

LETTER

Ignoring Women’s Performance: A Survey Experiment on Policy Implementation in Argentina

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Abstract

How does a politician’s gender shape citizen responses to performance in office? Much of the existing literature suggests that voters hold higher expectations of women politicians and are more likely to punish them for malfeasance. An alternative perspective suggests that voters view men politicians as more agentic and are, therefore, more responsive to their performance, whether good or bad. Using an online survey experiment in Argentina, we randomly assign respondents to information that the distribution of a government food programme in a hypothetical city is biased or unbiased, and we also randomly assign the gender of the mayor. We find that respondents are more responsive to performance information – both positive and negative – about men mayors. We find little evidence that respondents hold different expectations of malfeasance by men versus women politicians. These results contribute to our understanding of how citizens process performance information in a context with few women politicians.

Keywords: gender; voter attitudes; clientelism; survey experiment; Argentina

In democratic politics, politician gender may affect citizens’ prospective evaluations of candidates for elected office. Women politicians are often perceived to be “better types” than men politicians: voters believe them to be more likely to act in the public interest and less likely to behave in a self-serving fashion (see, for example, Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Barnes and Beaulieu, 2019).¹ As a result, voters may turn to women candidates in moments of crisis (for example, Piazza and Diaz, 2020; Funk et al., 2021). A meta-analysis of candidate choice experiments suggests that women generally hold a slight competitive advantage over otherwise comparable men (Schwarz and Coppock, 2022).

We know less about how electorates retrospectively assess women politicians’ performance once they are in office. The predominant view is that positive beliefs about women’s competence and probity imply that voters expect more of women in office and are, therefore, more likely to

¹Among the general public, multiple studies find that women are less tolerant of corruption than men (Swamy et al. 2001; Selters et al. 2018) and less likely to be involved in corrupt behaviour (e.g., Rivas, 2013; Gingerich et al. 2016). Moreover, women appear more inclined to tell the truth (e.g., Dreber and Johannesson 2008) and more risk averse (e.g., Croson and Gneezy 2009). These attributes – combined with the fact that women typically face high barriers to entry into political life (Bledsoe and Herring, 1990) – suggest that voters will believe women politicians to be, on average, better types than men (Anzia and Berry 2011; Fulton 2012).

punish women when they perform poorly. Recent literature provides evidence of higher performance standards for women candidates (Courtemanche and Connor Green, 2020) and of differential punishment for poor performance, including corruption and other scandals (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2018; Barnes *et al.*, 2020). An alternative argument suggests that electorates view men as having more agency and, therefore, greater responsibility for performance outcomes in general. This view implies that voters are more responsive to the performance of men politicians, both punishing them more for bad performance and rewarding them more for good performance (Costa, 2021; de Geus *et al.*, 2021). Beliefs about politician agency might be especially relevant for the evaluation of politicians holding executive office and have implications for understanding the likelihood of differential re-election rates across genders (de Geus *et al.*, 2021).²

In this article, we contribute to understanding how gender may affect citizen responses to politician performance by examining this question for politicians who hold executive office at the subnational level.³ We run a survey experiment among an online sample of Argentine residents about a hypothetical local mayor. We manipulate the gender of the mayor and randomly assign respondents to receive information about that mayor's performance in the distribution of a government food programme, signalling good or bad performance by describing the selection of beneficiaries as unbiased or biased, respectively. Follow-up questions elicit respondents' voting intentions for the hypothetical mayor as well as evaluations of the mayor and the food programme.

We find evidence that men politicians, relative to women politicians, are punished more for poor performance and rewarded more for good performance in office. An analysis of further questions shows limited differences in the baseline expectations of politician performance or of interpretations of programme implementation by gender.⁴ These findings are more consistent with the agentic perspective (de Geus *et al.*, 2021) than with the view that women politicians are held to higher standards compared to men. In addition, we show that respondents were highly attentive to the information about gender in the vignettes with women politicians. Studying subnational executive office holders, our results provide new evidence on how voters respond to politicians' gender in a context where women politicians are rare.

