentive frame) and a small or no gender gap in Treatment 2 (cooperative/communal frame). We model internal political efficacy as a function of gender and our treatment group, and controlling for sociodemographic

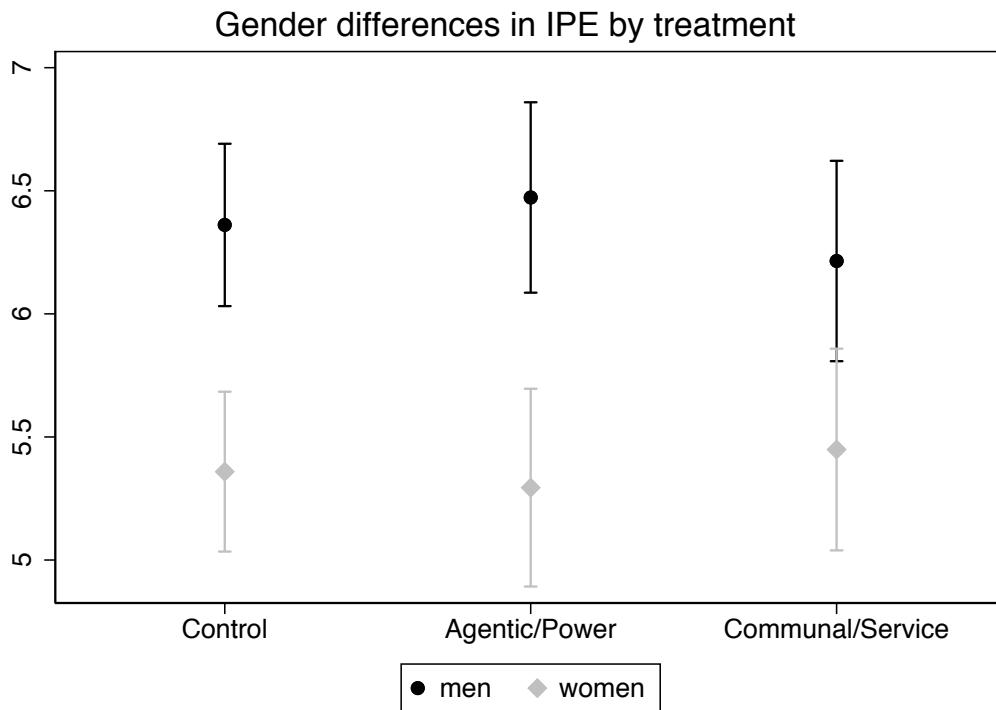
¹² The wording of the question was: "Thinking on the contents of the newspaper interview you just read, among the four following topics which one was NOT mentioned in the interview? (i) day to day life of a politician; (ii) corruption in politics; (iii) political vocation; (iv) advice for those who have political ambition. Corruption was the topic not covered in the interview. The four topics were offered in random order to participants.

¹³ The wording of the question is the following: "According to the interview you read, which of the following words in the scales best portray the political world described by the politician?" The three scales appeared in random order in the screen.

characteristics. The results of this estimation are summarized in Table A4 in the Appendix, Model 2 and plotted in Figure 3.

The predicted values of internal political efficacy for men and women across the experimental groups shows that the gender gap persists for the control group and Treatment 1 (power/competition frame). This is not surprising and corroborates that people’s perception of the political realm is more similar to the power frame than to the communal/service one. What is more relevant for our purposes here is that the gender differences in internal political efficacy are no longer statistically significant in Treatment 2. When political motivation is depicted emphasizing public service, women are no less likely to feel capable of participating in politics than are men.

Figure 3. Predicted values of internal political efficacy for men and women by treatment



Note: Estimates based on Table A3, Equation 2 in the Appendix.

These results are consistent with H6. Given citizens’ association of politics with agentic/masculine traits, women present lower levels of efficacy than men in the control group and the power frame. The gender gap in efficacy disappears when the political realm is presented emphasizing its service and communal dimensions. This adds a second pathway through which the gender gap in efficacy may be reduced. In Study 1, we showed that the gap in internal political efficacy disappears when typical gender personality traits did not hold (that is, when women perceive their personality as agentic). And also that the size of the gender gap

would decrease around 39 percentage points if women would be as attached to agentic traits as men do.

