
Miscellaneous

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The Impact of Gender on Political Perception: A Reception Study of the July 2023 Spanish Election Campaign

Abstract

The Spanish general election held on July 23, 2023, was significantly influenced by the discourse on feminism and gender-based violence, issues that all the political parties were determined to address either directly or indirectly. This research paper explores the electorate's reception of the feminist agenda, evaluating the extent to which the gender perspective is integrated into political discourse and resonates with the general public and investigating the gender-specific perceptions and biases that influence their assessment of political candidates. The responses to a survey administered between July 19 and 21, 2023 to 1,590 Spanish residents aged 18 and above, demographically weighted by gender, age, and geographical location, reflect the profound influence of gender on electoral perceptions and reveal nuanced differences in the evaluation of conservative candidates according to respondents' gender. Notably, the analysis highlights the critical role of women in moderating the advance of conservative and far-right political narratives. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender politics by underscoring the complex interplay between feminist policies and political perceptions within the context of the 2023 Spanish general election.

Keywords

Political candidate, reception, feminism, perception, political communication.

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1. Introduction

Politics, like other areas of human activity, has traditionally been dominated by men. The representation of women in spaces of public power such as political parties and parliamentary chambers has been progressively increasing, especially over the last two decades (Elder, 2020; Bridgewater & Nage, 2020). Even so, there remain notable disparities in the presence of women and men in politics and government. Studies of the issue have revealed that the culture of sexism is a persistent element in the political arena which limits the presence of women in spheres traditionally occupied by men (Verge & Troupel, 2011; Verge & de la Fuente, 2014), from the formation of lists of election candidates to representation in the executive and in government offices (Verge & Wiesehomeier, 2019).

From a sociological point of view, it is interesting to note how the feminist movement has internationalized its demands in the last five years, especially in Western societies (Quan-Haase *et al.*, 2021). In the case of Spain, the date of March 8, 2018 is particularly significant, as it marks the organization of feminist demonstrations and acts of protest that filled the country's streets (Idoiaga *et al.*, 2022). The presence of citizens in public spaces was driven by viral campaigns on social networks, such as #metoo #cuéntalo #YoSíTeCreo and #nosotrasparamos (Nuñez-Puente & Fernández Romero, 2023), movements that were created to draw attention to sexual and workplace harassment, but also to demand full equality of rights and living conditions between women and men.

This social support for feminism in Spain has come about in line with the arrival in parliament of a left-wing majority, which allowed the formation of a coalition government and the promotion of legislative changes, such as the 2010 Act on sexual and reproductive health and the voluntary interruption of pregnancy, and the 2022 Act on the comprehensive guarantee of sexual freedom, better known as the "law of 'only yes is yes'" (so named because of its emphasis on consent in sexual relations) and also as the "Montero law", named after its promoter, the then Minister for Equality, Irene Montero. However, the approval of the latter law brought to the fore the notable disparity in the thinking of the two main parties in the coalition government; moreover, the opposition criticized it vehemently due to its introduction of penalties that establish a range of punishments different from those provided for in previous legislation (Gómez, 2022).

In parallel to this feminist effervescence, there has also been an upsurge in support for the far right, a movement with a strong reactionary component (Milner, 2021; Cabezas, 2022). In Spain, the ultra-nationalist party Vox won its first 24 seats in parliament in April 2019, and since then, its anti-feminist discourse has polarized Spanish society in the face of the movement for gender equality (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2022; Boneta-Sádaba *et al.*, 2023). Opposition to feminism, or uneasiness with it, is observed above all among young people, especially those with less experience of inequality (de Miguel Álvarez, 2008). This tendency was borne out in the survey run by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research in November 2023, and in a study conducted by Ipsos in 32 countries between December 2022 and January 2023. Both studies conclude that Spain has the highest proportion of people declaring themselves to be feminist, with a figure of 53% ahead of Portugal (46%) in second place and France (45%) in third. Nonetheless, 53% of the people interviewed in the Ipsos survey consider that social improvements for women are detrimental to men. In this respect, Spain also tops the list of countries where this discrimination against men is perceived to be prevalent (61% of men and 44% of women surveyed), followed by the UK, with a 10-point difference.

The discourse known as anti-genderism (Reinhardt *et al.*, 2023) is considered a political (and therefore social) reaction to gender politics. This discourse tries to categorize these policies and ideals as "gender ideologies," in an attempt to relate "gender" with terms such as "totalitarianism," "discrimination," and even "supremacism" (Alcaide, 2022). In this way, a powerful interpretative framework is created that rejects and opposes public and legislative policies designed to reduce violence against women (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Arranz, 2022).

