

Is My Leader “Cool”? Differences in How Fans Perceive the Coolness of Female and Male Political Leaders

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Abstract

This article examines how followers perceive the “coolness” of political leaders, focusing on dimensions such as appeal, style, and lifestyle, and exploring whether these perceptions differ according to leaders’ gender. Drawing on survey data collected in seven European countries in 2024, the study analyses attitudes toward the five most appreciated male and female political leaders. The findings show that male leaders are generally regarded as cooler and tend to inspire more consistent judgements, whereas opinions about female leaders are more differentiated. Overall, the results suggest that the personalisation and celebrification of politics operate within a gendered framework, shaped by persistent stereotypes as well as by a tendency towards the objectification of female political leaders.

Key words

Political leadership; coolness; gender differences

1. Introduction¹

Although the common wisdom says that judgements are sensitive to appearance-based cues, citizens’ opinions on the “charme” and elegance

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of their political leaders have seldom been the object of specific research.

However, in a world in which politicians are becoming celebrities (Street 2004, Wheeler 2007) and media visual coverage emphasize candidates' appearance, are being charming or dressing well really uninfluential? And might the lifestyle of politicians influence voters' opinions? Do the factors that have proven crucial in the creation of stars in the entertainment sphere contribute to leaders' consensus?

The focus of this article is on how political followers approach such aspects – attractiveness, elegance, and lifestyle of political leaders –: if they pay attention to them and especially if there are notable differences depending on the gender of politicians. Basing on a rich body of literature that argue for the existence of gender stereotypes (see Campus 2013 for a review), we expect that female leaders can be seen differently as notoriously visual media coverage pose problems for women in politics. This happens when, for instance, women appearance is more mentioned and scrutinized by the media. Consequently, this contributes to the “trivialization effect” (Stevens 2007) according to which the attention toward such details undermines the seriousness and credibility of women in public life. The disparity of treatment derives from a tendency of objectification that is frequent in case of women politicians but more unlikely in the case of men (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996). In addition, female politicians are subject to a “double bind” effect (Jamieson 1995) that force them to maintain some stereotypical traits of femininity, but at same time to embrace stereotypical male leadership traits of assertiveness and toughness. Consequently, the disclosure and discussion of intimate and private life in the public mediated sphere may alter the already difficult balance that women in power are asked to possess in order to be judged positively.

With these research questions in mind, the article intends to explore the public attitudes toward a number of male and female leaders as concerns their personal appeal, intimate life and their lifestyle. We chose to focus our analysis not on the whole citizenry but on those that can be considered as political followers. So doing, our aim is to shed some light on those mechanism of celebrification of politicians and the transformation of citizens in political fans

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The project is aimed to examine how the spectacularisation and celebritisation of politics affect the functioning of contemporary democracies and – through an increasing interplay with the world of popular culture and the industry of entertainment – are changing the relationships between political actors and citizens.

The analyses are based on a survey carried out in seven European countries with different geographical, economic and political features: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Surveys were carried out during the summer of 2024, resulting in a final sample of 7,161 participants. Each of the seven countries contributed with a subsample exceeding 1,000 respondents, varying from 1,004 in the United Kingdom to 1,049 in Poland.

Data collection took place between 29 July and 7 August 2024 using the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) technique.

2. Closeness to a leader: who are the most selected leaders

Survey respondents were asked whether they felt close to a national political leader and, if so, were then invited to indicate the name of their leader. A total of 2,474 respondents answered the initial question affirmatively, out of 7,161 overall respondents, corresponding to 34.5 per cent. As expected, the question about the identity of the preferred leader yielded a wide variety of responses. With the aim of reducing this heterogeneity and identifying potential gender differences among the leaders mentioned, we chose to focus exclusively on the five most preferred male leaders and the five most preferred female leaders. In other words, a subsample was constructed including only those respondents who identified as their preferred leader one of the top five male or top five female leaders. The resulting subsample consists of 918 individuals.

As can be observed (Table 1), some of the mentioned leaders are or were heads of government in their respective countries (i.e. Giorgia Meloni, Giuseppe Conte, Pedro Sánchez, Keir Starmer and Donald

Tusk). Others currently hold highly prominent institutional roles – i.e. Angela Rayner, Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and Isabel Díaz Ayuso, President of the Community of Madrid. Others are leaders or prominent figures of major opposition parties in their respective countries: Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella in France (Rassemblement National), and Elly Schlein in Italy (Partito Democratico).

