

Female Autocrats as Role Models? The Effect of Female Leaders on Political Knowledge and Engagement in Vietnam

Paul Schuler, University of Arizona

Research shows that the presence of more female politicians can reduce gender gaps in political knowledge. Despite these findings, no study examines whether the role model effect applies to autocracies. This is an important oversight given the role political knowledge plays in increasing the use of nonelectoral forms of accountability. To test whether female political role models increase knowledge in autocracies, this study uses unique survey data from Vietnam occurring before and after a leadership change. In the transition, all the top leaders changed from male to different male leaders except for the legislative speaker, which transitioned from male to female. Results show that her selection led to a greater increase in name recognition for her position among women compared to men and that women were more likely to pay attention to legislative proceedings after her selection. These findings suggest that the role model effect travels to autocracies, although to a lesser degree.

Studies consistently find gender disparities in political knowledge in Western democracies (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), Latin America (Fraile and Gomez 2015), and other developing contexts (Dassonneville and McAllister 2018). Such disparities are important because knowledge is linked to greater electoral and nonelectoral participation (Bleck and Micheli 2018; De Vries and Giger 2014). In explaining the knowledge gap, recent work in democracies points to the impact of descriptive representation, with most finding that representation reduces the gap.¹

Despite the wealth of research from democracies, no study examines whether this relationship holds in authoritarian contexts. This is an important oversight. Although authoritarian regimes do not have competitive elections, political knowledge is important for citizens in autocracies in terms of equal access to public services and political influence. Authoritarian regimes are responsive to nonelectoral pressures such as pro-

tests, petitions, or social networks (Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016), and “regime insiders” with greater knowledge are more likely to use such channels (Tsai and Xu 2017).

This article examines the role model effect in autocracies using a rare survey instrument in Vietnam asking citizens to identify the names of the country’s top four leaders before and after a woman took one of the positions for the first time. In 2016, Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan was selected as Vietnam National Assembly (VNA) chair. Analysis of survey results in this article before and after the change shows that while a substantial gender gap in knowledge remained, the increase in awareness for the VNA leader among women was larger than among men. Additionally, results show a modest effect on behavior, as women increased their attention to VNA proceedings. Finally, in contrast to democracies (Mariani, Marshall, and Mathews-Schultz 2015), Ngan’s selection had the strongest effect on those unaffiliated with the regime. The findings suggest

Paul Schuler (pschuler@email.arizona.edu) is an assistant professor at the University of Arizona School of Government and Public Policy, Tucson, AZ 85721-0027.

Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1086/704786>.

1. Most studies find a positive relationship when knowledge is the dependent variable (Dassonneville and McAllister 2018; Fraile and Gomez 2015; Fridkin and Kenney 2014); but also see Fortin-Rittberger (2016). Results are mixed for engagement (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2007).

The Journal of Politics, volume 81, number 4. Published online July 12, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/704786>
 © 2019 by the Southern Political Science Association. All rights reserved. 0022-3816/2019/8104-00XX\$10.00

ooo

that although the role model effect may be smaller, it is not confined to democracies. Authoritarian female leaders may act as role models, but to a more limited degree than in democracies.

WHY AUTHORITARIAN WOMEN MAY NOT BE ROLE MODELS

While research suggests that female political role models can increase political knowledge for women in democracies, there are number of reasons why the role model effect may not translate to autocracies. One possible difference is that while the salience of the official or the policy increases political knowledge and political participation in democracies (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018), politicians in autocracies may be more reluctant to seek political attention (Gueorguiev and Schuler 2016). Second, while democracies with power-sharing institutions feature narrower gender gaps (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2010), power sharing is more limited in autocracies. Finally, while political affiliation mediates the role model effect in democracies (Mariani et al. 2015), ideological differences among the public are muted in autocracies (Pan and Xu 2018). With these differences in mind, other theories might predict a relationship. Fridkin and Kenny's (2014) "saliency of self" theory, where the novelty of a female candidate interacts with one's identity, should lead women to remember female leaders at a higher rate regardless of context.

