

# Gender Bias in Media Coverage of Election Campaigns\*

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## Abstract

We study gender bias in media coverage of candidates during election campaigns. Our analysis focuses on the 2015 Swiss national elections and relies on an almost comprehensive sample of print and online news items covering the full duration of the campaign, including up to 32,636 articles from 95 sources and covering all 3,867 candidates. First, we analyze media attention with regression methods and find a significant gender gap, except for incumbents. Second, we rely on hand-coded classifications for a subset of articles to study how female candidates are represented, compared to male candidates, across a range of topics. Third, we use structural topic models to search for gender stereotypes in the election coverage. Across 100 topics, we find only faint evidence of their presence.

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# 1 Introduction

There are many ways in which gender bias affects elections, including differential political ambition for men and women, biases in the recruiting strategies of parties, and voter behavior. We focus on the way in which the media report on male and female candidates. How female candidates are portrayed in the media is arguably of considerable importance both for their electoral prospects and for their decision to run for office in the first place. The literature has shown that media bias has decreased in the past decades, and scholars disagree about the nature and extent of remaining gender differences, and especially the degree to which women are portrayed according to gender stereotypes.

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of gender bias in media coverage of elections by relying on an almost comprehensive dataset of news items covering the 2015 Swiss national elections, including up to 32,636 articles from 95 sources, matched with information on all 3,927 candidates. Our analysis proceeds in three steps.

First, we focus on media attention. The unit of analysis in this part is the candidate and the dependent variable the number of times he or she was mentioned in newspaper articles during the campaign. We find a significant gender bias, except for incumbents.

Second, we rely on hand-coded classifications for a subset of articles to investigate how the prevalence of the topics of media coverage correlates with the gender of the candidates mentioned in the texts. We find that none of the main themes that characterized the coverage of the campaign has a clear gendered dimension.

Third, always relying on structural topic models, we search for the usage of gender stereotypes in the media coverage of the election by assuming a large number of topics. Across 100 topics, eleven could be conceivably seen as linked to stereotypes; however, the connection with stereotypes is very loose. Moreover, only two of these eleven topics correlate with mentions of male or female politicians. Ultimately, only one topic can plausibly be understood in terms of gender stereotypes. This

may mean that gender stereotypes were indeed largely absent from media coverage of the campaign, or that such stereotypes were used but are undetectable using our method.

## 2 Previous Studies

There is a relatively large literature on how female candidates are portrayed in the media, relative to men. Studies have focused on two main aspects: first, attention (e.g., the number of stories mentioning a candidate) and second, content (how a candidate is portrayed). When looking at content, studies typically differentiate among several categories, such as issues, horse race, and candidate traits. The consensus seems to be that biases in coverage have sharply decreased over time, but there is disagreement over the remaining extent of bias as well as its nature and causes. It is also unclear to what extent gender stereotypes continue to be used in the coverage of candidates, how subtle they are, and how they can be uncovered.

Early studies noted a significant bias in coverage against women (Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Kahn, 1994a). However, a decrease in bias was noted as early as the 1990s: “Analyzing statewide campaigns in 1994, I find much smaller coverage differences than in studies relying on pre-1990 data” (Smith, 1997, 71). Later studies find that the bias keep getting smaller, while uncovering more subtle ways in which coverage disadvantages women (Atkeson and Krebs, 2008; Bystrom, Robertson and Banwart, 2001; Banwart, Bystrom and Robertson, 2003; Heldman, Carroll and Olson, 2005; Jalalzai, 2006; Fowler and Lawless, 2009; Gershon, 2012; Hayes, Lawless and Baitinger, 2014; Baitinger, 2015; Escobar-Lemmon et al., 2016; Ward, 2016).

Kittilson and Fridkin (2008) is representative of the literature in several ways. First, it relies on a small sample (354 articles) that were coded manually. Second, it finds little bias on several important dimensions: it “fails to find any significant gender differences in 1) the amount and prominence of candidate coverage, 2) the amount of attention given to the candidates’ viability, 3) the focus on the candidates’ family background, and 4) the tone of coverage” (Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008, 381).

Third, it notes remaining imbalances in reporting, notably in terms of the gender stereotypes used by journalists.

[Dunaway et al. \(2013\)](#) is one of the largest studies, including over 10,000 news stories. It focuses on the content of coverage in election with female candidates, compared with all-male races, and finds that the former tend to be more focused on traits rather than issues. [Lühiste and Banducci \(2016\)](#) is another large study, relying on the 2009 European Election Study's Media Content Data, with candidate level data on media coverage from 25 European Union member states. It finds a small but persistent gender gap in the amount of coverage, robust to controlling for candidate viability. [Hayes and Lawless \(2015\)](#) focuses on the US, with data on 4,748 news stories in 342 districts, for a total of 108 female and 555 male candidates. It finds almost no gender gap in coverage, neither for frequency nor for the traits emphasized in the stories.