Conclusion

The relevance of gender differences across the world is clear if we consider the struggles of women to achieve parity in the economic and political spheres or the relevance of recent international feminist movements protesting against sexual harassment, assault and gender violence. This in combination with the wave of mobilization against gender equality brought about by the radical right parties around the world increases the current relevance of studying gender differences in the political realm. In this article we have engaged with one of the many dimensions of politics in which the gender gap persists despite advancements in the levels of gender inequalities in contemporary societies: psychological involvement with the world of politics.

We show why women do not perceive the political realm as a welcoming setting. We document that women's typical gender roles are a poor fit for the traits associated with the realm of politics, and this has implications for the how confident women feel to take part in politics. Relying on both observational and experimental evidence, we suggest two possible pathways to closing the gender gap in internal political efficacy. First, the gap vanishes when women express high confidence, assertiveness and ambition. Second, when politics is presented in ways that align with women's gender appropriate roles, women express levels of self-efficacy similar to men. These findings have important implications for the persisting gender gaps in politics.

First, scholars should pay attention to gender and political socialization which are at the origin of (a) a set of differentiated gender roles for boys and girls and (b) an association of the political realm to men (Bos et al. 2021). It is early childhood socialization that seeds the gender gap in politics, and adolescence when it becomes consolidated through school curricula and also missed opportunities for women to engage in sociopolitical learning processes (Beaumont 2011). The early years are key to creating and consolidating the gender gap, yet we know relatively little about these processes.

While our findings are coherent with the existence of enduring patterns of gendered socialization, we do not suggest (as some literature does) that these processes are set in stone. The evidence of our experimental study indicate that political attitudes, and by extension political representation, may be fairly malleable to how we portray the political realm. When citizens are confronted with another ideas about the political realm, such as the concern for the others, or the willingness to serve citizens and to solve their problems and improve their life, the gender gap in internal political efficacy vanishes. This suggests the need to contribute to changing the perception that politics is a belligerent and competitive

world. While mass media, and especially social media, have an important role to play, social science and humanities curricula are also relevant to changing this perception and to making politics inclusive.

Consequently, one line of intervention should aim overcoming these traditional gender stereotypes, minimizing gendered perceptions about social roles. Existing initiatives have focused on ways to increase the typical agentic traits among girls' (such as confidence, competitiveness, assertiveness), to boost girls' sense of belonging to the political world when they become adult women. But clearly they are not enough to close the gender gap in political engagement. Additionally, these measures are framed in such a way as if the blame was on women, who are not agentic enough. We need however, to put the focus on boys and men with the aim to increase their valuing of communion and caring goals. Future research should focus on the identification of boys' and men's behaviors and opinions both in private and public spaces. Decreasing gender inequalities in the realm of politics is also a responsibility of men, and we need to move beyond the approach of focusing exclusively on women's behaviors and values.

While prior explanations about the existence and persistence of the gender gap in political efficacy have emphasized socioeconomic resources and the increasing descriptive representation of women in politics, in this article we have focused on the psychological component of distance women feel to politics. We thus contribute to an incipient line of research on application of social role theory to the study of gender and politics. This research can contribute to effective advances in the understanding of the complex ways in which gender molds politics around the world (Heck et al 2021; Schneider and Bos 2019).

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APPENDIX

Wording of the interviews included in the experiment of Study 2

Please read carefully the interview with a politician below.

1)- Power Frame

Title: Speaking with our politicians

Summary: To change things in politics you need to be ready to compete and assume risks: that is the only way for the best ideas to triumph

You are a politician... Yes, from a very young age, I was drawn to power and admired people who are on the front lines and who like to compete to go far.

And do you regret it? Not at all, I am very proud to dedicate my life to politics. It is not an easy profession. To exercise power, you need firmness and determination. Only in this way is it possible to manage conflict and deal with criticism.

How is the day to day of a politician?

It is anything but boring. You must always be on the alert in order to react to any unforeseen events, including criticism from the media. Making decisions in politics is always challenging because you must deal with conflicting interests.

Could you describe in greater detail the day-to-day of a politician? It is very intense, and there is a lot of media pressure. The front lines of politics require absolute dedication: very long hours, which begin at six in the morning, with phone calls, whatsapps, emails, meetings. Sometimes it is exhausting.

