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Women Leadership at the Apex. The Distinctiveness of Urban Women Mayors in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Women occupy leadership positions at all levels of government. While the topic has been extensively investigated and referred to national legislatures, other venues remain under-researched. By focusing on the mayoral office, this article aims at contributing to fill the research gap regarding the local government arena and specifically executive positions. Drawing on a survey of around 2,600 European mayors, the study investigates whether women and male mayors differ in their social backgrounds, recruitment patterns and policy priorities. The resulting identikit of the 'Urban European Woman Mayor' points to important differences in the career path confirming the differences in policy priorities.

KEYWORDS

Women's political representation; local government; political leadership; mayors; urban democracies

1. Introduction

The (under-)representation of women in politics has been widely documented, but empirical analysis remains far more developed for legislatures (Paxton and Hughes 2013; Reynolds 1999; Wängnerud 2009) than for executive positions and more commonly refer to national than local contexts (Sundström et al. 2018). At the same time, existing gender representation research is less habitual to the study of local governance institutions. In the literature on gender and politics, local governments have been traditionally neglected, to the extent that they have been considered a 'blind spot' in comparative research on women in politics (Sundström et al. 2018).

Work on this research deficit is especially timely today, as women are little by little climbing into political office at different levels of government (Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2017; Reyes-Housholder 2016). Given that the executive office represents the apex of political power and the centre of decision-making processes, access would afford them the opportunity to become agenda setters and eventually achieve policy change. This work aims to analyze the distinctive traits and perceptions of women in local executives.

While the share of women in parliaments has improved worldwide in recent decades (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018), they remain under-represented in executive

positions (Claveria 2014; Krook and O'Brien 2012; Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2017; Reynolds 1999; Gerring et al. 2019), proving the existence of a thick layer of the glass ceiling, even if certain advances have been made (Jalalzai 2013). Perhaps as a result, research on gender and the executive branch is much less developed. Certainly, recent research efforts on executive positions have focused on prime ministers and members of cabinets (Barnes and Taylor-Robinson 2018; Liu and Banaszak 2017; Reyes-Housholder 2016), but less is known about the access and performance of women at the mayoral office in local democracies. Inquiring on these topics will enable us to better understand the key elements of representation in this particular arena.

The current lack of empirical research on women urban mayors merits to be surmounted for two main reasons. First, various processes of 'decentralization' have been encouraged all over, and city governments have become increasingly relevant in the multilevel governance system and in providing services to benefit the welfare of their residents, particularly in terms of issues that affect women, such as childcare or policies for the elderly. Second, in the European context in particular, urban mayors are increasingly significant actors in political systems, and their leaders have become central pieces and highly influential actors in local, regional and central governance in Europe (Bäck 2006; Heinelt et al. 2018).

Current evidence is predominantly case study driven and based on electoral data merged with secondary indicators and concentrated on descriptive representation issues. There is some comparative evidence focusing on Latin America (see Escobar-Lemmon and Funk 2018; Funk, Silva, and Escobar-Lemmon 2019; Alberti, Diaz-Rioseco, and Visconti 2021) for a summary and notable attempts willing to provide a general overview, based on case studies though (Pini and McDonald 2013). Indeed, most of the single country works rely on the question of the determinants of women mayors' representation, rather than policy priorities or social background, which are largely dependent on the data availability. In this regard, there is research on the US (Ferreira and Gyourko 2014; Kjaer, Dittmar, and Carroll 2018; Holman 2014) Germany (Fortin-Rittberger et al. 2017), Brazil (Meier and Funk 2017; Funk and Philips 2018) or Australia (Ryan, Pini, and Brown 2005), but to the best of our knowledge, none of them is based on a large sample systematically surveying mayors.

The analysis here proposed has as the main objective to ascertain to what extent there is a gendered path to the mayoral office and whether a link between descriptive representation (characteristics of those in elected office) and substantive representation (policy priorities) can be established (Pitkin 1967).

For the analysis below, we worked with one of the few available databases on European local government: a survey conducted in 2015–2016 on European mayors from municipalities with populations above 10,000 inhabitants, gathering responses from 2,600 of them from 29 European countries, 12% of whom were women. The database collects information on these leaders' sociodemographic traits and perceptions of their tasks, priorities, patterns of interaction with other local actors, notions of democracy, as well as other issues.

After this introduction, our theoretical framework proceeds by presenting an overview of the main findings and limitations of previous literature on women's descriptive and substantive representations. We then propose a set of hypotheses issued from our expectations, and we empirically test them on our sample of local leaders, exploring

whether or not female mayors differ from men. Our main findings point to differences between men and women in their political careers, and we offer empirical evidence on how policy priorities also differ between these two groups. Women tend to be younger than men and are likely to pay more attention to social issues and present a more leftist agenda.

2. Assessing the knowledge on European women mayors

In the quest for understanding to what extent mayor's gender makes any difference at the local leadership apex. The theoretical framework is built upon the discussion of three main aspects: a baseline knowledge of women's political representation (and its implications over the debate among numbers and actors); the descriptive representation of women at the local level and the effects of its presence on substantive representation. This approach is mainly built upon a sociological view of representation, the dominant in gender studies, rather than a more elitist (or Burkean) approach to representation.

Progresses have been completed in recent years in the quantitative monitoring of the presence of women in the European political system, under the pressures for realizing the EU objectives on gender equality are far from being reached, at all levels of government. Concerning their presence in the legislative institutions, the Institute for Gender Equality dataset registers in 2020 a percentage of 32.8 women in the EU28 national parliaments (24.4 in 2010), 34.2 in the regional ones (vs. 30.1 in 2010), 34.1% in local councils (30.5 in 2011, first data available in dataset). At the local-provincial level, Navarro and Medir (2015) report that women constitute 24.6% of the councils in the countries surveyed. Interestingly, despite the intuitive perception that women would have a greater presence in local elected offices, where supply barriers such as time devoted to political activity or geographical distance are lower, rates remain quite similar at the local and at the national one. The presence of women in executive positions is known to be low. The same dataset reports at the national level 17.9, at the regional one 35. The women mayors form in 2020 17.2% of the population of mayors (13,2 in 2011).¹

Specifically, gender bias is most marked in the top – that is, the apex of executive positions. In sum, it is more difficult for women to gain access to assemblies, and it is particularly difficult for them to become part of the core power apparatus. Because there is a scarce literature focusing on the role of women in local governments but not in national legislatures, we get inspiration from the latter. Even if we acknowledge that positions in legislatures and in executives differ, they are both elected officials. Therefore, we assume that the main elements of the theories of political representation apply to the two groups.