Like our study, [Fiechtner, Schönhagen and Puppis \(2016\)](#) analyzes the gender gap in the coverage of the 2015 Swiss national elections (both newspapers and radio/TV). Like other studies, it relies on a small sample (580 texts) that are coded manually. The study finds that female candidates are underrepresented, relative to their presence on electoral lists. However, the study finds no differences in the ways female and male candidates are portrayed.

There are few studies focusing directly on the usage of gender stereotypes by the media in the context of election campaigns. In the context of six gubernatorial campaigns in 1998, [Devitt \(2002\)](#) finds that articles focus on personal traits when covering female candidates, and on policy positions and record when reporting on male candidates. But most studies looking directly at stereotypes focus not on their presence and nature in media reporting, but instead on the extent to which voters hold such stereotypes ([Dolan and Lynch, 2014](#); [Dolan, 2014](#); [Dolan and Lynch, 2016](#)) and their effects on voters' perceptions of candidates ([Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993](#); [Kahn, 1994b](#)).

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Corpus

Our analysis of the newspaper coverage of female candidates is based on the Selects Media Analysis 2015 (Wüest et al., 2016). It comprises 70 German-language and 25 French-language newspapers (see appendix A1). The original corpus of 272,502 newspaper articles covers the period from the 1st of August until election day (October 18, 2015). National election campaigns traditionally start with speeches at the festivities surrounding the Swiss national holiday (1st of August). Thanks to a direct access to the repositories of the Swiss Media Service (<https://smd.ch/SMDView/>), we could retrieve virtually all documents published during this election campaign. The corpus comprises a large variety of sources: tabloid magazines such as *Schweizer Familie*, nationally important newspapers such as the *Le Temps* (quality press) or the *Blick* (tabloid), regional and local newspapers such as *La Broye*, online news sources such as *20 Minuten online* to specialized news outlets such as the *Finanz und Wirtschaft* (business news). Therefore, we are confident to have a comprehensive enough data basis to map the general newspaper coverage of candidates in the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland.

We use print media rather than television or radio programs partly for technical reasons but especially because they generally report more extensively on political matters than do on-air media (Druckman, 2005, 469). And despite strong convergence pressures, the newspaper market in Switzerland still is comparatively fragmented. Moreover, national elections in Switzerland essentially are cantonal elections, in which cantonal party sections have a decisive say in the selection of candidates and a commanding lead over elections campaigns in their constituency. Especially when it comes to cantonal political news such as the election campaign, we can therefore assume that newspapers convey the richest information.

To identify the relevant documents we relied on dictionary lookups and regular expressions. Concretely, we selected all documents featuring at least one name in a dictionary compiled from

the official list of candidates in the federal election 2015 running for seats in the National Council or the Council of States. The final dictionary features 3,867 politicians. We only searched for the combination of first and last name<sup>1</sup>, which greatly reduces the risk of false positives. Such a filter strategy is especially feasible since all entities of interest – i.e. the names of politicians – are readily available and, with only a few exceptions, precisely searchable. From the originally 272,502 newspaper articles, about 12% contained at least one candidate. We therefore end up with a corpus of 32,636 texts.

### 3.2 Media Attention

The first step of the analysis focuses on media attention to female and male candidates. Here, we estimate negative binomial regressions at the individual level, that is, at the level of candidates. The unit of analysis is the candidate and we use the number of mentions for a given candidate as dependent variable. We estimate negative binomial models because these two variables are highly over-dispersed. Some people like the media stars Phillip Müller (then the party president of the FDP) or Roger Köppel (a famous journalist running for the first time for the SVP in Zurich) have a large number of mentions, while many candidates have few or no mentions at all<sup>2</sup>. In addition to gender, we include the following variables: whether a candidate is an incumbent, a candidate's rank on party lists, a candidate's age, the party of the candidate, and the canton in which a candidate is running.

### 3.3 Newspaper Coverage Topics

For the analysis of newspaper coverage topics and their connection with the gender of candidates mentioned in the stories, we rely on a subset of articles that were hand-coded by the *Année Politique*

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<sup>1</sup>The regular expression used was `\\ < [firstname].0,12[lastname]s? \\ >`, which translates to a search for first and last name pairs that have a white space at the beginning and the end, at most twelve characters in between (e.g. a second first name) and an optional genitive s (e.g. “Kathy Riklins”) at the end.

<sup>2</sup>951 of the 3,874 persons in the analysis are never mentioned, and another 553 are mentioned only once.

Suisse project (APS) for purposes independent of our own project (<https://anneepolitique.swiss/>; see Appendix A1). The APS constantly classifies newspaper articles into 286 categories covering all aspects of Swiss politics. We were able to match 5,217 articles in our dataset with those in the APS database. Therefore, for this subset of articles, we can rely on the APS topic coding. For each of these articles, we compute the number of female and male candidates that are mentioned, as well as the percentage of female candidates, relative to the total number of candidates receiving a mention. This percentage is the dependent variable in this part of the analysis, whereas the explanatory variables consists in fixed effects for the topic categories. The analysis excludes articles in which no candidate is mentioned.