VIETNAM: CONTEXT AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This article tackles the authoritarian role model effect in Vietnam, which by nearly any definition is an autocracy. The Vietnam Communist Party bans all opposition parties, and the most powerful institutions are within the party. In Vietnam, these institutions include the Politburo, an 18-member body that meets regularly to set the major policy outlines.² One important difference between Vietnam and other single-party contexts is that in Vietnam power is less concentrated in the position of the general secretary and is instead shared more evenly between "four pillars" (*Tứ trụ*)—which include the party general secretary, the prime minister, the president, and the VNA chairperson.³ This difference plays a crucial role in my research design.

Vietnam is also a useful case because despite having relatively low levels of gender disparities in wages and labor force participation (World Bank 2011), many of the patterns found elsewhere—namely, a gender gap in knowledge and political engagement—apply to Vietnam as well.⁴ To show this, and

for the evidence that follows, I use data from the Vietnam Provincial Public Administration and Governance Performance Index (PAPI) survey, conducted annually since 2011 by the United Nations Development Programme. The survey measures provincial governance and thus has a massive, nationally representative sample size of about 14,000 respondents per year.⁵ It includes several knowledge items such as the ability to correctly identify one of Vietnam's top four leaders and other measures of knowledge and participation. Consistent with other contexts, an analysis of the measures shows that women have less political knowledge and participate less (see app. 2).

To examine the link between role models and knowledge, I rely on the fact that between the 2015 and 2016 waves of the survey, Vietnam for the first time selected a woman to one of the top four leadership positions. Ngan, a Politburo member since 2013, was promoted to VNA chair in 2016, thus making her the first woman selected to one of the four positions (see table 1). While most intrigue in the Party Congress surrounded jockeying for the general secretary position, the media emphasized the historic nature of Ngan's selection, suggesting that her gender was plausibly salient after the Congress (see *Vov.vn* 2016). Therefore, to examine the role model effect, I assess whether the rates of awareness of the VNA chair increased more for women than for other positions compared to men.⁶

Before proceeding, it is important to defend this measure—name recognition of a leader—as a meaningful proxy for political knowledge. As others note, name recognition or reciting facts may not be equivalent to actual knowledge (Mondak and Anderson 2004). Furthermore, women may be more likely to know different facts (Dolan 2011), and the role model effect on these knowledge items may take longer to manifest given that they could happen through socialization processes (Dassonneville and McAllister 2018). While these possibilities are valid, for these longer-term mechanisms to hold, the presence of a female role model, at least initially, must inspire the attention of females at a higher rate. Therefore, while name recognition in the immediate aftermath of selection is not sufficient for the long-term consequences, I argue it is a critical factor.

To test the role model effect, I examine the impact of Ngan's selection on the ability to correctly name the occupant of the VNA chair between men and women relative to the change in awareness for the other positions before and

2. See Malesky, Abrami, and Zheng (2011) for a description of Vietnamese institutions.

3. For a discussion of the "four pillars," see BBC Vietnam (2016).

4. See app. 1 for additional details on gender inequality in Vietnam.

5. For more detail on the PAPI's methodology, visit <http://papi.org.vn/eng/>.

6. One other potential concern is that Ngan's appointment was anticipated, thus boosting knowledge of her appointment ahead of the selection. Appendix 3 argues this is not likely given the secrecy that precedes Party Congresses in Vietnam.