The latest report by the Queen Sofia Study Centre of the FAD Youth Foundation (Boneta-Sábada *et al.*, 2023) indicates that Spanish youth between 14 and 17 years of age do not understand the concept of consent, which is the pivotal concept of the new law on sexual freedom; that is, they reject the possible positive impact of this law in terms of equality.

The passing of the legislation for the protection of female victims of gender violence, and the tense relationship between the two parties in government caused by the differences in their understanding of a law designed to promote consent and sexual education and eradicate the global problem of harassment, had a major bearing on the electoral campaign of July 2023. In this article we aim to study how feminist proposals were received by the general public and the degree of acceptance of women as candidates for the presidency of the country's government.

2. Politics, women, and feminism

Women have been under-represented in the political sphere, and it has traditionally been accepted that the interests of the public should be represented and defended by men (Campbell & Wolbrech, 2006). In recent decades, there has been increasing social pressure for women to take up positions of political responsibility. Due to laws on parity and quotas, the number of women on electoral lists and political posts has gradually increased in Europe (Bonet *et al.*, 2023).

As soon as this question becomes evident and women emerge as political or social leaders, the assumption that the public sphere should be dominated by men starts to wane, and women begin to take an interest in political activity (Burns *et al.*, 2001; Carroll, 1994). However, contrary to what one might think, this conception is not based on the belief that women have leadership capabilities –like men– and are equipped to hold public management positions. According to the studies by Campbell and Wolbrech (2006) and Wolbrech and Campbell (2017), the representation of women in politics does not affect levels of trust, but it does impact political discourse, especially among young women.

The feminization of politics, as this phenomenon of integration of women into the democratic procedure is called (Lovenduski, 2005; Rodríguez-García & Navarro-Yáñez, 2012), has been seen as a positive development because it helps to “imbue the conventional way of exercising and communicating politics with the values that have historically been attributed to women, but which in no way apply exclusively to them” (Quevedo-Redondo, 2022, p. 181). The presence of women as candidates and political actors increases the number of politicians (male and female) who focus their attention on a feminist agenda, prioritizing problems of everyday life and care for the public (*idem*); it enhances the communication of the values of the feminine ethos, the ethics of care and soft power (Quevedo-Redondo, 2021); and it encourages young women's political engagement (Atkeson, 2003; Hansen, 1997; Koch, 1997; Sapiro & Johnston-Conover, 1997; Verba *et al.*, 1997).

However, other political candidates such as Isabel Díaz Ayuso in Spain and Matteo Salvini in Italy have adopted the advertising and commercial discourse of influencers (Hinck & Rasmussen, 2021; Starita & Trillò, 2022; Caro-Castaño *et al.*, 2024). This strategy follows the logic of humanizing politicians (van Aelst *et al.*, 2012), prioritizing a self-promotional discourse that mixes personal, commercial, and political content (Riedl *et al.*, 2021) in preference to information about their plans for government. Another distinctive element of this type of candidate is its emphasis on a confrontational political style (Vicente-Fernández & Soria Ibáñez, 2023).

The mediatization of politics, primarily through television, brought about the phenomenon of politainment –that is, the mix of entertainment and political discourse (Redondo García *et al.*, 2020). The disintermediation we are witnessing today entails the personalization of political information through the direct communication of candidates via their social networks (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; López-Meri *et al.*, 2020). Leaders eclipse their party and detach themselves from it. In this individualization, authenticity, the transmission of trust, an unblemished past, ease of discourse, and mastery of the media (García, 2019) are political branding factors that

significantly influence public opinion. This communication strategy emphasizes the candidate's proximity to the audience in a scenario of distrust in politics in general (Oliva *et al.*, 2015).

Although the initial indications were that the general public accepted both men and women in places of political leadership (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993), in recent years, this trend seems to have changed: women are considered less capable than men in responding to social issues (Dalton, 2015; Koch, 2002; García-Beaudoux & De Adamo, 2022). The Gender Social Norms Index (PNUD, 2023, p. 8), which records people's attitudes toward women's roles across four key dimensions –political, educational, economic, and physical integrity– among 85% of the global population, reveals that 49% believe that men make better political leaders than women. Specifically, the share of people with no biases in gender social norms varied by 7.6 percentage points on average for countries that have had a female head of state or government in the past decade compared with 2.7 percentage points for countries that have not. However, there are two issues that this study does not make clear: first, whether the public judges all female politicians against the benchmark of the performance of the pioneers who were the first women to become heads of state or government, and second, whether the evaluation of these leaders is based on their professional ability lens or on personal matters.

