

Article

# Equal Access to the Top? Representative Bureaucracy and Politicians' Recruitment Preferences for Top Administrative Staff

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## Abstract

Although a voluminous literature on representative bureaucracy and minority discrimination suggests that characteristics other than qualifications influence hiring decisions, little is known about whether this also pertains to the top positions in political-administrative organizations. To shed light on this question, we ask how candidate ethnicity, gender, and age affect the recruitment preferences among politicians regarding the candidates for top administrative positions. Our study uses a survey experiment with random assignment of 1,688 Flemish local politicians to one of eight different descriptions of applicants to the leading managerial position of their local authority. We find that ethnic minorities, women, and younger candidates are generally considered more qualified for the job. Moreover, the impact of ethnicity and gender on recruitment preferences is conditional on politicians' ideological predispositions: Left-wing politicians consider ethnic minority candidates more competent, whereas right-wing politicians consider them less representative and are less inclined to invite them for job interviews than candidates from the ethnic majority. Furthermore, politicians furthest to the left are more inclined than right-wing politicians to recognize women as representative of the public at large and support inviting them for job interviews.

## Introduction

Discrimination during hiring processes in public organizations is a major concern in modern, merit-based bureaucracies. Equal access to administrative positions is a precondition for hiring the most qualified candidates and arguably also important to citizens' trust in government, government legitimacy, and perceptions of fairness in citizen encounters with government (Ricucci and Van Ryzin 2017; Ricucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena 2014; Theobald and Haider-Markel 2009). Thus, the descriptive representation of minority groups in public organizations may have

symbolic effects and importance beyond the hiring process itself (Atkins and Wilkins 2013; Gade and Wilkins 2013; Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006; Ricucci and Saidel 1997).

Theoretically, concerns about equal representation within the public sector have mainly been touched upon in the literature on representative bureaucracy (e.g., Keiser et al. 2002; Meier 1975; Ricucci, Van Ryzin, and Li 2016). This literature has been preoccupied with questions of (a) whether and why bureaucracies are descriptively representative of the citizens they serve (so-called passive representation) (Davis, Livermore, and Lim 2011; Dometrius and Sigelman 1984; Ricucci and Saidel 1997), (b) to what extent passive representation turns into active representation (Bradbury and Kellough 2011; Hong 2017; Keiser et al. 2002; Meier and Bohte 2001; Wilkins and Keiser 2006)—where bureaucrats “press for the interests and

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desires of those whom [they] are presumed to represent” (Mosher 1968, 12)—and (c) how representative bureaucracy influences public service performance (Andrews et al. 2005; Meier, Wrinkle, and Polinard 1999; Pitts 2007). However, little is known about the sources of underrepresentation of sociodemographic groups. To advance knowledge on this topic, we examine whether sociodemographic characteristics of candidates applying for top administrative positions in public organizations matter for how politicians evaluate them. Specifically, we ask how the ethnicity, gender, and age of otherwise identical candidates for the top management position in a local authority matter for how they are evaluated by the elected politicians within that authority.

In so doing, we offer three contributions to the literature on representative bureaucracy. First, by changing the focus from the questions of whether and with what effects public bureaucracies are representative toward the question of equal access, we shed light on the causes of (under)representation. Indeed, extant research suggests that large sociodemographic groups such as women and ethnic minorities are underrepresented at different levels of government (e.g., Andrews, Ashworth, and Meier 2014; Riccucci and Saidel 1997). From a practical perspective, understanding the causes of underrepresentation is an important precondition for offering policy advice on how to increase representation. Second, we argue that the political-ideological beliefs of elected politicians are important to the representation of top administrative staff within public organizations. Such beliefs, we argue, are likely to correspond with the politicians’ (dis)taste for various sociodemographic groups and, hence, to affect their assessment of otherwise identical candidates in recruitment situations. Third, we employ insights from labor economics on discrimination in hiring processes (e.g., Baert 2015, 2017) to understand underrepresentation in public organizations and discuss the relevance of discriminatory perspectives explicitly in relation to top administrative positions.

The next section discusses the literature on representation in top administrative positions. This is followed by a review of the literature on discrimination in hiring processes. This section furthermore presents the hypotheses and develops a theoretical argument about how politicians’ ideological beliefs impact how they evaluate the candidates applying for top administrative positions. The fourth section discusses how we examine the hypotheses by means of a survey-based vignette experiment with 1,688 Flemish local politicians, allowing us to take the characteristics of applicants for vacant positions as well as recipient (politician) characteristics into account. The fifth section presents the findings from the empirical analysis, while the final section concludes with a discussion of

the limitations and implications for public administration practice and research.

### Representative Bureaucracy at the Top

In contrast to other research on the composition of public organizations focusing on the sociodemographic characteristics of street-level bureaucrats (e.g., police officers, teachers, firemen) (Andrews, Ashworth, and Meier 2014; Andrews and Miller 2013; Atkins and Wilkins 2013; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Jackson Forthcoming; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena 2014), we deliberately focus on top administrative leaders; that is, the managers at the very top of public organizations, such as department heads, agency heads, and city managers. Although street-level bureaucrats are arguably more likely than top-level administrators to engage in the active representation of sociodemographic groups (Andrew, Ashworth, and Meier 2014), top-level administrators are likely to have a say in hiring processes at lower levels of the organization. The impact of recruiting certain people at the very top of the organization might, therefore, trickle down to lower levels. Being very close to the political level, such leaders may also influence policy making, as they are important providers of information and advice to the political level (Blom-Hansen et al. 2018).

Several studies have documented patterns of underrepresentation at upper levels of public organizations. Studying the composition of US federal bureaucracy, Meier (1975), for instance, finds that citizens from lower social classes are underrepresented at the upper levels of the US federal bureaucracy. More recent research adds that women and ethnic minorities tend to be underrepresented in leadership positions (e.g., Anestaki et al. 2016; Choi 2011; Clark, Ochs, and Frazier 2013), although women less so in agencies responsible for so-called feminine issues (Smith and Monaghan 2013). On the US state and local levels, in two studies on gender and ethnicity representation, Sigelman (1976) and Sigelman and Karnig (1977) found that women and African Americans were underrepresented in upper-level management. These findings have been supported by later research (e.g., Dometrius 1984; Reid, Miller, and Kerr 2004; Riccucci and Saidel 1997).

