

The Power of Image in Politics

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THE POWER OF IMAGE IN POLITICS

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The image of power - the power of image

Image in politics is a theme I have been working on for some time, both in my doctoral thesis in social anthropology (Krogstad 1999) and in a comparative and interdisciplinary Nordic project on politicians' rhetorical strategies and discursive styles in televised election campaign debates in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden (Gomard and Krogstad 2001). In this article I shall add power to the mentioned body of work. By studying how political actors present themselves and their messages, that is, by studying their perpetual work on creating the image of power, I think it is possible to grasp important aspects of the power of image in politics.

We all know that political communication is not first and foremost about truth; it is a struggle for power and influence between different interests. In this struggle, it is critical for politicians to persuade voters - and not just by the power of their argument, but also, and increasingly, through creating trust by means of their personality. I will focus on how women and men attend to these concerns in televised political debates. The examples are mainly drawn from the Nordic comparative project.

Ideally, political debates provide politicians with equal opportunities for airing their positions. This linguistic ideal of fairness has more elaborate equivalents in established theories of discourse, such as the theory of the ideal speech situation proposed by Habermas (1975, 1975b), Paul Grice's maxims for good and efficient communication (Grice 1975), and the face-saving traffic rules of social interaction analyzed by Goffman (1967). However, debates are rarely ideal (Gastil 1992). Rather than allowing everyone an equal opportunity, they often become events in which prior inequalities - e.g.,

gender, age, class, status - are re-enacted (Edelsky and Adams 1990). The question we have been pursuing in the Nordic project is whether and how such "brought along" parameters are made relevant, or "brought about," in actual debate situations. Hence the title of the book from the project: *Instead of the Ideal Debate. Doing Politics and Doing Gender in Nordic Political Campaign Discourse* (Gomard and Krogstad 2001). The overall design of the book is comparative. In addition to cross-national comparisons, we compare political discourse between and within gender groups, and between and within different status groups. The main question is: how do politicians employ, bend, or violate canonical debate rules in order to portray themselves as powerful and trustworthy female and male politicians?

Powerful women in Nordic politics

Since the Nordic countries are often seen as a laboratory of gender equality, they offer a unique context for the analysis of women's and men's political discourse. In no other place in the world have there been more women in politics over such a long time. Before I go into the details from the Nordic project, let me present one finding from an earlier study of the main debates on Norwegian television during the election campaign of 1993 (Krogstad 1994). In this I analyzed the communicative styles of politicians and found that female politicians had adopted communicative styles that were just as tough and dominant - or even more so - than the styles of their male colleagues. These results would seem to indicate that women have adopted the traditional political style that prevailed before the entry of women into politics, and that they are even slightly overdoing it in comparison with the men (which is probably necessary if women are to assert themselves on the top political levels). To be more specific: women were the most successful when it came to length of talking, number of contributions as well as profiling. The result is all the more surprising, considering that the women were given worse interview conditions than the men were. They were more

often interrupted and got much less support and attention from the TV host and from political colleagues than the men during the debate were. Not only did they compensate for this - the women even dominated the debate in the sense that they won the fight over the floor.

Prior to this Norwegian study, the Danish researcher Kirsten Gomard (1992) had found similar patterns in the verbal and non-verbal communication of Danish female politicians. However, in Denmark the women's toughness and dominance was more often counterbalanced by such "softer" communicative features as attention to colleagues, pedagogic and down-to-earth language, or a smiling face. The only female Danish politician who has made no such concessions to what is often regarded as traditional femininity - Ritt Bjerregaard - has become quite unpopular over the years with the press and parts of the Danish public.