Table 1. Vietnam's Leaders before and after the 2016 Party Congress

| Position | 2011–16 | 2016–Present |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| National Assembly chair | Nguyen Sinh Hung (male) | Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan (female) |
| General secretary | Nguyen Phu Trong (male) | Nguyen Phu Trong (male) |
| Prime minister | Nguyen Tan Dung (male) | Nguyen Xuan Phuc (male) |
| President | Truong Tan Sang (male) | Tran Dai Quang (male) |

after the Party Congress.⁷ This is a difference-in-difference analysis with three repeated cross sections. Despite the lack of panel data, Ngan's selection identifies the role model effect as long as nothing else about the post-Congress period or her selection affected female awareness of the VNA chair through an alternative channel. Because any plausible confounder, such as a political mobilization campaign for women or increased knowledge in general, should affect awareness for all positions, not just Ngan's, I argue that this assumption is plausibly met. With this setup, the "treated" group includes women who are asked about the VNA chair position after the Party Congress. Table 2 shows the percentage of women and men able to name the VNA leaders compared to the other leaders by year. Not surprisingly, both men and women were less able to name the others in 2016. However, while women increased their ability to name the VNA chair by 6% in 2016, men were about 1% more likely to name her. This provides initial confirmation of a small role model effect.

To more systematically test the effect, I use a triple-interaction probit model, where the interaction is between the following variables: *VNA Chair*, *Female*, and *Post-Congress*. *VNA Chair* is a binary variable indicating whether the respondent is answering a knowledge question about the VNA chair versus other positions; *Female* is the gender of the respondent; and *Post-Congress* indicates whether the knowledge question was asked after the transition. To account for the possibility that results could be affected by subtle shifts in the sample between the years, I create other covariates associated with political knowledge (see app. 4 for descriptive statistics).⁸ Table 3 shows the results of the probit model with standard errors clustered at the commune level to account for survey design (see app. 5 for the full results).

The first model pools the 2016 and 2017 results so that the *Post-Congress* variable includes both 2016 and 2017. The

7. The dependent variable *correct* measures whether or not the respondent could name the leader in an open-ended question. Respondents are divided into four groups, with each asked to name only one of the leaders.

8. Measures include education, poverty status, ethnicity, news consumption, and association membership.

results show that while men and women were more likely to name Ngan after the Congress, the increase was greater for women (see fig. 1 for substantive effects). Women were 7% more likely to identify Ngan than the previous chair and were about 4% less likely to identify the new leaders for other positions, for a difference of about 11%. Men were about 5% less likely to identify the new leaders for other positions and about 2% more likely to identify Ngan than the previous VNA chair, for a difference of about 7%. In short, the results show that Ngan attracted more attention from women than from men. However, in highlighting this finding, it is important to note that while significant, it does not erase the significant gender gap, even on that question. Therefore, while her selection made a difference, the gap in knowledge remained large.

I next turn to examine four possible heterogeneous effects, which is whether the role model effect should be most pronounced on younger (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Dasonneville and McAllister 2018), more educated (Fraile and Gomez 2015), regime-connected (Mariani et al. 2015), or news-reading respondents. Appendix 6.1 includes interaction effects of the Party Congress on these different variables for women. It shows that the only interaction effect that is significant is for non-regime-connected women. The implication could be that the non-regime-connected are generally more disengaged and take longer to make themselves aware of new leaders. However, when a woman is selected, the non-regime-connected women find a link—or, as Fridkin and Kenney (2014) suggest,

Table 2. Correct Leader Name Identification by Gender (%)

| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|---------------|------|------|------|
| Female: | | | |
| VNA leader | 12.6 | 18.5 | 19.4 |
| Other leaders | 33.7 | 28.4 | 31.5 |
| Male: | | | |
| VNA leader | 43.8 | 45.0 | 47.2 |
| Other leaders | 66.0 | 59.8 | 62.3 |

Note. Ngan was selected as VNA chair between the 2015 and 2016 surveys.

Table 3. Knowledge of Leaders and Marginal Effects

| Variable | Post-Congress Period 2017 and 2016 Pooled | Post-Congress Period 2016 Only | Post-Congress Period 2017 Only |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Female × VNA × Post-Congress | .214*** (.0764) | .265*** (.0871) | .158* (.0843) |
| Controls | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Constant | -1.950*** (.0547) | -1.873*** (.0614) | -1.926*** (.0596) |
| Observations | 41,760 | 27,785 | 27,818 |
| R ² (psuedo) | .238 | .235 | .240 |

Note. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. The probit model is a probit in which the dependent variable is correctly identifying the leader. In model 1 the Post-Congress variable pools 2016 and 2017, model 2 includes only 2016, and model 3 includes only 2017.

