ARTICLES

Hard Worker versus Pretty Eyes. Evaluating the Numerical and Substantive Representation of Flemish Ministers in Newspaper Articles

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Abstract

Previous research shows that female politicians receive less media coverage and that articles refer more often to women's family life, gender, personality, age and appearance. However, most research focuses solely on women as electoral candidates and is limited to campaign periods. Applying a broader timeframe is vital as voters' perceptions of politicians are mainly constructed during routine periods. And the question arises whether women occupying elite positions in politics encounter the same media bias. This article addresses both shortcomings by conducting a longitudinal quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 4,298 individual mentions of Flemish ministers in 3,528 newspaper articles during three distinct periods of the political cycle. Contrary to the numerical female underrepresentation among candidates, our findings suggest that the media tends to overrepresent female ministers. Furthermore, we notice a strong focus on women's gender throughout the political cycle and their physical appearance during election periods.

Keywords: newspaper coverage, gender bias, representation, elites, Belgium.

1   Introduction

In recent years, we are witnessing a trend towards a greater descriptive representation of women in politics (IPU, 2020). However, that does not mean that the fight for equal representation in politics is over as women continue to be vastly underrepresented in higher positions of political power. As politicians operate in a mediatised political environment where the media are citizens' primary source of information (Baugut, 2019), any systematic gender bias in media coverage is likely to contribute to this continued underrepresentation of female politicians (Aalderding & van der Pas, 2018).

Research within feminist media studies points to both numerical and substantive   media   underrepresentation.   The   former,   numerical

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underrepresentation, refers to the fact that female politicians are not only less visible but also less prominently visible in the news compared to their male counterparts, while the latter, substantive underrepresentation, indicates that news articles refer more often to women's family life, gender, personality, age and appearance (D'Heer & Van Leuven, 2019; Hooghe et al., 2015; van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020).

The systematic underrepresentation and stereotyped representation of women in news coverage generates two primary effects that are detrimental to women's representation in politics. First and foremost, both numerical and substantive media underrepresentation harm the visibility and evaluation of officeholders and candidates and, by extension, their chances of electoral success (Goodyear-Grant, 2013; Rohrbach et al., 2022). Secondly, female adolescents are less inclined to be politically active when female politicians are underrepresented in news coverage as this fuels the idea that the democratic system is not 'open for everyone' (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Hooghe et al., 2015). Likewise, when the media emphasises traits unrelated to politics, it can discourage young women from pursuing a political career. If young women stay alienated from seeking political office because of media gender bias, this will likely result in the continuation of women's political underrepresentation for the foreseeable future (Goodyear-Grant, 2013). Consequently, it goes without saying that research about the representation of female politicians is of great societal importance.

Although there are many recent studies focusing on women's representation in politics, most of them focus solely on the media representation of candidates in an electoral context (D'Heer et al., 2022; Lühiste & Banducci, 2016; Wagner et al., 2017). Research on media representation during other stages of the political cycle is presently lacking. However, studying all of the political periods that pertain to political activities in general, instead of solely focusing on election periods, is crucial, as voters' perceptions of politicians are largely based on media coverage during times of routine politics. Furthermore, research by Aaldering and van der Pas (2018) shows that gender bias in media coverage is relatively muted during election periods as the media are more focused on journalistic norms such as fairness and balanced reporting (Hopmann et al., 2011; Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009). In addition to a more prominent focus on balanced reporting, election campaigns heighten the salience of conflict between parties and individual politicians. As conflict becomes the prevailing theme in news stories, the relevance of the candidate's gender diminishes (Hayes & Lawless, 2015, 2016). Therefore, we can expect an increase in stereotypical reporting during routine times.

On top of that, most studies focus exclusively on electoral candidates instead of elite politicians (D'Heer et al., 2022; Dan & Iorgoveanu, 2013; Lühiste & Banducci, 2016; Meeks, 2012). Still, this is a highly heterogeneous body. According to Galtung and Ruge (1965), the more power a politician has, the more relevant and newsworthy that person is. This power is determined by the position of a politician. Ministers, party leaders and heads of government all belong to this powerful political elite and, as a result, are likely to receive more attention. The question thus arises whether the same numerical gender gap for candidates can be found among elite politicians. In addition, it is interesting to investigate whether

the same bias in substantive media representation (with a larger focus on non-political characteristics) also occurs for top, elite-group politicians. These politicians, including government ministers, are more well-known by journalists and the public, and they take many concrete policy decisions, thereby generating more political information compared to lesser-known candidates.

This study wants to address both shortcomings by conducting an in-depth longitudinal quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 4,298 individual mentions of ministers of the regional Flemish government (Belgium) in 3,528 articles from five different Flemish newspapers. These articles were collected during three distinct periods of the political cycle: (1) the election period of 2019, (2) the subsequent government formation period and (3) several months during the regular political year of 2021.

In order to provide a comprehensive perspective on media representation, we focus on three pivotal dimensions: news presence, news prominence and substantive representation. Firstly, news presence scrutinises the frequency of politicians' appearance in newspaper articles, shedding light on their overall visibility. Secondly, news prominence delves deeper into the degree of emphasis placed on political figures when discussed in articles, encompassing the frequency of their name mentions within an article and their presence in article titles. The third dimension, substantive representation, transcends mere presence and prominence by investigating the content of coverage. We focus on the frequency with which specific aspects of private life, gender, age, appearance and personal characteristics are mentioned. This reveals how politicians are characterised and highlighted in the media, offering a profound understanding of the narratives surrounding them (D'Heer et al., 2022).

The central objective is to scrutinise numerical representation – encompassing news presence and prominence, as well as substantive media representation of female ministers in comparison to their male colleagues. We want to (1) check whether journalists mention female ministers as much and as prominently as they do for their male counterparts and (2) whether female ministers are represented in a gender-stereotyped way.

