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# Public opinion towards female political leadership in the European Union

## An empirical study of trust in female and male political representatives in 28 European states

Master Thesis

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite the fact that women's representation in national parliaments and executives is increasing, female political representatives still constitute a minority, especially in high-level positions. The literature argues that gender stereotypes influence the perception of female political representatives who consequently face a disadvantage in politics. This thesis explores the factors that affect public opinion on female leadership in the European Union (EU). Using the Eurobarometer data on public opinion covering the 28 EU member states, I conduct a multiple linear regression analysis to investigate the effect of four individual level-factors (i.e., gender, age, education and profession), and three country-level factors (i.e., masculine culture, religion and communist legacy) on net female trust. The results suggest that female gender, education and masculine culture positively affect trust in female political representatives, while communist legacy produces a negative effect. Moreover, I discover that the EU public opinion favors female over male political representatives. Finally, by comparing the level of trust in female and male political representatives, I find that the great majority of respondents have egalitarian attitudes as they equally trust male and female leaders. These findings challenge the burgeoning literature on female leadership and have important implications for the study of public opinion, gender and political leadership in the EU.

*Keywords:* public opinion, female leadership, gender, political representatives, trust, EU.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The recognition of women's ability to govern and hold leadership positions has been growing in recent decades. Women's representation in national parliaments and executives has increased worldwide and has challenged what used to be considered a male domain. In Europe, countries like Germany, France, Great Britain and the European Union (EU) itself, all feature prominent female political leaders. Also, political parties from across the ideological spectrum have improved women's representation in their team. Though the number of women in political office has significantly increased, "gender equality in political leadership remains the exception rather than the rule" (O'Brien, 2019, 465). Female political representatives still constitute a minority, especially in high-level positions. Gender stereotypes associated with the competences and abilities of male and female politicians remain widespread (O'Brien, 2019). The concept of leadership itself is inherently associated with a male gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002) because for decades men have overly occupied political leadership's positions (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). Considering the recent trends as well as the intermingled nature of gender and leadership, it is essential to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that affect the public opinion on female leadership in the EU. This thesis attempts to answer the research question: which individual and country-level factors account for a variation of public opinion towards male and female political representatives across the EU?

Existing scholar works have examined how gender prejudice influences the perception of female leaders. Others have focused on the effect of women's presence in parliaments and ministries on the belief in women's ability to govern. Research on gender stereotypes and voter's perception suggests that female candidates face a disadvantage in politics due to gender prejudices (Bauer, 2015; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lawless, 2004; Simon & Hoyt, 2008). While more recent research indicates that there is no evidence regarding voters' preferences for male candidates (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). Yet, the majority of scholars direct little or no attention to the public opinion towards female leadership in terms of trust in both women and men political representatives, as the focus is usually limited to female leaders. To fill this gap, I propose a new variable called 'net female trust' which allows me to compare the level of trust in female and male political representatives. Moreover, the individual and country-level factors that affect the perception of leaders remain understudied. To fully understand what determines the perception of female political leadership, I investigate the effect of four individual level-factors (i.e., gender, age, education and profession), and three country-level factors (i.e.,

masculine culture, religion and communist legacy) on net female trust. Regarding the scope of the empirical analysis, most studies have almost exclusively been single country (usually the United States), while this research offers a cross-national analysis of EU countries.

Using the Eurobarometer data covering the 28 EU member states, I find that women show more support for female politicians than do men due to the gender affinity effect (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Dolan, 2008; Herrnson, Lay & Stokes, 2003). Education is also a factor which influences the public opinion as middle-educated and high-educated respondents have more trust in women leaders. At the country-level, there is a significant difference between countries with and without a communist legacy as being post-communist negatively impacts the trust in female leaders. Also, in countries with a masculine culture, the trust in female leaders is higher than in countries with a feminine culture. In addition to these findings, this thesis uncovers two interesting patterns which have remained largely unobserved. First, European citizens have more trust in women to represent their political interests. Second, in the EU the public opinion towards female political leadership seems to be egalitarian and in favor of gender equality.

This research thesis is organized into five sections. I begin by reviewing and reflecting upon the existing literature on gender and political leadership. Based on this theoretical background, I develop the hypotheses of this study. Following, I outline and justify the research design including data and methodological approach. The following section presents and analyzes the empirical results obtained from the descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Afterwards, I interpret the results and discuss their implication with respect to the scholarly work introduced in the literature review. Finally, I summarize the main findings and offer some suggestions for future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on female leadership has prominently expanded in the last decades because of a continuous increase in the election and appointment of women in political positions. Although the literature covers a wide variety of research and theories, this review focuses on two major topics which emerge repeatedly throughout the literature reviewed. These include the gender prejudice against female leaders (Bauer, 2015, 2017, 2018; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, &

Ristikari, 2011; Lawless, 2004; Simon & Hoyt, 2008 Schwindt-Bayer & Reyes-Housholder, 2017) and the gender affinity effect (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Beauregard, 2016; Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Dolan, 2008; Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003; Liu & Banaszak, 2017). Although the literature presents these themes in a multiplicity of contexts, this review primarily focuses on their application to public opinion. At the end of the section, I justify my focus on individual and country-level factors of public opinion towards male and female political representatives and develop my hypotheses based on the literature.

### *2.1. Gender prejudice towards female leaders*

As presented above, a first body of theories on public opinion towards female leadership is largely focused on gender prejudice. The theoretical framework which seeks to explain the differences and similarities between men and women in social behavior is the social role theory (Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000). What it claims is that each gender is associated with specific expectations or norms of what a social group can and should do. Such contrasting distribution of expectations about male and female behaviors shapes the gender role. Eagly, Wood & Diekman (2000) define gender roles as shared expectancies related to the socially identified gender of individuals. They include two types of expectations called descriptive and injunctive norms. The former includes the shared expectations about what people actually do, while the latter indicates the expectations of what people ideally should do (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). As a consequence, men and women accommodate to these social roles by pursuing role-related skills. For instance, in view of a domestic division of labor, girls learn how to cook and sew while boys learn skills for a future job in the paid economy. This gives rise to a distinction between communal and agentic characteristics. In other words, stemming from the domestic female role, women are associated with communal behavior focused on the wellbeing of other people. Women are thus seen as having strong interpersonal and communication skills. On the other hand, men's adaptation to the employment role favors a pattern of association with agentic behaviors, including being more assertive and independent. What emerges from this psychological process of association is the creation of gender stereotypes related to gender-typical occupational roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000). Moreover, the "sex segregation of the labor force" sets in motion a mechanism for which perceivers associate a set of typical skills to each gender from observing the type of job that is most commonly undertaken by either men or women (Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000, 467). Such association is consistent with the agentic attributes of the male gender role and the communal

traits of the female gender role. Thus, the fact that more men are employed in jobs that involve agentic behavior leads to the incorporation of the stereotypic of men into a male gender role. This in turn creates expectations which act as normative pressure and foster behavior coherent with gender-typical work roles (Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000).

Based on these assumptions, Eagly and Karau (2002) elaborate a "role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders" which explains why people are inclined to view women as less qualified than men for leadership positions. What they argue is that leadership roles are commonly perceived in masculine agentic terms. Thus, since women are associated with communal characteristics, people tend to view them as less suitable than men to become leaders. In other words, there is an incongruity between the social expectations of the leadership role and the feminine gender role (Koenig et al., 2011). Indeed, in their findings these scholars show that respondents, both men and women, have a less favorable attitude towards female leaders than towards male leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The social role theory explains also why voters associate different stereotypical characteristics and policy preferences to male and female political representatives. Voters tend to perceive female politicians with communal characteristics, such as empathetic, people-oriented, willing to compromise and more focused on policies related to education, family, and women's issues. On the contrary, voters view male politicians as having more agentic characteristics, such as more decisive, better leaders and better able to manage crises, defense, and foreign policy issues. In either case, the policy expertise and qualities associated with men are linked to the public sphere, while those associated with women stem from the traditional sphere of the family (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Dolan 2010; Lawless, 2004; Simon & Hoyt, 2008). Gender stereotypes influence the perception of voters who evaluate political representatives based on the expected competences and skills inherent to their gender. According to the feminine stereotype, women are perceived as less qualified than men to perform roles requiring agentic traits. This influences voters who refuse to view women candidates as having the required skills and policy expertise to become political leaders due to a "crucial mismatch" between the stereotypical female characteristics and the typical skills attributed to a politician. Hence, such role incongruity inevitably creates a disadvantage for female political candidates (Bauer, 2015; Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lawless, 2004; Simon & Hoyt, 2008).

Moreover, based on the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders, Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra (2006) found that female candidates are generally considered less qualified than men in masculine and gender-neutral working environments. Yet, they are considered to be as effective as male candidates in feminine environments which are more compatible with the feminine gender role. Moreover, the authors studied the individual-level factors which account for a different construal of female leaders, namely, gender and age. What they found is that male and younger respondents showed less prejudice against the female candidate than did female and older respondents. To explain this counterintuitive finding, they argued that the low percentage of women in leadership positions reinforces the stereotypical image, especially for women, that men are more suitable than women to become leaders (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006).