Could you tell us what you like best about politics? Having the power to make decisions that affect us all.

And what do you like least? What would you say are the costs of going into politics?

R- The worst thing is when your opponents attack you on a personal level. If you can handle that pressure, then politics is worth pursuing.

Q- What advice would you give someone who wants to go into politics?

R-Run for office, but do not expect to win the first time. Persevere. Politics is a long-distance race. To change things, you have to be willing to compete and take on risks. Only this way do the best ideas triumph

2)- Service Frame

Summary: Politics is a just service we all do in order to solve people's problems.

You are a politician... Yes, from a very young age I dreamed of working for others, solving problems and improving people's lives.

And do you regret it? Not at all, I am very proud to dedicate my life to politics. It is not an easy profession. In order to make decisions that affect millions of people, you need to have a lot of energy and conviction.

How is the day to day of a politician? It is anything but boring because you have to be in constant dialogue with different social and political actors. For me the key to being successful is putting yourself in someone else's shoes and knowing how to come to agreements.

Could you describe in greater detail the day-to-day of a politician? The front lines of politics require dedication because you have to constantly be attending calls and emails. There are many meetings that are necessary to listen to the opinions, problems and needs of the citizens. Surrounding myself with a good team is crucial for me.

Could you tell us what you like best about politics? The feeling of being able to contribute to the well-being of all.

And what do you like the least? What would you say are the costs of going into politics? I miss having more time for my family and friends. We need to

create a better work-life balance in the profession of politics.

What advice would you give someone who wants to go into politics? To get involved in local projects. Working at the local level is the best way to learn how to "do politics." After all, politics is a just service we all do in order to solve people's problems.

Table A.1 Descriptive Statistics of Variables included in Study 1

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Internal political efficacy	1310	5.79	2.62	0	11
Women	1504	0.51	0.50	0	1
Agentic Index	1469	15.38	7.74	0	33
Communality Index	1477	15.77	7.52	0	33
Education	1504	1.91	1.25	0	4
Age	1504	48.75	16.93	18	92
Having kids	1504	0.62	0.48	0	1

Source: Study 1, December 2020

Table A.2 Descriptive Statistics of Variables included in Study 2

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Internal Political Efficacy	1392	5.78	2.57	0	11
Women	1506	0.50	0.50	0	1
Education	1506	1.93	1.24	0	4
Age	1506	45.26	15.37	18	88
Having kids	1506	0.55	0.50	0	1
Ideology	1347	4.13	2.63	0	10
Treatment	1506	1.00	0.82	0	2
Agentic Index	1506	2.88	1.86	0	6
Correct	1006	0.82	0.38	0	1

Source: Study 2, June 2020

Table A3. Testing mediation conditions

	IPE	Agentic index	IPE
Women	-0.55***	-3.36***	-0.33**
	0.12	0.45	0.12
Education	0.19***	0.10	0.18***
	0.05	0.17	0.04
Age	0.00	0.01	0.01
	0.00	0.01	0.00
Has children	0.39**		0.29*
	0.14		0.14
Agentic Index			0.06***
			0.01
Intercept	3.25***	16.83***	2.17***
	0.24	0.87	0.26
N	1302	1302	1302
R ²	0.05	0.05	0.10

Source: Study 1. December 2020. Unstandardized OLS coefficients with their associated SE. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Findings are not equivalent to those showed in Table 1 in the main text because we have restricted the number of observations to be equal across equations so that our coefficient comparison across equations is rigorous

Table A4. Internal political efficacy by treatment

	Model 1	Model 2
Treatment (ref. cat= control)		
Agentic treatment	0.11	-0.02
	0.26	0.26
Communal treatment	-0.15	-0.16
	0.27	0.26
Women	-1.00***	-1.04***
	0.24	0.25
Agentic frame*Women	-0.18	-0.06
	0.37	0.36
Communal frame*Women	0.24	0.24
	0.38	0.37
Age		0.01
		0.01
Education		0.42***
		0.06
Working		-0.17
		0.16
Intercept	6.36***	5.27***
	0.17	0.39
Number of observations	1075	1075
R2	0.04	0.08

Source: Study 2, June 2020

Unstandardized OLS coefficients with their associated SE

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$