These strands of research share in common that while patterns of (under)representation at upper levels of public organizations have been repeatedly documented, little is known about why this is so. Thus, the literature is mainly based on comparing the sociodemographic characteristics of a population with the sociodemographic characteristics of those at upper-level positions in public organizations. While such an approach is helpful toward identifying whether

public organizations are composed in a representative manner, it does little to elucidate the potential causes of underrepresentation. For example, multiple causes might be contributing to the underrepresentation of women in top positions, such as self-selection due to cultural norms or differences between men and women in ambition, educational and training opportunities, stereotypes, lack of support and exclusion from networks, or outright discrimination against women (Cayer and Sigelman 1980; Greene, Selden, and Brewer 2001; Riccucci and Sidel 1997; Tharenou 1999). Similar causes may apply to other sociodemographic groups, including ethnic minorities. In the remainder of the article, we will focus specifically on the discrimination explanation, which is of particular relevance from an equal opportunity perspective. To do so, we turn to the literature on discrimination in hiring decisions.

### Discrimination in Hiring Decisions

The literature on discrimination in hiring decisions focuses on the causal effects of job candidates' sociodemographic characteristics on their success in receiving callbacks from employers. Although the literature on representative bureaucracy focuses mainly on the effects of representation, the hiring discrimination literature, in contrast, has a more distinct focus on discrimination as a source of underrepresentation. Nevertheless, the two literatures are both interested in the topic of underrepresentation and thus speak to one another. The discrimination literature is vast and covers a wide range of different grounds for discrimination, including religion, disabilities, and sexual orientation (Baert 2017). We do not aim to provide a comprehensive review of the literature, limiting our focus instead to the three most commonly studied grounds for discrimination: ethnicity, gender, and age. We pay particular attention to studies conducted in the same empirical context (the region of Flanders in Belgium) that we are studying. We refer readers to Baert (2017), Bertrand and Duflo (2016), Rich (2014), and Zschirnt and Ruedin (2016) for recent broader reviews and meta-analyses of this literature.

Empirically, comparing applicants with minority group names to other applicants with ethnic-majority group names, the literature overwhelmingly finds evidence supporting the proposition that minority applicants receive fewer callbacks from employers and, hence, are negatively discriminated against. Overall, 34 empirical studies document negative effects, while two studies find no differences between minorities and majorities, and one study reports an—in that particular context—expected positive effect of being from the minority group (Baert 2017, 6). In the specific Flemish

context in which we are interested, four studies unanimously document negative effects of minority group names on callbacks (Baert and Vujic 2016; Baert et al. 2015, 2017; Capeau et al. 2012). In comparison, evidence of gender discrimination is mixed and heterogeneous across different occupations, with effects indicating both discrimination of men and women as well as no discrimination at all (Baert 2017). Among studies in the Flemish context, two show no differences between callbacks for men and women (Baert 2015; Baert, De Pauw, and Deschacht 2016), while a third reveals a negative impact of pregnancy among women (Capeau et al. 2012). This may suggest that discrimination against women is primarily relevant among young women. Finally, empirical studies (including two Flemish studies: Baert et al. 2016 and Capeau et al. 2012) unanimously document adverse effects of age on callbacks (Baert et al. 2017, 11). Across studies, negative discrimination against older age is high and even higher than the discrimination against ethnic groups. Such discriminatory practices appear to set remarkably early. Thus, Albert, Escot, and Fernández-Cornejo (2011) document a substantial decline in callbacks for 38-year-old candidates compared with those aged 24 or 28.

Although we have some evidence on discrimination in general, the evidence is sparse regarding the more specific question of discrimination in access to top-level positions. Some general patterns might, however, be relevant for this level as well. As for the discrimination of ethnic minorities, racial animus and distaste of minority groups have been suggested as a possible source of discrimination (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Butler and Broockman 2011; DeSante 2013). Additionally, the presence of cultural stereotypes—that is, automatically activated cognitive shortcuts containing descriptions of how various groups including leaders, women, and minority groups are and how they should be, points to the relevance of discrimination at this level of the organization as well (see Baert, De Pauw, and Deschacht 2016, 715 for a short overview of sources of discrimination). Activated cultural stereotypes have been shown to be associated with fast categorizations that can lead to unconsciously biased assessments of certain groups (Quillian 2008; Schram et al. 2009; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2008). To the extent that incongruence exists between gender and minority groups stereotypes, on the one hand, and leadership stereotypes on the other, it may lead to discrimination against minority groups and women (Eagly and Karau 2002). Indeed, research shows that Caucasian men are perceived as being more similar to the common image of successful managers than women and ethnic minorities (Chung-Herrera and Lankau 2005; Derous, Ryan, and Nguyen 2012;

Duehr and Bono 2006; Hoyt, Simon, and Reid 2009, 234). Likewise, negative stereotypes according to which older people are less energetic, afraid of new technologies, and slower to learn new concepts and accept necessary changes (Edwards 2011) may help explain the negative discrimination against older applicants. Moreover, statistical discrimination may take place; in contrast to discrimination based on distaste and cultural stereotypes, statistical discrimination is based more on facts than values related to certain groups. For instance, minorities and women may be perceived as having less appropriate work-related experience. While this may generally be true, it becomes a question of discrimination when such facts are applied to specific cases and exclude qualified female and minority candidates from receiving callbacks that similarly qualified male and majority candidates would receive (Altonji and Blank 1999).

However, two important scope conditions for the relevance of stereotypes in hiring decisions about top administrative positions should be considered: First, as shown above, the literature demonstrates that people are generally influenced by stereotypes when making hiring decisions. But should we have similar expectations for politicians? There is little research on how stereotypes influence politicians' hiring decisions, but research from other domains of political decision making indeed suggests that the behavior of politicians is generally influenced by said stereotypes. More specifically, research on the responsiveness of political elites shows that requests sent to elected officials of another race are less likely to receive responses and that inequalities in responsiveness are mainly driven by the officials' personal biases (Butler and Broockman 2011; Costa 2017). Likewise, McClendon (2016) provides evidence of same-race bias where South African politicians are more responsive to same-race constituents in the highly salient case of South Africa. Overall, this research suggests that politicians are not fundamentally different from people at large in drawing on stereotypes—and are not likely to be so either in hiring decisions.