Surprisingly, our findings suggest that media tends to overrepresent female ministers. However, due to the limited number of ministers, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent uncertainty associated with making definitive inferences to other contexts about the numerical balance within news coverage. In terms of substantive media representation, female ministers' private lives, age and personality traits are not referred to more often than those of their male colleagues. Nonetheless, we do notice a strong focus on women's gender throughout the entire political cycle and, specifically, on their physical appearance during the election period. Taken together, these findings significantly contribute to the existing literature by expanding insights into the gendered portrayal of elite politicians and taking the timing of news coverage in the political cycle into account.

2 Women's Representation in the Media

2.1 Numerical Representation

Numerical media underrepresentation is a multifaceted concept that encompasses two essential dimensions: news presence and news prominence (D'Heer et al., 2022). News presence focuses on the frequency of politicians' appearances in newspaper articles, offering insights into their overall visibility within the media landscape. It serves as an initial gauge of how frequently politicians are featured in news content, reflecting their general presence in the public discourse. News prominence delves deeper into the level of emphasis placed on political figures when they are discussed in articles, which can significantly affect their perceived importance. In the subsequent paragraphs, we will explore and analyse the current literature related to both news presence and news prominence in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how politicians are represented in the media.

2.1.1 News Presence

Kahn (1994) was one of the first to analyse gender bias in media representation and concluded that women receive less coverage than their male contenders. Subsequent studies come to similar conclusions.

A study on television news, for instance, leading up to the 1997 British general election, discovered how women accounted for only 5% of national MPs appearing in the traditional media, even though women at the time constituted 9% of the membership in the British Parliament. The same pattern is apparent in a study on the media coverage of the 1999 South African elections. In this African country, 9% of news sources were female candidates. If we compare this with only 1% during the 1994 elections, it seems to be an immense improvement. Yet, compared to the percentage of women MPs in the country at the time (30%), the result remains meagre (Gallagher, 2001). Several, more recent, studies confirm this numerical underrepresentation of female MPs and candidates (Bystrom, 2005; D'Heer et al., 2022; Heldman et al., 2005; Hooghe et al., 2015; Lühiste & Banducci, 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2008; van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020; Wauters et al., 2010).

However, not all studies yield identical outcomes. On the contrary, research on the representation of female politicians in the US show several inconsistencies. Smith (1997), for example, discovered how female candidates received more attention than their male opponents during the 1994 governor elections. He attributes his findings to a so-called 'novelty effect'. As the election of governors has always been strongly male-dominated, the considerable presence of women was seen as something new and, thus, more newsworthy. This 'novelty effect' has also been cited in other studies as a possible reason for a (temporarily) better representation of female candidates in the media (Atkeson & Krebs, 2008; Conroy et al., 2015; Meeks, 2012; Miller et al., 2010). An important nuance, however, is that these conflicting results seem limited to the US elections. The overall picture is one in which female candidates are numerically underrepresented in the media when it comes to the aspect of news presence. This brings us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: Female ministers appear less often in the news than male ministers.

2.1.2 News Prominence

In addition to news presence, more recent studies looked at how much attention an MP or candidate receives within a news item as a measure of news prominence. Female candidates have, for instance, been reported to receive fewer quotes (Ross & Comrie, 2012; Semetko & Boomgaarden, 2007), notwithstanding a number of Canadian studies that do not support these findings (Goodyear-Grant, 2013; Wagner, 2014). Other studies have reported contradictory findings on additional measures of news prominence such as whether a politician is named first in the story, named multiple times or named in a headline. Women politicians, for example, received a greater number of headline citations with both first and last name. On the other hand, in the only study on ministers, male politicians tend to receive more headline citations that only include their first name (Sensales & Areni, 2017). Research by Trimble (2007) and Wagner (2014) on news prominence shows similar results when looking at leadership elections and municipal politicians. Taken together, the current literature on news prominence seems to be characterised by mixed findings.

Belgian research on female politicians' news presence and news prominence in electoral news coverage confirms the persistence of gendered patterns in television, newspaper, radio and web-based news items as female candidates were less often represented than their male counterparts (D'Heer et al., 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Wauters et al., 2010). However, in the case of news prominence, significant gender differences were only found when looking at the greater visibility in photographs and television broadcasts with female candidates appearing less prominently than male candidates (D'Heer et al., 2022).

Political scientists have questioned whether media are biased in their amount of coverage on female politicians or whether they follow a logic of newsworthiness covering the most powerful actors (Bennett, 1990; Vos, 2014). Following this reasoning, the highly diverse nature of electoral candidates and MPs, which is the primary focus of most literature, could account for the current lack of definitive conclusions on news prominence. Thus, it is critical to broaden our scope to politicians with a high level of power and newsworthiness, such as ministers. They differ from rank-and-file candidates and lesser-known MPs in two key aspects: (1) name recognition among voters and journalists (due to their prolonged involvement in politics) and (2) policy impact. Consequently, a greater amount of politically significant information about them is available, potentially influencing gender media bias. The question thus arises whether the same gendered pattern among candidates can be identified in the case of government ministers. Based on the existing literature, this brings us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b: Female ministers will appear less prominently in news stories than male ministers.

2.2 Substantive Representation

While there might be some discussion about the quantity of news coverage female politicians receive, in the case of news prominence, most researchers are in unison that the kind of coverage they do obtain clearly differs from that of their male counterparts (Aaldering & van der Pas, 2018; D'Heer et al., 2022; Vos, 2013, 2014).