Yet, a recent and innovative study which investigates the effect of the gender of political party leaders on how voters evaluate them seems to contradict the existing theories on gender prejudices faced by women in politics (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). Interestingly, Bridgewater & Nagel (2020) found that voters judge female party leaders in a more positive way than male ones. Moreover, at the individual-level of analysis, respondents from both sexes tend to view female leaders more favorably than male leaders. This implies that, given the gendered nature of the political environment, voters acknowledge the differences based on gender of political candidates, but there is no evidence regarding voters' preferences for male candidates (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020).

### *2.2. Gender affinity effect*

The most common individual-level factor used to investigate public opinion towards female leaders is the gender of respondents. Several studies which include this variable found that female respondents evaluate female leaders more positively than their male counterparts (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Beauregard, 2016; Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). In literature, this phenomenon is recurrent, and it is refereed as "gender affinity effect". In other words, female respondents have a preference for female candidates (Dolan, 2008). The literature highlights three main reasons which explain this effect. First, a feeling of group solidarity may lead women to support female candidates because of a feeling of demographic identification with a candidate of the same gender. Second, since women are still underrepresented in the political arena, female voters may seek descriptive representations by

supporting female candidates. Third, recalling the social role theory, voters tend to see female candidates as more suited to deal with issues such as child-care, abortion and welfare. Thus, since women voters attribute greater importance to these issues, they will vote for female candidates (Dolan, 2008; Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003).

Moreover, other studies focused on the effect of women's leadership positions on political attitudes claim that the presence of female political leaders has a stronger positive impact on women rather than on men respondents (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Beauregard, 2016; Liu & Banaszak, 2017). These scholars argue that women's descriptive representation has a symbolic effect especially on women (Alexander, 2012). Alexander & Jalalzai (2016) evaluated how the presence of a female executive affects the acceptance of female leaders at the country-level. Their evidence supports the symbolic effects of female leaders, particularly for female respondents, and the gender affinity effect.

Likewise, the increase of women in legislatures affects the belief in women's ability to govern (Alexander, 2012, 2015; Beauregard, 2016; O'Brien, 2019). Alexander (2012) assessed whether the rise of women in parliament has a symbolic effect on women's support for their ability to govern. In her findings, the author highlights a positive mutual relationship between the increased presence of women in parliaments and the beliefs in women's governing ability, especially for female respondents, younger respondents, and university respondents. This implies that the increased percentage of female political representatives in parliament improves women's trust in women's ability to govern (Alexander, 2012). Yet, the research of Schwindt-Bayer & Reyes-Housholder (2017) shows that in Brazil "the presence and novelty of a hypothetical female executive boosts women's symbolic representation, measured as approval of the governor, but presence without novelty was more important for men" (Schwindt-Bayer & Reyes-Housholder, 2017, 17). Thus, the increased presence of female executive produces symbolic effects for both female and male respondents in terms of trust in female political leaders.

Finally, several studies have been conducted to assess how women holding government positions can potentially influence citizens with respect to political attitudes, engagement, and activity (Beauregard, 2016; Liu & Banaszak, 2017). Such studies yield similar results, namely that women legislators and ministers have similar role model effects in inspiring female respondents to engage in politics. Hence, women are more susceptible than men to the symbolic

effects of the increased number of female political representatives on their political engagement and involvement (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Liu & Banaszak, 2017).

### *2.3. Individual and country-level factors of public opinion*

Some studies explore individual-level variables because individual variances in social perceivers can influence the perception of female leaders (Alexander, 2012; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006). Still, other moderators are likely to influence the public opinion on female leaders and, as noted by Eagly & Karau (2002), cultural variations can provide further insights. Other studies compare cross-countries attitudes towards women's political leadership and shed light on the strong impact of political culture on the public opinion towards female leaders (Alexander, 2012; Banaszak 2006; Norris & Inglehart, 2000). Yet, the majority of the above-mentioned scholars direct little or no attention to individual-level and country-level factors that explain a variation of trust towards male and female political representatives. Moreover, while they apply a macro-level approach to study the public opinion on female leadership, the micro-level trends in attitudes and behavior remain understudied. So far, empirical investigations do not thoroughly investigate the variation of public opinion towards female leadership in terms of trust in both women and men as political representatives. Significant studies focus on related behaviors and investigate the effect of women's presence in parliaments and ministries on political attitudes, engagement and participation. Moreover, existing female leadership theories emphasize the role of gender stereotypes to explain the perception of female leaders. However, the individual-level and country-level factors that affect the public opinion on female and male leaders remain understudied. Regarding the scope of the empirical analysis, most studies focus on the United States or on a single country while cross-national analysis is lacking. Finally, as the majority of studies focus exclusively on female leaders, there is a gap in the comparison of public opinion for both male and female political representatives, fostering calls in the literature for more in-depth analysis.

My contribution to the state of the literature is to offer a comparison of the public opinion towards both female and male political representatives by using a new variable called 'net female trust' which measures respondents' difference in the level of trust in female and male political representatives. Based on the identified literature gaps, my research investigates the factors which account for the variation in public opinion towards female political leadership by conducting a cross-national analysis in the European Union. In particular, it tackles both

individual-level – gender, age, education and profession – and country-level factors – feminine/masculine culture, religion and communist legacy. Ultimately this study attempts to answer the research question: which individual and country-level factors account for a variation of public opinion towards male and female political representatives across the EU?

At this point, based on the theory and literature reviewed, I derive the hypotheses which are examined in this study. According to the burgeoning literature, the effect of the variable *gender* of respondents on trust in female leaders rests on the assumption of the social role theory that men typically have a more masculine and agentic perception of leadership than women do. Thus, they support female leaders less than women do (Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Simon & Hoyt, 2008). Likewise, female respondents are more likely to exhibit the gender affinity effect and thus, they will be more supportive of female candidates (Dolan, 2008). Women are also more susceptible than men to the symbolic effects of the increased number of female political representatives on their engagement in politics (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Liu & Banaszak, 2017). Yet, there are important exceptions which highlight that the opinion on the performance of a female candidate is the same for both male and female respondents (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). Additionally, another study shows that women tend to view female candidates as less qualified for leadership positions than men do (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006). Overall, literature offers more evidence in favor of the assumption that women's trust on female candidates is higher than men's. I therefore suggest the following hypothesis:

*$H_1$: Female respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than male respondents.*

Regarding the variable *age* of respondents, there is evidence that it influences the perception of female leaders. Older people are assumed to have a more traditional construal of the female gender role, while younger people tend to support more gender equality (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Inglehart & Norris, 2003a). In particular, empirical research finds that millennials and generation Z are most likely to hold strong egalitarian views (Scarborough & Risman, 2019). In postindustrial societies, younger generations have received different formative and social experiences than the older generations. The continuous development of gender roles, such as the access of more women into higher education, is expected to have changed the norms regarding the social role of

women in the public sphere and the eligibility of female candidates for elected offices (Inglehart & Norris, 2003a). Thus, my second hypothesis states:

*$H_2$: Young respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than old respondents.*

Another relevant individual-level variable is *education*. The literature suggests that the symbolic effect of the increased number of women in parliaments on the trust in women's governing ability is stronger for university respondents (Alexander, 2012). Thus, in my research I study the effect of education on the public opinion towards female and male political representatives assuming that:

*$H_3$: High-educated respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than low-educated respondents.*

Finally, the socio-professional context of respondents may influence their level of trust in female leaders. The variable *profession* is not commonly used in the literature reviewed. However, the study conducted by Eagly & Karau (2002) shows that male managers perceive their female counterparts as successful as male managers are. Thus, I am interested in investigating whether the level of trust changes depending on the profession, assuming that:

*$H_4$: Respondents employed in high-skilled profession have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than those employed in low-skilled professions.*

In addition to the individual-level variables, I study three country-level variables: masculine culture, religion and communist legacy. I derive the variable *masculine culture* from Hofstede (2011) cultural dimensions theory. The scholar argues that the dimension "masculinity/femininity" is a societal rather than individual characteristic which is related to the division of roles and values between men and women. In feminine countries, there is a "minimum social role differentiation between the genders" as they both have the same values (Hofstede, 2011, 12). On the contrary, in masculine countries, there is a strong social role differentiation as men are perceived and expected to be assertive and ambitious while women should be modest and caring. To the best of my knowledge, this variable has never been used in the empirical research on female leadership, however, I include it in my study because it is related to the social role theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000). More

specifically, it allows me to detect whether countries with stronger descriptive and injunctive norms on gender roles will have a lower level of net female trust (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000). Moreover, evidence shows that the percentage of women in elected political positions is higher in feminine rather than masculine countries (Hofstede, 2011). Therefore, I would expect that effect on public opinion to be the following:

*$H_5$: Countries with a feminine culture have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than countries with a masculine culture.*

Second, whether countries have a religious or secular culture is relevant to the level of net trust in women as political leaders. Indeed, a broad literature suggests that "religion is a primary agent of gender role socialization" (Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016, 8) and exerts a major influence over people's attitudes and perceptions of gender roles (Alexander, 2012; Inglehart & Norris, 2003b). In particular, evidence shows that all religious faiths associate women with traditional and subordinate roles, thus having a negative implication for trust in female leaders (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016). On the other hand, secularization is associated with a rising tendency of gender equality in politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2003b; Norris & Inglehart, 2000). Therefore, I propose the following hypothesis:

*$H_6$: Countries with a secular culture have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than countries with a religious culture.*

The third and last country-level variable is *communist legacy*. Here, the literature shows an ambiguous relation with the acceptance of women as political leaders. On the one hand, Eastern European communist countries were leading examples of gender equality as they encouraged women to enter the workforce in order to rapidly achieve industrialization. Also, these countries showed high numbers of women in parliaments. In fact, scholars suggest that a communist legacy may yield a positive influence on the trust in women's ability to govern (Alexander, 2012; Banaszak 2006). On the other hand, after the fall of communism, those countries experienced the rise of an antifeminist political culture with the end of quotas for women and a dramatic fall in the percentage of female members of parliament (Alexander, 2012). Furthermore, a study conducted by Norris & Inglehart (2000) highlights that post-communist countries display more traditional attitudes towards female leadership (Inglehart & Norris, 2003a; Norris & Inglehart, 2000). Overall, I interpreted this ambiguous effect as:

*$H_7$: Countries with a communist legacy have lower net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than countries without a communist legacy.*

Finally, the literature suggests that the effect of individual-level variables may vary across countries. Thus, I derive three hypotheses on the interaction effect between individual and country-level variables. According to Norris & Inglehart (2000), the distribution of attitudes towards women's leadership among generations varies according to the type of country. Notably, they notice that in post-industrial countries younger generations have far more egalitarian attitudes than older generations. However, this difference is minimal or absent in post-communist and developing countries (Inglehart & Norris, 2003a; Norris & Inglehart, 2000). This study suggests that the effect of respondents' age on net trust in female leaders is different across countries. Thus, my hypothesis takes into account the interaction effects as:

*$H_8$: The effect of age is smaller in countries with a communist legacy.*

Based on an initial inspection of the data, I test for an interaction effect between gender and communist legacy. I assume that the general display of more traditional attitudes towards female leadership in post-communist countries (Inglehart & Norris, 2003a; Norris & Inglehart, 2000) reinforces the social role theory's assumption that men will trust female representatives less than women do because of a more masculine and agentic perception of leadership (Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Simon & Hoyt, 2008). I therefore propose the following hypothesis:

*$H_9$: The effect of gender is greater in countries with a communist legacy.*

A different deductive reasoning applies to the effect of gender in countries with a masculine culture. Here, I am interested in assessing whether the gender affinity effect (Dolan, 2008) has a different weight across countries. My intuitive hypothesis is that in masculine cultures women can try to compensate the strong social norms about the gender role (Hofstede, 2011) by being more trustworthy of female leaders. Thus, motivated by an initial inspection of the data, I expect countries with a masculine culture to exhibit a stronger gender affinity effect (Dolan, 2008), assuming that:

*$H_{10}$: The effect of gender is greater in countries with a masculine culture.*

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this section, I explain the research design of this study. First, I present the datasets from which I derive my data. Then, I define and operationalize my dependent and independent variables. Finally, I present the methodology used for the data analysis.

### *3.1. Data collection*

To explore the individual and country-level factors which account for a variation in public opinion towards female political leadership across Europe, I rely upon the survey of the Special Eurobarometer 465 on Gender Equality published in 2017 (European Commission, 2017), which is included in the Eurobarometer 87.4 (European Commission, 2019). The survey was conducted between the 13th and the 26th of June 2017 by the TNS opinion and social network in the 28 Member States of the European Union as of 2017. This means that the United Kingdom is considered a EU member state. Data were collected from 28,093 respondents from different demographic and social backgrounds who were interviewed face-to-face at home in their mother tongue. The correspondent dataset is retrieved from GESIS Data Archive (European Commission, 2019).

Moreover, I supplement this dataset with data on masculine culture, religion and communist legacy retrieved from different sources. Specifically, I rely upon the indicators of the website Hofstede Insights (www.hofstede-insights.com) to derive data on masculine culture. This database provides values for the 6 dimensions encompassed in Hofstede (2011) cultural dimensions theory, including masculinity, for each country in the world. I manually create the dataset by searching for and entering the value of masculinity for each single EU country. Notably, data about Cyprus are missing.

In addition, I collect data on religion from the Special Eurobarometer 341 on Biotechnology (European Commission, 2010). This report correlates people's attitudes to new technologies with various individual-level variables, including their religious belief. Data were collected from 26,671 respondents and then aggregated at the country-level into percentages of citizens per country who believe in God (European Commission, 2010; Sägesser et al., 2018). This Eurobarometer survey was commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate General for Research and carried out by TNS opinion and social network between the 29th of January

and the 17th of February 2010 (European Commission, 2010). Again, I manually enter the aggregated data for each EU country.

Finally, for the variable *communist legacy*, I rely upon a comparative dataset outlined by Armingeon & Careja (2004), which collects political and institutional data for 28 post-communist countries from 1989 to 2004. Indeed, I derive from it the list of the post-communist countries within the EU and manually create the dataset for this variable by differentiating the countries with a communist legacy from the countries without it.

***Dependent variable***

My dependent variable is the public opinion towards female leadership which is defined as trust in a female/male political representative (European Commission, 2017). To measure it, I use the survey questions QC9 and QC10 of the Special Eurobarometer 465 which respectively state: "Do you think that a female political representative can represent your interests?" and "Do you think that a male political representative can represent your interests?" (European Commission, 2019, 23). Respondents could select different response categories from 1 (yes, totally) to 4 (no, not at all) with 5 meaning 'don't know' (European Commission, 2019). In order to operationalize it, I firstly recode the responses so that 4 corresponds to full trust and 1 corresponds to no trust. Moreover, I remove the observations 'don't know' as they are not providing any relevant information for this research. Then, I create a new variable called 'net female trust' which measures the level of trust in female leaders minus the trust in male leaders. In this way, positive scores indicate higher trust in female leaders, negative scores suggest higher trust in male leaders and 0 corresponds to equal level of trust in both male and female representatives. The variable's range is standardized on a scale -3–3.

***Individual-level variables***

At this point, two sets of independent variables – i.e., individual-level and country-level – are defined and operationalized.

The first step of the analysis consists in examining how the individual variances in social perceivers can influence the opinion on female and male political representatives. This aspect is covered by the first set of hypotheses presented above ($H_1$, $H_2$, $H_3$ and $H_4$). I thus select 4 individual-level variables from the demographic and social characteristics included in the

Special Eurobarometer 465 survey: gender, age, education and profession. First, *gender* of respondents is a binary variable, and it is coded 1 for male and 0 for female (European Commission, 2019).

Second, *age* of respondents is measured in years since birth. Following the classification of generations proposed by McCrindle & Wolfinger (2010), I recode age into categories. The categorization includes generation Z (from 15 to 22 years old); generation Y or millennials (from 23 to 37 years old); generation X (from 38 to 52 years old); baby boomers (from 53 to 71 years old); and builders (over 72 years old) (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2010).

Third, to assess the *educational background*, respondents were asked at what age they stopped full-time education (European Commission, 2019). I recode this variable into three categories: low education ($x < 15$), medium education ($16 < x < 20$) and high education ($x > 21$). Moreover, respondents who are still studying are assigned to one of the three categories based on their age. Also, I remove refusals and unclear answers from the analysis.

Last, respondents' *profession* is operationalized as a categorical variable. The Eurobarometer's survey presents 18 professions, which are grouped and coded in the following six operational categories: low-skilled professions include unskilled manual workers, farmers, fishermen and people responsible for ordinary shopping and looking after the home. Then, medium-skilled professions include skilled manual workers, employed positions, supervisors, and owners of a shop, craftsmen, etc. Finally, high-skilled professions include managers, other white collars (i.e., lawyers, etc.), employed professionals (i.e., employed doctors, etc.) and business proprietors. Such categorization is inspired by the ILO's categories of occupation based on skill level (International Labor Organization, 2015). Moreover, I include students, unemployed, and retired as separate categories (European Commission, 2019).

### *3.2. Country-level variables*

The second step of my research analysis consists in incorporating the variables which account for a cross-country variation in public opinion towards female political leadership as described by hypotheses $H_5$, $H_6$ and $H_7$. The Eurobarometer dataset offers a cross-sectional sample of the 28 Member States of the European Union which allows for a country-level analysis (European Commission, 2017). Moreover, my model includes three additional variables, namely masculine culture, religioun and communist legacy.

The variable *masculine culture* is defined as a societal characteristic related to the division of roles and values between sexes, whereby there is a strong social role differentiation and asymmetry (Hofstede, 2011). To measure it, I rely upon the indicators of the website Hofstede Insights (www.hofstede-insights.com) which provides a percentage of the estimated rate of masculinity for each country in the world. From such dataset, I select only the EU countries. The values range from 1 to 100. To interpret them, if the value is smaller than 50 ($x < 50$), it means the country has a prevalent feminine culture; while if it is larger than 50 ($x > 50$), then the country has a dominant masculine culture (Hofstede Insights).