Second, the widespread attention to anti-discriminatory practices in public organizations in Western democracies may work against the negative impacts of gender, age, and minority group stereotypes. Indeed, evidence of discrimination within the public sector is mixed. While a study of labor market ethnic discrimination in Sweden (Carlsson and Rooth 2007) finds similar levels of discrimination in the public and private sectors, a Norwegian study documents significant discrimination in the private sector but not in the public sector (Midtbøen 2016). Furthermore, some studies have documented how the impact of minority group status on callbacks disappears when ethnic minorities

mention volunteer work for organizations in their application or when they have had extensive work experience (Baert and Vujic 2016, Baert et al. 2017). This suggests that discrimination is often based on statistical conclusions, where certain attributes (here, lack of appropriate experience) are erroneously ascribed to individuals from minority groups (Altonji and Blank 1999). Arguably, applicants for top administrative positions will be highly experienced, thus reducing potential statistical discrimination. Moreover, in relation to the concept of age discrimination, life experience might be expected to be an important perceived quality of managers that speaks against age discrimination for this particular group of applicants. Nevertheless, based on the evidence from empirical studies and the theoretical arguments suggesting the negative impact of cultural stereotypes for women, seniors, and ethnic minorities, we hypothesize the following:

- H1: Politicians assess ethnic minority applicants less favorably than applicants from the ethnic majority.
- H2: Politicians assess female applicants less favorably than male applicants.
- H3: Politicians assess older applicants less favorably than younger applicants.

Moreover, empirical research suggests ideologically driven heterogeneity in the extent to which women and minority groups are represented across public organizations (Anestaki et al. 2016; Brewer and Selden 2003; Clark, Ochs, and Frazier 2013; Kim 2003; Lewis and Nice 1994; Llorens, Wenger, and Kellough 2008; Naff and Crum 2000). However, since this research is based on observational data that does not allow researchers to distinguish between different causes of this pattern, it remains unclear why citizen ideology correlates with women and minority group representation. This may be a question of self-selection, where women and minority groups are less inclined to apply for positions in public organizations characterized by conservative ideologies. Women and minority groups might also face important barriers or even outright discrimination when applying for positions in organizations with more conservative citizenries (Llorens, Wenger, and Kellough 2008). In favor of the latter argument, research has shown that attitudes toward affirmative action and equal opportunities vary across the political spectrum, with left-wing politicians and liberals being traditionally more supportive than right-wing politicians and conservatives (e.g., Harrison et al. 2006, 1016; Wilkins and Wenger 2014). In part, this reflects different ideological perspectives on the role of government, where conservatives and right-wing supporters tend to prefer less government intervention in

social relations and economic standings than liberals and others on the left. However, it also reflects differences in skepticism toward immigrants and minority groups, which has arguably become even more pronounced in the wake of terrorism in the new millennium, the refugee crisis in Western Europe, and the emergence of right-wing, ultra-nationalistic and conservative parties (e.g., the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Golden Dawn in Greece, and Vlaams Belang in Flanders). Hence, differences in hiring patterns and the composition of public organizations may, to some extent, reflect the underlying ideological values of politicians for certain sociodemographic groups. To the extent that politicians seek to recruit officials with ideological values similar to their own, they may also use an applicant's ethnicity and gender as proxies for their political leaning and use this information in the hiring process. Given the political character of top administrative positions, this kind of behavior could be particularly relevant for administrative positions at the very top. Based on these considerations, we suggest the following hypotheses:

- H4a:** The impact of applicant ethnicity (H1) is moderated by the ideological beliefs of politicians, with right-wing politicians being even less inclined to assess ethnic minorities favorably than left-wing politicians.
- H4b:** The impact of applicant gender (H2) is moderated by the ideological beliefs of politicians, with right-wing politicians being even less inclined to assess women favorably than left-wing politicians.

## Design

Extant research uses one of two approaches to measure discrimination in hiring decisions (Baert 2017, 2). Many studies have conducted statistical analyses of nonexperimental data based on either surveys or administrative registers. This approach, however, is likely to suffer from endogeneity bias because not all of the relevant variables that employers consider when assessing job candidates (e.g., administrative data seldom contains information about language skills) are available to researchers studying nonexperimental data (Baert 2017, 3; George and Pandey 2017). Another approach uses so-called correspondence experiments in which fictitious job applications (differing only in terms of a randomly assigned characteristic of interest to the researcher, such as gender or age of the applicant) are submitted for real job positions, where the difference in subsequent callbacks from employers across the randomly assigned characteristic is used to measure discrimination (e.g., Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004;

Darolia et al. 2016). This approach requires a huge number of job openings to achieve the necessary statistical power in the data analysis. Since our focus is on a group of limited size (top administrative positions), job openings occur too seldom to conduct a correspondence experiment within a reasonable period. Moreover, correspondence experiments are mainly suited for job positions in which written applications are the norm and where applications are not checked against other sources. This renders correspondence experiments less relevant for the study of discrimination in the hiring of top administrative staff since their applications are likely to be subject to intense scrutiny, including phone calls to prior employers and assessing profiles on online networks (e.g., LinkedIn). Such employer checks may undermine the credibility of fictitious job applications, thereby curbing the effects of the experimental treatments.

In response to these challenges, we turn to a large-scale survey experiment (for a similar approach to studying hiring discrimination, see Guul 2016). Similar to the correspondence studies, one major advantage of the survey experiment is that the causal impact of the personal characteristics of interest (here, the applicants' gender, ethnicity, and age) can be estimated by randomly assigning respondents to different descriptions of job applicants that vary only in terms of the characteristic of interest. Importantly, nesting the experiment in a survey also allows us to measure additional characteristics on the employer side including political ideology. However, the survey experimental approach comes at a price. In particular, survey experiments are often criticized for exhibiting lower levels of external and ecological validity than other designs (Aguinis and Bradley 2014). We discuss these issues further after the analysis.

Our respondents are elected local politicians from two types of Flemish local authorities: Flemish municipalities and Flemish Public Centers for Social Welfare (i.e., OCMW in Dutch) (Flanders is the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). Both types have a council with seated local politicians. The council members' contact information was gathered via the website of the local authority. As in many other Western democracies, issues of gender, ethnicity, and age representation in public organizations have been intensely debated in Flanders (e.g., Blyth 2014; Hope 2014). This debate also has institutional expressions in Flanders in the form of independent public bodies such as UNIA (combating labor market discrimination in general) and the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men. Politically, a wide spectrum of opinions toward immigrant and women's rights are represented due to the multiparty nature of Flemish local government, ranging from socialist parties to national-conservative and immigration-skeptic parties.