* $p < .1$.
 ** $p < .05$.
 *** $p < .01$.

the “salience of self”—inducing them to connect with the autocrat. It is also possible that regime-connected women have links to the party making them aware of male and female leaders, thus attenuating the effect.

I next examine effects on behavior. Consistent with democracies, Ngan’s selection should also affect behaviors such as voting and willingness to run for office. In the Vietnamese context, this is complicated by the fact that Ngan was selected and not elected as VNA chair and that respondents cannot run for office. However, one area where Ngan’s selection might have a more immediate effect is on the degree to which respondents pay attention to news. Unfortunately, because a number of other factors could affect news consumption, this is not an effective dependent variable. Another possibility is examining whether citizens pay attention to the VNA. Vietnam televises query sessions on live television, with about

40% of survey respondents claiming to have watched some of these sessions each year. If Ngan’s selection has an impact on engagement, it is plausible that women pay more attention to VNA proceedings.

To assess this, I use the same strategy as in the previous section. For the dependent variable, instead of knowledge, I assess whether respondents watched any of the VNA proceedings in the previous year. Appendix 7.2 shows the marginal effects of gender on paying attention to the VNA before and after Ngan’s selection. After controlling for the same factors in the full model in table 3 (see app. 7.1 for results), Ngan’s selection increased women’s likelihood of watching by 6% as compared to only 4% for men. The difference is small but statistically significant, suggesting the possibility that Ngan’s selection also affected political engagement for women.

CONCLUSION

This article shows that female leaders in authoritarian regimes have effects on knowledge and engagement similar to those found in democracies. Although the effects are small, they suggest that the findings from democracies partially translate to autocracies. However, in making this argument, it should be emphasized that the knowledge gap remains, showing that the role model effect may be smaller in autocracies. Second, more research needs to be done on the heterogeneous effects to assess why the findings are stronger for nonconnected women. Third, this study focuses on a particularly visible position—one of Vietnam’s top four leaders. The weakness of the findings suggests that for less salient positions the effect may dissipate. Finally, this article considers a specific form of political knowledge. Future work should address whether the role model effect extends to other forms of knowledge over a longer duration (Dassonneville and McAllister 2018).

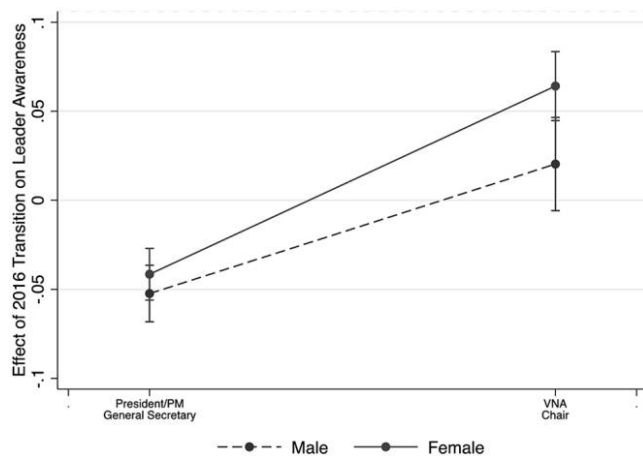


Figure 1. Knowledge of leaders. The points are the point estimates for the effect of the transition on knowledge for men and women for the different positions. The bars are the 95% confidence intervals.