Moreover, the variable *religion* is defined as the percentage of citizens per country who believe in God (European Commission, 2010; Sägesser et al., 2018). I retrieve the data from the Special Eurobarometer 341 on Biotechnology which presents national percentages of religious belief. Countries with a percentage above 50% are considered to have a religious culture; on the other hand, countries with a percentage that does not exceed 50% are considered to have a secular culture (European Commission, 2010).

Finally, the variable *communist legacy* measures whether countries are post-communist or not (Alexander, 2012). It is interpreted as a binary variable where countries with a communist legacy are coded 1 and all others 0. This information is retrieved from a comparative dataset for 28 post-communist countries in Europe (Armingeon & Careja, 2004) from which I only select the countries which are part of the EU.

### *3.3. Data analysis*

The strategy I choose to make valid causal inferences from this large-N observational data is conditioning. In order to isolate the relationship I am interested in studying from the influence of possible confounding factors, I include those factors into my analysis (Toshkov, 2016). My control variables are going to be the individual-level explanatory variables presented above, because the estimation of the effect of a single variable on net female trust – i.e., gender – is conditional on all the other individual-level variables in the model. In this way I can "condition on potential confounding variables" (Toshkov, 2016, 220). The reason why my control variables are studied as explanatory variables is that I am particularly interested in estimating their effect on net female trust.

The hypotheses presented above involve the analysis and interaction of two levels: individual and country-level. The reason why I choose to include in my research both levels is to avoid the so-called Simpson's paradox, which arises when the inference at the individual and aggregate level yield different results (Toshkov, 2016). In other words, considering only aggregate-level data conceals important information and can lead to incorrect conclusions. For this reason, including individual-level variables in observational studies is extremely relevant to uncover hidden trends (Baker & Kramer, 2001). Therefore, in order to describe variation at both levels, I utilize a multilevel model of analysis to estimate the causal effect of each explanatory variable on the respondents' trust in male and female political representatives at each level of aggregation. This is possible by employing three multiple linear regression (ordinary least squares) models (Agresti & Franklin, 2013; Halman & Draulans, 2006; Toshkov, 2016).

The first set of hypotheses (*$H_1$, $H_2$, $H_3$* and *$H_4$*) posits that individual-level characteristics – i.e., gender, age, education and profession – have a causal effect on the respondents' public opinion on female leadership. Notably, I expect the coefficient of age to be negative and statistically significant, while the coefficients of female gender, education and profession to be positive and statistically significant (Toshkov, 2016). To test these individual-level hypotheses, I use the first model of multiple linear regression analysis which predicts the causal relationship between the dependent variable (net female trust) and the four individual-level variables (Agresti & Franklin, 2013; Liu & Banaszak, 2017; O'Brien, 2019).

$$(\text{Net female trust}_{i)} = \beta_o + \mathbf{\beta_1\ (Gender}_{\boldsymbol{i}}\mathbf{)} + \mathbf{\beta_2\ (Age}_{\boldsymbol{i}}\mathbf{)} + \mathbf{\beta_3\ (Education}_{\boldsymbol{i}}\mathbf{)} + \mathbf{\beta_4\ (Profession}_{\boldsymbol{i}}\mathbf{)} + e_i$$

Moreover, the second set of hypotheses (*$H_5$*, *$H_6$* and *$H_7$)* suggests a causal relationship between the three country-level variables and respondents' trust in male and female political representatives. Specifically, I expect the coefficients of masculinity, religion and communist legacy to be negative and statistically significant (Toshkov, 2016). To investigate the interaction of these variables with net female trust, the second model adds them to the regression analysis (Agresti & Franklin, 2013; Liu & Banaszak, 2017; O'Brien, 2019).

$$(\text{Net female trust}_{ij)} = \beta_o + \beta_1\ (\text{Gender}_i) + \beta_2\ (\text{Age}_i) + \beta_3\ (\text{Education}_i) + \beta_4\ (\text{Profession}_i) + \\ + \mathbf{\beta_5\ (Masculinity}_{\boldsymbol{j}}\mathbf{)} + \mathbf{\beta_6\ (Religion}_{\boldsymbol{j}}\mathbf{)} + \mathbf{\beta_7\ (Communist\ legacy}_{\boldsymbol{j}}\mathbf{)} + e_{ij}$$

In addition, a third model analyzes a cross-level interaction between individual and country-level variables as outlined in hypotheses $H_8$, $H_9$ and $H_{10}$ (Liu & Banaszak, 2017). The model estimates whether two individual-level variables – gender and age – produce different effects across countries (Agresti & Franklin, 2013). In this case, the coefficient of age is expected to be smaller and statistically significant in countries with a communist legacy; while the coefficient of gender is expected to be greater and statistically significant in countries with a communist legacy and in countries with a masculine culture (Toshkov, 2016).

$$\begin{aligned}(\text{Net female trust}_{ij}) = {} & \beta_o + \beta_1 (\text{Gender}_i) + \beta_2 (\text{Age}_i) + \beta_3 (\text{Education}_i) + \beta_4 (\text{Profession}_i) + \\ & + \boldsymbol{\beta_8 (\text{Age}_i) * (\text{Communist legacy}_j)} + \boldsymbol{\beta_9 (\text{Gender}_i) * (\text{Communist legacy}_j)} + \\ & + \boldsymbol{\beta_{10} (\text{Gender}_i) * (\text{Masculinity}_j)} + e_{ij}\end{aligned}$$

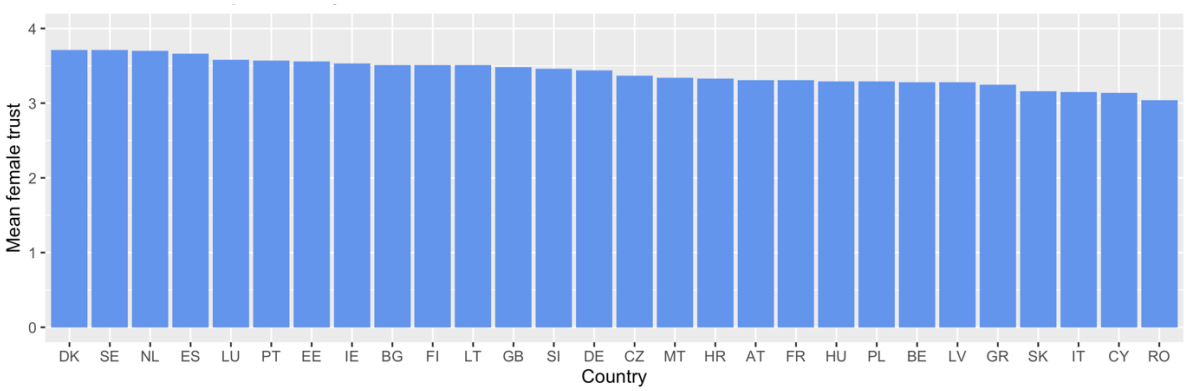
## 4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

In this section, I present and analyze the empirical results of my research. First, I conduct a preliminary analysis using descriptive statistics in order to show the trend in public opinion on female leadership across EU countries, and the correlation between the dependent variable – net female trust – and the four individual-level explanatory variables. Following, I display the results of the three models of multiple regression analysis and discuss them *vis-à-vis* my hypotheses.

### *4.1. Descriptive statistics*

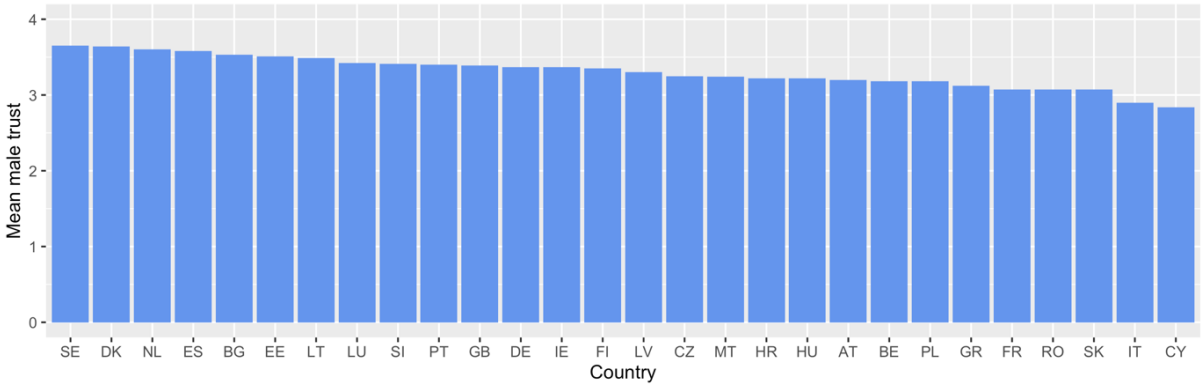
The first step is to visualize the trend in public opinion across the EU with respect to male and female political representatives. Figure 1 presents the mean value of the trust in women to represent citizens' interests according to country. Apparently, all EU countries show very high levels of trust in female representatives ranging from 3.04 of Romania to 3.71 of Denmark and Sweden. In fact, in the survey question of the Special Eurobarometer 465 about female trust, '3' corresponds to a level of trust of 'yes, somewhat' (European Commission, 2019). In total the variation of the mean across countries is 0.67.