Research Design

Context

We carry out empirical research in Argentina, which we consider a mixed case concerning the representation of women politicians. On the one hand, Argentina was the first country in the world to introduce gender quotas for legislative candidates in national elections (1991),⁵ women's representation in the national legislature is high, and the country had a woman as president from 2007 to 2015. At the same time, women's representation in executive offices at other levels is limited. Argentina is a federal country with over 2,000 municipalities where only about 13 per cent of mayors are women, suggesting that women still face significant barriers to political success.⁶

²In research on legislative productivity in the United Kingdom, a recent study finds no significant differences in voter assessments of politicians of different genders (Hargrave and Smith 2024).

³De Geus *et al.* (2021) explore responses to men and women governors, premiers, and mayors in the US and Australia.

⁴By baseline expectations, we refer to beliefs about mayors of both genders in the control group, where respondents did not receive any information about programme implementation.

⁵See Caminotti (2014) for more details on the origins of this law.

⁶<https://www.infobae.com/politica/2019/12/01/el-mapa-de-las-intendencias-son-minoria-gobiernan-al-9-de-la-poblacion-y-la-mayoria-gestiona-zonas-rurales/> (accessed 22 March 2022). In large part due to the gender quotas, the representation of women in national legislative positions is substantial: 40 per cent of senators and 41 per cent of deputies in 2019–21. Source: Ministerio del Interior, Argentina (<https://www.argentina.gob.ar/interior/observatorioelectoral/analisis/mujeres>, accessed 26 March 2022).

Vignette Experiment

Our experiment focuses on a hypothetical man or woman incumbent mayor's role in implementing a food distribution programme, a widely recognized form of welfare distribution in Argentina.⁷ We described that programme as either distributed fairly to those who really need it, or else as distributed in a biased fashion wherein individuals with connections to the municipality are favoured. We also included a control condition in which we provide no information about programme implementation. We consider performance on this dimension to be a valence issue: evidence shows that most Argentines prefer unbiased distribution of social welfare benefits (Weitz-Shapiro, 2014).

We used simple randomization, such that each respondent had the same probability of being assigned to any of the treatment conditions.⁸ The vignette was shown to respondents on a series of screens with follow-up questions. Respondents were thus repeatedly exposed to the treatment to which they were assigned. Although not the focus of this study, the vignette also manipulated the mayor's political party and whether the mayor's name was included on a photo of a box of food from the programme referenced in the text.⁹ The full text of the prompt is below.

Imagine a Peronist/PRO/[omit] mayor who is running for re-election this year. During his/her time in office, the mayor [man/woman, as indicated by Spanish language pronoun] carried out a programme to help poor people, which consisted of the distribution of boxes of food, as shown in the photo. Programme beneficiaries are strictly selected based on need/theoretically selected based on need. In practice, those with contacts inside the municipality receive priority /[omit].¹⁰

We recruited $N = 2,040$ respondents from Netquest's online panel in Argentina in March 2021. The sample was designed to closely mirror the composition of the national population in terms of gender, age, region, and socioeconomic status.¹¹ We implemented the survey in Qualtrics; respondents could complete it on a computer, tablet, or smartphone. Table 1 summarizes the assignment to the relevant manipulations.

Respondents Take Note of Women Mayors

Before turning to the results, we provide evidence of respondent attentiveness to the mayor's gender. All respondents had the opportunity to learn about the mayor's gender in the text of the vignette. The first sentence of the vignette asks respondents to imagine a mayor: "*Imagine un*

⁷The distribution of boxes of food is relatively common in Argentina, was part of large national nutrition programmes in the 1990s and 2000s (Perelmiter, 2016; Weitz-Shapiro, 2014), and saw a resurgence during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/coronavirus-argentina-seamosuno-repartio-16-millones-rationes-nid2370415/>, accessed 14 December 2023).