The data were collected in February and March 2017 using an online survey sent to the entire population of local politicians in Flemish municipalities and the Public Centers for Social Welfare ( $N = 9,415$ ). After three reminders, we obtained 1,688 valid responses, corresponding to an 18.4% response rate. Comparing those responding to our survey to nonresponders on known characteristics (table 1), we find that our sample is representative of the population of local politicians at large in terms of party affiliation (except for the Green Party, which is overrepresented in the sample) and size of home municipality. Politicians from the Antwerp region are overrepresented in the sample (28% in the sample compared with 24% among nonresponders), whereas politicians from the Limburg region are underrepresented (12% in the sample compared with 14% among nonresponders). In all cases, however, the differences in the composition of the sample and the group of nonresponders are minor in absolute terms.

As shown in table 2, the sample mainly consists of male candidates from parties that are members of the ruling coalition. A very small minority of the respondents (11 persons in total) have an Arab name. With such limited variation in respondent ethnicity, our sample does not allow for an examination of how respondent ethnicity affects assessments of candidates from different ethnic groups. Important for our purposes, however, the sample exhibits considerable variation in self-reported political ideology, thus allowing for an examination of H4a and H4b.

Our survey experiment focuses on the recruitment of applicants to the position of secretary in Flemish local governments. The responsibilities of secretaries are formalized within official decrees from the Flemish Government (Municipal Decree—Title II—Chapter V—Department II for the municipal secretary and OCMW Decree—Title II—Chapter V—Department II for the OCMW secretary) and include the general management of the local authority. They are the very top administrative position in the authority and report directly to the council. The selection and hiring process for secretaries is described in official decisions from the Flemish Government. It begins with a public job announcement, resulting in a list of applications with the necessary qualifications, moving on to a series of selection tests that result in a ranking of candidates and, finally, selecting the candidate. Several checks and balances are incorporated into the procedure. For instance, council members cannot be part of the selection committee, and secretaries are therefore supposed to be hired based primarily on meritocratic principles. However, the council does have several responsibilities, such as (a) defining the rules concerning the public announcement, (b) selecting the time lag between the public announcement and deadline for applications, (c) defining the rules concerning the selection procedure, and (d) approving the candidate selected. Based on these responsibilities, the council clearly has influence on the selection and hiring process. Among actual secretaries, 62% are males, corresponding to a statistically significantly skewed distribution (two-sided

**Table 1.** Analysis of Nonresponse

Variable	Responders (Means)	Nonresponders (Means)	Difference
City councillor (1) or OMCW councillor (0)	0.74	0.76	0.02
Party affiliation			
Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie	0.22	0.22	0.00
Christen Democraten & Vlaams	0.30	0.31	0.01
Open Vld	0.12	0.12	0.00
Socialistische Partij Anders	0.10	0.10	0.00
Groen	0.06	0.03	0.02**
Vlaams Belang	0.01	0.02	0.01
Partij van de Arbeid	0.00	0.00	0.00
Other parties	0.20	0.20	0.00
Municipal population size	28,344	26,634	1,710
Provinces			
West Flanders	0.19	0.21	0.02
East Flanders	0.23	0.21	0.02
Flemish Brabant	0.19	0.20	0.01
Antwerp	0.28	0.24	0.04**
Limburg	0.12	0.14	0.03**

Note: Two-sided *t*-tests of differences in means.

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for the Sample

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Respondent ethnicity (Arab = 1; non-Arab = 0)	0.01	0.08	0	1	1,688
Respondent gender (female = 1; male = 0)	0.36	0.48	0	1	1,679
Respondent age (years)	52.95	11.11	22	83	968
Political ideology (5-point scale running from most to the left = 1 to most to the right = 5)	3.11	1.16	1	5	1,581
Member of ruling coalition (1 = yes; 0 = no)	0.64	0.48	0	1	1,661

Note: The table describes the sample on key background characteristics.

*t*-test:  $t = 5.96$ ;  $p < .000$ ;  $n = 616$ ), while not even a single secretary has an Arab name (compared with an estimated 5.4% of the Flemish population at large in 2016).<sup>1</sup> Actual hiring decisions may be influenced by both supply and demand factors, and, thus, these numbers cannot be taken as evidence that actual discrimination takes place; nevertheless, at the very least they highlight the relevance of studying the causes of unequal representation in this case.

To examine how the ethnicity, gender, and age of applicants for a secretary position affect the politicians' recruitment preferences, we use random assignment to vignettes containing short descriptions of the applicants. Each respondent was presented with one of eight possible vignettes. We manipulate age by assigning the applicant an age of either 38 or 55 years. The criterion for doing so was to focus on applicants who have moved beyond the typical age of having their first children but still have several years left on the job market. The selection of these age specifications arguably limits the generalizability of our findings. We return to this issue in the discussion after the analysis. Furthermore, in line with other experimental research on representative bureaucracy (e.g., Ricucci, Van Ryzin, and Li 2016; Schram et al. 2009), we manipulate ethnicity and gender by using different names for the applicants. As for ethnicity, we used either one of two typical Flemish names (Mark or Sofie) or one of two Arab names (Mohammed or Fatimah). Mark and Sofie are very common names in Flanders, often mentioned in lists of the most popular Flemish names. Similarly, Mohammed and Fatimah are popular names

among Arab communities and are also typically high on lists of the most popular Arab names. In Belgium, as in many other West European countries, immigrants of Arab descent have become a prominent ethnic minority (OECD 2008). Research suggests that negative, ethnicity-based stereotypes are particularly relevant in relation to citizens with Arab descent (Oswald 2005). Indeed, the four studies that have previously been conducted comparing applicants with ethnic-majority names to applicants with Arab names have found clear negative effects of Arab names (Baert 2017). In terms of the impact of ethnicity, this should, therefore, be a most likely case. In total, the experiment uses a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial design that allows us to compare the impact of ethnicity, gender, and age to one another as well as to explore whether, for instance, ethnicity has a different impact on assessments of male and female applicants.