Respondents that mentioned one of the top five female leaders account for 37.1 per cent of the subsample, compared to 62.9 per cent who selected one of the top five male leaders. This reveals a marked preference for male leaders, likely reflecting the disparity in the numbers of female political leaders and possibly the persistence of widespread biases about politics as a domain not suitable for women – biases that are, however, not confined to the political sphere alone.

This pattern is further confirmed by the fact that only one female leader – Giorgia Meloni – exceeds the threshold of 10 per cent of respondents expressing support, whereas among male leaders this threshold is surpassed by as many as three figures: Sánchez, Tusk, and Conte.

Tab. 1. Female and male leaders to whom respondents feel particularly close (top five positions)

	Freq.	%	% country
Giorgia Meloni	151	16.5	12.9
Marine Le Pen	65	7.1	5.3
Isabel Díaz Ayuso	51	5.6	5.5
Elly Schlein	46	5.0	3.7
Angela Rayner	27	2.9	2.2
Tot. female	341	37.1	
Giuseppe Conte	136	14.8	11.8
Pedro Sánchez	132	14.4	14.3
Jordan Bardella	122	13.3	9.9
Keir Starmer	103	11.3	8.4
Donald Tusk	83	9.1	12.0
Tot. male	577	62.9	
Tot.	918	100.0	

A subsequent question asked respondents to select, from a list provided, the reasons (up to a maximum of three, to be ranked in order of importance) why they liked the leader they mentioned.

Table 2 reports the data relating to the first answer (i.e. the reason that respondents considered the most important one). As can be seen,

the distribution is fairly balanced, so suggesting that no single reason predominates; rather, the motivations underlying appreciation for a leader are multiple.

In first place, with a percentage of 23.6, is the sharing of the leader’s ideas and political vision. This is by no means negligible, as it highlights the continued importance of the ideological and value-based dimension through which political preferences are structured. This dimension may have been too hastily downplayed in claims regarding the emergence of a post-ideological world and the declining relevance of the left-right divide (see, for example, the classic works by Daniel Bell 1960, Francis Fukuyama 1992, Anthony Giddens 1994).

Considerable importance is also attributed to the leader’s ability and competence, suggesting that respondents perceive the leader as qualified to fulfil positions of responsibility, whether currently held or potentially assumed in the future. Closely following are being perceived as an authentic person and as someone who understands the problems of ordinary people. This answer is consistent with a consolidated literature about the importance of leader character in shaping voters’ political attitudes (Garzia et al. 2021)

As can be observed, the cross-tabulation between the variable “reason for liking the leader one feels close to” and the variable “leader’s gender” is not statistically significant ($p = .156$). This does not mean, however, that the relationship is irrelevant. On the contrary, as is also evident from the values reported in the table, it could be argued that there are no substantial differences between the reasons underlying appreciation for male leaders and for female leaders. In other words, the leader’s gender does not seem to influence the motivations driving such appreciation.

Tab. 2. Reasons why a leader is liked by leader’s gender

$\chi^2=9.332$, $p=.156$

	Male	Female	Tot.
For being competent and capable	19.0	20.9	19.8
For understanding the problems of the people	14.8	16.8	15.6
For sharing his/her ideas and political vision	22.6	25.4	23.6
For being likeable	4.8	1.8	3.6
For being a real, authentic person	15.7	16.8	16.1
For being a honest person	12.9	10.0	11.8

For being the only one who can save the country	10.2	8.3	9.5
Tot.	100.0	100.0	100.0

3. The leader's coolness

Once explored why a leader is appreciated, we proceeded to investigate if there are other factors – among those that can be regarded as non-political – that contribute to followers' good opinion of their leaders. Having in mind the increasing interrelation between politics and pop culture, we were especially interested to explore those aspects that matter for the stars of the world of entertainment, like the personal appeal, the physical appearance and the dress outfits, and the lifestyle.

In a word, we define coolness as the quality of being attractive and fashionable. A cool leader is one who can engage with contemporary trends in terms of appeal, fashion and hobbies. Therefore we built a "coolness index" using a Two-Parameter Logistic Model (2PL), a statistical and probabilistic model especially appropriate for estimating latent dimensions from dichotomous variables,² on the basis of survey respondents' answers to three questions – the percentages of "yes" responses to these questions range from 76.1% to 88.1%:

«Referring to this leader or political figure, would you say that:

- He/she is a charming person.
- I like the way he/she dresses.
- I like his/her lifestyle».