⁸To examine the possibility of imbalance in the randomization, we run a multinomial logit model with the six possible treatment combinations as the outcome variable, and age, education, gender, and social class as the explanatory variables. We find a statistically significant, yet substantively small, imbalance on education, which does not affect our results. See Online Appendix Tables B1 and B8 for details.

⁹Beneath the prompt on the screen, all respondents were shown an image of a box of food, typical of those distributed in social programmes in Argentina. Respondents were randomly assigned to either see a name on the box or not; if they were randomly assigned to see a name, then the name matched the gender of the mayor mentioned in the vignette, which was independently randomly assigned.

¹⁰There were 36 treatment conditions, corresponding to a 3 (performance info), X 2 (gender), X 3 (party), and X 2 (name on photo) design. Online Appendix Table B8 replicates the results reported below with controls for the additional treatment conditions.

¹¹The Online Appendix reports sample characteristics (Table C1) and includes the complete questionnaire (both in English and in Spanish). The vignette experiment was the first part of a longer survey that also included a battery of questions about knowledge of social programmes.

Table 1. Vignette Experiment Research Design

Mayor	Programme Implementation		
	Biased	No Info	Unbiased
Man	342	352	355
Woman	321	328	342

Note: Each cell shows the number of respondents assigned to that combination of treatments.

intendente” if they are assigned to a vignette about a man mayor or “*Imagine una intendenta*” if they are assigned to a vignette about a woman mayor.¹²

As a manipulation check, immediately after measuring the outcome variables, we asked respondents whether they remembered the gender of the mayor who was mentioned, with possible responses of: “man”, “woman”, “that information was not provided”, or “I don’t recall”. Information about a woman mayor was substantially more noteworthy to respondents. Table 2 shows the distribution of responses to this question by treatment combination. Among respondents assigned to a vignette with a man mayor, 51 per cent replied that they recalled a man mayor, 39 per cent said that they were not given this information, and 9 per cent of respondents said that they could not recall. Only 1 per cent of respondents incorrectly recalled a woman mayor. For respondents assigned to a vignette with a woman mayor, 91 per cent correctly reported learning about a woman mayor. Four per cent incorrectly recalled a man mayor, 2.4 per cent reported not receiving this information, and 3 per cent said that they did not know.¹³

These results establish that respondents were attentive to the gender of the mayor in the vignette. This gives us confidence that respondents assigned to the woman-mayor condition were thinking about a woman mayor when they answered the outcome questions. It is also a striking descriptive finding about how notable Argentines find women mayors.¹⁴

Results

We asked respondents two questions to assess the electoral impact of the information in the vignette.¹⁵ The first asked the respondents their likelihood of voting for the hypothetical mayor in the next election. The second asked whether the respondents believed that the food programme would help the mayor secure re-election.¹⁶ Figure 1 shows the results for these two outcomes.

¹²Traditionally, the masculine and gender-neutral articles are the same in Spanish; some respondents may not infer gender based on the use of the masculine form. As mentioned above, the gender of the mayor was further reinforced for some respondents by the orthogonal treatment that featured the inclusion of a picture with the mayor’s full name (Pedro and Alicia, in the case of the man and woman mayor, respectively).

¹³Including the name of the mayor in the picture improved recall among vignettes with a man mayor by about 13 percentage points but does not affect recall for vignettes with a woman mayor. See Online Appendix Table B6.

¹⁴Separately, we asked respondents whether the programme goes to those in need; those who read that programme implementation was biased were less likely to believe it did compared to those in the control, although there is no difference between those who received information that the programme was unbiased and those in the control. See Online Appendix Table B9. Although not designed as a manipulation check, this pattern suggests respondents were also attentive to the information in the vignette about programme implementation.

¹⁵In addition, we asked respondents whether they thought that programme beneficiaries would vote for the mayor. Results for this outcome show no gender differences and are presented in Online Appendix Table A1.