Reactions of social media audiences often exaggerate these perceptions. Women politicians are more likely to be subjected to hate speech in cyberspace (Wilhelm & Joeckel, 2019; Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2021; Sánchez-Meza *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, it has been shown that the media often focuses on women's physical appearance (Conroy *et al.*, 2015). In this regard, gender stereotypes affect the opinions and trust placed in political leaders. The perception of traditional gender roles, reinforced by an entrenched patriarchal system, may undermine the trust placed in female politicians and simultaneously question their competence in the performance of their tasks (Lawless & Pearson, 2008; Koch, 2002).

This rejection may also be interpreted in a context in which feminism is associated with the struggle for “supremacy” (de Miguel, 2008) or with the “gender ideology” (Boneta-Sádaba *et al.*, 2023). This is the direction in which the manosphere is heading; it is an interconnected and digital spectrum of misogyny in which men –usually white and Western– target women and feminism as the cause of their loss of rights (Ging, 2019). Among the heterogeneity of the manosphere's voices, extreme right-wing parties and secular and religious citizens' movements have been detected (Alabao, 2021).

When investigating the reasons for the social unease with regard to feminism, some experts point to other factors in addition to post-*machista* discourses (Etura Hernández *et al.*, 2017) such as the simplification in the treatment of complex demands such as sexual consent, internal struggles or fractures within feminism and the “sheer provocation of being a teenager” in the face of “an institutionalized feminism that in some ways represents an authority figure” (Boneta-Sádaba *et al.*, 2023, p. 23).

Drawing on the previous literature on political candidacies, public opinion, and feminism, our research explores how Spanish society digests feminist policies and proposals. The general purpose of study is to determine whether the public believe that feminist projects should or should not be driven by female candidates or politicians and to analyse how feminism has revolutionized political approaches regardless of the gender of its proponents. In addition to this, the study aims to fulfil the following objectives:

- O1. To establish whether gender is an explanatory variable for the public's perception of political candidates.
- O2. To establish whether gender is an explanatory variable for the public's perception of feminism.
- O3. To discuss the traits Spanish voters seek when choosing candidates to manage public institutions (from a feminist perspective).
- O4. To identify the communication platforms that help the public form an image of their candidate.

3. Methods

In this quantitative study, the primary means of data collection was a survey administered to a representative sample of the Spanish population via Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) by the demographic research company YouGov Spain from July 19 to July 21, 2023. The sample comprised 1,566 adults selected to ensure a proportional representation of demographic characteristics, including gender, age, and region of residence. The gender distribution in the sample was almost equal, with 49% men ($n=779$) and 51% women ($n=811$). We also aimed to include age as a variable to distribute the interviewees, insofar as it may affect the reception of feminism. We have taken into account recent studies that highlight a stronger rejection of feminism and feminist policies among young people (Boneta-Sábada *et al.*, 2023) or qualitative studies on aging and activism, which find that (predominantly White) women over the age of 50 are active participants in social movements (Roy, 2007; Sawchuk, 2009; Rohlinger *et al.*, 2019). With this in mind, we have established 4 age bands : 8.3% of the participants were between 18 and 24 years of age ($n=130$), 14.1% between 25 and 34 ($n=220$), 19.4% between 35 and 44 ($n=304$), 19.2% between 45 and 54 ($n=301$), and 39% were 55 years or older ($n=611$). The results' global margin of error was $\pm 2.48\%$ for a 95% confidence interval.

Data collection was planned for the second week of the election campaign, which in total lasted from July 7 to July 21, 2023. This period included the only presidential debate, held on July 19 and broadcast by the national television company, which featured leading candidates including Pedro Sánchez of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE, a center-left party), Santiago Abascal of Vox (a far-right party), and Yolanda Díaz of Sumar (a left-wing party), but not Alberto Núñez Feijóo of the Popular Party (PP, a conservative right-wing party). Data were collected from July 19 to July 21 immediately following the debate. This timing was chosen as it fell just two days before the election scheduled for July 23; the aim was to record the reactions and opinions of the public following the debate at this critical point in the campaign.

The questionnaire created for the study aimed to evaluate voters' opinions and perceptions regarding the election candidates. It contained several questions regarding the credibility ascribed to each candidate and the factors that respondents considered most significant when deciding how to vote. The questions encompassed a wide range of topics, starting with an assessment of the candidates' credibility, in which respondents were requested to rate each candidate on a scale of one to five. Particular emphasis was placed on the presentation of specific candidates based on the Autonomous Community of the respondents, thus highlighting the regional dimension of the evaluation. Additionally, participants were asked to state who they would choose as president if they could select from a list of politicians who were not candidates in these elections, in order to gain insights into their more general political preferences. Finally, respondents were asked to state their ideological leanings on a scale of one (far left) to five (far right).