Given that the present study aims to explore whether gender differences can be identified in the way male and female political leaders are perceived, our analysis was meant to ascertain whether the level of coolness attributed by respondents to their preferred leaders depends on the respondent's gender and/or the leader's gender, and/or on the joint effect of both variables – namely, their interaction effect. In the latter case, for instance, we could expect that female respondents would assign lower coolness scores to male leaders and higher scores to female leaders and male respondents would act in the opposite way. Such expectations were based on a general principle of

² The resulting measure is a continuous scale that roughly approximates a standard normal distribution, with the majority of observations lying within the theoretical interval between -2 and +2.

“likability heuristics” according to which people like people similar to themselves and, in particular, voters perceive politicians for whom they vote as being most like themselves with respect to some personality traits (Caprara and Vecchione 2017, 235-241). In light of this, we hypothesized that this *similarity-attraction* effect could operate through gender, that is to say women pay attention more to the coolness traits of other women – that may share similar fashion and life style rules – while men pay more attention to other men than women.

To test these hypotheses, a two-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was conducted in order to assess both the main effects of the two independent variables (respondent’s gender and leader’s gender) and their interaction effect on the dependent variable (coolness index). As Table 3 shows, the model is statistically significant, although the proportion of variance explained is limited, due to the small number of variables included. The main effect of the independent variable respondent’s gender is significant; the effect of leader’s gender is also significant, albeit to a much lesser extent. In both cases, the size of the effects is quite small, as shown by the partial η^2 . By contrast, the interaction effect is not statistically significant.

Tab. 3. Test of between-subjects effect

Dependent variable: Index of coolness

$R^2=.034$

Source	Df	F	p-values	partial η^2
Correct model	3	11.020	***	.034
Gender	1	25.203	***	.026
LeadGender	1	4.480	*	.005
Gender * LeadGender	1	0.143		.000

By examining the estimates of parameters, it is possible to analyse the findings in greater detail (Table 4). The first notable result is that female respondents appear to attribute greater importance to aspects of leadership related to coolness (mean score on the index equal to .148, compared to -.075 among male respondents). At the same time, male leaders receive higher levels of appreciation in terms of coolness (mean score of .083, compared to -.10 for female leaders). As noted above, however, no interaction

effect between the two variables emerges.³ This means that our expectations that women would appreciate more the coolness of female leaders and men appreciate more the coolness of male leaders are not confirmed.

Overall, these findings point to the presence of gender differences in the evaluation of leadership traits associated with “coolness”. Female respondents tend to display greater sensitivity to the symbolic and stylistic dimensions of leadership. By contrast, coolness does not appear to be a privileged asset for women. Indeed, the finding that male leaders are particularly appreciated for their appeal, style, and image suggests the existence of a gender asymmetry. Men are able to mobilise these resources without incurring the penalties to which female leaders are often exposed, as women remain subject to a persistent double standard according to which if a male leader is young and charming – a leader *de charme*, as called by Schwartzemberg (1977) –, is likely to be appreciated, while a beautiful woman could even result to be disadvantaged, as her beauty increases the risk of receiving a biased media coverage and not being taken seriously (Campus 2013, p. 89-90).

Tab. 4. Univariate ANOVA Index of coolness by gender by leader gender

Gender	Male vs Female	Std. Error	p-values
		Mean	S.d.
	Male	-.075	.029
	Female	.148	.033
LeadGender	Male vs Female	Std. Error	p-values
		Mean	S.d.
	Male	.083	.027
	Female	-.010	.035
Gender*LeadGender	Gender: Male	Std. Error	p-values
	LeadGender	Mean	S.d.
	Male vs Female	.077	
	Male	-.036	.036
	Female	-.113	.046
	Gender: Female	Std. Error	p-values
	LeadGender	Mean	S.d.
	Male vs Female	.077	
	Male	-.036	.036
	Female	-.113	.046

³ More precisely, female respondents show a slight tendency to assign higher coolness scores to male leaders; however, this tendency is only marginally significant ($.05 < p < .10$) and may therefore be disregarded.

LeadGender	Std. Error	p-values
Male vs Female	.059	.
	Mean	S.d.
Male	.203	.040
Female	.092	.053

The findings discussed so far can be enriched by looking at each leader included in the analysis, with the aim of identifying what differences emerge in the degree of their perceived coolness.

As noted above, male leaders are, on average, considered to be cooler than female leaders occupying comparable roles. This pattern is confirmed by Table 5 below: male leaders display higher average levels of perceived coolness and more homogeneous scores, with only a single leader – Bardella – falling below the mean. By contrast, female leaders exhibit a more polarised distribution: while some achieve comparatively low evaluations, others – Le Pen and Díaz Ayuso – attain the highest coolness scores overall. This suggests that coolness is not evenly distributed among female leaders, whereas it appears a more stable and consistently recognised trait among male leaders.