¹⁶All outcomes of interest are coded on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all likely) to 4 (very likely). Outcomes were measured immediately after the vignette, which reappeared at the top of every page with outcome questions. Voting outcomes were asked first, followed by questions about perceptions of the programme, and then questions about perceptions of the mayor. See Online Appendix C.

Table 2. Recall of Mayor’s Gender in Vignette

Mayor	Recollection	n	Proportion
Man (N = 1027)	Man	528	0.51
	Woman	14	0.01
	Not provided	397	0.39
	I don’t know	88	0.09
Woman (N = 963)	Man	39	0.04
	Woman	873	0.91
	Not provided	23	0.02
	I don’t know	28	0.03

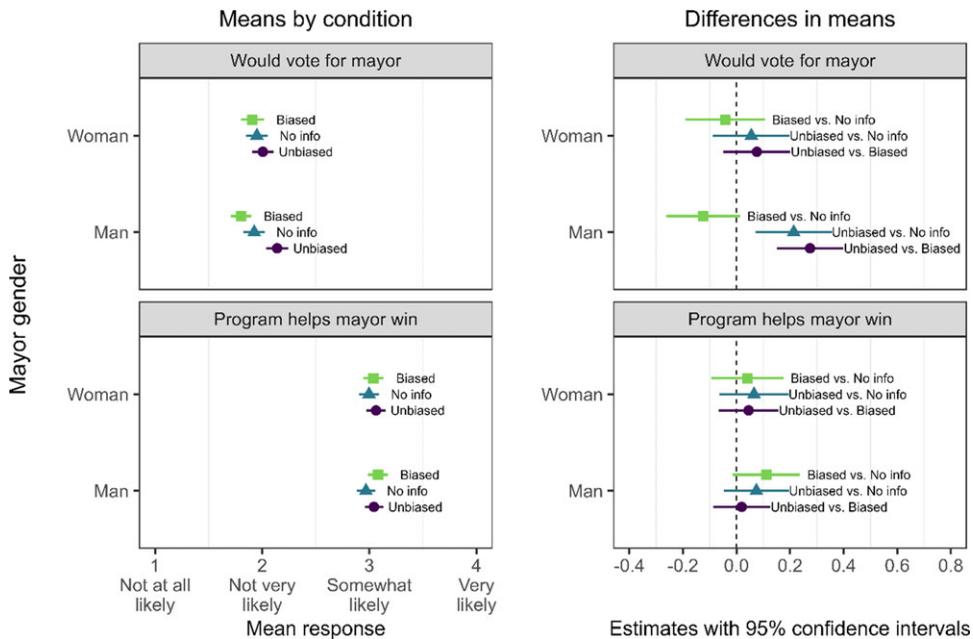


Figure 1. Means by treatment condition and differences in means for electoral performance outcomes.

The left panels show the mean response for each combination of mayor gender and programme implementation; the right panels show the differences in means across conditions.¹⁷

We first compare vote intention among respondents who learned about biased implementation to vote intention among respondents in the control group who did not receive any information about implementation. Among respondents who learned about a man mayor, information about biased implementation reduced the vote intention by 0.12 points ($p = 0.08$), compared to a reduction of only 0.04 points for women mayors ($p = 0.58$). The punishment for men mayors is three times as great, although the difference between these point estimates is not statistically significant ($p = 0.43$).

Next, we examine the effects of information about unbiased implementation compared to the control condition. Men mayors described as implementing the programme in an unbiased fashion receive a 0.21-point increase in vote intention on the four-point scale ($p < 0.01$). The difference for women mayors is a 0.06-point increase ($p = 0.45$). The difference between these two estimates

¹⁷Online Appendix Section A presents full tables for the findings described here. Appendix Section B shows additional results.

is substantively large (men receive rewards almost four times as large a benefit as women), but not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p = 0.13$).

These effect sizes are of meaningful magnitudes. As can be seen in the Online Appendix Table B10, the existence of a match between the mayor's party in the vignette and the respondent's self-reported partisan preference is associated with a 0.50-point increase in expressed vote intention ($p < 0.01$). The effect size of describing unbiased implementation in vignettes with men mayors is therefore about 42 per cent as large as this central determinant of voting behaviour, and the effect size of describing biased information in vignettes with men mayors is about 21 per cent as large.