REFERENCES

- BBC Vietnam. 2016. "Đánh giá "Tứ trụ Việt Nam" [Evaluating "Vietnam's four pillars"]. BBC Vietnam, April 8. https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2016/04/160407_hangout_vn_leaders_assessments.
- Bleck, Jaimie, and Kristin Michelitsch. 2018. "Is Women's Empowerment Associated with Political Knowledge and Opinions? Evidence from Mali." *World Development* 106:299–323.
- Campbell, David, and Christina Wolbrecht. 2006. "See Jane Run: Women Politicians as Role Models for Adolescents." *Journal of Politics* 68 (2): 233–47.
- Chen, Jidong, Jennifer Pan, and Yiqing Xu. 2016. "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China." *American Journal of Political Science* 60 (2): 383–400.
- Dassonneville, Ruth, and Ian McAllister. 2018. "Gender, Political Knowledge, and Descriptive Representation: The Impact of Long-Term Socialization." *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (2): 249–65.
- Delli Carpini, Michael, and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- De Vries, Catherine, and Nathalie Giger. 2014. "Holding Governments Accountable? Individual Heterogeneity in Performance Voting." *European Journal of Political Research* 53 (2): 345–62.
- Dolan, Kathleen. 2011. "Do Women and Men Know Different Things? Measuring Gender Differences in Political Knowledge." *Journal of Politics* 73 (1): 97–107.
- Fortin-Rittberger, Jessica. 2016. "Cross-National Gender Gaps in Political Knowledge: How Much Is Due to Context?" *Political Research Quarterly* 69 (3): 391–402.
- Fraile, Marta, and Raul Gomez. 2015. "Why Does Alejandro Know More about Politics than Catalina? Explaining the Latin American Gender Gap in Political Knowledge." *British Journal of Political Science* 47:91–112.
- Fridkin, Kim, and Patrick Kenney. 2014. "How the Gender of U.S. Senators Influences People's Understanding and Engagement in Politics." *Journal of Politics* 76 (4): 1017–31.
- Gueorguiev, Dimitar, and Paul Schuler. 2016. "Keeping Your Head Down: Public Profiles and Promotions under Autocracy." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 16 (1): 87–116.
- Kittilson, Miki Kaul, and Leslie Schwindt-Bayer. 2010. "Engaging Citizens: The Role of Power-Sharing Institutions." *Journal of Politics* 72 (4): 990–1002.
- Ladam, Christina, Jeffrey Harden, and Jason Windett. 2018. "Prominent Role Models: High-Profile Female Politicians and the Emergence of Women as Candidates for Public Office." *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (2): 369–81.
- Malesky, Edmund, Regina Abrami, and Yu Zheng. 2011. "Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Vietnam and China." *Comparative Politics* 43 (4): 409–27.
- Mariani, Mack, Bryan Marshall, and A. Lanethea Mathews-Schultz. 2015. "See Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and Sarah Palin Run? Party Ideology, and the Influence of Female Role Models on Young Women." *Political Research Quarterly* 68 (4): 716–31.
- Mondak, Jeffrey, and Mary Anderson. 2004. "The Knowledge Gap: A Reexamination of Gender-Based Differences in Political Knowledge." *Journal of Politics* 66 (2): 492–512.
- Pan, Jennifer, and Yiqing Xu. 2018. "China's Ideological Spectrum." *Journal of Politics* 80 (1): 254–73.
- Tsai, Lily, and Yiqing Xu. 2017. "Outspoken Insiders: Political Connections and Citizen Participation in Authoritarian China." *Political Behavior* 40 (3): 629–57.
- Vov.vn. 2016. "Cử tri kỳ vọng vào nữ Chủ tịch Quốc hội đầu tiên [The hopes of voters for the first woman National Assembly chair]. Vov.vn, March 31. <http://vov.vn/chinh-tri/quoc-hoi/cu-tri-ky-vong-vao-nu-chu-tich-quoc-hoi-dau-tien-495353.vov>.
- Wolbrecht, Christina, and David Campbell. 2007. "Leading by Example: Female Members of Parliament as Political Role Models." *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (4): 921–39.
- World Bank. 2011. "Vietnam—Country Gender Assessment" (English). World Bank, Washington, DC.