Certainly, the mainstream approach to political representation of women is grounded upon the basic assumption that 'descriptive representation usually furthers the substantive representation of interests by improving the quality of deliberation' (Mansbridge 1999, 654), even if nuances are established by part of the academia. The debate on the critical mass theory, which builds on the premise that 'all women will act for women as soon as their numbers increase,' is challenged by the critical actors' approach 'critical actors are those who act individually or collectively to bring about

women-friendly policy change' (Childs and Krook 2009, 145 and 127). This rich debate leads to open up new paths for analysing women's representation

Even if recent experimental evidence points towards a more positive evaluation of political systems when women's representation is higher (since greater women's presence gives all citizens clues about how the political system works (Verge, Wiesehomeier, and Espirito-Santo 2020)), these findings have to be supported with more research. In general terms, the majoritarian approach in gender studies sticks to this evidence, as we also do, but this complex debate between numbers and substance on representation merits further investigation and more nuanced statements.

2.1. Who and how are they? Descriptive representation

The relative recent arrival of women in politics has not occurred without resistance, which has been translated into a specific gendered distinctive pattern. As a result, the groups of women and men in politics differ in several aspects: analyses of women within the political elite have consistently identified that, compared to men, women are likely to be a) less in number, b) better educated (Rule 1987; Matland 1998; Steyvers et al. 2018) and c) recruited in greater numbers in left-leaning parties (Caul 1999). Some studies conducted on legislatures at regional and provincial levels also report that they tend to be younger compared to their male counterparts (Bäck 2006; Navarro and Medir 2015).

Regarding the share of women in political institutions, the literature has linked their higher or lower presence to three categories of factors: *institutional* (Kittilson 2006; Oñate 2014; Wängnerud 2009), such as electoral rules, how parties organise candidate selection or gender quotas; *socioeconomic* (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2008; Rosenbluth, Salmond, and Thies 2006), such as the proportion of women in the workforce and the strength of the welfare state; and *cultural or contextual* (Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013; Sundström and Stockemer 2015), like modernisation trends, beliefs about equality and the social acceptance of women for representational and leadership roles. For our purposes, we propose to analyze institutional and contextual variables first, followed by individual and socioeconomic elements.

Concerning institutional and contextual variables, Sundström and Stockemer (2015) state that women's representation levels at the local level are not independent of their national context, and at the same time other authors state that the context in which female leadership is undertaken is important so that one cannot simply extrapolate from studies finding strong gender effects in very different institutional settings (Ferreira and Gyourko 2014).

If at the central level of government more women are found in arenas with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems and greater district magnitudes, where there are more posts in the ballot to distribute, at the local level, this can be seen in systems of directly (or strong) elected mayors, where candidates compete for a single post (FPTP, plurality systems), with the effect of reducing the number of women in such mayoral offices. This effect has been observed in (Steyvers, Reynaert, and Bäck 2006) and can be checked for the more recent years. More generally, larger shares of women councilors and mayors are found in Scandinavian, where beliefs about equality are more deeply rooted in culture. Moreover, the literature has widely proved that

women are primarily recruited from left-wing parties, irrespective of the electoral system. Moreover, even in those cases where electoral systems belong to the same 'family' they may not automatically bring about the same effect in every country. This is largely due to its differentiation on their particular features and types, and because the electoral system is only one of the several factors that have an impact on women's representation (depending largely on the respective political and social conditions of each country). However, a broader distinction between PR systems and majority systems may apply since proportional systems are generally more open to inclusion than majority systems.

Ideology or party family constitutes a dimension of distinctiveness for women in political institutions. The dominant literature illustrates that women are primarily recruited from left-wing parties. These parties would be more likely to encourage the representation of women in parliaments and governments (Reynolds 1999) owing to the centrality of egalitarian values in their agendas, as well as their application of internal quota policies. Other authors have precised that left-wing parties are more prone to granting women their first access to elected positions, while right-wing parties score higher in maintaining them in parliaments, showing more effectiveness in promoting their careers (Santana & Aguilar, 2019), maybe because they are more interested in having professional female MPs. Also, applying to local governments, left-wing parties seem to contribute the largest share of women in parliaments and assemblies at all echelons, while minor parties in particular, but also conservative and right-wing parties often tend to eschew the topic of female candidacies (Fortin-Rittberger et al. 2017). Specially in the ideological variable, the dominant literature in this field is based on the available evidence, which turns out to be somehow ideologically self-selected, and thus subject to limitations.

A relevant variable in local government analysis, the size of the political unit, has not been particularly scrutinized and no clear relationship emerges from the literature. Big cities tend to concentrate more political power than small ones, thus probably being more object of strong political actors' ambitions (less consequently of women), and the women candidates find there less space and more obstacles. Kjaer, Dittmar, and Carroll (2018) point towards the contrary hypothesis, but their work relates to councilors and not mayors. The specificity of the mayoral position suggest the possible efficacy of the power approaches that state that women tend to reach more easily the less powerful positions (this is to say, small municipalities).

In relation to individual aspects, particularly the level of education attained, the literature on political elites describes a pattern of political leaders having high levels of education and being likely to belong to specific qualified professions (Cotta et al. 2000). University training is today commonplace among political elites. This is partly the case because governing has become an increasingly complex activity that requires a good level of mastery of intricate issues, as well as due to the fact that the proportion of people with higher educational credentials has dramatically increased in recent decades. However, studies have identified differences between male and female politicians, with women tending to be better educated (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2018). This indicates that education continues to be a vital resource for women (Paxton and Hughes 2013) in overcoming the structural disadvantages they face in making it to the electoral list.

Finally, age is also an interesting trait to explore. Müller-Rommel and Vercesi (2017) demonstrated in their work on European prime ministers that, for executive offices, women would need to gather substantial life and political experience before reaching top political positions, due to their reported initial disadvantage in the competition for candidacy. However, when we look at the scarce literature focusing on mayors' age it seems to point towards women mayors being younger than their male counterparts (Ryan, Pini, and Brown 2005).

Summing up the theoretical framework mobilized tends to configure a local arena where women urban mayors are expected to be older (as in other executive positions), better educated, and with greater leftist party affiliation than men. Moreover, the strong personalization of politics and city size should disadvantage the presence of women.