One of the primary findings is the disproportionate attention that is given to the private lives of female politicians by mentioning their children and marital status (Adcock, 2010; van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). This attention unconsciously reinforces the outdated notion that women are supposed to occupy the private sphere and men should occupy the public sphere. Given that politics is widely considered to be a public domain, this reinforces the idea that women do not naturally 'belong' in politics (Wahl-Jorgensen & Ye, 2015). While certain types of media seem to stress the family relationships of both male and female politicians, these are not always presented similarly. Van Zoonen (2002), for instance, discovered how the Dutch gossip press showed the families of male politicians as 'a source of support', while it was portrayed as a 'source of conflict' for women in the pursuit of a political career. Other studies confirm these findings (Banwart et al., 2003; Heldman et al., 2005). We, therefore, hypothesise that:

> *Hypothesis 2a: A politician's private life is mentioned more often in articles about female ministers than those about male ministers.*

Not only does the private life of female politicians receive more attention; in fact, Van Zoonen (1998) notes that the gender of politicians itself is receiving more attention in current news reporting. Female politicians are still given the prefix 'woman' or are mentioned as the 'leading lady', which marks them out as "different to the traditional (male) politician" (Ross & Comrie, 2012). This leads to the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2b: A politician's gender is mentioned more often in articles about female ministers than those about male ministers.*

In addition to a greater focus on family life, marital status and gender, female politicians are also confronted with a larger spotlight on their appearance and age (Aday & Devitt, 2001; D'Heer & Van Leuven, 2019; van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). This was strongly reflected in the coverage of, for example, Sarah Palin and Hilary Clinton during the 2008 presidential campaign (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Taken together, this brings us to the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 2c: A politician's appearance is mentioned more often in articles about female ministers than those about male ministers.*

> *Hypothesis 2d: A politician's age is mentioned more often in articles about female ministers than those about male ministers.*

Another way to highlight the difference between male and female politicians is, in the case of women, by focusing on certain 'female' or 'soft' characteristics such as warmth, compassion, honesty, kindness, care and softness (Wahl-Jorgensen & Ye, 2015). This could have far-reaching consequences, as male politicians seem to benefit more from these attributed traits than their female counterparts. In this context, reference is regularly made to the 'double bind' that women experience: female politicians cannot enjoy electoral profit from female gender stereotypes and are rejected when showing signs of typical male personality traits (Banwart, 2010). People link femininity to political incompetence, and they tend to see competence as a non-feminine trait (Jamieson, 1995). Thus, a female politician who wants to be successful must have stereotypically masculine characteristics, but not to such a degree that her personality deviates too much from the classic expectations of femininity (Banwart, 2010). This brings us to our final hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2e: A politician's personality traits are mentioned more often in articles about female ministers than those about male ministers.*

3   Data and Methods

According to our literature research, we can distinguish two gendered patterns in the (written) news: (1) female politicians are numerically underrepresented, and (2) if they are present in the media, they are mostly described stereotypically. This study aims to contribute to existing research by examining whether this is also the case for elite politicians, in particular, government ministers, in the Flemish press during the whole political cycle, including routine periods outside the electoral campaign.

3.1 Case Selection: Flanders

The media system in Belgium can be best described as being part of the Democratic corporatist model, referring to high levels of professionalisation, independent journalism and a strong public broadcaster (Brüggemann et al., 2014). Journalists themselves are of the view, and often proclaim, that the distribution of trustworthy information is their most important role (Van Leuven et al., 2019). Even though digital channels are the primary source of news consumption, traditional newspapers have maintained their popularity among both younger generations and adults (De Marez et al., 2023). Flanders, the largest region of Belgium, is described as becoming increasingly gender-neutral, both on a general societal level and in the political sphere. Research has, for example, shown that the Flemish electorate holds very limited political gender stereotypes based on the (issue) competences of male and female politicians (Devroe, 2021; Meier, 2012).

Nevertheless, international comparative research has shown that the news visibility gap persists in PR systems (Thesen & Yildirim, 2023; van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Indeed, research on the news representation of female politicians in the Flemish press has consistently illustrated their lower visibility and more trivialising news coverage compared to their male colleagues (D'Heer et al., 2022;

Hooghe et al., 2015; Vos, 2013; Wauters et al., 2010). However, these studies focus primarily on news broadcasts or news representation of female candidates during election periods. As such, the question regarding the existence of a media bias in traditional newspapers with respect to elite positions throughout the entire political cycle remains unanswered.

3.2 Methods

To test our hypotheses, we rely on a longitudinal in-depth quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Our content analysis is based on the five most important Dutch-language newspapers in Flanders: (1) *De Morgen*, (2) *De Standaard*, (3) *De Tijd*, (4) *Het Laatste Nieuws* and (5) *Het Nieuwsblad*. Together, these newspapers reach over 5,339,600 readers per day. By including a mix of newspapers in terms of type (quality and popular newspapers) and media house (DPG Media and Mediahuis), we try to facilitate the principle of objectivity as much as possible. The media content is studied for a period of nine months in total: the election period (26 February to 26 May 2019), the period following the formation of a new coalition (1 October to 31 December 2019), and three months during a regular political year (15 August to 15 November 2021). A total of 3,528 articles were collected. Several of those mentioned multiple politicians which brings us to a total of 4,298 individual mentions. These individual entries constitute the units of analysis throughout the paper. Of the 4,298 cases collected, 906 came from *De Morgen*, 753 from *De Tijd*, 994 from *De Standaard*, 656 from *Het Nieuwsblad*, and 989 from *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Although the focus of this research is mainly on female politicians, the articles on male ministers have also been recorded and coded. This is not only necessary to draw meaningful conclusions about women's media representation, as it can also help reveal stereotypes in the representation of male politicians. Articles from regional newspapers and supplements were not included in the dataset. One of the advantages of this study is that the data set contains every article written on male and female ministers of the Flemish government during the nine months examined. We find it necessary to include all articles to make sure we can form a broad and complete picture of news reporting in the chosen timeframe. Subsequently, no problems should arise concerning legitimacy and representativeness. This research has, therefore, a solid foundation in terms of objectivity and validity.

In our study, we consider various variables to comprehensively assess media representation. The independent variable under scrutiny is gender, while our dependent variables encompass two critical aspects of numerical representation: news presence and news prominence. When examining news presence, we employ a 2 × 1 contingency table, adjusting values to reflect the distribution of politicians in the government, with 33.3% women and 66.6% men. This adjustment ensures that both expected and observed counts account for the non-50/50 gender distribution, which is crucial for an accurate analysis. We perform a chi-square analysis on the row percentages to explore the association between gender and news presence.