Figure 1. Mean trust in female representatives per country




Second, I investigate the mean value of trust in male leaders by country, as visualized in Figure 2. Again, all countries display high levels of trust in men political representatives to represent citizens' interests. Cyprus is the country with the lowest mean value corresponding to 2.84, while the country with the highest male trust with a mean of 3.65 is Sweden. In total the variation of the mean across countries is 0.81.

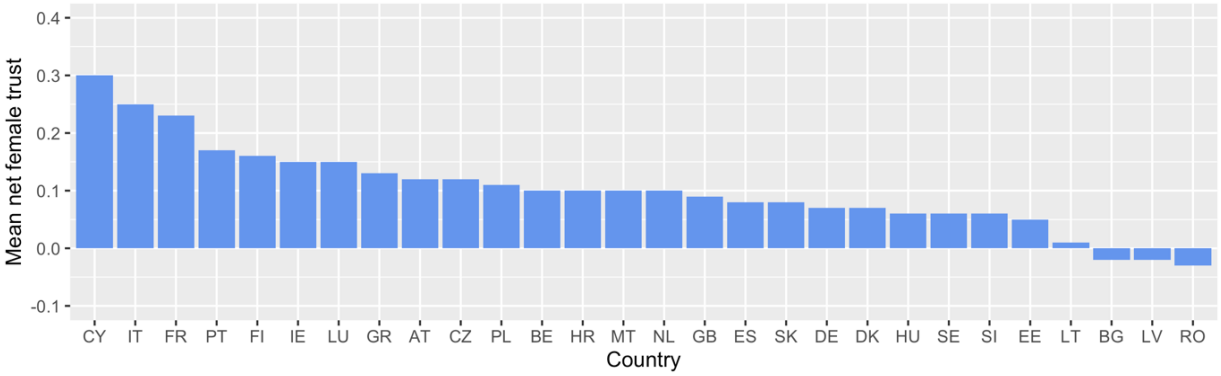
Figure 2. Mean trust in male representatives per country




Finally, it is important to focus on my dependent variable net female trust, which takes into account the public opinion for both genders by measuring the level of trust in female leaders minus the trust in male leaders. Figure 3 presents the distribution of the mean of net female trust per country. The graph displays a small variation across EU countries with respect to net female trust. Indeed, the value of the mean of this variable is comprised between -0.03 and 0.30, corresponding to a variation of 0.27. Yet, the majority of countries show a mean value between 0 and 0.15. This indicates that there is a general tendency to slightly trust more women than men as political representatives within the EU. Yet, three European countries, namely, Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania have a negative mean, suggesting a propensity to trust more

male leaders. It is interesting to note that, when data is aggregated at the country level, there is not a considerable cross-national variation.

Figure 3. Mean net female trust per country




The second step is to disaggregate data at the individual level by looking at the bivariate association between the outcome variable net female trust and the four individual-level explanatory variables – i.e., gender, age, education and profession. For the categorical variables, I compare the categories using summaries of center and variability (i.e., mean and standard deviation) for the dependent variable and the Pearons' chi-squared test statistic to assess the "goodness of fit" of their relationship with net female trust (Agresti & Franklin, 2013). Moreover, for the variable gender, I add the cross-tabulation of data to make a contingency table which displays conditional proportions based on the explanatory variable[1]. These descriptive statistics are not controlled, but they nevertheless provide a preliminary indication of the relationship between explanatory individual-level variables and net female trust (Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016).

Table 1 presents the contingency table between net female trust and gender of respondents. When net female trust is 0, it means that respondents have the same level of trust in both male and female political representatives. Also, when female trust is positive (x>0), then respondents trust more female representatives. On the contrary, when net female trust is negative (x<0), then respondents trust more male representatives. The proportions displayed in the table suggest a normal distribution (Agresti & Franklin, 2013). It is interesting to note that the majority of both male (80.06%) and female (72.26%) respondents tend to trust political representatives independently of their gender. However, as shown in Table 2, female

[1] The tables with the conditional proportions on age, education and profession for net female trust are included in the appendix.

respondents display a positive mean of net female trust while male respondents have a negative mean. The latter means that male respondents tend to trust more male political representatives. This preliminary analysis supports my first hypothesis $H_1$, namely that female respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than male respondents. Finally, since the p-value is smaller than 2.2e-16, there is a relationship between the two variables.

Table 1. Conditional proportions on gender for net female trust

| Net female trust | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| -3 | 0.82% | 0.18% |
| -2 | 2.25% | 0.76% |
| -1 | 9.57% | 3.60% |
| 0 | 80.06% | 72.26% |
| 1 | 5.64% | 18.48% |
| 2 | 1.22% | 3.87% |
| 3 | 0.44% | 0.84% |

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of net female trust for gender

| Gender | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | -0.07 | 0.63 | -3 | 3 |
| Female | 0.23 | 0.67 | -3 | 3 |

Next, I analyze the association between net female trust and respondents' age as displayed in Table 3. To do so, I calculate mean and standard deviation of net female trust per each category of age. What emerges is that respondents from generation X have the highest mean value of net female trust (0.12), while the category of generation Z has the same mean value as baby boomers and builders (0.08). Overall, all categories display very similar values of mean and standard deviation. This suggests that respondents' level of trust in male and female political representatives is independent from their age, and it seems to contradict my second hypothesis $H_2$ which assumes a negative and significant relationship between age and net female trust. However, the chi-squared test indicates that a relationship exists between the variables ($p=0.0005$).

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of net female trust for age

| Age | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Generation Z | 0.08 | 0.66 | -3 | 3 |
| Generation Y | 0.10 | 0.66 | -3 | 3 |
| Generation X | 0.12 | 0.67 | -3 | 3 |
| Baby boomers | 0.08 | 0.68 | -3 | 3 |
| Builders | 0.08 | 0.67 | -3 | 3 |

Moving forward with the analysis, it is important to examine the association between net female trust and the level of education of respondents. As presented in Table 4, the mean value of net female trust for low education is 0.01 smaller than for middle-and-high education. Yet, all categories display positive mean values. Thus, respondents from each category of education have more trust in female than male representatives. This seems to partially support my third hypothesis $H_3$, which states that respondents who have completed a high education have higher net trust in a woman to represent citizens' interests than respondents with a lower level of education. Overall, the chi-squared test shows the presence of a relationship between the two variables ($p < 2.2e\text{-}16$).

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of net female trust for education

| Education | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low | 0.09 | 0.73 | -3 | 3 |
| Middle | 0.10 | 0.72 | -3 | 3 |
| High | 0.10 | 0.55 | -3 | 3 |

Another association to consider is the one between net female trust and respondents' profession which is displayed in Table 5. What emerges from the summaries of center is that respondents employed in low-skilled profession have the highest level of trust in female representatives (0.17) followed by those employed in high-skilled professions (0.11) and unemployed (0.11). Surprisingly, students (0.09) together with respondents employed in medium-skilled professions (0.09) and retired (0.08) show the lowest mean values of net female trust. This preliminary analysis contradicts my fourth hypothesis $H_4$, according to which respondents employed in high-skilled occupations have higher net trust in a woman to represent citizens'

interests than those employed in low-skilled occupations. Finally, the chi-squared test indicates a relationship between the two variables ($p<2.2e-16$).

Table 5. Mean and standard deviation of net female trust for profession

| Profession | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low-skilled | 0.17 | 0.74 | -3 | 3 |
| Medium-skilled | 0.09 | 0.65 | -3 | 3 |
| High-skilled | 0.11 | 0.59 | -3 | 3 |
| Students | 0.09 | 0.61 | -3 | 3 |
| Unemployed | 0.11 | 0.78 | -3 | 3 |
| Retired | 0.08 | 0.69 | -3 | 3 |

### *4.2. Inferential statistics*

At this point, I turn to the multiple regression analysis. As presented in the previous section, in order to estimate the causal effect of each explanatory variable on net female trust at both individual and country level, I utilize three multiple linear regression models (Agresti & Franklin, 2013; Halman & Draulans, 2006; Toshkov, 2016). Model 1 contains the individual-level variables, Model 2 adds the country-level variables and Model 3 adds the cross-level interactions (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). Based on the results, I either confirm or reject the hypotheses formulated in the previous section and presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Hypotheses

| | |
|---|---|
| $H_1$ | Female respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than male respondents. |
| $H_2$ | Young respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than old respondents. |
| $H_3$ | High-educated respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than low-educated respondents. |
| $H_4$ | Respondents employed in high-skilled professions have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than those employed in low-skilled professions. |
| $H_5$ | Countries with a female culture have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than countries with a masculine culture. |

| | |
|---|---|
| $H_6$ | Countries with a secular culture have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than countries with a religious culture. |
| $H_7$ | Countries with a communist legacy have lower net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than countries without a communist legacy. |
| $H_8$ | The effect of age is smaller in countries with a communist legacy. |
| $H_9$ | The effect of gender is greater in countries with a communist legacy. |
| $H_{10}$ | The effect of gender is greater in countries with a masculine culture. |

***Model 1***

The results of the first model of multiple liner regression analysis are presented in Table 7. This model predicts the causal relationship between net female trust and the four individual-level explanatory variables, and it tests my hypotheses $H_1$, $H_2$, $H_3$, and $H_4$. The results show that the effect of the explanatory variable *gender* of respondents is statistically significant (t=-37.84; p<2e-16). In particular, the estimated coefficient of gender(male) is negative (-0.31). This reinforces the findings of Table 3 which suggest that female respondents tend to evaluate more positively women candidates than male respondents. Moreover, the result means that female gender is a positive predictor of trust in women as political representatives. Hence, hypothesis $H_1$ is confirmed and it is accepted at 1% significance level.