In addition, the questionnaire investigated the impact of candidates' traits on voting decisions using a Likert scale to assess the significance of factors such as political experience, academic background, age, gender, personality, and physical appearance. It aimed to identify which factors respondents regarded as the most important when evaluating candidates: charisma, honesty, gender, oratory, credibility, and political proposals.

Finally, the questionnaire further explored the impact of gender perceptions, the ability to defend societal interests, and the role of diverse media outlets in shaping the electorate's opinions. The last item examined participants' views on various feminist statements made by the candidates, without identifying the speakers in order to encourage unbiased feedback.

The statements evaluated were:

- “Some men and also some women feel uncomfortable with certain feminist discourses.” Pedro Sánchez, Socialist Party¹.
- “Feminism good.... *machismo* bad... Give it a rest! Equality here as well –neither feminists nor *machistas*.” Santiago Abascal, Vox².
- “Feminism raises questions about society; it’s an intellectual movement that is on the move and challenges society. It challenges both women and men. That’s why it makes people feel uncomfortable.” Yolanda Díaz, Sumar³.
- “There’s an impression that some men aged 40 or 50 have been made to feel uncomfortable by certain discourses.” Pedro Sánchez, Partido Socialista⁴.
- “It isn’t right to play with feminisms; feminism belongs to everyone, and it belongs to no-one.” Yolanda Díaz, Sumar⁵.
- “I want to express my pride in a person who has decided to be a mother and a candidate for mayor [...]. She hasn’t weighed up what’s good for her or bad for her. Fairweather feminists do what interests them. Real feminists do what they want.” Alberto Núñez Feijóo, Popular Party⁶.

4. Results

In this section the key findings of the survey are presented, looking out particularly for any statistically significant disparities between the responses of men and women. The aim is to determine the role of gender in shaping respondents’ perceptions of the candidates. The section also examines the responses related to the age variable, paying attention to any substantial differences between men and women within the youngest age groups of respondents. This demographic is particularly interesting because of its unique characteristics and potential influences on the candidate’s perceptions.

First, in the assessment of the credibility of the four national-level candidates (Pedro Sánchez, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, Santiago Abascal, and Yolanda Díaz), statistically significant differences between men and women were observed only in the cases of candidates from right-wing parties (Feijóo and especially Abascal), who both enjoyed greater credibility among men than among women (see Table 1). By contrast, the credibility of Sánchez and Díaz (leaders of the two national left-wing parties) did not vary significantly according to respondents’ gender. Overall, Díaz (Sumar) was the most highly rated candidate (2.68 on a scale of 1–5, SD: 1.43), followed by Sánchez (PSOE) (2.54, SD: 1.41), Feijóo (PP) (2.26, SD: 1.36), and finally Abascal (Vox) (2.03, SD: 1.36).

¹ Authors translation into English. Original version: “Hay hombres y también mujeres que se sienten incómodos con algunos discursos feministas”.

² Original Spanish version: “Feminismo bueno... machismo malo ¡Anda ya! Igualdad también para eso. Ni feministas ni machistas”.

³ Original Spanish version: “El feminismo cuestiona la sociedad, es un movimiento intelectual que camina y cuestiona la sociedad. Nos cuestiona a las mujeres y a los hombres. Por esto es incómodo”.

⁴ Original Spanish version: “Hay una impresión de que ciudadanos, hombres de 40 o 50 años, han visto que algunos discursos han sido incómodos hacia ellos”.

⁵ Original Spanish version: “No es bueno que juguemos con los feminismos. El feminismo es de todas las personas; no es de nadie”.

⁶ Original Spanish version: “Quiero mostrar mi orgullo por una persona que ha decidido ser madre y candidata a la alcaldía [...]. No ha echado cuentas para ver cuándo le viene bien o cuándo le viene mal. Los feministas de boquilla hacen lo que les interesa. Los feministas de verdad hacen lo que quieren”.

Table 1. Assessment of the credibility of the four national-level candidates based on the gender of the respondents.

Candidate	Gender	N	Credibility average (1-5)	Standard deviation
Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	Male	750	2,49	1,44
	Female	800	2,59	1,38
	Total	1550	2,54	1,41
Alberto Núñez Feijóo (PP)	Male	749	2,40	1,38
	Female	791	2,13	1,33
	Total	1540	2,26	1,36
Santiago Abascal (Vox)	Male	745	2,29	1,44
	Female	792	1,79	1,23
	Total	1537	2,03	1,36
Yolanda Díaz (Sumar)	Male	742	2,64	1,47
	Female	780	2,71	1,40
	Total	1522	2,68	1,43

Source: Own elaboration.