In the realm of news prominence, we address two dimensions: 'title mention' as a categorical variable, indicating whether a politician's name appears in the

article's title (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0). For the 'count' variable representing the frequency of a politician's name in an article, a negative binomial regression is employed instead of an OLS regression due to the left-skewed nature of the data. In our analysis, we also incorporate several control variables to examine the impact of various factors on the news coverage of politicians. These control variables are essential for a comprehensive understanding of female ministers' media representation. We categorise the position held by a minister in the government, distinguishing between Minister-President, Vice Minister-President, and regular ministers in the descending order of importance. We anticipate that the Minister-President will be mentioned more frequently than Vice Minister-Presidents, and Vice Minister-Presidents more than regular ministers. This variable aids in identifying the influence of political position on news coverage. Seniority also plays a role. We include this variable in our analysis because politicians with more experience and years in service are likely to be mentioned more often and more prominently in the media (Vos, 2014). Finally, we have included a dummy variable to control for the political party of the respective politician. This enables us to examine the influence of political affiliation on the coverage of politicians in news reports.

To evaluate our third dependent variable, 'substantive representation', we analyse the mentions related to a politician's private life, gender, age, appearance and personal characteristics. In this instance, the small number of positive cases makes a logistic regression unreliable. Thus, we resort to a chi-square analysis based on a 2 × 2 contingency table and compute Cramer's V on the row percentages to measure the strength of the association between gender and the variables related to substantive representation.

To accurately evaluate the level of representation in our chi-square analyses, we propose a novel measure of overrepresentation or underrepresentation. This measure is calculated by dividing the percentages of media attention by the corresponding percentage of government presence (labelled as 'Rep.'). Values greater than '1' indicate overrepresentation, suggesting that the specific group receives more media attention compared to their representation in the investigated context. Conversely, values smaller than '1' indicate underrepresentation. For instance, when female politicians are mentioned in 41.1% of the cases, we divide 41.1 by 33.3 (the percentage of women in the government) and arrive at 1.25, which is greater than 1, indicating overrepresentation. Conversely, when male politicians are mentioned in 58.9% of the cases, we divide this percentage by 66.6 (the percentage of men in the government) and obtain 0.88, which is smaller than 1, indicating underrepresentation (see Table 1, news presence). This approach is inspired by the advantage ratio in research on electoral systems but is novel in the context of research on media representation (Taagepera & Shugart, 1989). Additionally, to delve deeper into the nuanced aspects of the gender effect, we will supplement the quantitative content analysis with a more in-depth qualitative content analysis.

The articles were manually coded using a scheme that was drawn up based on insights from previous literature (see Appendix 2). This assures uniformity in the way the articles are coded and makes sure that external analysts can replicate the

research. As much as 5% of the individual mentions (n = 215), chosen at random, were reregistered and recoded to determine the reliability of the variables, resulting in satisfactory Cohen's Kappa values ranging from 0.763 to 1 (see Appendix 1).

4   Results

4.1 Numerical Representation

We start the discussion of our results with a presentation of the findings about the numerical representation of male and female ministers.

Of the 4,298 individual mentions, 2,533 (59%) concern male ministers and 1,765 (41%) relate to female ministers (see Table 1). However, it is essential to compare these numbers with the actual gender distribution within the Flemish government, which comprises six men (66.6%) and three women (33.3%). Considering the 'Rep.' values (see the Methods section, for the calculation method), there is no deficit in terms of female representation. On the contrary, when we examine the representation measure and the average number of mentions per person, we observe an overrepresentation of female ministers. This overrepresentation is mainly visible during the election period and the regular political year and is statistically significant. We notice a rather equal representation just after the formation of the new coalition.

The overrepresentation of female politicians in the mentions is mainly due to the many references to Zuhal Demir during the regular political year. This can be linked to her role as Minister for Environment. Due to the 3M scandal and the holding of the Glasgow Climate Change Conference (COP26), she featured remarkably more frequently in the media (n = 410, see Appendix 3) during the last weeks of October and early November. A similar remark can be made about the nomination of Hilde Crevits as the figurehead of the CD&V campaign during the election period. Her media presence declined remarkably in the following months. Both cases could (partly) explain the overrepresentation of women during the election period and the regular political year. It is, however, crucial to highlight the case-specific nature of these results. These instances, while contributing to the overrepresentation of female politicians in the mentions, are contingent on specific events, such as scandals or election campaigns. As a result, the generalisability of our findings to a broader context is limited. This specificity is particularly noteworthy in light of the small number of ministers (N = 9) in our study. Therefore, caution is warranted in extrapolating these results to a more comprehensive understanding of media representation of female ministers. In addition, this election period was characterised by a major focus in the campaigns of the parties and politicians themselves on the female politicians who ran for office.

Table 1   *Mentioned in Article – News Presence (N = 4,298)*

Period	Female actors % (n)		Rep.	Male actors % (n)		Rep.	X²	df	P-value
Election	49.0	(457)	1.48	51.0	(476)	0.77	102.810	1	<0.001
Coalition	33.0	(558)	1.00	67.0	(1,133)	1.00	0.085	1	0.770
Routine	44.8	(750)	1.36	55.2	(924)	0.83	99.097	1	<0.001
Total	41.1	(1,765)	1.25	58.9	(2,533)	0.88	115.636	1	<0.001

Nonetheless, as this study does not report a numerical media underrepresentation of female ministers in the case of news presence, we have to reject *Hypothesis 1a*.

Next, we look at news prominence. The most noticeable part of a newspaper article is the title. If we look at the descriptive data (see Appendix 4), title mentions are quite rare. Nevertheless, we see a clear difference between female and male politicians during all three periods. After the coalition formation, female politicians are mentioned 34 times in the title of a newspaper article. Male ministers are referred to in 115 titles. The large number of male title referrals after the coalition formation could be related to Jan Jambon's appointment as Minister-President of Flanders. Here, female ministers are underrepresented.

A different pattern emerges during the regular political year as female ministers are clearly overrepresented if we keep the gender division within the Flemish government in mind (see Appendix 4).