With respect to *age*, the regression analysis does not detect any significant difference among generations. In other words, respondents from all generations tend to evaluate female and male political representatives in a similar way. Thus, the findings reject my hypothesis $H_2$.

Furthermore, as expected, the effect of the level of *education* of respondents has a positive effect on net female trust. Interestingly, the estimated coefficient of middle-level education is higher than high-level education. This result indicates that respondents with a middle-level education have the highest net female trust, followed by high-educated and then low-educated respondents. Moreover, the interaction coefficient of education is statistically significant. The regression of Model 1 partially endorses hypothesis $H_3$ as it confirms that high-educated respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than low-educated respondents. Yet, the model uncovers that the relationship between education and net female trust is stronger and more significant for the category middle-level education.

Table 7. Multiple linear regression models

| | *Dependent variable:* | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Net Female Trust | | |
| | **Model 1** | **Model 2** | **Model 3** |
| Gender (female) | (reference) | (reference) | (reference) |
| Gender (male) | -0.310*** (0.008) | -0.310*** (0.008) | -0.244*** (0.010) |
| Age (generation Z) | (reference) | (reference) | (reference) |
| Age (generation Y) | 0.007 (0.021) | 0.011 (0.021) | 0.012 (0.026) |
| Age (generation X) | 0.019 (0.022) | 0.022 (0.022) | 0.034 (0.026) |
| Age (baby boomers) | -0.003 (0.023) | -0.003 (0.023) | 0.010 (0.026) |
| Age (builders) | -0.005 (0.026) | -0.009 (0.026) | -0.007 (0.029) |
| Education (low) | (reference) | (reference) | (reference) |
| Education (middle) | 0.048*** (0.013) | 0.042*** (0.013) | 0.042*** (0.012) |
| Education (high) | 0.029** (0.014) | 0.021 (0.014) | 0.009 (0.014) |
| Profession (low-skilled) | (reference) | (reference) | (reference) |
| Profession (medium-skilled) | -0.006 (0.016) | 0.001 (0.016) | -0.004 (0.016) |
| Profession (high-skilled) | 0.028 (0.018) | 0.029 (0.018) | 0.018 (0.018) |
| Profession (student) | 0.005 (0.027) | 0.015 (0.027) | 0.011 (0.027) |
| Profession (unemployed) | 0.006 (0.022) | 0.008 (0.022) | 0.003 (0.022) |
| Profession (retired) | 0.007 (0.018) | 0.014 (0.018) | 0.002 (0.018) |
| Masculinity | | 0.001*** (0.0002) | 0.002*** (0.0002) |
| Religion | | 0.0001 (0.0002) | |
| Communist legacy | | -0.104*** (0.008) | -0.017 (0.028) |
| Age (generation Y) * Communist legacy | | | 0.012 (0.032) |
| Age (generation X) * Communist legacy | | | -0.015 (0.032) |
| Age (baby boomers) * Communist legacy | | | -0.024 (0.031) |
| Age (builders) * Communist legacy | | | -0.008 (0.033) |
| Gender (male) * Communist legacy | | | -0.178*** (0.017) |
| Gender (male) * Masculinity | | | -0.003*** (0.0003) |
| Constant | 0.217*** (0.033) | 0.194*** (0.029) | 0.097*** (0.031) |
| Observations | 26,333 | 25,869 | 25,869 |
| $R^2$ | 0.064 | 0.057 | 0.065 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.063 | 0.057 | 0.064 |
| *Note:*[2] | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

[2] Model 1 includes the dummy variable for the country indexes (see Table A4 in the appendix).

Last, for the variable *profession*, the regression model predicts that the causal effect is not statistically significant, meaning that there are no significant differences in how respondents from different professions evaluate political representatives. Therefore, hypothesis $H_4$ is rejected.

In conclusion, Model 1 has an adjusted R-squared of 0.063 which indicates that it explains only a very small part of the public opinion on female leadership. Overall, at the individual level, only the variables gender and education have a significant effect on net female trust.

***Model 2***

Moving forward with the analysis, I introduce the Model 2 of linear regression which includes both individual and country-level explanatory variables and tests my hypotheses $H_5$, $H_6$ and $H_7$. The results of this model are visualized in Table 7. Adding the country-level variables has an effect on the category high-level education, whose effect becomes statistically insignificant.

At the country-level, the variable *masculinity* has a significant positive effect on net female trust (t=-3.73; p=0.0002). This coefficient, although small (0.001), contradicts my hypothesis $H_5$ because it means that countries with a masculine culture have a higher trust in women as political representatives than countries with a feminine culture. Moreover, as expected, the variable *communist legacy* relates negatively to net female trust (-0.104). Thus, post-communist countries tend to have less trust in women than men as political representatives. The effect is very significant (t=-12.31; p<2e-16). This result confirms my hypothesis $H_7$ which is accepted at 1% significance level. The last country-level variable *religion* is not significant (t=0.49; p=0.62). Hence, hypothesis $H_6$ is rejected. Overall, the adjusted R-squared of model 2 is 0.057 which indicates that it explains only a very small part of the public opinion on female leadership. Ultimately, at the country level, two variables, masculine culture and communist legacy, have a significant effect on net female trust.

***Model 3***

Finally, Model 3 adds the cross-level interactions between the individual-level and the country-level variables (Table 7). It tests the hypotheses $H_8$, $H_9$ and $H_{10}$. The results show that the effect of age does not produce any difference in communist and non-communist countries because the interaction coefficient is not significant. Therefore, I reject hypothesis $H_8$. Moreover, I

investigate the cross-level interaction between gender and communist legacy as stated in hypothesis $H_9$. Here, the results show that the effect of gender is different in countries with and without a communist legacy. Notably, male respondents in post-communist countries tend to have a more negative net female trust than male respondents in countries without a communist legacy. The relationship between the two variables is statistically significant (t=-10.78; p<2.2e-16) and it confirms my hypothesis $H_9$ which is accepted at 1% significance level. Finally, the interaction effect between gender and masculine culture, although small (-0003), confirms my last hypothesis $H_{10}$ according to which the effect of gender is greater in countries with a stronger masculine culture. The effect is very significant (t=-9.11; p<2e-16). In conclusion, Model 3 has an adjusted R-squared of 0.064 which indicates that it explains only a very small part of the public opinion on female leadership.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Which individual and country-level factors account for a variation of public opinion towards male and female political representatives across the EU? My research investigates whether the variables retrieved from the existing literature on gender and political leadership have an effect on how European citizens perceive male and female political representatives. In the previous section, I presented the results of the multiple linear regression analysis. Now, I interpret them and discuss their implication and contribution with respect to the scholarly work introduced in the literature review. Finally, I acknowledge the limitations of my research.

The results of this research indicate that, at the individual level, female respondents and middle-educated respondents have higher net trust in female political representatives. Yet, age and profession are not significant. Likewise, at the country level, countries with a masculine culture have higher net female trust than countries with a feminine culture, although the effect is very small. On the contrary, post-communist countries show lower net female trust than countries without a communist legacy. Religion is not significant. Regarding the cross-level interaction, the results indicate that gender has a stronger effect in countries with a communist legacy and in countries with a masculine culture. Finally, the study does not demonstrate any significant interaction between age and communist legacy.

In line with hypothesis $H_1$, the results confirm that female respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than male respondents. This finding supports the gender affinity effect, according to which women show more support for female candidates than men do (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Dolan, 2008; Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003). Also, it confirms the scholar findings according to which male respondents trust female leaders less than do women (Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Simon & Hoyt, 2008). Besides, it supports the assumption that female respondents will trust female political representatives more than men because they are more susceptible to the symbolic effects of female leaders (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Liu & Banaszak, 2017). Yet, the results contradict the findings of Eagly & Karau (2002) that both male and female respondents have a negative attitude towards female leaders. Similarly, the results contradict Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra's (2006) claim that women have a stronger prejudice against female leaders as they tend to consider female candidates to be less qualified than the male ones. Furthermore, my findings partially support the work of Bridgewater & Nagel (2020), namely that female respondents evaluate female political leaders more positively than their male counterparts. However, their research provides evidence that both male and female respondents view female leaders more favorably. This is in contrast with my finding because from the descriptive and inferential statistics what emerges is that male respondents' net female trust is negative. Although the mean value is small (-0.07), male respondents have higher trust in male political representatives. Yet, the great majority of men (80.06%) displays an equal level of trust in male and female political representatives.