Reception studies

In order to measure the power of image in politics, one needs reception studies. These are difficult and time consuming to carry out. I have only made quick shortcuts to reception studies myself: After each of the Norwegian debates I analyzed in Norway, opinion polls were conducted of spectators' opinions of the politicians - and these I combined with my own analyses of the politicians' communication. Unanimously, viewers give high marks to the most prominent and dominant female politicians (Krogstad 1994). This I find interesting. Unfortunately, similar opinion polls are not carried out in such close proximity to television debates in Denmark, so it is not possible to make cross-national comparisons. In terms of both numbers and status, however, the position of female politicians seems stronger in Norway (and also in Sweden) than in Denmark. Female party leaders and ministers have been more numerous in Norway, for example, and the Norwegian Prime Minister for many years was a woman, Gro Harlem Brundtland.

Another reception study from Norway, however, is less optimistic than the study mentioned above. In an experimental evaluation of gender stereotyping of political candidates, Richard Matland (1994) tested a sample of more than 500 students in six secondary educational institutions in Norway (first time voters). Each student was asked to choose between a speech by a labor party candidate and one by a conservative party candidate, and to evaluate their chosen candidate on a number of characteristics. Half the students were told that the candidates were female, the other half that the candidates were male. Despite having read the same speech, the respondents clearly distinguished between male and female candidates in a number of policy areas. With some exceptions, the differences followed traditional gender stereotypes. Although the "male" candidate said exactly the same thing as the "female" one, "he" was regarded as more competent on defense and the economy. "She" was rated superior on women's rights and care of children/the elderly. Gender schemata differed depending on the respondent's political persuasion. Respondents who chose to read the conservative candidate's speech were less inclined to perceive women as political equals than respondents who chose to read the labour candidate's speech.

The results of Matland's experimental study paint a somewhat pessimistic picture of Norwegian voters. Matland also casts doubt on the assertion that a political culture stressing equality is a crucial part of the explanation for women's prominent position in Nordic politics. Rather, he points to the institutional structure of the electoral system as an explanation for women's strength. From an equality point of view it is quite disturbing, I think, to see that gender schemata on the part of the voters are so strong, and indeed that they play a more powerful role in Norway than in the United States (where a similar experiment has been carried out). This result indicates that a broad representation of women does not necessarily lead to a gender-neutral evaluation of political leaders. Matland suggests, however, an alternative

interpretation. In a context where women for many years have promoted themselves as different-but-equal, the gender stereotypes found in the experiment might reflect a situation in which women's areas of expertise are regarded as equal in importance to men's.

Image and issue

In my empirical chapter in the Nordic comparative book I have tried to evaluate the complex and rather "messy" relationship between image and issue in televised debates (Krogstad 2001). The material consists of the final official televised debates preceding the 1994 referenda on EU membership in Sweden and Norway. The aim is not to demonstrate the intuitively and intellectually correct claim that issue and image are connected. Hypotheses should be riskier than that. Rather, I try to disentangle the relationship between image and issue, a relationship I have often thought of as a tangled ball of yarn. Two questions are addressed: 1) How can image and issue be differentiated operationally? And 2) is it true that image is more important than issue in televised debates? The latter claim is frequently made, but rarely proven.

H. Paul Grice's maxims for good and efficient communication provide the point of departure. His co-operative principle encourages speakers to be informative, honest, brief, relevant and polite. While these are defined as central to an issue-oriented debate style, an image-oriented debate style is defined as one marked by violations of the co-operative principle. Five types of violation are of interest in this study: long-windedness, credit claiming, performance, question evasion, and negative attention towards fellow debaters. Also in this work I relate the debaters' styles of discourse to the viewers' evaluations of the politicians as revealed in polls conducted immediately after the debates. Table 1 and Table 2 present the number of violations of the efficiency principle in the Swedish and Norwegian debates.