2.2. Are they different in interests and perspectives? Substantive representation

Once they are in representative positions, what difference, if any, do women make? An overview of the specialized literature presents evidence that having more women in positions of power has an effect.

The idea of women having a distinctive type of political and policy action or leadership style resides for some observers on the idea that they share similar life experiences (such as childbearing, occupation and unequal positions in paid and unpaid work) and so share interests as well (Phillips 1995). In contrast, some authors claim that not all women have shared life trajectories and conclude that the political representation of women may not have special effect in representing women's interests or emphasizing themes related to the struggle against discrimination and in favor of equality and autonomy (Celis 2008). Regardless of the perspective, the question debated is whether or not some issues can be identified as privileged in women leader's policy agendas. A substantial corpus of empirical research at the central levels of government show that women offer distinctive attitudes and values and contribute to improving women's positions in society through their work in parliaments and executive offices (Mateo-Diaz 2005; Thomas and Wilcox 2005). Some empirical research on the local sphere converges to such observations.

For instance, in their examination of the allocation of local expenditure by mayors in Brazilian municipalities, Funk and Philips (2018) find that greater female representation as mayors and city councilors renders it more likely that spending will be focused on issues that disproportionately concern women, hence electing women improve women's substantive representation. Such subjects include family and children's issues, health care, social services and the environment (Little, Dunn, and Deen 2001; Poggione 2004). In a similar vein, Holman (2014) finds that the presence of a female mayor has a positive influence on the likelihood a city participates in funding social welfare programs, together with the amount of monetary resources devoted to those issues. Some empirical studies in local government in the Nordic countries also report a more marked interest among women in social policy agendas as well as outcomes that are beneficial for women in their daily lives (Bratton and Ray 2002; Wängnerud and Sundell 2012). In Norway and Sweden, it is shown that municipalities that elect a large number of women tend to be gender-equal in other respects, including policy outputs such as childcare coverage (Bratton and Ray 2002), employment opportunities

for women (Wängnerud and Sundell 2012) and public expenditure in areas related to the situation of female citizens (Svaleryd 2009).

Summing up the presence of women may be associated to legitimacy issues, such as perceptions of a more open and fairer political system and, especially, of more diverse representatives' profiles and legislative agendas (Verge, Wiesehomeier, and Espírito-Santo 2020). Therefore, urban women mayors should assign greater importance to social-related issues in the policy agenda than men do.

3. Methods, data and expectations

Our data are derived from an original and unique database gathered in 29 countries, through the distribution of a questionnaire addressed to the mayors (or their equivalent) of cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants. The sample represents 30.7% of the total population investigated by the survey. Although the data set is not strictly a sample, we believe that the number of mayors interviewed as well as its territorial and gender representation, provide suitable conditions for reliable statistical analysis (see Table 1). The data used in this article has been created by a long-lasting academic

Table 1. Percentage of women mayors in Europe and in our sample (n women = 348).

	Response rate (%)	women at mayoralty* (%)	Women in sample		Local government system**	Direct election***
			%	N		
Albania	50.8	-	17.9	5	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Austria	34.9	7.5	11.8	4	<i>Strong mayor</i>	both
Belgium	44.6	14.8	17	19	<i>Collective</i>	
Croatia	45.9	7	10.7	8	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Cyprus	38.9	3.8	-		<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Czech Republic	33.9	4.2	14.8	9	<i>Collective</i>	
Denmark	51.1	11.2	16.7	8	<i>Committee-leader</i>	
England	10.8	17.4 (in UK)	7.4	2	<i>Strong mayor/Committee-leader /Collective</i>	both
France	7.2	16	13.8	8	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Germany	38.5	8.9	10.2	58	<i>Strong mayor/Collective</i>	X
Greece	40.7	4.9	4.1	4	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Hungary	43.0	20.5	11.3	8	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Iceland	83.3	21.6	20	1	<i>Committee-leader</i>	X
Ireland	35.5	19.4 (2015)	-		<i>Council manager</i>	
Israel	10.8	-	-		<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Italy	20.5	14.1	14.9	26	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Latvia	16.3	24.4	33	2	<i>Committee-leader</i>	
Lithuania	54.4	8.3	10	3	<i>Council manager</i>	
Netherlands	34.2	21.6	22.4	26	<i>Collective</i>	
Norway	41.2	28	19	4	<i>Council manager</i>	
Poland	24.9	10.7	14.8	26	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Portugal	43.0	7.5	10	7	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Romania	3.9	4.5	12.5	1	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Serbia	37.6	6.6	4	2	<i>Committee-leader</i>	
Slovakia	24.7	23.3	5.9	1	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Slovenia	45.3	7.5	4.2	1	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Spain	40.3	17.4	21.5	65	<i>Strong mayor</i>	X
Sweden	74.5	36.9	34.1	45	<i>Committee-leader</i>	
Switzerland	67.6	-	10	10	<i>Collective</i>	X
Total		14.9	12.9	348		

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2017) and The European Mayor II survey.

collaboration of local government scholars that have implemented two waves of questionnaires at Mayors for comparative purposes (Heinelt and Magnier 2018). Concerning the content of the questionnaire, it has been specially designed to overcome national particularities and to ask for concepts that are directly comparable across countries and widely accepted in academia. In the event that there is an effect of social desirability in the answers (sincerity in mayors' responses), it would be present in all the respondents. Therefore, the observed differences hold and neutralize this potential effect. Therefore, no relevant biases in the content, structure and wording of the questionnaire are expected. The major caveat comes from the selection of municipalities being limited to those of medium and large size. Therefore, even the municipality size discriminant can be only partially examined: the findings of this contribution apply to the elites of >10.000 inhabitants local governments.