### 3.4 Stereotypes

We attempt to identify gender stereotypes inductively with a structural topic model (STM) (Roberts et al., 2014; Roberts, Stewart and Airoidi, 2016). The STM is a hierarchical model in which a document  $d$ 's prevalence of each topic is drawn from a logistic-normal linear distribution whose mean is a function of document covariates. Therefore, the STM's major innovation is that the prior distribution of topics (prevalence) and words (contents) can be influenced by covariates (Roberts et al., 2014; Roberts, Stewart and Airoidi, 2016). In the following analysis, we correlate the candidates' gender with both the topic's prevalence and the word's content, but report results only for the former.

Since we want to discover the semantic patterns that are related to the candidate mentions in the newspaper articles, we only include a text window of plus-minus two sentences around the sentence that contains an occurrence of a candidate into the analysis. Newspaper articles often cover much more than the description of candidates, so, after having tested models for entire articles and for different text windows, we found this text window of five sentences to work well for our purposes. Further, we preprocess these text contexts by removing numbers and punctuations, and by stemming all words.

The most important covariate in our analysis measures the gender of the candidates mentioned

in a given text. Concretely, we measure whether a text mentions only female candidates, only male candidates, or both male and female candidates.

The analysis includes several other covariates, namely: (1) a daily trend variable with a B-spline of order 10; (2) newspaper IDs; (3) the log of the number of politicians mentioned in the text passage; whether at least one (4) incumbent is mentioned; (6) the party affiliation, age, age squared and list place of the candidates mentioned; (7) whether a candidate is running for the National Council or the Council of State; and (8) the SMA classification whether an article covers Swiss politics.

We estimate the topic models using the `stm` package in R (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2014). We initialize the models with the spectral algorithm, which is robust to changes in several CTM parameters and starting values (Roberts, Stewart and Airolidi, 2016). Since gender stereotypes in media coverage are likely to appear only in a fine-grained semantic space, we estimate a 100-topics model.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Media attention

Table 1 analyzes the number of times candidates are mentioned in our corpus, distinguishing between candidates to the Council of States and the National Council. Similar to the US Senate, the Council of States represents the cantons equally regardless of their size. The National Council, on the other hand, is analogous to the US House of Representatives. An interesting variation between the two chambers, not found in the US, regards the electoral system. Almost all cantons elect the Council of States with a majoritarian and the National Council with a proportional system.

Table 1 shows that, controlling for incumbency status, male candidates receive more media attention than female candidates. Comparing coefficient sizes, the difference between men and women is about 26% of that between incumbents and non-incumbents in the Council of States election, and about 19% in the National Council election (models 1 and 3). Table 1 further explores



	Council of States		National Council		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(Intercept)	4.62** (2.08)	5.16** (2.10)	-3.70*** (0.23)	-3.69*** (0.23)	-3.68*** (0.23)
Woman	-0.47* (0.26)	-0.85** (0.38)	-0.45*** (0.05)	-0.46*** (0.05)	-0.53*** (0.06)
Incumbent	1.80*** (0.18)	1.72*** (0.19)	2.18*** (0.11)	2.10*** (0.13)	2.18*** (0.11)
Top candidate			0.63*** (0.06)	0.63*** (0.06)	0.55*** (0.07)
Woman × Incumbent		0.70 (0.51)		0.23 (0.22)	
Woman × Top candidate					0.24** (0.10)
Age	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.09)	0.20*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.01)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)
Canton FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Party FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
BIC	933.91	936.65	21828.45	21835.54	21830.96
Log Likelihood	-385.44	-384.66	-10765.96	-10765.38	-10763.09
Deviance	80.11	79.92	4121.59	4121.64	4119.60
Num. obs.	73	73	3779	3779	3779

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

Table 1: *Negative binomial regression coefficients. Dependent variable: number of times a candidate was mentioned in a news item.*