A well-known criticism of experiments relying on names to convey information about ethnicity is that certain names also have connotations of socioeconomic status and class (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Consequently, differences in responses across vignettes may be driven more by respondents' perceptions of the productivity of various groups (i.e., statistical discrimination) than their preferences or tastes for different groups. To reduce such bias, all of the vignettes explicitly emphasized that the applicant grew up in a socially disadvantaged neighborhood with two younger siblings and that the applicant has a master's degree in public administration and 7 years of experience in managing another local government. The experimental design is presented in table 3.

We conducted a series of logistic regressions to test whether the eight experimental groups are similarly composed in terms of gender and ideological beliefs and whether respondents are members of the ruling coalition or the opposition. These tests indeed support the expectation that the experimental groups are balanced, as only three differences (comparable to what

1 We are indebted to the Association of Flemish OCMW secretaries (De Vereniging van Vlaamse OCMW-secretarissen) and the Centre of Expertise for Municipal Secretaries (Expertisecentrum van Gemeentesecretarissen) for providing information on secretaries in municipalities and OCMWs in 2017. Data on the share of inhabitants with Arab descent was obtained from [www.npdata.be](http://www.npdata.be).

**Table 3.** Experimental Design

Imagine that you are part of the selection committee for a new secretary in your local government. You received a CV from the following applicant:

**Mark/Sofie/Mohammed/Fatimah** grew up in a socially disadvantaged neighborhood with two younger siblings and **his/her** parents. **He/she** is 38/55 years old, holds a master's degree in public administration, and has 7 years of experience in managing local government from another municipality.

1. How competent do you think the applicant is—based on the given information—to become your new secretary (0 [not at all] to 10 [very competent])? [labeled *Competence*]
2. To what extent do you think the applicant would be recognized as a representative of the public at large (0 [not at all] to 10 [very much so])? [labeled *Representative*]
3. To what extent would you support inviting an applicant with these qualifications for a job interview (0 [not at all] to 10 [very much so])? [labeled *Job interview*]

Note: Bold letters indicate experimental treatments.

should be expected by chance) across experimental groups are significant at the 0.1 level (see [table A1](#) in the appendix).

In all cases, the vignette was followed by the same three-item battery of questions. The items are included to tap into qualitatively different aspects of candidate evaluations. One item focuses on the respondents' assessment of applicant competence for the job, while a second item focuses on the representational aspect of public administration by asking about the extent to which the applicant should be recognized as a representative of the public at large. Finally, the last question concerns whether respondents would support inviting the applicant to a job interview. The three dependent variables all run from 0 to 10, with higher values corresponding to a more positive assessment of the candidate. Therefore, we expect a negative impact of our experimental treatments (minority group applicants, female applicants, older applicants) on all items. Descriptive statistics of the three items are presented in [table 4](#). We deliberately chose not to randomize the order of items because one of them logically preceded the others. It would be illogical to pose the applicant-competence question before the job interview question. The fixed order of items introduces the risk of item-order effects. We deal with this issue by testing for prior items in robustness tests.

### Analysis

[Table 5](#) presents the analysis of Hypotheses 1–3 in Models 1–3. Beginning with the top row of the table, we find mixed evidence in support of Hypothesis 1. Consistent with the hypothesis, there is a substantial negative effect of having an Arab name on being perceived as a representative of the public at large. However, respondents support inviting applicants with Arab names for job interviews just as often as applicants with traditional names, and they even consider them more competent.

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics for the Dependent Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Competence	7.25	1.52	0	10	1,688
Representative	5.95	2.06	0	10	1,670
Job interview	8.00	1.79	0	10	1,684

Note: The table contains descriptive statistics on respondents' perception of applicant competence (labeled "Competence"), the extent to which they consider the applicant representative of the public at large ("Representative"), and whether they would support inviting the applicant for a job interview ("Job interview").

Moving to Hypothesis 2, we find no evidence supporting the expectation that female candidates are assessed less favorably than their male counterparts. In fact, the empirical material even suggests a tendency for men to be discriminated against, as respondents are slightly more inclined to support inviting women than men for job interviews. Although statistically significant at the 0.1 level, the effect is weak in substantial terms since it corresponds to only around one-twelfth of a standard deviation in the dependent variable. Finally, the analysis lends considerable and consistent support across all three items to Hypothesis 3 about negative discrimination against older applicants. In all cases, 55-year-old applicants score around half a point lower on the 10-point scaled dependent variables than the 38-year-old applicants. Models 4–6 present a similar set of analyses but with controls for respondent gender, age, ethnicity, and the share of the population with an Arab name included. These analyses are based on fewer respondents than Models 1–3 due to missing values on the age variable. The controls do not change our results, thus indicating the robustness of our findings.

In conclusion, in contrast to age, the hypotheses about gender and ethnicity effects find little support in our data. As suggested in Hypotheses 4a and 4b, however, the average effects examined in [table 5](#) may cover



**Table 5.** Main Effects

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Competence	Representative	Job interview	Competence	Representative	Job interview
Applicant ethnicity (Arab = 1) (H1)	0.228** (.002)	-0.824** (.000)	0.018 (.833)	0.268** (.005)	-0.939** (.000)	0.021 (.848)
Applicant gender (Female = 1) (H2)	-0.022 (.759)	0.022 (.822)	0.147* (.088)	0.107 (.262)	0.127 (.307)	0.231* (.033)
Applicant age (55 years = 1) (H3)	-0.507** (.000)	-0.435** (.000)	-0.561** (.000)	-0.394** (.000)	-0.431** (.001)	-0.486** (.000)
Respondent ethnicity (Arab = 1)				0.704 (.159)	0.172 (.760)	-0.636 (.125)
Respondent gender (Female = 1)				-0.120 (.231)	-0.097 (.451)	-0.145 (.195)
Respondent age (years)				-0.009* (.025)	-0.004 (.444)	-0.015** (.003)
Percentage of municipal population with Arab background (2016)				-0.004 (.797)	0.056** (.000)	0.024* (.061)
Constant	7.395** (.000)	6.563** (.000)	8.193** (.000)	7.833** (.000)	6.890** (.000)	9.024** (.000)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.034	0.051	0.026	0.033	0.080	0.040
N	1,688	1,670	1,684	965	958	963

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients; *p* values in parentheses.  
\**p* < .10; \*\**p* < .05; \*\*\**p* < .01.

differences in effects between respondents with different ideological viewpoints. We study these hypotheses by means of interaction terms between candidate ethnicity and ideology, and candidate gender and ideology, respectively. Ideology is measured using a 5-point scale variable in which focus is on self-reported ideological position. The variable runs from 1 (strongly to the left) to 5 (strongly to the right).<sup>2</sup> Since self-reported ideology is not experimentally manipulated and more women than men in our sample report being left-wing, we control for respondent gender. Likewise, we include an interaction term between respondent gender and applicant gender in this analysis to account for potential own-gender bias, which is the empirically observed tendency of women to rate women higher than men and vice versa (Hoyt, Simon, and Reid 2009; Rudman and Goodwin 2004).<sup>3</sup> Finally, the ethnic composition of the municipality in which the job is to be filled is likely to affect the assessments of job applicants with

Arab origins. We, therefore, control for the percentage of the population in each municipality who are of Arab origin and include an interaction term between applicant ethnicity and the said percentage.