Tab. 5. Leaders’ coolness index

F=6.600; Df=9; sign.=***; $\eta^2=.062$

	Mean	N	Std dev.
Giuseppe Conte	.134	135	.628
Pedro Sánchez	.088	132	.612
Jordan Bardella	.013	120	.561
Keir Starmer	.048	101	.602
Donald Tusk	.080	79	.657
Giorgia Meloni	-.015	150	.706
Marine Le Pen	.200	65	.613
Isabel Díaz Ayuso	.296	50	.436
Elly Schlein	-.540	46	.704
Angela Rayner	-.169	27	.873
Tot.	.043	906	.651

The pattern observed in the distribution of coolness scores among male and female leaders can be therefore interpreted in terms of an existing double standard. Male leaders benefit from a structural advantage: their coolness is recognised consistently, and few are penalised for displaying traits associated with leadership, resulting in higher average scores and more compact distributions.

Female leaders, by contrast, face more selective evaluations. While some achieve the highest coolness scores overall, other women's score are considerably lower, reflecting the tension inherent in the "double bind" (Jamieson 1995): women leaders are expected simultaneously to demonstrate competence and to conform to gendered norms regarding femininity, that may imply also aspects like appearance, style, and personal presentation. Success in meeting both sets of expectations can yield exceptional recognition, but failure to manage this dual expectation often results in lower evaluations. It would be interesting, but this goes beyond the scope of this article, to explore why some appear cooler than others; whether this depends more on leaders' self-representation or on different attitudes of their followers toward the traits associated to the concept of coolness. At a first look, the results show that the most appreciated in the top five are conservative women, but with very different score. Thus, not much can be said about a relationship between coolness and ideological positioning.

Overall, these findings suggest that perceptions of aesthetic leadership traits, such as coolness, are gendered. The existence of a double standard helps explain why female leaders' scores are more dispersed and polarised, while male leaders' scores are more stable and consistently high. In other words, the personalisation of politics, though increasingly central to the evaluation of leaders, operates within a gendered evaluative framework, producing both constraints and opportunities for female leaders.

4. Coolness and soft news

The process of "celebrification" – that is becoming a celebrity (Driessens 2012) – of an individual starts when the public is getting interested about his/her private life, intimacy, personal space. Therefore, it may be assumed that the coolness of a political leader may become the object of attention in a context in which people is provided with news about those aspects. If both the media and politicians themselves do not disclose such type of information, citizens are less inclined to pay attention. However, the interest for these details may have different motivations. Some people are just curious, but for others this becomes part of the ordinary screening of politicians. Indeed, details of their family life, hobbies and holidays help people to acquire a deeper knowledge and understanding of their leaders'

character. It would be wrong, however, to assume that this applies to the totality of followers. As table 6 shows, our sample was almost split in two, with a slight majority declaring that private details are not important and for some they are even distracting from the things that matter.

Overall, almost half of our subsample recognized the importance of personal details. Notwithstanding, it is worth noting that a very high percentage (88%) of those who chose one of our ten leaders gave a positive answer to the question concerning the leader’s lifestyle, so declared to having an opinion about it. This means that, in any case, also those for whom the leader’s private life is not important are able to form a judgement on these aspects as well.

Tab. 6. Relevance for politicians and the media to disclose details of the private lives of politicians by respondent’s gender by leader’s gender

Gender			Yes, it helps to know and judge politicians better	Yes, I am curious	No, it is not important to me	No, because it distracts from the things that matter	Tot.
	LeadGender						
Male	Male	Male	37.3	23.5	27.6	11.6	100.0
		Female	21.4	13.0	54.7	10.9	100.0
	Tot.		31.3	19.6	37.8	11.3	100.0
Female	Female	Male	28.3	18.1	37.4	16.2	100.0
		Female	18.1	14.1	54.4	13.4	100.0
	Tot.		24.6	16.6	43.7	15.1	100.0
Tot.	Tot.	Male	33.3	21.1	31.9	13.7	100.0
		Female	19.9	13.5	54.5	12.1	100.0
	Tot.		28.3	18.3	40.4	13.0	100.0

Table 6 reveals that male respondents value private details more than women (31.3% because they help them to know and assess politicians better, compared to 24.6% of women; 19.6% out of curiosity, compared to 16.6% of curious women). Even more notable, the most interested in such kind of information are those respondents which chose a male leader. Both findings are intriguing for a number of reasons. First, it is commonly assumed that female politicians are more subject to a public and media screening about their private life. In contrast to what happens to men, their private life is often an issue. A screening that has often harmed women by

picturing them, for instance, as childless women that cannot understand family problems or as mothers that cannot concentrate on their public duties because of their mothering burden. In sum, our findings stresses that the private life of men appear more interesting than women's (even if this does not disprove that family issues remain more sensitive for women).