As regards candidates from regional parties, Gabriel Rufián of the Catalan center-left party, Esquerra Republicana, was the only one to receive markedly divergent evaluations regarding credibility based on respondents' gender, with scores of 2.50 from men and 2.15 from women. Aitor Esteban from the Basque center-right party PNV achieved the highest overall credibility rating (3.07), while Roger Montañola from the Catalan right-wing party PDCAT received the lowest (1.96).

When asked to choose up to three politicians not running for prime minister, a majority of respondents (55.4%) stated that they would prefer someone other than those listed in the survey for the post. These politicians come from a wide range of backgrounds, including former prime ministers, regional presidents, mayors, and political leaders with significant symbolic importance (Carles Puigdemont, the Catalan president in self-imposed exile in Brussels; Oriol Junqueras, leader of Esquerra Republicana; or Arnaldo Otegi, head of the Basque independence party Bildu). Delving deeper into public sentiment, the survey revealed particular preferences for Isabel Díaz Ayuso of the PP (35.7%), president of the Community of Madrid, and Íñigo Errejón, leader of Más Madrid (26.1%). Interestingly, while Errejón's appeal was consistent across genders, Ayuso obtained more support from men than women (41.1% vs. 31.7%). This pattern of gender-based differences extends further, as observed in the case of Equality Minister Irene Montero, who ranked as the third most popular choice among women (19.1%) but fell to the seventh among men (13.9%). By contrast, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros of Vox was notably more favored by men (21.6%) than by women (10.6%), and Pablo Casado, the former president of the PP, enjoyed more popularity among women (17.5%) than among men (13.5%).

Building on these insights, the survey also sought participants’ perspectives on candidates’ capacity to safeguard society’s broader interests, with a specific focus on gender. An overwhelming majority (83.7%) believed both men and women possess equal capabilities. Nevertheless, within this broad agreement, nuanced differences surface: a significant portion of women (14.3%) felt more strongly that women are better suited to protect societal interests, compared to 10.7% of men who shared this view. Conversely, a smaller proportion of men (5.1%) argued in favor of their own gender’s proficiency in this area, a sentiment less commonly held among women (2.5%).

Following the exploration of gender perceptions regarding political capabilities, the survey assessed public opinion on feminism, specifically by analysing statements made by political leaders. These statements were presented without attribution, in order to elicit unbiased responses. The statement that obtained the highest level of agreement (3.65 on a scale of 1 to 5, SD: 1.26) was “Some men and also some women feel uncomfortable with certain feminist discourses,” indicating a nuanced public reception of feminist rhetoric. Interestingly, this sentiment is slightly stronger among men (3.73) than women (3.58), indicating varying degrees of acceptance of feminist discussions across genders. The second most agreed-upon statement was “It isn’t right to play with feminisms; feminism belongs to everyone, and it belongs to no-one” (3.54, SD: 1.30), with women (3.64) showing higher agreement than men (3.43). On the other hand, the statement that received the least support was “There’s an impression that some men aged 40 or 50 have been made to feel uncomfortable by certain discourses” (2.96, SD: 1.22); however, it resonated slightly more with men (3.03) than women (2.90). The statement that elicited the most divergent responses was “Feminism good.... *machismo* bad... Give it a rest! Equality here as well –neither feminists nor *machistas*,” with rates of agreement of 3.36 among men and 3.06 among women.

Table 2. Respondents’ rates of agreement with various statements about feminism, by gender.

Statement	Gender	N	Agreement average (1-5)	Standard deviation
Some men and also some women feel uncomfortable with certain feminist discourses	Male	759	3.73	1.23
	Female	807	3.58	1.28
	Total	1566	3.65	1.26
Feminism good.... <i>machismo</i> bad... Give it a rest! Equality here as well –neither feminists nor <i>machistas</i>	Male	759	3.36	1.50
	Female	807	3.06	1.60
	Total	1566	3.21	1.56
Feminism raises questions about society; it’s an intellectual movement that is on the move and challenges society. It challenges both women and men. That’s why it makes people feel uncomfortable	Male	759	2.98	1.39
	Female	807	3.16	1.37
	Total	1566	3.07	1.38

There's an impression that some men aged 40 or 50 have been made to feel uncomfortable by certain discourses	Male	759	3.03	1.26
	Female	807	2.90	1.19
	Total	1566	2.96	1.22
It isn't right to play with feminisms; feminism belongs to everyone, and it belongs to no-one	Male	759	3.43	1.33
	Female	807	3.64	1.27
	Total	1566	3.54	1.30
I want to express my pride in a person who has decided to be a mother and a candidate for mayor [...]. She hasn't weighed up what's good for her or bad for her. Fairweather feminists do what interests them. Real feminists do what they want	Male	759	3.18	1.30
	Female	807	3.07	1.31
	Total	1566	3.12	1.30

Source: Own elaboration.