Our sample consists of 348 women out of 2,396 mayors (12.9%), fairly evenly distributed across our 29 countries without remarkable deviant cases (as displayed in Table 1) while ensuring that those countries that include greater numbers of cases are not biased. The comparison between the available data of women mayors per country in 2017 confirms that the potential bias of our sample of women (if exist) is limited to some national cases and blurs when the whole sample is considered, which is the case in all our analysis since we do not perform any cross-country research. Most of the data (about 90%) were collected in 2015 and in the first quarter of 2016. The original version of the survey was drafted in English, and then it was translated by different national experts thus slightly adapting the questionnaire to the idiosyncratic institutional settings of the different countries. Except Germany who sent the questionnaire in paper format, the research groups followed the development of its own data collection through a common online questionnaire sent to official email addresses of mayors. Besides, most teams adopted telephone campaigns in order to invite the mayors to complete the questionnaire. The average response rate per country is 37.8%, ranging from the 3.9% in Romania to 83.3% in Iceland (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

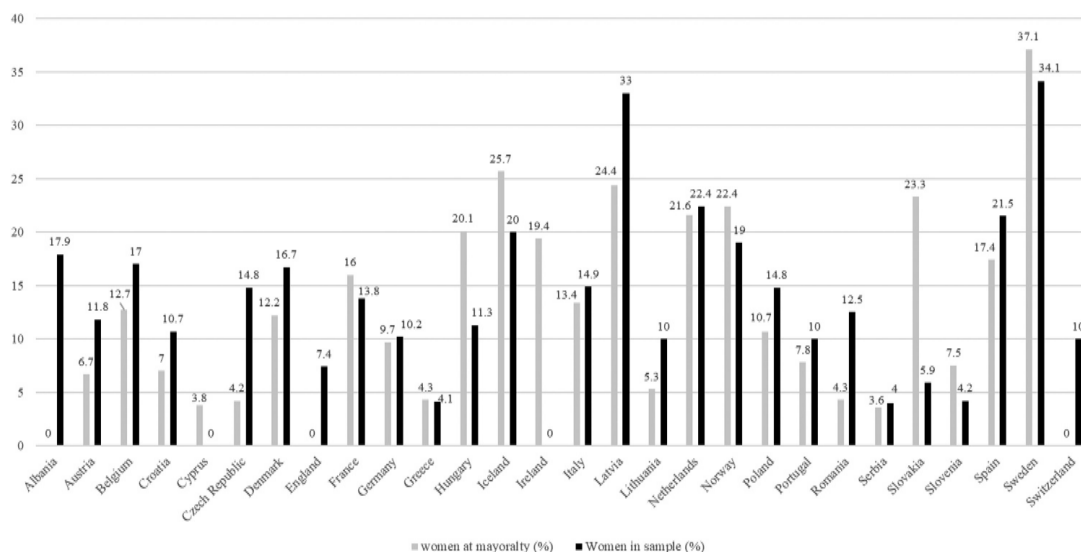


Figure 1. Percentage of women mayors in Europe and in our sample

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2015) and The European Mayor II survey.

Exploiting intensively our dataset and in order to propose amore complete picture of the urban European woman mayor, we worked starting from the most classical questioning of the literature, aset of two blocks of hypotheses targeting descriptive and substantive representation.

H1. Concerning descriptive representation:

H1a The urban women mayors are supposed to be older, better educated and with greater leftist party affiliation than men.

H1b The strong personalization of politics (favoured by strong mayor forms) should promote more the presence of men

H1c City size is expected to strengthen the trend in favor of males.

H2. Related to the substantive representation of mayoralty:

H2: Urban women mayors should assign greater importance to social issues in the policy agenda than men do.

Even though the questionnaire was not designed to test gender differences, as a means of exploring specific dimensions of gender issues among council leaders it is viable and worthwhile. Indeed, we can map the social background and political affiliation of women and men, and we enjoy the potential to profile (if relevant) a different approach to policy priorities based on gender.

To develop our analysis, we use a set of questions from our survey that can be classified into two main groups: socio-political background, on the one hand and policy priorities on the other. For the former we use classical variables such as age, education level, party membership (Yes/no) and party family (progressive/conservative). For the latter, we focus on questions regarding the prioritisation and importance of certain challenges on mayors' policy agendas.

Gender is our main independent variable, being reported by respondents and thereby enabling us to distinguish between two independent groups based on the natural attributes of sex. In this sense, the analysis made in this paper states that 'gender' is an independent attribute of our objects of analysis (mayors) that has an impact on their role, perceptions and visions. Our analyses focus on differences between groups (men versus women), not on cross-country comparisons. The general null hypothesis operates under the theoretical assumption that these groups are two different samples from the same population, thus assuming that there are no differences between men and women mayors in their social backgrounds, recruitment and perceptions of policy priorities. Therefore, the tests made in this paper reflect the likelihood that their values are equal.

First, we provide empirical bivariate evidence of such differences and commonalities. To offer more than mere descriptive results, we stick to bivariate analysis based on

independent *t*-test and chi-square tests for the main socio-political aspects of our first group of hypotheses. To test the basic assumption that no differences based on gender for an identical population exist, we primarily use the independent means *t*-test for continuous variables and Pearson's chi-square test for categorical variables. The independent samples *t*-test compares the mean of two sets of values from one continuous variable, while the Pearson's chi-square tests the idea of comparing the frequencies observed in certain categories to the frequencies one might expect to find in those categories by chance. When using the latter technique, we often recode the original variables in the database into a dichotomous version to create 2×2 matrices that easily capture the most important information for each indicator.

Nevertheless, to test our second hypothesis (substantive representation), we rely on more complex models, a set of regression models aimed at identifying the intertwined effects of personal traits and institutional settings in different European countries. First, we fit as a discriminatory analysis a one-way ANOVA test for the nine policy priorities included in the questionnaire. After running the ANOVA test, we run several multilevel regression models, all of which with gender as the main independent variable of interest in every policy priority. We use linear regression models to test our dependent variable on the importance given by people in mayoralty to several policy priorities. In order to control the fixed-country effects and the potential divergences caused by the distribution of the sample, we fit OLS multilevel models with varying intercept by country. Departing from the original SPSS matrix database, we used R to perform all these analyses.

4. Empirical results

4.1. *Bivariate evidence of a persistent gender gap in descriptive representation*

Our data evidence significant differences in the mayors' personal traits both in terms of age and education, thereby confirming only one of our expectations: on average, elected women are younger and better educated than their male colleagues. Women in our sample are more present in the early age classes in particular, under 50 years since a 44.7% of the women in the sample have less than 50 (while 36,6% of the men have less than 50 years). Our data seem to configure a different structure of age distribution within urban mayors divided by gender.

Moreover, the age difference between the two groups is statistically significant and is about 1.8 years, with Levene's test being significant (0.048), equal variance not assumed, and the mean difference due to gender statistically significant (*p*-value is 0.001), see Table 2.

Table 2. T-test and Chi-square test for age and education.