Taken together, these results are contrary to findings that voters punish women more harshly for poor performance (Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2018; Barnes *et al.*, 2020). They are instead consistent with the hypotheses and results in de Geus *et al.* (2021), wherein voters perceive greater agency among men politicians and are more likely to both punish them for bad performance and reward them for good performance compared to women politicians.

We also examine the differences between the two treatment conditions – unbiased versus biased programme implementation. Relative to the biased implementation condition, unbiased implementation is associated with a 0.34-point increase in the likelihood that the respondent will vote for the man mayor ($p < 0.01$) but with only a 0.10-point increase that a respondent will vote for the woman mayor ($p = 0.19$). This 0.24-point difference-in-differences is statistically significant at the 95 per cent confidence level, again indicating that survey respondents were more responsive to performance information provided about men mayors.

Turning to the second question, which asks respondents whether the food programme will help the mayor win re-election, the different treatment conditions elicit more limited differences in patterns of responses. For both men and women mayors, information about *either* biased or unbiased implementation increases respondents' perceptions that the programme will be electorally valuable compared to the control. For men mayors, the 0.11-point increase in the biased-implementation condition is marginally significant ($p = 0.08$), whereas the 0.07-point increase in the unbiased-implementation condition is not ($p = 0.23$). For women mayors, the treatment effects are small in both conditions; the differences are not statistically significant, nor are they statistically distinguishable from the differences observed among men mayors. The pattern of responses suggests that voters think biased implementation may be electorally valuable, even if they themselves react negatively to it.

It is possible that the existence of differential punishment and/or rewards will vary by the gender of the citizen assessing performance (see, for instance, Costa and Schaffner, 2018; Schwarz and Coppock, 2022). For example, if women have even higher expectations for women politicians than men do, women could be harsher when punishing women politicians for not meeting expectations and are less likely to reward them for good performance. We find no evidence of this in our data.¹⁸

Do Differential Reactions Originate in Different Baseline Expectations?

The section above establishes that respondents react more strongly to performance information for men mayors than for women mayors. We find evidence both of differential punishment (men mayors are punished more for biased implementation) and of differential rewards (men mayors are rewarded more for unbiased implementation). Is this a result of different baseline preferences

¹⁸See Online Appendix Table B3. We also present heterogeneous treatment effects by social class in Online Appendix Table B4 and by whether or not respondents share the partisan identity of the mayor mentioned in the vignette in Online Appendix Table B5. The social class analysis shows that the positive reaction to information about unbiased implementation by men mayors is concentrated among respondents from lower-class backgrounds, whereas the negative reactions to information about biased implementation by women mayors is concentrated among respondents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. The partisanship analysis shows that positive reactions to unbiased performance by men mayors are stronger among respondents who share a partisan identity with the mayor.