Table 6 and figures 1 and 2 present the findings.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis of Hypothesis 4a (reported in table 6) shows a similar pattern across all items, although at different magnitudes: The Arab candidate name treatment tends to have a more negative impact for right-wing than for left-wing politicians. Regarding competence, the difference in treatment effects is around 0.4 points on the 10-point scale between the respondents furthest to the left and furthest to the right. This difference in treatment effects is, however, statistically insignificant. For the representative and job interview variables, the difference in treatment effects for those furthest to the left and right is around 0.8 points on the dependent variable (both statistically significant with *p* = .023 and .018, respectively).

Furthermore, figure 1, in which treatment effects are presented by ideology, provides a more nuanced picture. For the competence variable, we find that left-wing politicians tend to favor people with Arab names, while the treatment has no statistically significant

2 Self-reported ideology was measured using the following question: "How would you describe your own political views on a left-right scale?" (response categories: 1: strongly to the left; 2: mostly to the left; 3: in the center; 4: mostly to the right; 5: strongly to the right).

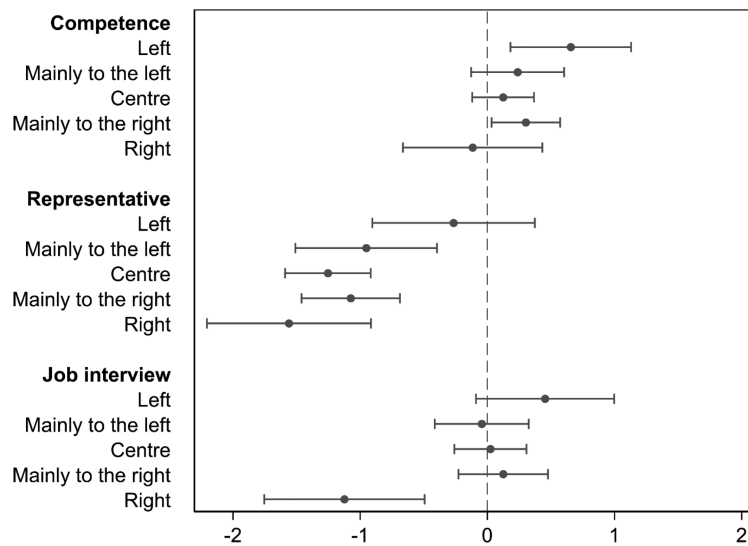
3 Similar interactions between applicant ethnicity/respondent ethnicity and applicant age/respondent age are less relevant for empirical reasons: first because of very limited variation in respondent ethnicity and, second, because including age is associated with a major drop in the number of cases. Robustness checks including these interactions can be found in the [supplementary material](#).

4 In the table, all interaction terms are included simultaneously. All effect sizes and significance levels are of similar magnitude to those presented in the table if the analysis is conducted as separate regressions in which only one interaction term is included in each.

**Table 6.** Interaction Analyses (Hypotheses 4a and 4b)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Competence	Representative	Job Interview
Applicant ethnicity (Arab = 1)	0.538** (.019)	-0.491 (.101)	0.510+ (.051)
Applicant gender (Female = 1)	0.177 (.433)	0.563+ (.053)	0.582* (.024)
Applicant age (55 years = 1)	-0.493** (.000)	-0.369** (.000)	-0.496** (.000)
Political ideology of respondent	-0.071 (.263)	-0.178* (.020)	-0.107 (.113)
Respondent gender (Female = 1)	-0.172 (.119)	0.017 (.905)	-0.106 (.419)
Percentage of municipal population with Arab background (2016)	-0.026 (.115)	0.009 (.543)	-0.018 (.297)
Applicant ethnicity × ideology (H4a)	-0.104 (.120)	-0.197* (.023)	-0.187* (.018)
Applicant gender × ideology (H4b)	-0.102 (.131)	-0.150+ (.085)	-0.137+ (.086)
Applicant ethnicity × percentage Arab background	0.023 (.274)	0.100** (.000)	0.043+ (.076)
Applicant gender × respondent gender	0.260+ (.082)	-0.168 (.202)	-0.056 (.751)
Constant	7.774** (.000)	7.026** (.000)	8.618** (.000)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.064	0.121	0.066
N	1,576	1,558	1,573

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients; *p* values in parentheses.  
 +*p* < .10; \**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01.



**Figure 1.** Marginal Effects of Arab Candidate Name by Respondent Ideology (Hypothesis H4a). Note: The figure depicts marginal effects of Arab candidate names for different levels of respondent ideology with 90% confidence intervals

impact among the politicians furthest to the right. Moving to the perception of representativeness, it is notable that all politicians except those furthest to the left tend to perceive candidates with Arab names as less representative of the public than those with traditional, Flemish-sounding names. Finally, those furthest to the right are considerably less inclined to invite applicants with Arab names to job interviews, while ideology has no significant impact for the remaining politicians. In conclusion, the analysis lends considerable support to the proposition that ideology matters to how politicians assess candidates of different ethnicity.