Age		Higher Education	
Women's age (mean)	50.52	Women's with higher education (%)	84.4
Men's age (mean)	52.32	Men's with higher education (%)	77.8
Levene's test (<i>p</i> -value)	0.048	χ^2	7.472
<i>t</i> -test	-3.520	<i>p</i> -value	0.006
Difference in means	-1.799	Fisher's exact test	0.006
<i>p</i> -value	0.000	Odds ratio	0.647
<i>R</i> ²	0.02		

Source: The European Mayor II survey.

These results are contrary to our expectations and may appear to be counter-intuitive. Indeed, we could expect women mayors to be older than their male counterparts, as has been shown in other executive positions (Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2017 in particular as already reminded). This supposition was due to the fact that they may have been prevented from entering politics during their child-rearing period, given the fact that women are traditionally more likely to take more responsibility for duties related to family care. In addition, women are expected to require a longer trajectory and greater experience in politics before entering top executive positions. Indeed, if we review political career duration at the time of the survey,² men appear to have longer careers than women do. In this sense, men enter politics, on average 2.5 years before women, representing a gap slightly larger than the age difference. Some findings in the scarce literature on local politics and gender have already accounted for these differences in age in previous studies of European mayors (Steyvers, Reynaert, and Bäck 2006).

The convergence between these results and those obtained on the career length is nevertheless particularly interesting and not underlined in the literature. Women are not only younger but also access the apex position more rapidly in local government. Perhaps because they are also more often well qualified: 77.8% of the men had attained a university degree, compared to 84.4% of the women.

Institutions nevertheless appear to be key factors in understanding the presence of women in urban mayoralties. Which external conditions favour the election of women more than others? Our data indicate a significant relationship between gender and two different contextual factors: city size and electoral system. Moreover, we will ascertain whether the party membership and the ideological orientation of mayors, and therefore the orientation of the party or coalition they were supported by, yield differences by gender.

We find differences in the distribution of men and women regarding city size since women are ruling in significantly smaller cities than men do (32.937 inhabitants on average for women and 40.717 on average for men, *t*-test being significant at 0.09). Moreover, considering a threshold of 30,000 inhabitants in order to divide the cities into two categories, smaller and larger, women have a statistically significant greater presence in the first category: 15.3% compared to 11.9% elected in 'big' cities, as can be seen in Table 3. In addition, according to table 3, women are more numerous in cities where the electoral system is centered on the indirect election of the mayor: in such institutional contexts, the proportion of women mayors is 20.4%, whereas in direct election systems the figure is only 12.6%. Compared to men, women have 1.76 times more odds to be elected in indirect or weak electoral systems (Table 3).

Indeed, the party system remains at the center of the local political scene even if its importance is relatively diminished in comparison with the past. Parties continue to play a key role as gatekeepers, managing the selection process of politicians. Our data show a comparatively larger presence of partisan women. Party membership is greater between urban female mayors than between men (80.3% vs. 77%) and only 14.4% of women claim to have never joined a political party, compared to men at 15.2% (Table 3).

An additional important finding in the field is that women do better in left-wing parties (as remarked in Dahlerup and Leyenaar 2013; Wängnerud 2009). Although party ideology today is supposed to matter less than in the past, leftist parties have

Table 3. (A) Mayors by city dimension (Chi-square test and *t*-test), **(B)** Mayors by electoral system (Chi-square test and *t*-test), **(C)** Women in left-wing parties and ideological self-placement (Chi-square test and *t*-test).

A) Mayors by city dimension (Chi-square test and <i>t</i>-test)			
City size			
<i>Chi-square test (30.000 inhab threshold)</i>		<i>Direct t-test of means</i>	
Female mayor in small cities (%)	15.3	Female Mayor (inhabitants)	32937.4
Female mayor in big cities (%)	11.9	Men Mayor (inhabitants)	40717.6
χ^2	4.791	Levene's test (p-value)	0.027
p-value	0.029	t-test	-2,65
Fisher's exact test	0.030	Difference in means	7780.22
Odds ratio	1.337	p-value	0.000
B) Mayors by electoral system (Chi-square test and <i>t</i>-test)			
Electoral system			
<i>Chi-square within indirect electoral system</i>		<i>Chi-square women vs men</i>	
Female mayor in indirect election system (%)	20.4	Female mayor in indirect election system (%)	35,1
Female mayor in direct election system (%)	12.6	Male mayor in indirect election system (%)	23.2
χ^2	22.38	χ^2	22,38
p-value	0.000	p-value	0.000
Fisher's exact test	0.000	Fisher's exact test	0.000
Odds ratio	1.788	Odds ratio	1.76
C) Women in left-wing parties and ideological self-placement (Chi-square test and <i>t</i>-test)			
<i>Left-Wing parties</i>		<i>Ideological self-placement</i>	
Female member of left-wing parties (%)	55.5	Female self-placement (0-10 mean)	4,55
Male member of left-wing parties (%)	43.5	Male self-placement (0-10 mean)	5,02
χ^2	10.769	Levene's test (p-value)	0.031
p-value	0.001	t-test	-3.317
Fisher's exact test	0.001	Difference in means	-0,469
Odds ratio	1.615	p-value	0.001

Source: The European Mayor II survey.

traditionally been more likely to nominate women to safe places on their lists. Our survey data highlight significant differences regarding the political orientation of males and females, confirming this trend reported in the literature. We used two variables in the questionnaire to evaluate the political orientation of the respondents according to the left-right axis. The first question is built on scale, asking mayors to place themselves in a range from 0 (left) to 10 (right). The second question directly investigated the partisan affiliation of the respondents; the later recodification according to Andersson et al.'s work (Andersson 2014) enabled us to differentiate between left- and right-wing parties. Females were more likely to identify themselves on the left than were men. Moreover, this was not only true in the case of the self-placement of the interviewees but also when considering party membership and consequent placement into larger political families. Certainly, women are 1.61 times more likely to be enrolled in left-wing parties and significantly more ideologically oriented to the left than are men (Table 3).