Respondents believed that the most influential factor in the public's voting decisions is the candidate's personality (3.94, SD: 1.08), followed by political experience (3.72, SD: 1.17) and academic background (3.70, SD: 1.26). The candidate's gender was seen as the least influential factor (2.20, SD: 1.34). Notably, the only factor to present a statistically significant gender difference in perceptions was political experience, with women deeming it more influential (3.79 vs. 3.64). Given the historical underrepresentation of women in public office, the fact that women perceive political experience (a characteristic many female candidates may lack) as more valuable could reflect a heightened awareness of the inequalities that female candidates face compared to their traditionally more experienced male counterparts.

Asked about the factors that most influenced their own vote, respondents ranked the candidate's honesty (4.58, SD: 0.87), credibility (4.50, SD: 0.89), and policy proposals (4.41, SD: 0.97) as paramount, while gender was deemed the least important (1.86, SD: 1.2). Here, the gender-based differences in valuation were not statistically significant, whereas for other factors, women consistently rated the influences on their vote higher than men, particularly regarding policy proposals (4.50 vs. 4.32).

Faced with two candidates offering similar policies and political experience, respondents say that the most decisive factor for their vote was honesty (4.53, SD: 0.87), followed by education (3.75, SD: 1.16) and charisma (3.60, SD: 1.10). Gender was the least important factor (1.96, SD: 1.25). Education and gender were the aspects with the greatest disparities between men and women, being significantly more important to women than to men (3.84 vs. 3.65 for education and 2.04 vs. 1.87 for gender). This nuanced understanding of electoral influences highlights the complex interplay between personal qualities and societal values in shaping voter preferences, with a marked recognition of integrity and substance to the detriment of demographic characteristics.

4.1. Significant findings by age

The survey findings demonstrated a relationship between the age of the respondents and their answers to specific questions. Notably, older individuals typically held the view that Feijóo and Abascal were more credible candidates than their younger respondents. However, despite his generally lower average credibility among younger age groups, Abascal received varied ratings based on gender, with higher credibility scores from young men. Interestingly, young men (2.62, SD = 1.51) rated him much more favorably than young women (1.61, SD = 1.02). Considering that Abascal's party Vox has consistently opposed feminism and the leftist government's feminist

policies, these results suggest a gender polarization among the younger demographic on this issue, which is in line with the trends identified in the earlier sections.

Regarding politicians not standing for election for whom young people would vote, young men showed a preference for Pablo Iglesias, the former leader of the left-wing party Podemos (29.7%), followed by Nadia Calviño, Deputy Prime Minister and PSOE member (25.6%), Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP), president of the Community of Madrid and a critic of the government’s feminist policies (22.9%). In contrast, young women predominantly chose Irene Montero of Podemos, Minister of Equality (34%), followed by Ayuso (31.2%) and Iglesias (23.4%). This finding suggests that the person responsible for governmental equality policies was more popular among young women than among young men.

Asked about candidates’ ability to defend the general interests of society based on their gender, age-related differences were also evident. Respondents within the 25–34-year age range were the least inclined to believe that both women and men could effectively defend societal interests, with 17.2% believing that females were better suited to this role and 7.7% preferring males. On the other hand, individuals aged 55 and above were more likely to assert that the two genders are equally competent in defending these interests, with a substantially lower number of individuals in this age bracket believing that women were better suited (8.9%). This suggests that different generations have different perceptions of gender roles and political leadership abilities.

Table 3. Percentage of respondents who identify with each of the following statements by age group.

Age Group	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	+55	Total
Male and female candidates in elections are equally capable of defending the general interests of society	79.1%	75.1%	82.9%	84.4%	88.0%	83.8%
Female candidates in elections tend to defend the general interests of society better than males	15.5%	17.2%	14.1%	13.3%	8.9%	12.5%
Male candidates in elections tend to defend the general interests of society better than females	5.4%	7.7%	3.0%	2.3%	3.1%	3.8%

Source: Own elaboration.

In the 18–24 years age bracket, gender differences were discernible in responses to two statements made by political leaders. The statement “Feminism good... *machismo* bad... give it a rest! Equality here as well. Neither feminists nor *machistas*” elicited average agreement scores of 2.38 (SD: 1.48) from young women and of 3.07 (SD: 1.52) from young men. The second statement, “I want to express my pride in a person who has decided to be a mother and a candidate for mayor [...]. She hasn’t weighed up what’s good for her or bad for her,” yielded average agreement scores of 2.64 (SD: 1.21) among young women and 3.05 (SD: 1.27) among young men. These differences confirm the prevalence of anti-feminist views among men and feminist stances among women in the youngest age group, which presents more polarization than the other age groups.