Moving forward with the analysis, my study demonstrates a correlation between the level of *education* of respondents and their net trust in female political representatives. The results partially support hypothesis $H_3$, according to which high-educated respondents have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than low-educated respondents. However, the results indicate that respondents who completed a middle-education have a higher net female trust than high-educated respondents. While Alexander (2012) claims that the symbolic effect of the increased number of women in parliaments on the trust in women's governing ability is stronger for high-educated respondents, my result does not confirm the assumption that the higher the level of education, the higher the trust in female political representatives. An interesting implication of these results is that respondents with a high-level education seem to have a tendency to trust political representatives independently of their gender.

Regarding the variable *age*, the results do not support the hypothesized negative relation with net female trust as stated in hypothesis $H_2$. In fact, the results are in contrast with the empirical findings presented in the literature reviewed according to which younger respondents, especially generation Y and generation Z, have more egalitarian attitudes while older respondents have a more traditional construal of the female role, and thus show a stronger gender prejudice (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Scarborough & Risman, 2019). Apparently, respondents tend to trust male and female political representatives independently of their generation, and thus independently of their formative and social experience (Inglehart & Norris, 2003a). Moreover, the descriptive statistics show that people from all generations tend to trust slightly more female political representatives. This means that the majority of respondents of each age category has the same level of trust in male and female political representatives, with a small percentage of respondents who trust more female politicians.

Furthermore, the results do not confirm the empirical finding of Inglehart & Norris (2003a) according to which post-industrial and post-communist countries differ in terms of generational attitudes towards female leadership (Inglehart & Norris, 2003a; Norris & Inglehart, 2000). In fact, in my findings, age does not produce any different effect in communist and non-communist countries. Although age does not have a direct influence on net female trust, it may have an indirect impact through a mediating variable, such as gender stereotypes (Dolan, 2008). In fact, the literature suggests that older people tend to believe more in gender stereotypes than younger ones (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006). Therefore, further research including gender stereotype as a mediating variable is needed to detect the existence of indirect effects on net female trust.

The same implication applies to the variable *profession*. In fact, contrary to hypothesis $H_4$, the results of my analysis do not indicate any significant relationship between the profession of respondents and their level of net female trust. Therefore, I derive that the evidence that people employed in managerial positions perceive female managers as successful as their male counterparts does not extend to political representatives (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In fact, my results do not indicate any difference between the level of net female trust of people employed in high-skilled and low-skilled professions.

Regarding the country-level variables, in particular *masculine culture*, the results of the linear regression contradict my expectation outlined in hypothesis $H_5$ that countries with a feminine culture have higher net trust in women to represent citizens' interests than countries with a masculine culture. In fact, the results show that there is a small difference in the level of net female trust between countries with a masculine and feminine culture, and such difference is positive for masculine culture. This means that countries with a stronger social role differentiation between genders (Hofstede, 2011) have higher trust in female rather than male representatives. This result does not fit with the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. According to this theory, having deep-rooted gender role stereotypes leads to the perception that women are less qualified than men to fulfill roles requiring agentic behaviors such as being leaders and political representatives (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, my results show the opposite: the stronger the masculine culture in a country, the higher the level of trust in female political representatives. This implies that having a masculine culture with a strong social role differentiation does not result into a negative judgment of female political representatives. An alternative explanation is provided by the result of the interaction model between gender and masculine culture. Indeed, the regression model confirms my hypothesis $H_{10}$ and suggests that in masculine countries, women exhibit a stronger gender affinity effect (Dolan, 2008). In other words, they compensate the strong social norms about the gender role (Hofstede, 2011) by being more trustworthy of female leaders. This could explain why countries with a masculine culture have higher trust in female political representatives.

A significant country-level finding which meets the expectation stated in hypothesis $H_7$ is the effect of *communist legacy* on net female trust. In line with the literature, post-communist countries display lower levels of net female trust because they have more traditional rather than egalitarian attitudes towards female leadership (Inglehart & Norris, 2003a; Norris & Inglehart, 2000). This result confirms the findings of Alexander (2012), who finds that countries with a communist legacy support less women's ability to govern. Interestingly, by looking at the mean values of net female trust across EU countries (Figure 3), the only three countries with negative values, namely Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania, are post-communist. Furthermore, the presence of a communist legacy strengthens the effect of gender as outlined in hypothesis $H_9$. This implies that men in post-communist countries will trust female representatives even less because of a more traditional and masculine perception of leadership (Alexander & Jalalzai, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Simon & Hoyt, 2008).

*Religion* does not produce the expected effect stated in hypothesis $H_6$. Despite evidence that religious faiths associate women with traditional and subordinate roles while secular beliefs support gender equality (Inglehart & Norris, 2003b; Norris & Inglehart, 2000), religion does not produce any significant effect on net female trust. This suggests that having a country with a religious or secular culture does not affect the public opinion on female political leadership.

A crucial finding stems from the country overview of the level of net female trust. What emerges from the analysis is that all EU countries, except for Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania, have a higher trust in female rather than male political representatives. At first impact, this finding seems to contradict the burgeoning literature documenting the disadvantage faced by women in politics due to gender stereotypes and role incongruity (Bauer, 2015; Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lawless, 2004; Simon & Hoyt, 2008). Following the role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002), I expect to discover a higher trust towards male political representatives. Yet, this is not the case, because EU citizens have more trust in women rather than men to represent their political interests. In line with the work of Bridgewater and Nagel (2020) who address public opinion towards both male and female party leaders, I find that respondents evaluate women political representatives more highly than men and that "women largely drive this effect" (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020, 5).

In order to clarify this counterintuitive finding, I tentatively propose a set of alternative theoretical explanations. First, respondents might trust more female political representatives because they perceive women to be less likely than men "to engage in the illegal use of public positions for private gain" (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2019, 134). In other words, voters view female politicians as less likely to involve in corruption because they are perceived to be risk averse and marginalized within political institutions (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2019). Women are thus seen as a legitimizing presence in politics (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). Second, respondents may evaluate female political representatives more positively because they are perceived to prioritize social welfare spending and to be more invested in promoting welfare state policies regarding health care, child support and education (Bolzendahl & Brooks, 2007; Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Caiazza, 2002; Lawless, 2004). Third, since the beginning of the euro crisis in 2009, trust in governmental institutions has dramatically fallen (Foster & Frieden, 2017). Hence, since men represent the great majority of political representatives in EU national governments – in Europe only the 28.6% of members of national parliaments are women (UN

Women, 2020) – EU citizens may associate the economic problems which followed the crisis to a male leadership. Therefore, since they perceive their national governments as being predominantly run by men, they consequently could have lost trust in male political representatives. This assumption could explain why the level of trust is lower for male political representatives. Ultimately, further research is needed to establish the extent to which these potential theoretical arguments can explain the interesting tendency to trust women political representatives more than men.

Furthermore, this study uncovers an interesting pattern which has remained largely unobserved. While previous research has mostly been focused only on female leaders, I compare the public opinion on male and female political representatives using the variable 'net female trust'. What I find is that the 75.7%[3] of respondents evaluate political representatives independently of their gender (net female trust = 0). This means that respondents with a low trust in female leaders also have a low trust in male leaders. Similarly, respondents who plenty trust female leaders also amply trust male leaders. This seems to expand the claim that there is no "evidence that voters prefer men" as political representatives (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020). Rather, the great majority of EU citizens equally trust male and female politicians. These findings have important implications for the study of gender and political leadership. Given the evident contradiction with the burgeoning literature which claims that the perception of female leaders is negatively affected by gender stereotypes (Eagly & Karau, 2002), I propose an alternative explanation. It could be argued that the public opinion towards female political leadership in the EU is moving towards being more egalitarian and in favor of gender equality. A study conducted in the US shows that gender equality in the public sphere of work and politics has dramatically increased since the second wave of feminism (1960s-1970s). This trend is reflected in an increased number of egalitarians who support gender equality, and a transformation of traditionalists into ambivalents who have far more liberal views (Scarborough & Risman, 2019). Thus, the literature supports the claim that "there has been ongoing change, albeit slow, in an egalitarian direction" (Scarborough & Risman, 2019, 195). Nevertheless, this explanation needs to be tested in the EU context in future research in order to be confirmed.

[3] The frequency table of net female trust is included in the appendix (Table A5).