Our bivariate data analyses enable us to develop a profile in which contextual and institutional variables play an important role in gender dynamics, to an even greater extent than the role played by the personal characteristics of candidates. We are more likely to find a woman mayor if we look at a small town, with a system involving an indirect election and with members of left-oriented parties. The comparatively limited presence of women as leaders of bigger cities, where they continue to encounter greater

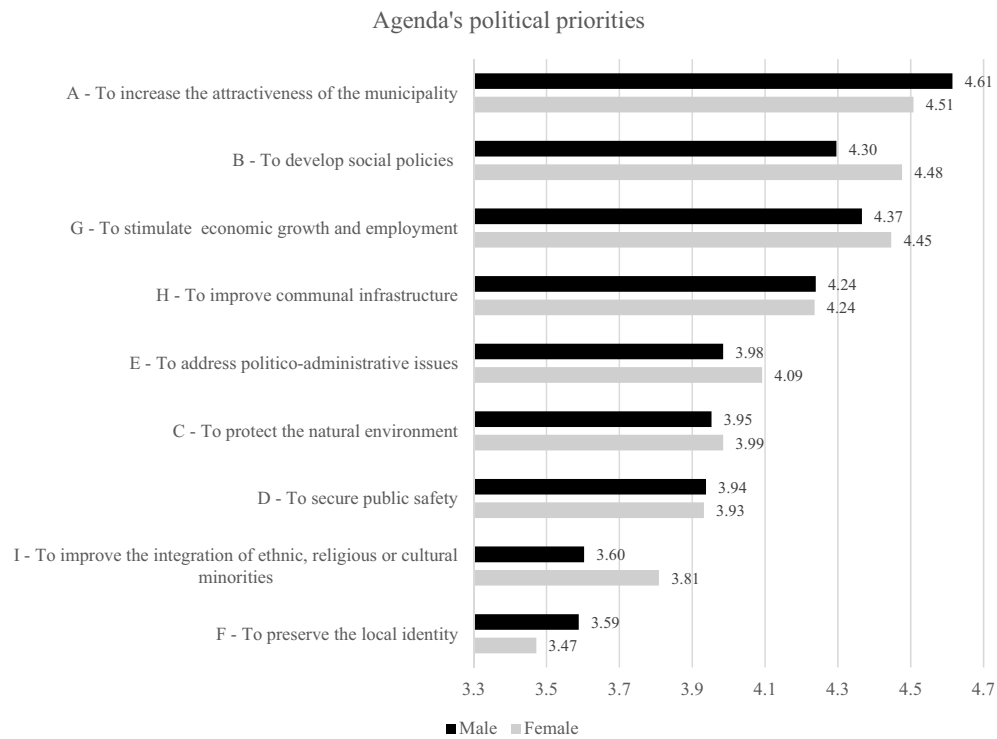


Figure 2. Performing several ANOVA tests (figures in annex) regarding the question about the main challenges and priorities faced by mayors, we further pointed out the differences between men and women mayors: in five out of nine issues the two considered groups of respondents diverge significantly, whereas similar visions and perceptions were present in remaining four items. Women assigned comparatively lower values to the item referring to the general and wide transformation of their cities in more attractive places (Response A) and their attention to “developing a traditional lifestyle” (Response F), while they seem to be more attentive to facing the concrete problems of their local communities: reducing social differences through the implementation of social policies (Response B); raising the efficiency of the administrative machine for improving relations with citizens (Response E); and improving the internal social cohesion of the community (Response I). The overall bivariate picture offers evidence for considering the existence of a slight gender gap in terms of priorities for people-oriented challenges. The remainder of the topics (C, D, G and H) do not exhibit significant differences.

difficulties in reaching office, emphasizes the persistence of social barriers and prejudices that preclude women from attaining mayoral leadership. In this sense, our findings are in line with most of the existing literature on the descriptive representation of mayors.

If we turn our attention to more substantive representation issues, we uphold the assumption that women have certain interests in common, as claimed by studies on women in representative bodies. Therefore, we expect that women will tend to manifest distinctive values and attitudes as a group and to share common interests and policy priorities at the mayoral office as well, especially focusing on social-oriented policies. In fact, moving to the agenda's priorities of mayors (Figure 2), we observe that women give comparatively more importance to policies oriented to the maintenance or improvement of social cohesion of their community. We consider here the average response rate (scale from 1 to 5) to a set of questions (see the concrete wordings of the

survey in the [Appendix](#)). Nine issues were proposed to the mayors as possible key priorities in their agenda, which they must answer give a rank from 1 to 5.

Multivariate analysis allows us to better understand the descriptive representation of our empirical findings and the dynamics through which is developing the traditionally registered difference between women and men in performing their mayoralty.

4.2. *Modelling the gendered mayoral office: differences in priorities*

Given that politics (and particularly mayors' operating space) do not occur in bivariate environments, as well as the fact that a more robust approach to these particular issues is required, we propose a multivariate analysis controlling for the main personal and institutional variables affecting local governments' orientation. Therefore, we construct four multivariate models for each social-policy priority as dependent variables: developing social policies (B), improving relations with citizens through administrative performance (E), fostering a traditional lifestyle (F), and improving internal social cohesion of the community (I).

We build our models in a three-step process, where the first model is exclusively a bivariate multilevel regression with gender as the unique independent variable, the second includes personal attributes (level of education, age and partisanship), and the third adds institutional variables (typology of local government,³ local autonomy index *lai2014*⁴ and the size of the jurisdiction, i.e. inhabitants). This process allows us to test whether gender maintains its explanatory power even when controlling for personal traits, national and institutional settings. The following [Table 4](#) accounts for the models.

The general picture for the four socially oriented items (B, E, F and I) is quite clear. Although the significance of gender disappears for the question of maintaining a traditional lifestyle (F), it is maintained for the other three social-oriented items. Indeed, it is robust for each of the three proposed models and for every step model we present.

The responses to these policy priority issues are statistically significant most of them to a $p < 0.01$ value and with an average slope effect of 0.148 on gender differences. Certainly, the slope size of the effect is modest (the predicted change in the declared policy priority for the shifting in gender) but allows us to infer that the fact of having a woman in the mayoralty increases the possibility of finding more social-related priorities and a more progressive agenda of local governments.

The remaining independent variables included in our models do not clearly show a consistent pattern of impact on the different dependent variables. However, the LAI index appears as a moderator of social-oriented items of mayors (maybe because more autonomy implies more resources *per se* and less trade-offs between welfare policies and other policies), the direct election of mayors increases the likelihood of promoting social policies in E and I (but not in B and F) and the population of the municipality does not seem to matter (maybe because our sample includes municipalities above 10.000 inhabitants where the classic divide between big and small is somehow blurred). In any case, these results show explicitly that women at mayoralty tend to assign higher priority than men to developing social policies (B), addressing administrative issues with the aim of improving citizens' relations (E) and fostering the integration of

Table 4. Modelling social priorities at the mayorality.