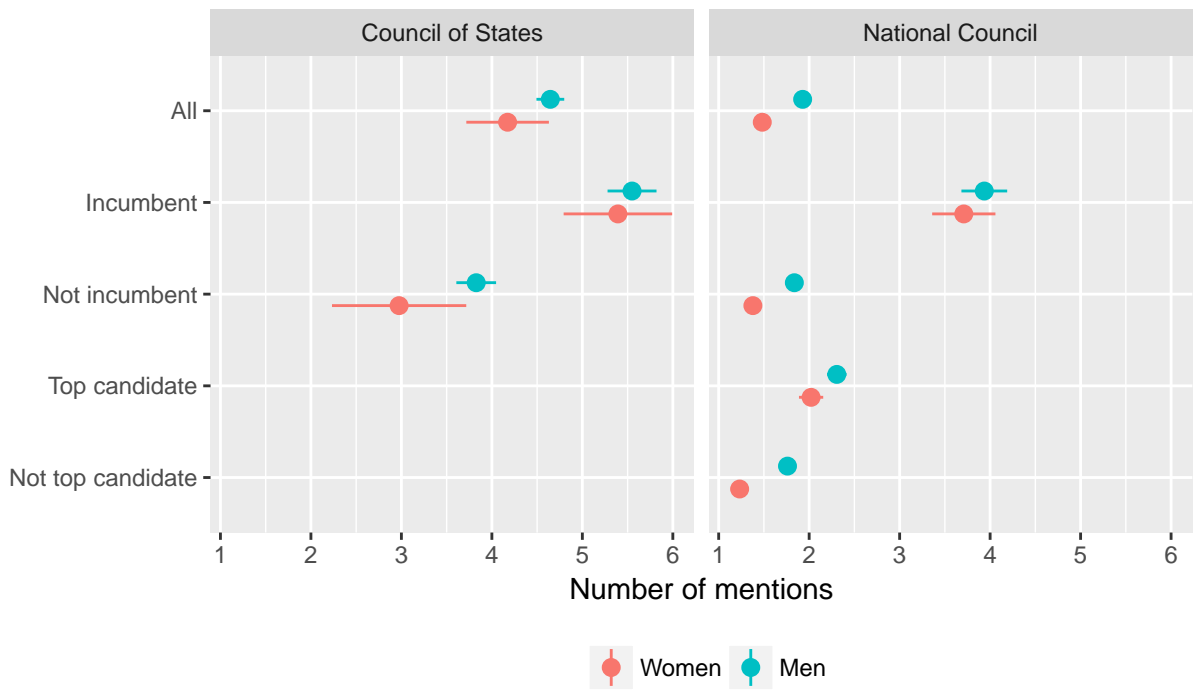


Figure 1: *Media attention to female and male candidates: Fitted values and 95% confidence intervals from full and the two interaction models shown in Table 1.*

interactions between candidates' gender and incumbency as well as, for the National Council election, whether a candidate is on one of the top-3 ranks in the party list ("Top candidate"). The results of these interactions are best seen in Figure 1. In both elections, there is a gender gap in media attention for non-incumbent candidates, but not for incumbents. Furthermore, in the National Council election, being a top candidate closes the gender gap in media attention, but only partially. That is, men on top of the party list are mentioned more frequently in the media than women on the same position, controlling for incumbency status.

## 4.2 Newspaper Coverage Topics

The analysis of newspaper coverage topics is shown in Figure 2. Results are reported separately for all candidates, for incumbents, and for non-incumbents. The regressions include fixed effects for all 286 topic categories, but for readability Figure 2 shows only the topics that were covered in at least fifteen news articles. Vertical lines indicate the percentage of female candidates. We notice that female candidates are underrepresented in some, but not all topics. Consistent with the results in Section 4.1, new candidates are underrepresented in coverage of the elections (topic "National elections"), whereas incumbents are not. We also notice that neither gender equality, nor topics that are stereotypically associated with women, such as family policy, nor the personal life of politicians are among the most common topics of election coverage, although they are included in the APS coding scheme. A fortiori, no gender bias is visible regarding such topics.

## 4.3 Gender stereotypes?

Section 4.2 has shown that, unsurprisingly, gender stereotypes were not one of the main themes of the election campaign coverage. However, they might become visible if we increase the number of topics. Figures 3 and 4 show the output of a 100-topics model. In the German corpus, only eleven of the 100 topics might have some connection with gender stereotypes, but even in these eleven

Share of female candidates mentioned in news articles, by topic  
 women/(women + men), subset of topics covered in at least 15 articles