However, this result is not confirmed when we perform a logistic regression (see Table 2). While we do see positive coefficients for female ministers during the election and routine periods, suggesting a potential higher frequency of title mentions compared to male ministers, these findings lack statistical significance. Instead, our analysis suggests that the frequency of title mentions is influenced by the political context, specifically the position held during the election and routine periods, as well as seniority during the coalition period and across all three periods. Additionally, noteworthy patterns emerge regarding party affiliations with N-VA and CD&V ministers consistently garnering more title mentions than their counterparts from Open Vld. This emphasis on the political context strengthens our concern about the case-specific nature of our results related to news presence. The nuanced interplay of political dynamics suggests that the frequency of title mentions is intricately tied to specific circumstances, reinforcing the need for caution in generalising our findings to a broader context.

Table 2   *Logistic Regression Modelling: News Prominence as Mentioned in the Title*

	Total	Election	Coalition	Routine
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variable				
Gender (ref. male)	0.09 (0.13)	0.30 (0.62)	−0.26 (0.23)	0.29 (0.20)
Control variables				
Position				
Minister (ref.)				
Minister-President	0.07 (0.18)	**1.71* (0.83)**	0.40 (0.28)	**−0.76* (0.37)**

Table 2   (Continued)

Independent variable	Total Coef. (SE)	Election Coef. (SE)	Coalition Coef. (SE)	Routine Coef. (SE)
Vice Minister-President	−0.16 (0.15)	0.27 (0.65)	−0.43 (0.28)	−0.12 (0.24)
Seniority	**0.04⁺** **(0.02)**	−0.01 (0.07)	**0.06*** **(0.03)**	0.02 (0.04)
Party				
Open Vld (ref.)				
N-VA	**1.03**** **(0.32)**	0.65 (1.42)	0.77 (0.47)	**1.05*** **(0.48)**
CD&V	**0.77***** **(0.23)**	**2.11*** **(1.05)**	**0.62⁺** **(0.33)**	**0.72⁺** **(0.39)**
Constant	−3.80*** (0.49)	−4.76** (1.68)	−3.83*** (0.71)	−3.51*** (0.75)
Observations	4,298	933	1,691	1,674
Log Likelihood	−1,176.76	−202.90	−492.78	−458.28
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,367.53	419.79	999.56	930.57

Note: ⁺$p < 0.10$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Additionally, we conducted a negative binomial regression to investigate the frequency of politician name mentions within an article (see Table 3). In contrast to the logistic regression results, this analysis does reveal a discernible gender effect. Notably, significant differences emerge during the coalition period, indicating that female ministers tend to have a smaller number of name mentions in one article compared to their male counterparts. However, looking at the routine period and considering all three periods together, female ministers exhibit a larger number of name mentions in one and the same article. Importantly, similar to the logistic regression findings for title mentions, our results also highlight the influence of factors such as position, seniority and party affiliation on the frequency of name mentions to a certain extent.

As both the results of our logistic and negative binomial regression models contradict our expectation, we have to reject *Hypothesis 1b*. The rejection of the hypotheses related to news presence and news prominence challenges the assertion of a numerical media underrepresentation for female politicians. However, it is again crucial to approach these findings with caution, considering the limitations imposed by the small number of ministers in this study. Additionally, the observed importance of individual political characteristics, such as position, seniority and party affiliation, further underscores the complexity of media representation dynamics.

Table 3   *Negative Binomial Regression Modelling: News Prominence – Total Mentions in Articles*

	Total	Election	Coalition	Routine
	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)	Coef. (SE)
Independent variable				
Gender (ref. male)	**0.05+** **(0.03)**	−0.05 (0.07)	**−0.12*** **(0.05)**	**0.13**** **(0.05)**
Control variables				
Position				
Minister (ref.)				
Minister-President	0.05 (0.04)	0.09 (0.12)	**0.24***** **(0.07)**	**−0.15*** **(0.07)**
Vice Minister-President	−0.02 (0.03)	**0.23**** **(0.09)**	−0.03 (0.05)	**−0.12*** **(0.05)**
Seniority	**0.01*** **(0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)	**0.01*** **(0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)
Party				
Open Vld (ref.)				
N-VA	**0.29***** **(0.06)**	0.32 (0.20)	0.13 (0.09)	**0.29**** **(0.10)**
CD&V	**0.16***** **(0.05)**	**0.49***** **(0.11)**	0.08 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)
Constant	0.35*** (0.09)	0.18 (0.30)	0.44*** (0.13)	0.50** (0.15)
Observations	4,298	933	1,691	1,674
Log Likelihood	−7,695.21	−1,646.30	−3,024.60	−2,963.30
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,404.43	3,306.60	6,063.20	5,940.60

Note: +$p < 0.10$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

4.2 Substantive Representation

We now move forward to the discussion on bias in the substantive media representation of female ministers. More particularly, we investigate references to the private life, gender, appearance, age and personality traits of ministers. Given the limited number of positive cases precluding a logistic regression analysis, our approach involves a comprehensive quantitative content analysis across all nine ministers under study. Additionally, to delve deeper into the nuanced aspects of the gender effect, we will supplement the quantitative content analysis with a more in-depth qualitative content analysis.