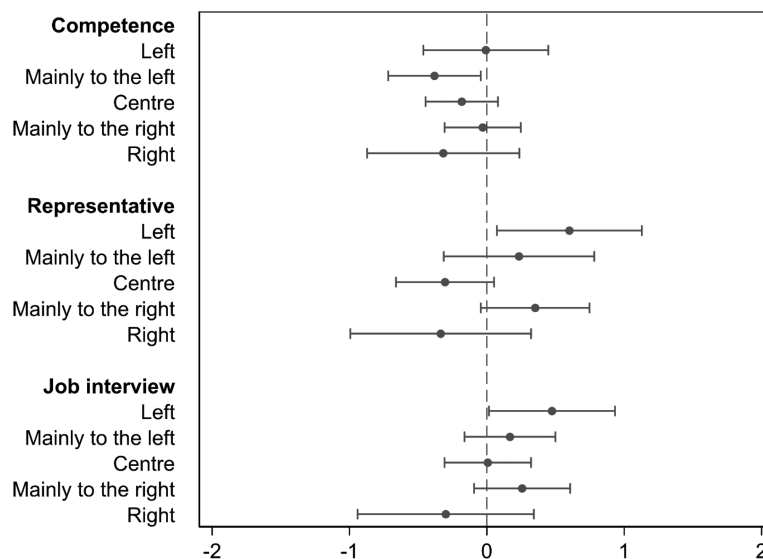
Moving to Hypothesis 4b, [table 6](#) and [figure 2](#) provide evidence that ideology also matters somewhat to how male and female candidates are evaluated, although to a lesser extent than for ethnicity. Although the analysis of the impact of candidate gender on perceptions of candidate competence shows a mixed picture ([figure 2](#)), the politicians furthest to the left are more inclined to perceive women as representative of the public at large and to support inviting them for job interviews than the politicians furthest to the right ( $p < .1$ , [table 6](#)).

Looking at the interaction term between the ethnic composition of the municipalities and applicant ethnicity, which was included for purposes of statistical control, we find that applicants with Arab backgrounds are perceived as being relatively more representative and that politicians are more likely to invite them for job interviews, the larger the share of the population with an Arab background. This is consistent with the

idea that politicians consider the bureaucratic representation of minority groups important and even more so if the minority group is of a substantial magnitude.

Finally, the interaction term between applicant gender and respondent gender is statistically significant in the analysis of candidate competence assessment and thus provides some evidence of own-gender bias among female respondents. While women and men alike tend to view the competence of female candidates as higher than that of males, this tendency is only statistically significant ( $p < .1$ ) for female respondents who view female candidates as 0.44 points more competent on average. This is consistent with previous research showing that women generally tend to like women more than men like men ([Rudman and Goodwin 2004](#)).

In addition to the analyses presented here, we ran a number of robustness checks (all reported in the [supplemental material](#)). In one specification, we used ordered logit regression to account for the categorical nature of our dependent variable. The results from the ordered logit regression are highly similar to those in the article, albeit slightly weaker in terms of statistical significance. Most importantly, the interaction hypotheses are now only statistically significant at the 0.1 level. Second, we replaced the self-reported ideology measure with one based on party affiliation (see the [supplementary material](#) for details on coding). This analysis produces highly similar results to those in the article for the interaction between applicant ethnicity and ideology. However, all of the interactions between applicant gender and ideology are insignificant using



**Figure 2.** Marginal Effects of Candidate Gender by Respondent Ideology (Hypothesis H4b). *Note:* The figure depicts marginal effects of candidate gender for different levels of respondent ideology with 90% confidence intervals

this specification. One possible interpretation is that the politicians' ideological beliefs are more closely aligned with the party line for ethnicity than gender issues. Third, we added controls for prior items by controlling for the competence variable in the analysis of the representative variable and by controlling for the competence and representativeness variables in the analysis focusing on the job interview variable. Neither of these robustness checks alter our main results in [table 5](#). A similar control is less feasible in [table 6](#) due to the strong correlation between self-reported ideology and the responses to the competence and representative items. In a fourth specification, we added interactions between candidate ethnicity/respondent ethnicity and candidate age/respondent age to control for own-group bias related to either ethnicity or age. All of our main findings except for the interaction between applicant gender and ideology (Hypothesis 4b) remain statistically significant at the same levels. Since the coefficient for the said interactions remains of the same magnitude to those reported in [table 6](#), the insignificant findings can be ascribed to increasing standard errors due to the significant reduction in sample size when including the age variable. In a fifth specification, we added controls for party affiliation (by including party dummies) to disentangle left-right ideology from party affiliation. This strengthens our findings somewhat, and the interaction between candidate ethnicity and ideology becomes statistically significant at the 0.1 level in the expected direction in the analysis of candidate competence. Likewise, the interaction between candidate gender and ideology becomes significant at the 0.05 level in the analysis of the representative item but insignificant in the analysis of the job interview item. In summary, our additional checks strongly support that our main effects as well as the analysis of Hypothesis 4a concerning the interaction between ideology and applicant ethnicity are robust to other specifications. The less strong finding concerning the interaction between candidate gender and ideology is also less robust to other specifications, although it finds some support in general.

### Discussion and Limitations

Our empirical study is based on a survey vignette experiment among Flemish local politicians, an approach which prioritizes high internal validity. However, our findings cannot be taken as evidence that discrimination against women and ethnic minorities does not take place at all, and the limitations of our study should therefore be discussed. First, discrimination is not necessarily limited to the assessment of job applications but may also show up in the actual job advertisements, in job interviews, or in-house promotions.

Second, the stylized nature of the experiment raises concerns about the extent to which the findings travel to real-world hiring processes. While easily accessible cues such as gender, age, and ethnicity may be even more important in real-world application situations, where employers have to screen massive numbers of applications, the importance of sociodemographic characteristics may be less pronounced in situations where such applicant characteristics are but one item of information among many submitted in each job application. Although we cannot provide any conclusion regarding this issue, it is noteworthy how the hiring discrimination literature has often documented discrimination using fictitious applications submitted to real-world job openings, suggesting that sociodemographic characteristics are also of relevance in real-world applications to job openings. Third, social desirability bias may skew our results toward more favorable assessments of women and ethnic minorities, although we consider this unlikely since we promised our respondents personal anonymity in the analysis and reporting of results. Moreover, social desirability is arguably likely to matter even more in actual hiring decision processes where politicians' actions are more conspicuous. We would, therefore, expect our survey to be less affected than real actions by such bias.

Furthermore, we do not experimentally manipulate political ideology. However, it is possible that both ideology and candidate assessments correlate with other personal characteristics, such as personal experiences with ethnic minorities (McLaren 2003; Pettigrew 1997). While political ideology is not directly manipulable, future research may consider ways to obtain better causal estimates of the moderating impact of ideology, for instance, by priming political motivation (e.g., James and Van Ryzin 2017) or manipulating the extent to which political ideology is salient to the job applied for (e.g., Baekgaard et al. 2017).