Among the youngest respondents, gender played a role in determining the importance of a candidate’s credibility, since young women rated this characteristic higher than young men (4.46 vs. 4.08). Furthermore, when presented with two candidates with identical political proposals, education and honesty were the only factors that varied significantly between young

men and women: young women reported that these two factors would carry more weight in their voting decisions than young men.

4.2. The role of the media in shaping perceptions of political candidates

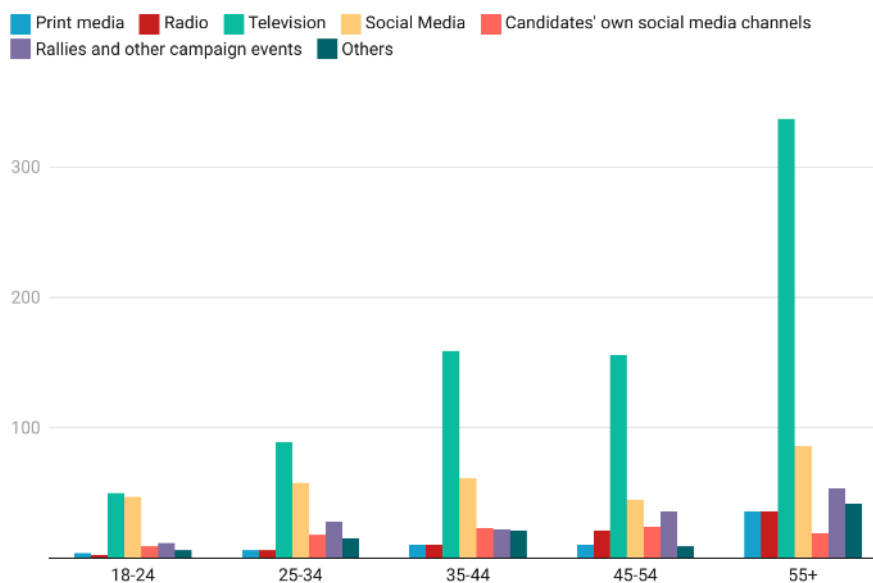
In response to the question of which medium exerted the greatest influence on their perception of the various candidates, television was the most frequently cited source (50.5%), followed by social media (18.9%) (Table 4). Rallies, candidates' social media channels, radio, and print media all scored below 10%. No discernible differences were detected between male and female respondents in this regard. However, age-based disparities are also evident: specifically, the younger age group (18 to 34 years) was considerably less likely to be swayed by television than their older peers and demonstrated a greater inclination toward social media. Conversely, print media and radio are more significant among the older groups, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Table 4. Which of the following media do you believe makes the most significant contribution to shaping the image you have of the various candidates?

Type of media	Frequency	Percentage
Print media	66	4.2%
Radio	74	4.7%
Television	791	50.5%
Social media	297	18.9%
Candidates' own social media channels	93	5.9%
Rallies and other campaign events	152	9.7%
Others	93	5.9%

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1. Media preferences by age group in shaping perceptions of political candidates



Source: Own elaboration.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The comprehensive analysis presented in this study shows that gender significantly impacts the general public's perceptions of political candidates (Objective 1). A notable finding is the significant differences in perceptions of conservative party candidates according to the voter's gender: specifically, men are more likely to attribute credibility to the conservative candidates Núñez Feijóo (PP) and Abascal (Vox) than women. In contrast, the analysis of the perceptions of left-wing candidates did not reveal any significant gender differences. However, it is worth noting that the candidate who registers the highest credibility –both among men and women– is precisely the only woman running for president, Yolanda Díaz. In an order of preferences different from Díaz, we find the case of Pablo Casado, who, although not a candidate at the time of the study, is mentioned as a potential presidential candidate if other politicians besides the leading candidates were to be considered. This example is significant because it breaks the trend observed in conservative parties' candidates (PP and Vox), which generally register greater credibility among male voters than female voters. In this case, however, Casado garners more support from women than from men, and, in complete contrast, Ayuso, the current president of the Community of Madrid, would attract a higher concentration of male voters. The scope of our study does not allow for an objective interpretation of this specific scenario, although it does open lines of research for analyzing the type of communication and leadership characteristics as factors influencing male and female conservative voters' preferences.