Table 4   *Substantive Representation (N = 4,298)*

	Female actors %	(n)	Rep.	Male actors %	(n)	Rep.	χ²	df	P-value	Cramer's V
Election										
Private sphere	47.4	(9)	1.42	52.6	(10)	0.79	0.020	—	0.887	0.005
Gender	**91.3**	**(42)**	**2.74**	**8.7**	**(4)**	**0.13**	**34.682**	**—**	**<0.001**	**0.193**
Appearance	**71.4**	**(15)**	**2.14**	**28.6**	**(6)**	**0.43**	**4.332**	**—**	**0.037**	**0.068**
Age	57.1	(4)	1.71	42.9	(3)	0.64	0.188	—	0.665	0.014
Personality	52.8	(28)	1.59	47.2	(25)	0.71	0.333	—	0.564	0.019
Coalition										
Private sphere	33.3	(8)	1.00	66.7	(16)	1.00	0.001	—	0.972	0.001
Gender	**88.2**	**(15)**	**2.65**	**11.8**	**(2)**	**0.18**	**23.699**	**—**	**<0.001**	**0.118**
Appearance	50.0	(5)	1.50	50.0	(5)	0.75	1.315	—	0.252	0.028
Age	26.1	(6)	0.78	73.9	(17)	1.11	0.504	—	0.478	0.017
Personality	**17.9**	**(7)**	**0.54**	**82.1**	**(32)**	**1.23**	**4.089**	**—**	**0.043**	**0.049**
Routine										
Private sphere	55.6	(5)	1.67	44.4	(4)	0.67	0.423	—	0.515	0.008
Gender	**90.0**	**(9)**	**2.70**	**10.0**	**(1)**	**0.15**	**8.31**	**—**	**0.004**	**0.070**
Appearance	100	(1)	3.00	—	(0)	—	1.233	—	0.267	0.027
Age	—	(0)	—	—	(0)	—	—	—	—	—
Personality	58.3	(14)	1.75	41.7	(10)	0.63	1.803	—	0.179	0.033
Total										
Private sphere	42.3	(22)	1.27	57.7	(30)	0.87	0.034	—	0.855	0.003

Table 4   (*Continued*)

	Female actors %	(n)	Rep.	Male actors %	(n)	Rep.	χ²	df	P-value	Cramer's V
Gender	90.4	(66)	2.71	9.6	(7)	0.14	74.715	1	<0.001	0.132
Appearance	70.0	(21)	2.10	30.0	(11)	0.45	8.035	1	0.005	0.043
Age	66.7	(20)	2.00	33.3	(10)	0.50	0.746	1	0.388	0.013
Personality	42.2	(49)	1.27	57.8	(67)	0.87	0.068	1	0.794	0.004

First, as mentioned earlier, any reference to marital status, (grand)children and work-family balance is interpreted as a reference to the private sphere. Such a reference is found in 52 cases (see Table 4). As many as 22 of these cases refer to the private life of a female minister, and 30 such cases refer to the private life of a male minister. The private lives of male ministers are mentioned more often. However, the difference is only minor and can be explained by a large amount of attention to the resignation of Benjamin Dalle's (the Flemish Minister of Media) wife, Maïté Piessen, as a radio newscaster due to a potential conflict of interest. When we consider the gender distribution in the Flemish government and the average number per person (see 'Rep.' in Table 4 and Figure 1), we can distinguish an overrepresentation in references to the private lives of female ministers. Nevertheless, no statistically significant differences based on gender were noted. Therefore, the *Hypothesis 2a* – "a politician's private life is mentioned more often in articles about female ministers than those about male ministers" – is rejected.

A qualitative examination of the references to private lives further illuminates the nuanced portrayal of female ministers in media coverage. Notably, female minister Hilde Crevits is frequently characterised as the 'mother-in-law' of her party CD&V, with references to her private life often emphasising her role as a mother. This distinctive depiction aligns with broader societal perceptions that tend to associate female politicians with familial roles. Similarly, Zuhal Demir is recurrently identified as 'a mother', a characterisation reinforced by a campaign video where she emerges as the 'Mother of Lions', aligning with the symbolic representation of the lion as the spirit animal of her party N-VA. The campaign video, featuring Demir with her daughter and symbolising her as the 'Mother of Lions', is pivotal in shaping the narrative surrounding her private life. Furthermore, her participation in the programme *About Mothers* adds another dimension to the discussion of her private life. In this programme, Demir openly discusses her role as a mother, providing a personal insight into the intersection of her political career and familial responsibilities. These qualitative insights underscore the complexity of media portrayals, revealing how certain female ministers are often framed by their party and themselves within the context of motherhood.

Figure 1   Substantive Representation – Average per Person
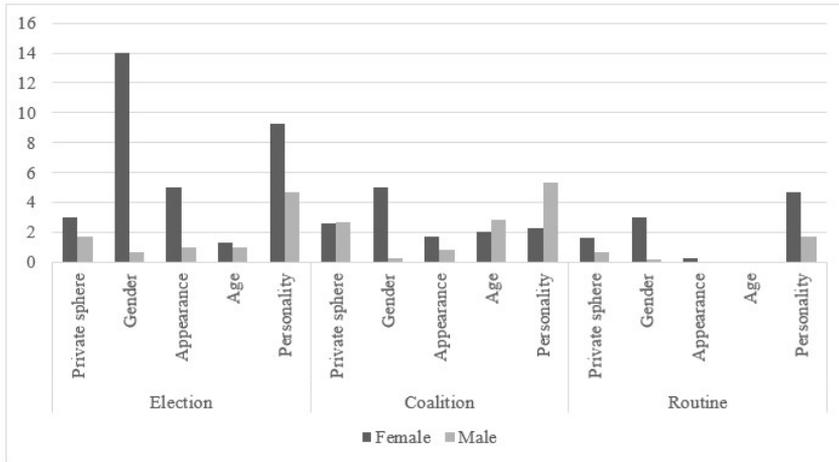
The explicit mention of a politician's gender includes words such as 'man' and 'woman'. References to male and female ministers via mergers with these words are also included in our analysis. Such referrals were found in 73 items (see Table 4). Most references to male ministers and female ministers are based on compositions such as 'leading lady' in the case of Crevits or 'green lady' concerning Demir. Jan Jambon, on the other hand, is often addressed as 'statesman' and 'action man', while Dalle is praised as the 'coming man' and a 'poster boy'. Such references evoke associations with the American press and, according to D'Heer and Van Leuven (2019), result in more popularising and trivialising reporting. According to the literature, female legislators are often given the prefix 'woman' to mark them out as "different from the traditional (male) politician" (Ross & Comrie, 2012). Something similar happens in the Flemish press when journalists focus on the possible appointment of Hilde Crevits as Minister-President of Flanders. She would have been the very first female Minister-President in the history of the Flemish government.[1] This is mainly discussed at length in articles published before the election. Hilde Crevits emerges as a prominent figure, consistently represented as the 'leading lady', 'front woman' and the 'patroness' of CD&V in numerous articles. This recurrent characterisation aligns with the broader discourse surrounding her leadership role within and outside the party, emphasising her significance as a female political figure. Similarly, Zuhal Demir's gender is often highlighted in the context of a campaign video by N-VA, where she is prominently featured as one of the key female politicians in her party. The qualitative analysis further reveals that the gender-focused references are not merely incidental but are strategically employed to emphasise the leadership roles of these female politicians within their respective parties. This finding adds a layer of complexity to the quantitative results, suggesting that gender mentions are not solely indicative of superficial labelling but are intricately linked to the narrative construction by