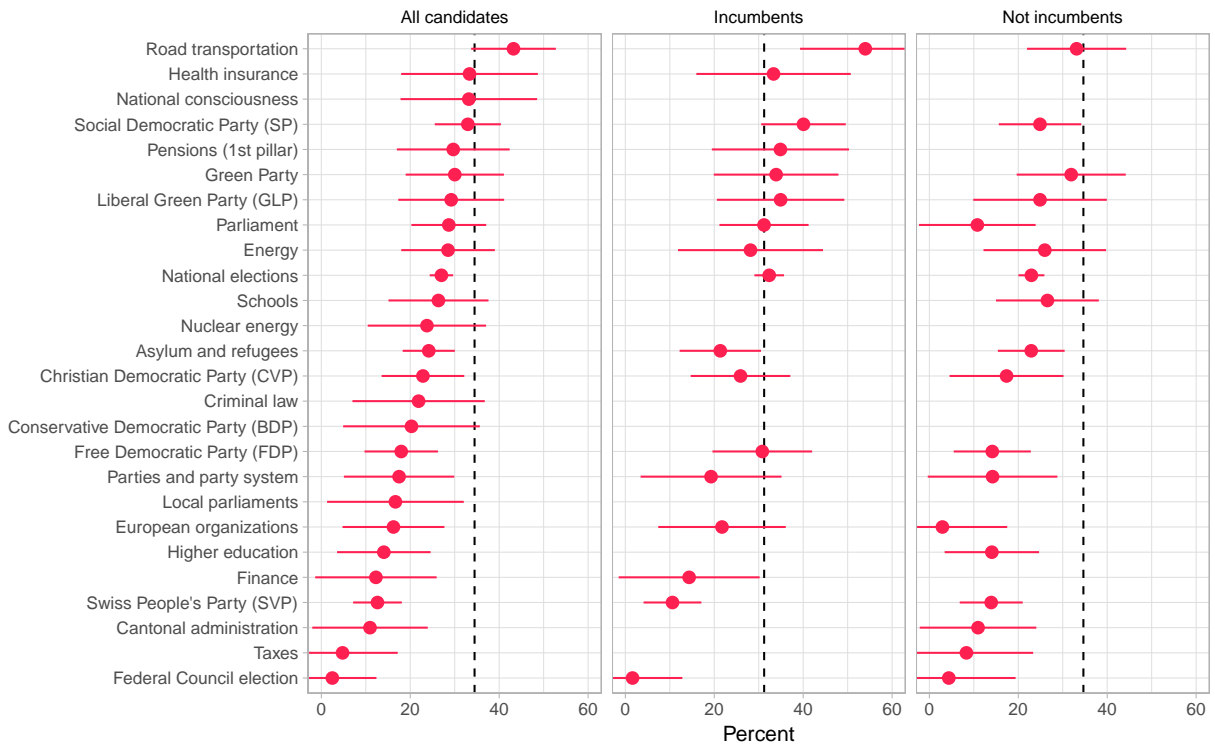


Figure 2: Share of female candidates mentioned in news articles, by topic and incumbency status. Vertical lines indicate the percentage of female candidates for each group.

topics, the link with stereotypes is weak. We could not find topics that clearly pick up candidates' appearance or family situation, for instance. Instead, words potentially suggesting the usage of gender stereotypes in the texts are scattered across the eleven topics and do not come together in a coherent topic.

To further explore this aspect, Figures 5 and 6 show the correlation between the 100 topics and the gender of the candidates mentioned in the texts. In the German corpus, We notice that of the eleven topics potentially linked to gender stereotypes, only two exhibit a significant and sizable correlation with the gender of the candidates mentioned on the texts. The first is topic 9, which correlates with mentions of female politicians. This topics has to do with gender equality and quotas. While it makes sense that it appears more frequently in connection with female than male candidates, it is not as such an indication of gender stereotypes. The second topic, correlating with mentions of male politicians, is topic 61. Here, we find keywords such as “funny,” “collegial,” “intelligent,” and “political star,” which suggest these desirable traits might be more frequently associated with male than female candidates.