Relatedly, our data does not allow us to distinguish between different explanations of why political ideology matters. As discussed in the theoretical section, one explanation emphasizes the ideological beliefs of politicians while another focuses on rational cue-taking, where politicians actively seek to hire people with political ideologies similar to their own based on their sociodemographic profile. It is a point for future research to examine these explanations by, for instance, looking at the extent to which politicians take political cues from pictures or descriptions of candidates for top positions.

Another question concerns the extent to which findings generalize to other settings. Coming from a largely conservative and Roman Catholic region, Flemish local politicians might be expected to be relatively more skeptical toward women and immigrants than

politicians in less conservative settings. Conversely, previous research has provided evidence of ethnicity-based stereotypes and discrimination among public officials in very different settings, such as US state legislatures (Butler and Broockman 2011), Swedish municipalities (Adman and Jansson 2017), and South African municipalities (McClendon 2016). Also, as discussed in the review, evidence of discrimination in various hiring decisions in Flanders is relatively strong (Baert 2017). Compared with these results, our evidence of in particular ethnicity-based stereotypes is relative weak. While we cannot provide any further evidence on this question, we may speculate that the strong institutions supporting equal treatment in Flemish local government have actually reduced the importance of stereotypes in this particular setting.

Finally, our findings may not travel to candidates of all ages. We explicitly designed our experiment to limit the relevance of pregnancy and small children for the youngest age group. Our results would likely have been different—particularly for young women—had we used a younger age than 38 years as our youngest age category. In this respect, one possible avenue for future research would be to focus specifically on age and randomly assign ages in the span of, for instance, 30–60 years to allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of age on candidate assessment.

## Conclusion

Equal access to positions in public organizations is a core value in merit-based bureaucracies and should be particularly relevant to recruitment processes at the very top of politico-bureaucratic organizations. This article reports on how the gender, ethnicity, and age of applicants to top administrative positions matter to how they are assessed by their political council. We find evidence of discrimination against older applicants, while—contrary to our expectations—being either a woman or having an Arab name has a slightly positive main effect on how politicians assess competence and whether they would support inviting the applicant for a job interview. However, these patterns cover wide heterogeneity in treatments effects between politicians with different ideological viewpoints. Right-wing politicians tend to be significantly less positively affected than left-wing politicians by candidates having either a female or Arab name, and we even find that left-wing politicians significantly consider candidates with Arab names more competent than majority group candidates while, conversely, right-wing politicians consider candidates with Arab names significantly less representative and are significantly less inclined to invite them for job interviews.

Our findings have clear policy relevance as discrimination, equal opportunities, and equal representation

in the public sector are core concerns in Western democracies. In the Flemish case, this is illustrated by how the findings served as the basis for a parliamentary question in the Flemish Parliament, which focused on actions undertaken by the Flemish Regional Government to ensure equal representation in local government. Importantly, unequal bureaucratic representation also has real policy implications as demonstrated by recent research (Brunjes and Kellough Forthcoming). In this respect, an emerging question is: Which checks and balances are and/or can be put in place to avoid ideology-driven discrimination? Among the possible measures to reduce concerns about ideology-based hiring are standardized formal rules about hiring procedures that cannot be modified or replaced by the politicians who are later going to be served by top administrators. However, the value of introducing such standardized procedures should be weighed against the potential drawbacks of delimiting local autonomy in finding the ideal candidate.

Our article is one of the first to link the literature on discrimination within labor economics with the study of representative bureaucracy in public administration. Our findings therefore also have theoretical implications and are particularly relevant for studies of representative bureaucracy. Despite the significant thematic overlap with the literature on hiring discrimination, the literature on representative bureaucracy has proceeded without much consideration of the conditions giving rise to underrepresentation. We touch upon one of several possible conditions (less people with relevant skills among underrepresented groups, preference-based self-selection of underrepresented groups, and discrimination at other stages of the hiring process being three out of many other possibilities), namely discrimination in the assessment of job applications. Besides the policy relevance of this approach, it also opens an avenue for asking new questions of relevance to the literature on representative bureaucracy. Examples of these questions are: To what extent does discrimination matter to the composition of public organizations? How can the representativeness of sociodemographic groups be improved? What is the relative importance of discrimination compared with other conditions giving rise to underrepresentation? And how do these conditions matter to the composition of public organizations in terms of skills and attitudes and, in turn, to bureaucratic output? Related to the latter question, one hypothesis that is consistent with our findings could be that people tend to hire those who concur with their ideological opinions. One way to empirically examine this hypothesis would be to compare discriminatory hiring practices among politicians with discriminatory hiring practices among their top-level managers and lower levels of the organization.

The hypothesis would find support if the tendency to discriminate is significantly correlated across various levels of the organization.

Also noteworthy in relation to the representative bureaucracy literature is the finding of strong age discrimination. The representative bureaucracy literature typically focuses on the representation of either women or minority groups (e.g., Andrews and Miller 2013; Keiser et al. 2002; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Lavena 2014; Wilkins and Keiser 2006). However, this finding suggests that the representative bureaucracy literature might also benefit from broadening the scope to other sociodemographic characteristics. In this respect, representative bureaucracy scholars may find it helpful to consult the literature on hiring discrimination, since a number of sociodemographic characteristics have proven important to discrimination in this literature, including disability, religion, and union affiliation (Baert 2017). Finally, the findings add to the growing literature on partisan and ideological biases in political decision making (e.g., Baekgaard and Kjaergaard 2016; Baekgaard et al. 2017; Blom-Hansen et al. 2018; Demaj 2017; George et al. 2018; Nielsen and Moynihan 2017; Porter and Rogowski Forthcoming; Sheffer et al. 2017) by emphasizing how ideological biases also matter beyond purely political decisions for more organizational matters.

## Supplementary material

Supplementary data are available at *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* online.

## Appendix

**Table A1.** Balance Test

Treatment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ideology	2.97*	3.07	3.03	3.07	3.09	3.10	3.31*	3.22
Gender	0.33	0.36	0.38	0.35	0.38	0.40	0.32	0.39
Member of ruling coalition	0.63	0.62	0.65	0.66	0.70+	0.62	0.64	0.61

*Note:* Entries are means. Tests of statistical significance were conducted by regressions/logistic regressions, where means for each treatment on each variable were compared with the average for all other treatments combined.

\* $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

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