political figures. Moreover, the qualitative insights contribute to a better understanding of the temporal variations observed in the quantitative analysis. For instance, during the election period, the extensive discussion surrounding the potential appointment of Hilde Crevits as Minister-President of Flanders not only contributes to the higher frequency of gender-focused articles but also underscores the societal significance attached to the prospect of the first female Minister-President in the history of the Flemish government. Nevertheless, we can note statistically significant differences across all three periods. After conducting a Cramer's V test to determine the strength of the relationship between the two variables, we can only speak of a weak-to-moderate cohesion between the politician's gender and the mention of gender in an article. Despite the correlation being small, we can still accept *Hypothesis 2b* – that "a politician's gender is mentioned more often in articles about female ministers than those about male ministers."

In 32 instances, media referred to ministers' physical outlook (see Table 4). This includes a politician's clothing, makeup, facial features and hairstyle. References to politicians' origin were not included in the dataset. As many as 21 of those references were about the appearance of a female minister, while 11 were related to the image of a male minister. Benjamin Dalle is described multiple times as CD&V's new 'poster boy' for his 'good looks' and journalists refer to Jan Jambon's "literal and figurative big shoes to fill". However, the appearance of both Hilde Crevits and Zuhal Demir attracts the most attention. Journalists talk about Crevits' 'beautiful eyes', but also the dark circles around them. A few reporters comment on her 'Hillary Clinton-coupe'. The pink jacket she wore during the election period was the talk of the town and was seen as a strong wardrobe statement. This was not an accidental clothing choice but a strategic one. In one of the articles, Crevits emphasised the intentionality behind her sartorial decisions, stating multiple times: "I opt for something simple and sporty, yet chic enough to present myself well. Because I like to look good, with beautiful clothes." Furthermore, she acknowledged the visual impact: "a nice addition for the photo", underlining her awareness of the visual component and the potential photographic resonance of her attire. It was mentioned multiple times during campaign coverage. When talking about Zuhal Demir's appearance, the focus is on her stiletto heels and short-skirted appearance. In addition, she is described several times as a 'babe' and a 'handsome' or 'beautiful' woman. This emphasis on her physical attributes is notably heightened in connection with an N-VA campaign video where Demir is deliberately presented in a manner aligning with these descriptors. The video features the quote, "Do you want Zuhal back?" accompanied by a playful wink at the camera, strategically framing her not just as a political figure but also as an embodiment of attractiveness and charisma. Overall, we note a statistically significant difference with a weak Cramer's V (0.043). This is primarily due to articles published during the election period. No statistically significant differences were observed for the coalition formation period and during the regular political year. We can, however, carefully accept *Hypothesis 2c* – that the appearance of female ministers is emphasised more often than the looks of their male counterparts in modern media.

Conclusions can also be drawn about the references to politicians' age, which often indirectly says something about their appearance. Apart from the numerical indication of age, this study also examined implicit references such as 'young' and 'old'. Of the 4,298 cases, 30 refer to the age of the subject. Of these, 20 are related to male ministers and 10 to female ministers (see Table 4).

More than half of those references were about Benjamin Dalle's young age. However, at 39, he is only 3 years younger than Matthias Diependaele and only 2 years younger than Zuhal Demir. Journalists talk about his 'fresh face' and describe him as a 'young talent' or someone who "brings rejuvenation to the government". One explanation for this is his relative obscurity and status as a political novice. Indeed, most of these comments were made after forming the new coalition and his new appointment as Flemish Minister for Brussels, Media, and Youth. Despite being head of his party's political research department since 2016, this minister post is the first political mandate he has taken on. The focus on his age lapsed during the regular political years. If we look at our representation measure, the age of female ministers is overrepresented, mainly due to the election period. Nevertheless, no statistically significant difference was noted between men and women. The *Hypothesis 2d* – that the age of female ministers is emphasised more often than the age of their male colleagues – is therefore rejected.

Finally, in 116 cases, a reference is made to a minister's personality (see Table 4). As many as 67 of these concern articles about male ministers, and 49 articles refer to a personality trait of a female minister. According to our analysis, the difference in representation is only statistically significant during the coalition period with 32 cases for male politicians against 7 mentions for female representatives. While there is a correlation between both variables during the coalition period, it is weak (Cramer's V = 0.049). The *Hypothesis 2e* – "a politician's personality traits are mentioned more often in articles about female ministers than those about male ministers" – is thus rejected.

In the articles analysed, typical 'feminine' traits are indeed attributed to both female and male politicians. Jan Jambon, for instance, is seen as 'hardworking' but 'vulnerable', and Bart Somers is praised for his 'ability to compromise'. Yet, female politicians are mainly fitted with stereotypically feminine traits, and male representatives are linked to typically male personality traits. Hilde Crevits, Zuhal Demir and Lydia Peeters, for example, are described as 'human', 'sweet', 'cautious', 'compassionate' and 'caring'. At the same time, male politicians have a 'strong personality' and show signs of 'leadership' and 'managerialism'. In addition, men are also considered 'ambitious', 'articulate', 'intelligent' and 'competent' (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Furthermore, it is essential to note that most of the stereotypical 'masculine' characteristics and the stereotypical 'feminine' features are regarded as positive or neutral. None of the personality traits receive a clear negative connotation.