Second, it is commonly assumed that celebrity and soft news magazines are aimed at a female audience (Feasey 2008) as well as women are overrepresented among the audience of talkshow and infotainment based on gossip and soft news. Therefore, women should be more prone to value positively the information on the private life of politicians. On the contrary, our male respondents value information of private life more than women. This led us to investigate in more depth the role of soft news through infotainment and entertainment formats in reinforcing the propensity to take the coolness of leaders into consideration.

Our survey respondents were asked if they read an article or watched TV programmes where the private life of the preferred leader was discussed, read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazine, read a biography/autobiography about them.

Tab. 7. "Have you recently ..." (% of "Yes" responses) by respondent's gender and by leader's gender

	Respondent's gender		Leader's gender		Tot.
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Read an article or watched TV programme	53.9	54.2	56.3	49.9	53.9
Read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazine	37.6	32.4	39.5	28.2	35.3
Read a biography/autobiography	30.3	29.9	32.9	25.4	30.1

Table 7 does not show significant gender difference as for each activity. This finding confirms that gossip about politicians is practiced by all respondents, while, once again, gender matters for leaders: men are object of more attention and curiosity.

5. Results and discussion

This study started from the premise that media representations of political leaders devote increasing attention to their "charme" and

personal appeal, as well as to their way of dressing and lifestyle. This development is largely attributable to the growing contamination of politics with elements of popular culture, as a result of which political leaders have increasingly come to assume the status of celebrities.

The aspects of leadership outlined above give shape to the leader's coolness, that is, his or her way of being attractive, and trendy. This article focused precisely on this dimension of coolness by considering the five male leaders and the five female leaders most frequently identified by respondents as their favourites.

More specifically, the study sought to address three main research questions. First, is the coolness of political leaders a significant factor for their followers, in the sense that it contributes to shaping their opinions and attitudes? Secondly, to what extent do gender differences – above all as concerns the leader's gender – influence assessments of leaders based on coolness? Finally, acknowledging the role played by the media in providing followers with information related to leaders' coolness, to what extent followers are exposed to soft news and how far are they truly interested in the private lives of their preferred leaders?

With regard to the first research question, the analyses conducted allow us to argue that the dimension of coolness is relevant to the way followers perceive their preferred leaders, insofar as, as the findings have shown, high percentages of followers express appreciation for the leader's "charme", way of dressing and lifestyle.

With regard to the issue of gender differences, the study first highlighted that individuals generally feel closer to male leaders than to female leaders. Male leaders also receive higher levels of appreciation in terms of coolness, and the scores they obtain do not differ substantially from one another. Furthermore, those who express appreciation for male leaders tend to recognise that details concerning their private lives are useful for gaining a better understanding and evaluation of their preferred political figure. Compared with those who feel close to female leaders, they also seek out information about such politicians more actively, whether through reading articles – including in gossip magazines – consulting autobiographies, or watching political programmes.

By contrast, the distribution of scores of coolness attributed to female leaders appears to be particularly polarised, meaning that some receive high scores, others intermediate ones, and others still relatively low evaluations.

All of this can be explained with the persistence of gender prejudices and stereotypes surrounding women's formal engagement in politics, to processes of "trivialisation" that tend to undermine the credibility of women who choose to pursue a political career, and to the trap represented by the so-called "double bind" effect. This effect consists in the fact that female leaders may incur negative judgements when they are perceived either as highly competent but insufficiently feminine, or as highly feminine but insufficiently competent.

Finally, it is worth noting that only almost half of respondents consider important to focus on the details of leaders' private lives disclosed by the media, or because such information helps them form an opinion or out of simple curiosity. Among these individuals, male followers predominate, whereas no significant gender differences emerge with regard to the sources – such as articles, biographies or autobiographies, and television programmes – from which information about the activities of preferred leaders is obtained.

In conclusion, the political coolness must be recognised as having growing significance, although it should also be emphasised that its perception remains marked by profound gender differences, stemming from deeply entrenched prejudices and stereotypes, as well as from a tendency towards the objectification of female political leaders that proves difficult to overcome.

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