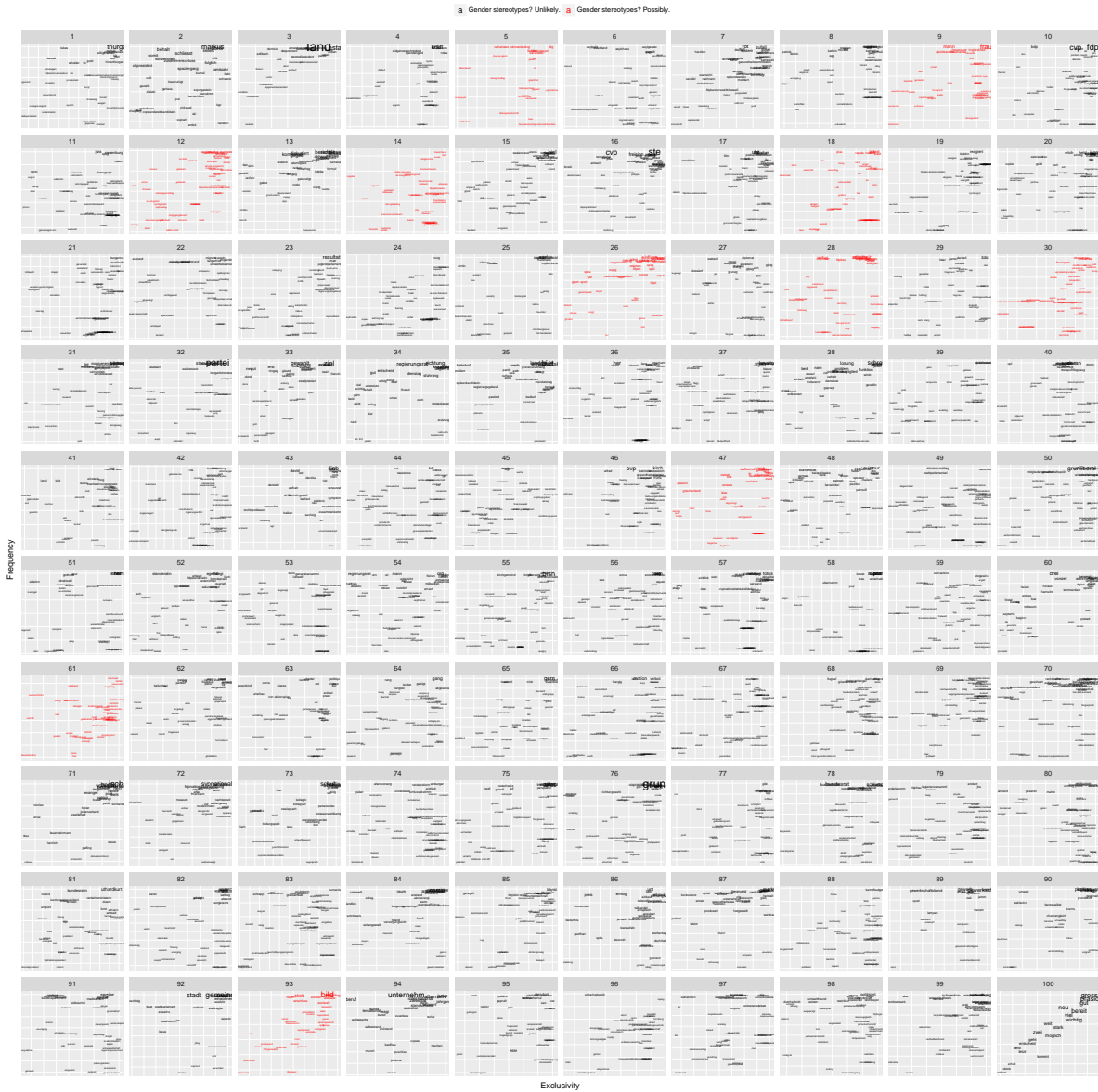


Figure 3: 100 topics for the German corpus. Topics that might have some connection with gender stereotypes (11/100) are in red.



Figure 4: 100 topics for the French corpus. Topics that might have some connection with gender stereotypes (11/100) are in red.