The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some limitations. The relationship between individual-level factors and trust in male and female political representatives might be conditioned by forces that, due to data limitation, I was unable to control. For instance, party affiliation can affect the support for female candidates. There is evidence that the gender affinity effect is limited by partisan loyalty. In other words, female respondents tend to trust more female representatives from their own party, but the same support does not apply to female representatives of an opposite political party (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Dolan, 2008). Whether this effect applies to public opinion towards female political leadership in the EU is an open question and an avenue for future research. Moreover, the data used are the most recent to cross-nationally assess the factors that affect public opinion towards female political leadership in the EU. However, since they denote a cross-section of a specific time point, the results cannot confirm whether the levels of trust are constant over time. This represents a limitation because it was not possible to assess whether the findings imply a growing trend towards gender equality in the EU. Further research should include a longitudinal analysis of the level of trust in male and female political representatives in order to investigate how the public opinion towards female political leadership has evolved over time (Alexander, 2012; Liu & Banaszak, 2017). The results of this study can nonetheless be considered valid for the purpose of answering my research question.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This thesis contributes to a clearer understanding of the public opinion towards female political leadership in the European Union. It investigates which factors affect the perception of both female and male political representatives in terms of trust in their ability to represent the citizens' interests. Based on the identified literature gaps, this research offers evidence of the micro and macro-level trends of public opinion on female leadership which have largely remained understudied. Likewise, while the majority of studies focus exclusively on female leaders, this analysis allows for comparison of the level of trust in female and male political representatives. Following a quantitative analysis of individual and country-level variables, this thesis uncovers two interesting patterns which are in contrast to the expectations stemming from the literature. First, it can be concluded that EU citizens evaluate women political representatives more positively than men. Second, the European public opinion is oriented

towards gender equality in politics, as the majority of respondents equally trust male and female politicians. Yet, this egalitarian tendency is not homogenous, but varies between citizens and countries. At the individual level of analysis, the results indicate that women are the drivers of this effect as they have high trust in female representatives due to gender affinity (Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Dolan, 2008; Herrnson, Lay & Stokes, 2003). Also, education positively impacts trust in women politicians. At the country-level, the more traditional construal of the female gender role of post-communist countries is reflected in lower levels of trust in female leaders (Alexander, 2012; Inglehart & Norris, 2003a; Norris & Inglehart, 2000). Whereas, in countries with a masculine culture, the deep-rooted social norms about the gender role are balanced by a higher level of trust in female political representatives (Hofstede, 2011).

The results challenge the burgeoning literature according to which women are subject to a disadvantage in politics due to gender stereotypes and role incongruity (Bauer, 2015; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Lawless, 2004; Simon & Hoyt, 2008). In fact, contrary to my initial expectations, the European public opinion favors female political representatives. These findings raise the question of why EU citizens have more trust in women rather than men to represent their political interests. Since in the literature there is not yet a theoretical explanation able to justify this phenomenon, I propose three alternative interpretations. First, female politicians are perceived to be less likely to be involve in corruption than their male counterparts (Barnes & Beaulieu, 2019). Second, women are perceived to promote welfare state policies (Bolzendahl & Brooks, 2007; Bridgewater & Nagel, 2020; Caiazza, 2002; Lawless, 2004). Third, the economic crisis has contributed to a decline of trust in government (Foster & Frieden, 2017) which mirrors a loss of trust in male political leadership. Moreover, to explain why the majority of respondents equally trust male and female politicians, I assume that the EU public opinion might be moving towards an egalitarian direction (Scarborough & Risman, 2019). Based on these conclusions, future research is needed to assess the extent to which these alternative explanations can shed light on these counterintuitive findings. To better understand the implications of these results, future studies should take into account the causal mechanism at work in this theoretical puzzle. Generally, the findings underscore the need for further research on public opinion, gender and political leadership.

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## APPENDIX

Table A1.Conditional proportions on age for net female trust

| Net female trust | Generation Z | Generation Y | Generation X | Baby boomers | Builders |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| -3 | 0.49% | 0.50% | 0.32% | 0.54% | 0.50% |
| -2 | 1.42% | 1.11% | 1.44% | 1.58% | 1.50% |
| -1 | 5.97% | 5.51% | 5.94% | 6.61% | 7.03% |
| 0 | 78.03% | 77.44% | 74.82% | 75.20% | 74.60% |
| 1 | 10.60% | 12.02% | 13.83% | 12.81% | 13.31% |
| 2 | 2.68% | 2.64% | 2.88% | 2.72% | 2.50% |
| 3 | 0.81% | 0.77% | 0.74% | 0.54% | 0.54% |

Table A2. Conditional proportions on education for net female trust

| Net female trust | Low | Middle | High |
|---|---|---|---|
| -3 | 0.72% | 0.53% | 0.26% |
| -2 | 1.73% | 1.77% | 0.66% |
| -1 | 7.91% | 7.04% | 4.07% |
| 0 | 71.53% | 73.03% | 81.83% |
| 1 | 14.33% | 13.64% | 10.92% |
| 2 | 3.11% | 3.15% | 1.84% |
| 3 | 0.67% | 0.84% | 0.41% |

Table A3. Conditional proportions on profession for net female trust

| Net female trust | Low-skilled | Middle-skilled | High-skilled | Students | Unemployed | Retired |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| -3 | 0.41% | 0.55% | 0.26% | 0.35% | 1.07% | 0.55% |
| -2 | 1.58% | 1.49% | 0.59% | 1.16% | 1.89% | 1.64% |
| -1 | 6.69% | 6.21% | 4.48% | 4.66% | 6.87% | 7.11% |
| 0 | 69.26% | 76.24% | 81.23% | 80.62% | 71.08% | 74.45% |
| 1 | 16.70% | 12.57% | 10.67% | 10.42% | 14.30% | 13.04% |
| 2 | 4.78% | 2.50% | 1.87% | 2.09% | 3.91% | 2.59% |
| 3 | 0.58% | 0.57% | 0.90% | 0.70% | 0.88% | 0.62% |

Table A4. Multiple linear regression models with country indexes.

| | *Dependent variable:* | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Net Female Trust | | |
| | **Model 1** | **Model 2** | **Model 3** |
| Gender (male) | -0.310*** (0.008) | -0.310*** (0.008) | -0.244*** (0.010) |
| Age (generation Y) | 0.007 (0.021) | 0.011 (0.021) | 0.012 (0.026) |
| Age (generation X) | 0.019 (0.022) | 0.022 (0.022) | 0.034 (0.026) |
| Age (baby boomers) | -0.003 (0.023) | -0.003 (0.023) | 0.010 (0.026) |
| Age (builders) | -0.005 (0.026) | -0.009 (0.026) | -0.007 (0.029) |
| Education (middle) | 0.048*** (0.013) | 0.042*** (0.013) | 0.042*** (0.012) |
| Education (high) | 0.029** (0.014) | 0.021 (0.014) | 0.009 (0.014) |
| Profession (medium-skilled) | -0.006 (0.016) | 0.001 (0.016) | -0.004 (0.016) |
| Profession (high-skilled) | 0.028 (0.018) | 0.029 (0.018) | 0.018 (0.018) |
| Profession (student) | 0.005 (0.027) | 0.015 (0.027) | 0.011 (0.027) |
| Profession (unemployed) | 0.006 (0.022) | 0.008 (0.022) | 0.003 (0.022) |
| Profession (retired) | 0.007 (0.018) | 0.014 (0.018) | 0.002 (0.018) |
| Country AT | (reference) | | |
| Country BE | -0.008 (0.029) | | |
| Country BG | -0.142*** (0.030) | | |
| Country CY | 0.185*** (0.036) | | |
| Country CZ | -0.019 (0.030) | | |
| Country DE | -0.026 (0.026) | | |
| Country DK | -0.046 (0.030) | | |
| Country EE | -0.099*** (0.030) | | |
| Country ES | -0.021 (0.030) | | |
| Country FI | 0.051* (0.029) | | |
| Country FR | 0.104*** (0.029) | | |
| Country GB | -0.022 (0.027) | | |
| Country GR | 0.029 (0.029) | | |
| Country HR | -0.027 (0.029) | | |
| Country HU | -0.075*** (0.029) | | |
| Country IE | 0.031 (0.029) | | |
| Country IT | 0.148*** (0.030) | | |
| Country LT | -0.137*** (0.029) | | |
| Country LU | 0.038 (0.036) | | |
| Country LV | -0.171*** (0.030) | | |
| Country MT | -0.042 (0.036) | | |
| Country NL | -0.015 (0.029) | | |
| Country PL | -0.036 (0.030) | | |
| Country PT | 0.060** (0.029) | | |
| Country RO | -0.148*** (0.029) | | |
| Country SE | -0.030 (0.029) | | |
| Country SI | -0.075*** (0.029) | | |
| Country SK | -0.060** (0.029) | | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Masculinity | | 0.001*** (0.0002) | 0.002*** (0.0002) |
| Religion | | 0.0001 (0.0002) | |
| Communist legacy | | -0.104*** (0.008) | -0.017 (0.028) |
| Age(generation Y) * Communist legacy | | | 0.012 (0.032) |
| Age(generation X) * Communist legacy | | | -0.015 (0.032) |
| Age(baby boomers) * Communist legacy | | | -0.024 (0.031) |
| Age(builders) * Communist legacy | | | -0.008 (0.033) |
| Gender (male) * Communist legacy | | | -0.178*** (0.017) |
| Gender (male) * Masculinity | | | -0.003*** (0.0003) |
| Constant | 0.217*** (0.033) | 0.194*** (0.029) | 0.097*** (0.031) |
| Observations | 26,333 | 25,869 | 25,869 |
| $R^2$ | 0.064 | 0.057 | 0.065 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.063 | 0.057 | 0.064 |
| *Note:* | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

Table A5. Frequency table of net female trust

| Net female trust | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| -3 | 127 | 0.47% |
| -2 | 385 | 1.4% |
| -1 | 1690 | 6.2% |
| 0 | 20487 | 75.7% |
| 1 | 3460 | 12.8% |
| 2 | 730 | 2.7% |
| 3 | 179 | 0.7% |
| **Tot** | 27058 | 100% |