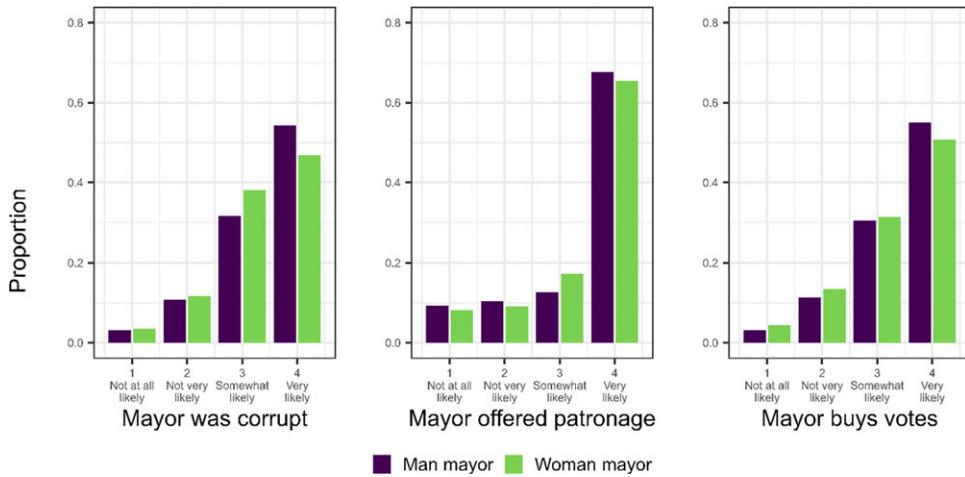


Figure 2. Perceptions of corruption, patronage, and vote-buying by mayor gender in the control group.

Note: p-values from χ^2 tests: $p = 0.27$ for the corruption outcome; $p = 0.40$ for the patronage outcome; $p = 0.60$ for the vote buying outcome.

for mayors of different genders? Our evidence suggests not. In the control condition, respondents are equally likely to say that they would vote to re-elect a man or woman mayor (1.93 versus 1.95; $p = 0.73$) and equally likely to say that the programme will help the mayor win re-election (2.97 vs. 3.00; $p = 0.66$). Furthermore, if there were different baseline expectations across genders, this should lead to either greater rewards or greater punishment for men mayors, but not both.

Other questions from the survey also suggest that Argentine respondents view men and women mayors similarly. After reading the vignette and after the measurement of the voting outcomes, respondents assessed whether the hypothetical mayor was likely to have engaged in corruption, patronage, or vote buying. Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses across politician gender for respondents in the control group. Although respondents are somewhat more likely to say that it is “very likely” that men mayors are corrupt, use patronage, or engage in vote buying, both difference-in-means tests and chi-squared tests of differences across the whole distributions return insignificant results. When they do not receive information about politician performance, respondents believe that men and women mayors are equally likely to engage in illicit behaviours.

Does Performance Information Differentially Change Programme Perceptions?

Another possible explanation for our findings is that the information about programme implementation might lead respondents to update their perceptions of the described social welfare programme in different ways for men and women mayors. To examine this possibility, we explore questions that ask respondents if they would be satisfied with the programme if it were run in their municipality and whether they believe the programme was distributed to those most in need.

Figure 3 shows the results for these outcomes. The top panels provide some evidence of differences across genders.¹⁹ As compared to the control condition, biased implementation decreases respondent satisfaction by about 0.13 points for both men and women mayors ($p = 0.09$ for men; $p = 0.07$ for women). By contrast, information about unbiased implementation is somewhat more meaningful for men mayors. Compared to the control condition, unbiased implementation by men mayors leads, on average, to a 0.27-point increase in programme

¹⁹For this variable only, there is a more notable – but still not statistically significant – difference between men and women mayors in the control condition. When asked how satisfied they would be with the programme if it were implemented in their municipality, respondents confer a slight advantage on women mayors (2.15 versus 2.07, $p = 0.35$).