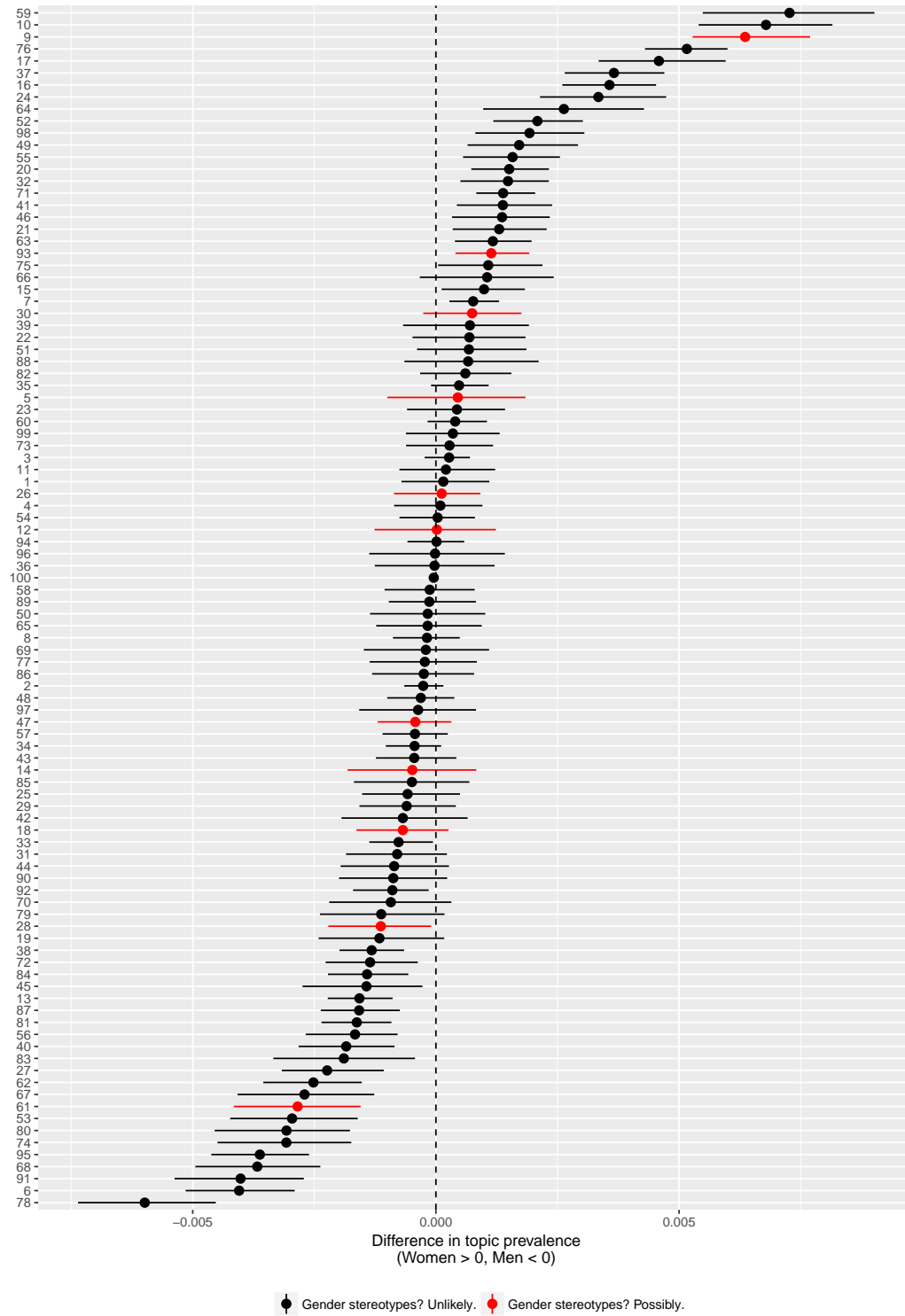


Figure 5: Topic prevalence and gender (difference in probabilities) for the german corpus.



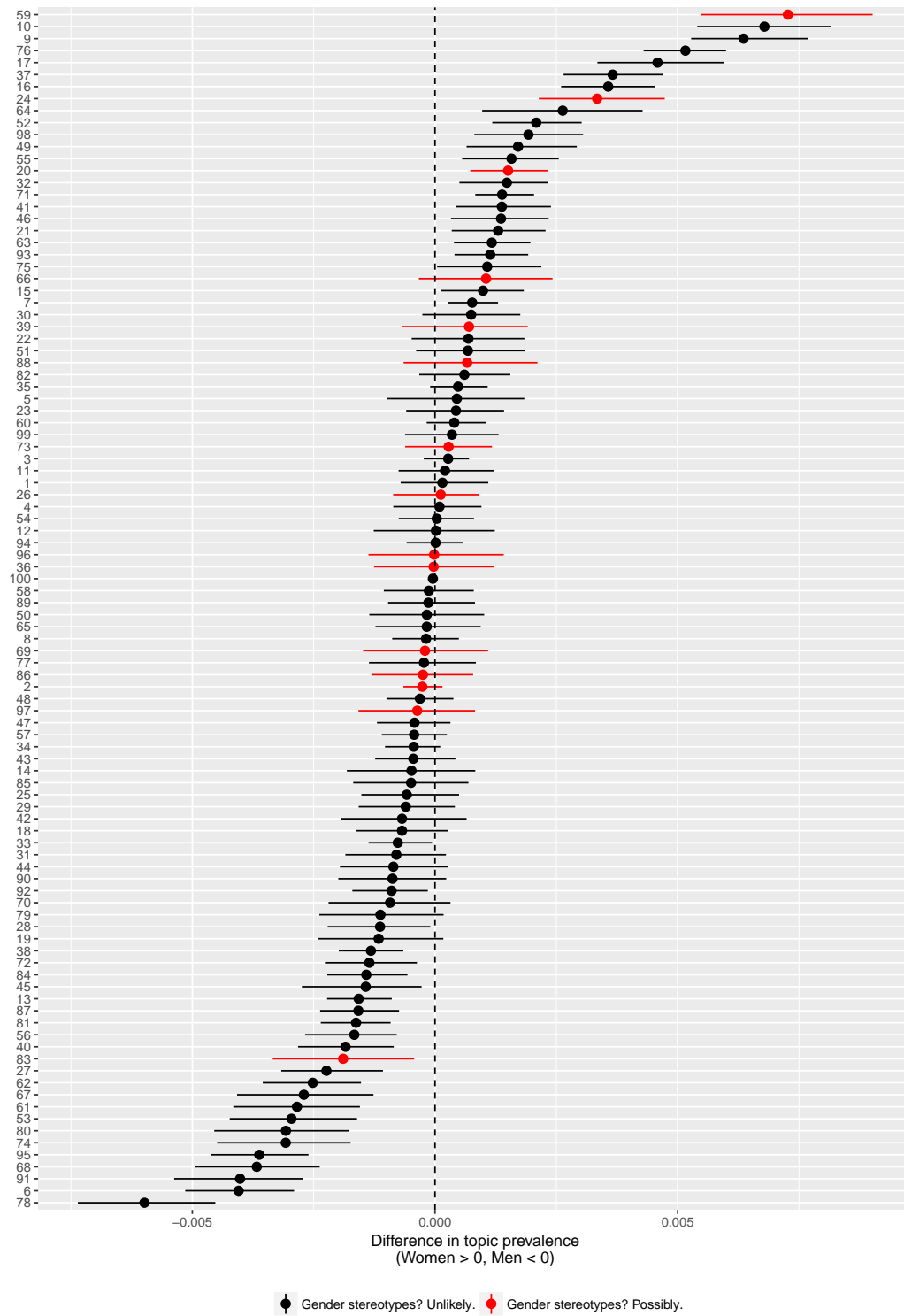


Figure 6: Topic prevalence and gender (difference in probabilities) for the french corpus.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper we have analyzed a unique corpus covering almost all articles written during the 2015 Swiss national elections, which we matched with information on all 3,927 candidates. Our analysis has identified three patterns regarding gender bias in media coverage of candidates.