Below are a number of challenges that many municipalities are facing. For each challenge please indicate the degree to which it is an important priority on the policy agenda of you as a mayor during your current term of office

Dependent variable:	(B)			(E)			(F)			(I)		
	Develop social policies			Improve citizens relations			Maintain traditional lifestyle			Integration of minorities		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Women	0.162*** (0.044)	0.138*** (0.046)	0.143*** (0.047)	0.121*** (0.046)	0.120** (0.048)	0.120** (0.050)	0.048 (0.054)	0.018 (0.057)	0.014 (0.060)	0.177*** (0.056)	0.184*** (0.058)	0.182*** (0.061)
Partisanship (No)		-0.075* (0.042)	-0.070* (0.042)		-0.069 (0.044)	-0.065 (0.044)		0.025 (0.052)	0.023 (0.053)		-0.090* (0.053)	-0.086 (0.054)
Secondary education		0.031 (0.086)	0.022 (0.086)		-0.131 (0.091)	-0.120 (0.092)		0.009 (0.106)	0.041 (0.108)		-0.134 (0.109)	-0.131 (0.111)
Higher Education		0.020 (0.078)	0.013 (0.078)		-0.105 (0.082)	-0.093 (0.083)		-0.114 (0.097)	-0.097 (0.099)		-0.212** (0.100)	-0.212** (0.101)
Age (years)		0.003 (0.002)	0.003* (0.002)		0.005** (0.002)	0.005** (0.002)		0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)		0.005** (0.002)	0.005** (0.002)
Local Autonomy Index 2014 (lai2014)			-0.034** (0.017)			-0.047** (0.019)			-0.049** (0.021)			-0.015 (0.020)
Direct election of Mayor form			0.081 (0.168)			0.410** (0.186)			0.193 (0.203)			0.406** (0.194)
Collective Form Mayor			-0.477* (0.265)			-0.667** (0.298)			-0.463 (0.319)			-0.433 (0.302)
Committee leader form			-0.079 (0.290)			-0.330 (0.325)			-0.378 (0.349)			0.122 (0.331)
Strong Mayor Form			-0.307 (0.282)			-0.623** (0.315)			-0.372 (0.340)			-0.419 (0.324)
Inhabitants (log)			0.035 (0.022)			0.010 (0.023)			-0.041 (0.028)			0.095*** (0.028)
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	4.523*** (0.076)	4.346*** (0.148)	5.028*** (0.563)	4.197*** (0.085)	4.080*** (0.160)	5.305*** (0.625)	3.629*** (0.087)	3.623*** (0.180)	5.400*** (0.686)	3.763*** (0.082)	3.736*** (0.180)	3.140*** (0.663)
Observations	2,334	2,151	1,996	2,327	2,148	1,994	2,338	2,154	2,001	2,337	2,154	1,999
Log Likelihood	-2,625.193	-2,430.802	-2,200.878	-2,743.422	-2,534.100	-2,329.408	-3,127.527	-2,891.706	-2,679.572	-3,177.210	-2,934.021	-2,714.450
Akaike Inf. Crit.	5,258.386	4,877.604	4,429.756	5,494.844	5,084.200	4,686.817	6,263.053	5,799.412	5,387.145	6,362.420	5,884.043	5,456.899
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	5,281.407	4,922.993	4,508.141	5,517.853	5,129.578	4,765.187	6,286.081	5,844.812	5,465.564	6,385.446	5,929.443	5,535.305

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

minorities (I). Gender is not significant in ‘maintaining a traditional lifestyle’, but it is probably the less clearly socially oriented item in our set of possible answers. The overall results show that gender maintains its explanatory power, and makes a steady difference in social policy priorities, for these particular items even when controlling for country and a variety of personal, contextual and institutional variables. Indeed, gender appears to be a systematically consistent variable in any of the different models, clearly pointing towards a clear pattern of distinctiveness. These findings point to the confirmation of an identifiable and distinctive substantive representation of women mayors. In other words, the presence of women at the mayoral office has the effect of enhancing social issues in local agendas, at least in terms of policy priorities. The implications are straightforward: increasing the presence of women at the political apex of local power not only stands by itself, for reasons of equality, but may also contribute to addressing more effectively the many social challenges that we face as a society after having been hit by successive recent crises.

5. Conclusion

This is an original work exploring gender issues based on a unique data set on mayors’ perceptions on social background and political priorities across urban Europe. It has allowed us to offer new and relevant insights regarding a very particular political executive position: mayoralty. In this paper, we focus on two key vectors of research: social background (descriptive representation) and an illustration of policy priorities (substantive representation). Indeed, our main findings reinforce the notion of a gendered path in the selection process. Leaving aside the question of share of women in mayoral offices (which cannot be accurately addressed with our data as we work with a sample), as expected, women mayors’ career differs from men mayors. Moreover, we offer robust findings on how policy priorities also differ between these two groups.

Concerning the main social background variables analyzed, we find results that are in line with scarce previous research, particularly studies that reflect the fact that women are younger and better qualified. Even if the specificity of the mayoral position (executive) stimulates us to hypothesize that women would arrive later and would therefore be older than men, we find that women mayors are actually younger and have shorter political careers.

Regarding political recruitment and access to mayoralty covered by the H1 hypotheses, our results converge with those attained to date. We additionally confirm that women at the apex of European local governments have a markedly more leftist ideology than men and are more likely to come from leftist parties than their male counterparts. However, for the first time, we test some institutional factors and their impacts on access to mayoralty. First, we find significantly more women in less populated cities. Second, we examined different electoral systems, finding that the presence of women at the apex is greater where strong personalization of politics (direct election of mayors) is not in place.

Finally, considering the policy priorities of women and men once in the mayoral office (Hypothesis 2) we also note relevant results partially confirming what has been detected in other political arenas: women tend to assign greater importance (priority) to social issues than men, but not only to them. However, female mayors rate the challenge of increasing

local economic attractiveness to a lesser extent than do their male counterparts. Mayors were asked to evaluate priorities regarding a wide range of challenges faced by municipalities today. Among the nine challenges, we can identify social, economic, law enforcement and environmental issues: women rated these four challenges significantly higher than did men, all of which were clearly identifiable through their social content.