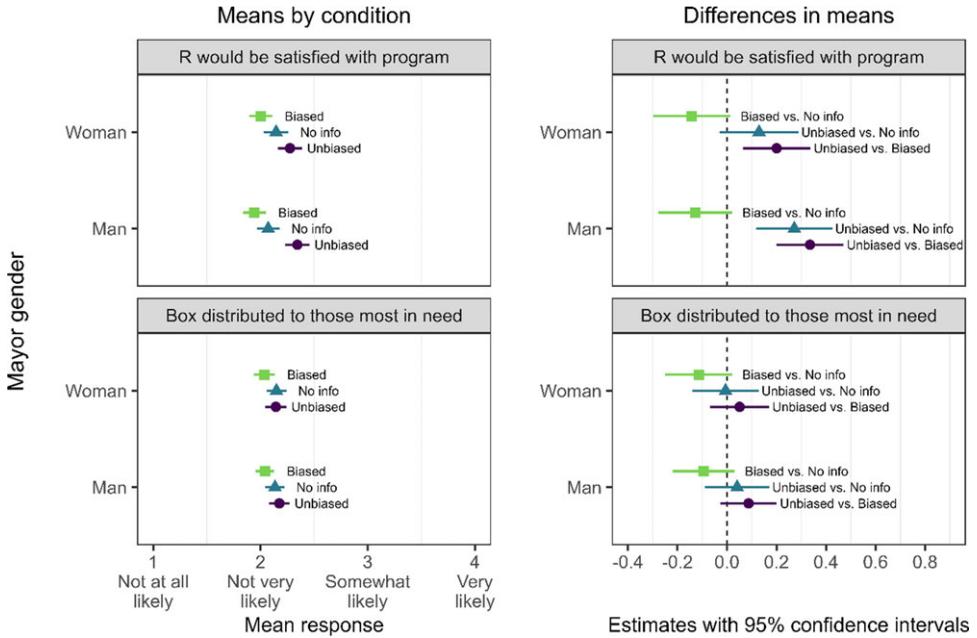


Figure 3. Means by treatment condition and differences in means for programme satisfaction outcomes.

satisfaction ($p < 0.01$). This difference is more than twice the size of the difference observed for woman mayors (0.13, $p = 0.11$ for the test of the null hypothesis of no difference from the control condition), although the two differences are not statistically distinguishable from one another ($p = 0.21$). We also see that the comparisons across the unbiased and biased implementation conditions are significant for both men and women mayors; the difference is larger for men mayors but not statistically distinguishable from the difference estimated for women mayors ($p = 0.25$).

While this pattern might provide some insight into why men mayors benefit more from information about unbiased implementation, it does not help us understand why men mayors also appear to be punished more for biased implementation. Instead, our results seem most consistent with the argument that voters are more likely to view men mayors – especially those holding executive office – as responsible for outcomes under their watch, whether positive or negative (De Geus et al. 2021).

In the bottom panels, we show that information about biased implementation reduces perceptions that the programme will benefit those most in need, for both men and women mayors. The effect for women mayors is slightly larger and is significant at the 90 per cent confidence level. The effects of this treatment across genders, however, are not distinguishable from one another ($p = 0.83$). Conversely, information about unbiased implementation appears to have no effect on beliefs about whether the programme benefits those in need, for mayors of either gender.

Finally, we explore whether implementation information changes perceptions of other mayor characteristics. Online Appendix Table B2 shows no evidence of an effect of performance information on whether the respondent thinks the mayor is likely to have engaged in corruption, patronage, or vote buying.

Discussion

Existing research presents varying findings about how voters evaluate candidates and office-holders of different genders. The predominant view in the literature suggests that the public tends

to hold women politicians to higher standards, such that they face more punishment for failing to deliver in office or becoming embroiled in scandal. An alternative argument suggests that voters credit men with more agency and provides evidence that voters are more responsive to men's performance in office – whether good or bad.

We contribute to this literature through a study of whether Argentine respondents' reactions to information about social welfare programme implementation at the local level vary with the gender of the local executive. Consistent with the agentic perspective, we find evidence that men mayors are rewarded more strongly for good programme implementation, and punished more strongly for poor implementation. Although the cross-gender differences are not significant for either individual treatment, the total difference between the two treatments is significantly greater for men mayors than for women mayors. We also show, contrary to much existing literature, that our respondents do not have higher baseline expectations for women mayors, so differing baseline expectations cannot explain the pattern of results we document.

Finally, our analysis also shows that respondents have a very high recall of the mayor's gender when they read about a woman mayor. This suggests that, in a context where women mayors are rare, respondents' focus on a woman mayor's gender identity might diminish their attention to performance information compared to when the mayor is a man. Future research designs might explore this possibility by comparing responsiveness to performance information across genders in contexts with different shares of women politicians.

Supplementary material. For supplementary material accompanying this paper visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123424000668>

Data availability statement. Replication data for this article can be found in Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/SWIPBZ>.

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