First, media attention is biased against female candidates, except when they are incumbent. Controlling for their viability (their rank on party lists), non-incumbent men are mentioned more frequently than non-incumbent women. Holding one of the top-three positions on the party list reduces the gender gap in media attention, but it does not eliminate it. We conclude that it is harder for female than for male newcomers to gain the attention that might help get them elected.

Second, none of the main themes that characterized the coverage of the campaign has a clear gendered dimension.

Third, the usage of gender stereotypes in the election coverage was essentially undetectable using our methods. Of 100 topics our most detail model identified, eleven were potentially connected with gender stereotypes, using a very broad understanding of such stereotypes. Of these eleven topics, only two were discussed disproportionately with either male or female candidates, and only one is potentially linked with gender stereotypes. Specifically, in one of the 100 topics, attributes such as “funny,” “collegial,” “intelligent,” and “political star” were used more frequently in texts mentioning man than in texts mentioning women.

A crucial question for the future direction of this project is to what extent structural topics are suitable for the identification of gender stereotypes in media coverage of candidates.

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# A1 Newspaper corpus

Name	Type	N articles	Name	Type	N articles
20 minuten	freesheet	6,278	Le Matin Newsnet	news portal	2,704
20 minuten online	news portal	5,018	Le Nouvelliste	regional	4,374
20 minutes	freesheet	4,865	Le Temps	national	2,699
24 heures	regional	5,852	Limmattaler Zeitung	local	1,277
24 heures Newsnet	news portal	2,507	Medienwoche	news portal	39
* Aargauer Zeitung	regional	6,922	Migros Magazine	company	660
Anzeiger von Uster	local	288	Migros-Magazin	company	897
* Basellandschaftliche Zeitung	regional	1,772	Neue Luzerner Zeitung	national	8,933
* Basler Zeitung	national	8,000	* Neue Zürcher Zeitung	national	8,528
Basler Zeitung Newsnet	news portal	900	NZZ am Sonntag	sunday	1,726
* Berner Zeitung	national	8,758	NZZ Online	news portal	3,471
Berner Zeitung Newsnet	news portal	3,970	Obersee Nachrichten	local	691
Bieler Tagblatt	local	2,739	Oltner Tagblatt	local	1,173
Bilanz online	business	155	* Ostschweiz am Sonntag	sunday	1,045
* Blick	boulevard	4,137	RTS	news portal	2,647
Blick am Abend	boulevard	3,102	Rümlanger	local	147
* Bote der Urschweiz	local	4,793	Schweiz am Sonntag	sunday	2,546
Bündner Tagblatt	regional	4,232	Schweizer Bauer	company	1,713
Cash	business	10,627	Schweizer Familie	tabloid	557
Coop eration	company	442	Schweizer Illustrierte	tabloid	582
Coopzeitung	company	569	Seetaler Bote	local	777
Das Magazin	weekly	123	* Solothurner Zeitung	regional	2,486
* Der Bund	regional	5,520	* Sonntagsblick	sunday	1,249
* Der Bund Newsnet	news portal	1,527	* Sonntagszeitung	sunday	1,232
Der Landbote	regional	5,010	SRF	news portal	7,267
Die Weltwoche	weekly	593	* St. Galler Tagblatt	national	15,410
Die Wochenzeitung	weekly	399	* Südschweiz	national	5,504
Finanz und Wirtschaft (FuW)	business	1,158	Swissinfo	news portal	312
FuW online	business	1,875	Tagblatt der Stadt Zürich	local	324
Freiburger Nachrichten	regional	2,818	* Tages-Anzeiger	national	6,566
Furttaler	local	413	* Tages-Anzeiger Newsnet	news portal	7,383
GHI	freesheet	391	Tageswoche	regional	242
Glattaler	local	562	Tageswoche online	news portal	734
Glückspost	tabloid	816	* Thurgauer Zeitung	regional	5,088
Handelszeitung	business	773	Tribune de Genève	national	5,406
Handelszeitung online	business	503	Tribune de Genève Newsnet	news portal	8,590
Infosperber	news portal	180	Volketswiler	local	161
Journal de Morges	local	534	Walliser Bote	regional	3,899
L'Agefi	business	3,209	Werdenberg. & Obertoggenb.	local	5,357
L'Express / L'Impartial	regional	3,454	Willisauer Bote	local	1,485
L'Hebdo	weekly	575	Zentral plus	news portal	422
L'Illustr e	tabloid	282	Zentralschweiz am Sonntag	sunday	978
La Broye	weekly	580	Zofinger Tagblatt	local	2,272
La Libert e	regional	5,491	Zürcher Oberländer	regional	3,934
Le Journal du Jura	regional	3,483	Zürcher Unterländer	regional	3,231
Le Matin	national	3,358	Zürichsee-Zeitung	local	5,081
Le Matin Dimanche	sunday	1,150	Total		130,703

\* Also included in the Année Politique Suisse Dataset