We must keep in mind that we are analyzing political priorities through a survey that enquires into mayors' attitudes, rather than the public policies actually and effectively implemented by the mayoralty. We do not have evidence for this translation from desires (priorities) to political decisions (the actual public policies implemented), hence our analysis is based on political ideas without allowing for mechanical translations to the effective implementation of public policies. Several preliminary results appear to indicate similar leadership styles or at least an institutionalization of the role of the mayor, which may have effects in blurring the differences between men and women regarding these dimensions when they reach the top of the local executive position. In this sense, further paths may be realized in comprehending the impact of the concrete institutional executive position in the evolution from political priorities to action, alongside the effective implementation of the agenda.

Also, this results on descriptive and substantive representation open somehow room for a debate on the nature of women representation at the local level and the future of parity at the local level. Since they arrive younger and better educated at the apex, and their presence seems to indicate differences in priorities (but without evidence of implementation), could these be a reflect on a more elitist representation at the local level? Probably complementary work, especially on the nature of the work women undertake in politics to secure mayoral (and also other) positions, together with an analysis of the successful and unsuccessful campaign by women for selection as mayoral candidates, would be very revealing and it would open new paths to the representation debate. Finally, concerning the increase of the needed parity, the article leaves room to investigate on how women engage in individual strategies to reach mayoralties and how political parties facilitate, or not, these careers. In less populated cities, mayoral offices may appear to be less attractive for a male political career (hence generating less competition) but may be seen (supposedly) as less difficult to combine with the many tasks yet predominantly assumed by the women. More evidence on those aspects would illuminate social movements and relevant stakeholders to push to introduce institutional and legal measures to equilibrate, from a gender perspective, all kind of mayoralties.

Notes

1. On this point, see also: Müller-Rommel and Vercesi (Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2017); the authors found that between 1945 and 2014, only 14 women of a total of 290 prime ministers (4.5%) have led European parliamentary systems. In recent works focusing on the national levels for a large sample of countries, Gerring (Gerring et al. 2019) confirms the general trends observed, since they state that 81% of political elites overall are male, while 92% of elites at the apex (the top one or two decision-makers) are male. Specifically, gender bias is most marked at the top – that is, the apex of executive positions. In sum, it is more difficult for women to gain access to assemblies, and it is particularly difficult for them to become part of the core power apparatus.
2. Calculated considering the years from the first party membership to 2016, as reported by interviewees in the questionnaire.
3. The classification is based on the classical work of Mouritzen and Svava (2002), analyzing horizontal leadership at mayoralty.

4. The LAI index is the final product of a project aiming to measuring and comparing local autonomy in Europe. The final index takes into account 11 different variables measuring different aspects of local autonomy in 39 European countries. The data set is downloadable, together with more information, here: <http://local-autonomy.andreasladner.ch/>.

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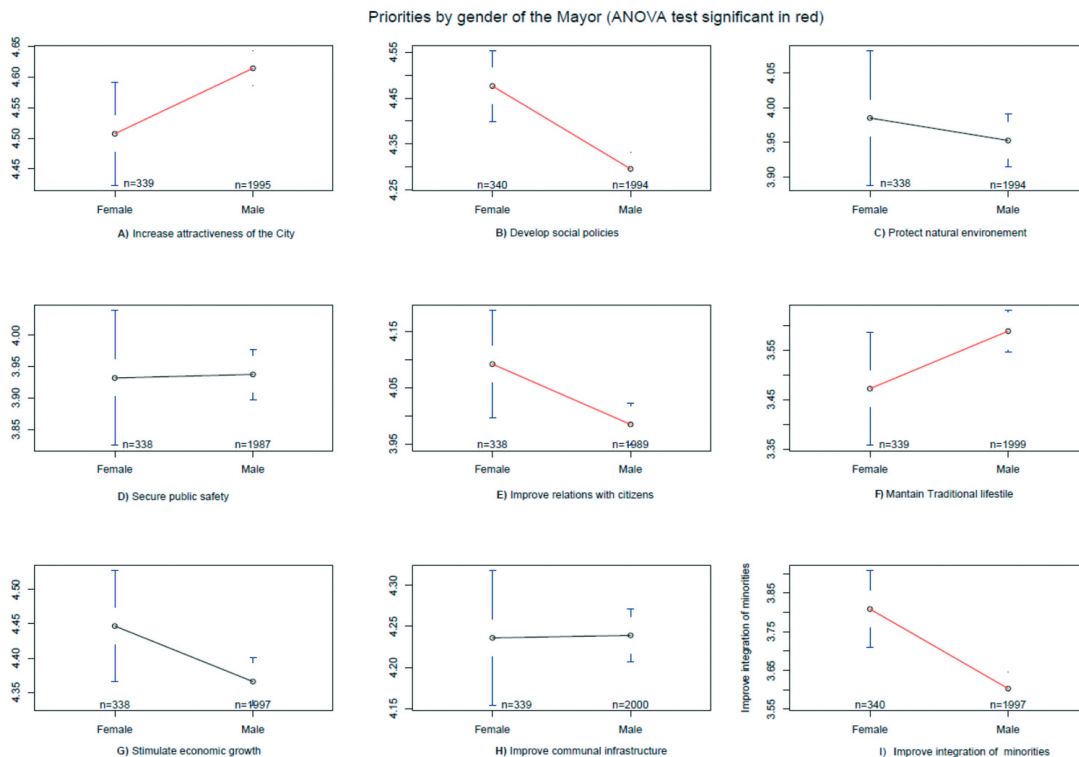
Appendix

Below are a number of challenges that many municipalities are facing. For each challenge please indicate the degree to which it is an important priority on the policy agenda of you as a mayor during your current term of office.

A score of 1 indicates a "Low priority" and a score of 5 indicates a "High priority".

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	1 Low priority	2	3	4	5 High priority
A To increase the attractiveness of the municipality as a place of business and a place for people to live in, by regeneration and development projects, new cultural facilities, improvement of the aesthetics of the city, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B To develop social policies to secure adequate housing, healthcare, education, public transport facilities and take care of the needs of vulnerable groups (the elderly, the young, the unemployed, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C To protect the natural environment and secure the responsible use of natural resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
D To secure public safety, fight crime and secure law and order	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
E To address politico-administrative issues, e.g. in order to improve relations with citizens, better and more efficient services, securing integrity and fighting corruption, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
F To preserve the local identity and the locality's traditional lifestyle	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
G To stimulate economic growth and employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
H To improve communal infrastructure, communication and transport	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I To improve the integration of ethnic, religious or cultural minorities and emphasise diversity and tolerance in the local community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Source: The European Mayor II survey