Expanding the analysis to other political figures that were not candidates in the election, this study reveals intriguing observations regarding Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP) and Irene Montero (Podemos). In these two cases, political positioning appears to influence public perception more than gender. Díaz Ayuso is positively perceived by conservative-minded respondents, receiving favorable views from men (41.1%) and women (31.7%). Meanwhile, Irene Montero, who did not reach the same level of popularity as Díaz Ayuso, was a significantly more popular hypothetical candidate among women (19.1%) than among men (13.9%). These findings suggest that, while gender plays a role in political perception, ideological alignment (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) may be a more decisive factor in the valuation of specific political figures.

With respect to the influence of gender on the perception of feminism (Objective 2), respondents tended to show a general consensus against those statements or politicians who better represent feminist policies (CIS, 2024), without any notable differences between men and women. However, a greater divergence of opinions is observed between genders. Although the overall acceptance of feminist policies is low, it is slightly higher in women than in men. These results indicate that resistance or skepticism regarding feminism transcends gender differences, suggesting an influence of more complex underlying factors in shaping these perceptions.

This study highlights that candidates' capacity to serve society's collective interests is the predominant consideration for voters when selecting their representatives (Objective 3). The results indicate that gender distinctions are generally negligible, suggesting a shared understanding of the essential attributes of a candidate. However, minor variations were observed, such as the interplay between personality, political experience, and academic background, which significantly affects the overall evaluation.

Political experience was the characteristic that respondents believed people valued most. It was rated as more important for voters by women than by men, possibly due to a greater awareness of the long-standing male dominance of politics and its impact on the way people value political candidates. In our view, this reflects the historical gender inequality in this field. Honesty, credibility, and political proposals were crucial in voting decisions, whereas gender played only a relative role, being less determinant for men than for women. In situations where candidates present similar proposals, gender was the last criterion of choice, although women mentioned it more than men.

Regarding the influence of communicative platforms on the formation of a candidate's image (Objective 4), television was considered the key factor (Beaudoux, 2014), followed at some

distance by social media. This trend remains consistent across genders. However, a gradual shift towards social media was observed among younger audiences, although television still plays a significant role (Ramírez *et al.*, 2023). These conclusions align with the findings reported in other sociological studies, such as the Digital News Report 2023 and the 2023 CEO Barometer. Specifically, for those under age 25, while television remained an important source of information, the popularity of social media was particularly notable in younger age groups.

In summary, our findings make a significant contribution to understanding how the public perceived their political representatives and feminist proposals in the period leading up to the July 2023 election. Despite the fact that some of the statements with which respondents agree more strongly are aligned with anti-feminist positions, the results obtained (Objective 1) point to a trend among women of not attributing credibility to leaders who clearly express an anti-feminist discourse. It is through this result that we can understand why there is a greater voting preference among men for political parties like VOX and PP. This also explains how a conservative female politician, such as Isabel Díaz Ayuso, gathers the majority of the conservative vote, predominantly from men. With all said, we propose reflecting on the real and potential role that women have as a counterforce against the advance of the far right in Spain (Cabezas, 2022), supported by a strong feminist movement in recent decades and a trend towards progressive opinions on gender issues and social rights.

The study also underlines the importance of considering the generation variable. A marked tendency was observed among the younger population towards a more pronounced gender gap, especially in terms of the gender biases exhibited by young men. Further studies with more detailed analyses are required to fully understand these phenomena.

Similarly, the study has allowed us to continue seeing audiovisual media, particularly television, as the primary channel of information. However, it also reveals how social media is shaping political public opinion among younger individuals, which opens up future lines of research that can help us understand the types of campaigns and communication strategies employed by different candidates and how the public discourses disseminated by the manosphere align with conservative or ultra-conservative postulates (Lacalle *et al.*, 2023).

Our results also highlight the persistence of a historical inequality between men and women. The greater perception among women that people value political experience when choosing a political candidate could be partly attributed to the longstanding male dominance in politics and the delayed incorporation of women into the public sphere, and to a higher awareness among female respondents of this disadvantage. Two final points worth considering are the possible influence of political correctness on some of the responses, and the need for a fuller social debate about what feminism really is.

In conclusion, our research underscores the complexity of political and gender perceptions in today's society and highlights the need for a critical and reflective approach to these issues in the future.

Despite the insights provided by this study, some limitations need to be acknowledged. One key limitation is the potential bias that may have been introduced by respondents. Given the sensitive nature of political and gender-related questions, there is a possibility that some participants might have tailored their answers to align with socially acceptable norms, in an effort to adhere to political correctness. This may have influenced the accuracy of their responses, particularly when discussing feminist discourses or candidates. Future research should consider these potential biases and explore methods to mitigate their impact, such as conducting experimental studies to create controlled environments where respondents' behaviors and opinions can be observed more directly.

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