An important observation is the fact that the gender-stereotypical representations observed in media coverage do not originate solely from the media itself but are integral to the narrative that political parties and politicians proactively present during the campaign. Articles featuring stereotypical depictions predominantly consist of interviews with the involved politicians, their party

colleagues or descriptions of activities undertaken by the politicians themselves within the campaign context and debate programmes. Notably, half of these articles were published during the campaign period, totalling 146 out of the 303 mentions. Even beyond this phase, during the coalition and routine periods, the content largely revolves around campaign slogans and depictions that stem from the campaign period. This prompts a critical reflection on whether we can attribute this phenomenon of stereotypical media representation to a media bias or rather recognise it as a bias shaped on the supply side by politicians and their parties themselves, aiming to attract as many voters as possible by strategically emphasising gender-stereotypical patterns.

5   Conclusion

This study monitored female and male ministers' numerical and substantive media representation in the written press in Flanders (Belgium) during three distinct periods. In general, the underrepresentation of female ministers is less evident than in previous research on female candidates.

If we take the average mentions per person and the gender division in the Flemish government as a measure of how often women should appear in the media, there is no deficit in numerical terms at the cost of female ministers. On the contrary, we can see a clear overrepresentation of women. In terms of news prominence, that is, title mentions and amount of name mentions in one article, we uncovered statistically significant effects in the negative binomial regression with female ministers being overrepresented during the routine period and in total but underrepresented during the coalition period.

As for the substantive media representation of Flemish ministers, we see that private lives, age and personality traits of female ministers are not referred to significantly more often than those of male ministers. These results also hold when we look at the average per person. However, we do notice a statistically significant focus on female ministers' gender. Such references could be dangerous as they result in more trivialising reporting and can evoke stereotypes in the reader (D'Heer & Van Leuven, 2019). By emphasising a female politician's gender, they are put forward as being different from the traditional (male) politician (Ross & Comrie, 2012).

We also found a statistically significant effect in the focus on the physical outlook of female ministers during the election period. Even though there are no statistically significant differences in relation to mere mentions of politicians' private lives and personality traits, we do observe a gender-based disparity in the discourse surrounding these two topics. The private lives of female politicians are frequently referenced as a cause of contention, whereas the family life of male politicians is more often seen as a source of encouragement and support. As anticipated, both male and female politicians are ascribed with conventional feminine traits, but male representatives are predominantly linked with traditional masculine personality traits while their female colleagues are not. These

stereotypical representations are mainly due to the narrative politicians and their respective parties put forward during the campaign period.

Taken together, this study contributes to the literature on media representation by expanding insights on ministers' gendered representations in Flanders while looking at different moments in the electoral cycle. Our study provides several indications that gendered political coverage is lower in the case of women in elite positions compared to rank-and-file politicians. This is reassuring because of the negative impact that unequal media representation has on the electoral prospects of female politicians, their credibility and the political interest of young girls and women (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Goodyear-Grant, 2013; Hooghe et al., 2015; Rohrbach et al., 2022). We cannot detect major differences between periods. The more equal substantive media representation and numerical overrepresentation takes place both during the election period and other periods of the political cycle, such as the formation of a new coalition and the regular political year.

While our study provides valuable insights into the gendered portrayal of politicians in the media, it is imperative to acknowledge its limitations, specifically concerning the numerical underrepresentation of news presence and news prominence. The small sample size, encompassing only nine ministers, raises concerns about the generalisability of our results in this specific aspect, thereby emphasising the potential case-specific nature of our findings. To establish more robust and widely applicable conclusions, especially regarding news presence and news prominence, there is a pressing need for extensive longitudinal studies with larger sample sizes. Additionally, cross-country analyses could offer a broader perspective, facilitating more comprehensive multivariate analyses taking different individual political characteristics into accounts. Such endeavours would enable a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics influencing the numerical representation of female politicians, moving beyond the confines of our present study and providing a more nuanced and generalisable framework for interpreting gendered portrayals in political media coverage. Future research could also usefully scrutinise a more diverse range of media channels instead of just the written press. It is, furthermore, also possible that other characteristics of politicians, which we did not test, contribute to a possible bias in the media. This study focused on the political and social backgrounds of politicians. Nonetheless, their perceived competence and efforts, as well as the topics they focus on, can increase their newsworthiness and visibility as well. To investigate this effect, we must shift our attention to what politicians do instead of who they are (Midtbø, 2011).

From previous literature, we know that many journalists are not aware of the way in which they construct frames. What we know even less about is how readers 'deconstruct' those frames (Zoch & Turk, 1998). An interesting angle to further explore is, therefore, how readers speak about female politicians during online discussions that arise in the comment sections of online articles on social media, such as Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter). We can look at how the underrepresentation of female politicians manifests itself in different cultures and how we can link them to national media portrayals (Humprecht & Esser, 2017). This form of media is more topical than ever since political parties and individual politicians have never devoted more time to their social media presence. A second

interesting line of research that we can link to this fact is how female politicians will present themselves on social media. This becomes particularly relevant as our analysis indicates that a substantial portion of stereotypical portrayals emanates from the campaign messages deliberately crafted and disseminated by politicians and their respective parties. Current European research focuses mainly on women as passive actors. This perspective puts female politicians in the market as active participants in the political world.

Finally, the integration of qualitative methodologies in this study has proven to be instrumental in uncovering nuanced insights that complement the quantitative findings. Therefore, we should consider the dominant use of quantitative content analysis in studies on the media representation of female politicians. Although quantitative analyses provide the necessary basis for determining whether an unequal media representation is present, the obtained results have rarely been discussed in greater depth (D'Heer & Van Leuven, 2019). Supplementing quantitative research with, for example, interviews or experiments can help us to better understand the problem. We can gain a better understanding of the attitudes of politicians towards the media and how they may differ between male and female (potential) representatives. Additionally, such qualitative approaches would allow us to delve into the motivations behind the persistent use of stereotypical messaging by politicians and parties. Are these choices driven solely by the politicians themselves or do they emanate from the belief that voters respond more favourably to gender-stereotypical portrayals?

In short, the findings presented here provide a rich basis for further inquiry, which will contribute to the refinement of theories on women's media representation.

Note

1 Liesbeth Homans was the Minister-President of Flanders between July and October 2019. The Homans government was, however, only an intermediate government in attendance of a new Flemish government and was replaced in October 2019 by the Jambon government.

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