Table 1. Number of violations of the efficiency principle in the Swedish debate. Female participants in italics

	Long-windedness	Credit-claims	Per-formance	Question evasion	Neg. att. towards fellow debaters	Total number of violations	Violations in %
Kenth Petersson (no)	5	6	6	5	3	25	11%
<i>Eva Hellstrand (no)</i>	6	8	4	2	3	23	10%
<i>Agneia Stark (no)</i>	3	5	13	2	5	28	12%
Carl Bildt (yes)	7	12	20	0	15	54	24%
Ingvar Carlsson (yes)	6	22	25	2	14	69	31%
<i>Marit Paulsen (yes)</i>	7	4	12	2	2	27	12%
Total	34	57	80	13	42	226	100%

Table 2. Number of violations of the efficiency principle in the Norwegian debate. Female participants in italics

	Long-windedness	Credit-claims	Per-formance	Question evasion	Neg. att. towards fellow debaters	Total number of Violations	Violations in %
<i>Anne E. Lahnstein (no)</i>	12	11	8	12	4	47	25%
Hallvard Bakke (no)	7	1	3	3	5	19	10%
Stein Ønhoi (no)	9	3	9	7	12	40	21%
Thorbjørn Jagland (yes)	4	2	14	3	7	30	16%
Jan Petersen (yes)	3	2	5	0	11	21	11%
Thorvald Stoltenberg (yes)	13	11	6	0	1	31	17%
Total	48	30	45	25	40	188	100%

Before I present the “winners” and the “losers,” let me say again: of course we all know that it is impossible to separate image from issue - image always involves issue and vice versa - but for analytical purposes I have tried to keep the two concepts distinct. The central finding of this study is this: in order to communicate efficiently, debaters must first attend to what I have defined as their images. The debaters with many violations of the co-operative principle - that is, the most image-oriented debaters - are the winners in the eyes of the viewers. The most issue-oriented debaters are the losers. When gender enters the picture, this conclusion still holds, but with one qualification. Negative attention towards fellow debaters, which is a central element of any political

debate, is where “doing politics” seems to be most in conflict with “doing femininity”, and more in accordance with “doing masculinity”.

The power of generosity, the power of aggression

Let me present another study from the Nordic book: Kirsten Gomard’s study of communicative styles of Danish politicians in 11 single party debates (Gomard 2001). Gomard found a striking difference in the way female and male panel leaders handled the balance between the members of their panels. Whereas most of the male party leaders created alliances with the panel member who was already in the stronger position, the female leaders handled the internal floor distribution in a compensatory way - ensuring greater visibility for the other panel member, even at their own disadvantage. The Danish female leaders created somewhat unfavorable working conditions for themselves, then, but they may have considered this a price worth paying, inasmuch as their promotion of other panel members served to project a unified and less hierarchical image of their party or organization. We might also think of their handling of the internal floor distribution as an “energizing” way of demonstrating power and leadership. This is in line with a definition of power as energy, effective interaction, and the empowerment of subordinates - a definition, which challenges the portrayal of power as domination or control (Hartsock 1981). Exercising this kind of power requires, however, that one is sensitive to the choreography of political debates. Not all debate formats allow for such leadership (and especially not multi-party debates, which may be seen as zero sum games). It would appear, though, that the Danish format allowed for it, inasmuch as the debates only included representatives from one party or one non-party campaign organization at a time, thus making a generous handling of the internal floor distribution possible. The problem seems to be that some of the male panel leaders behaved as if their female party colleagues were not there, or as if they were political opponents. This tendency was also visible in the

politicians' use of competitive strategies. Neither female panel leaders nor subordinate female panel members made a heavy use of competitive strategies in the Danish debates. Only men (though not all the men) made aggressive attempts to capture the floor. Gomard maintains that a woman may be less credible as a woman may if she is too aggressive.

In the earlier mentioned study on issue and image, I find some of the same tendency. Although I claim that most of the devices for an image-oriented discourse style seem to be open to female and male politicians alike, I am in doubt when it comes to negative attention towards fellow debaters, and especially aggressive personal attacks. None of the women in either the Norwegian or the Swedish debate were particularly attack-oriented. Is this because women are not supposed to show aggression, even though ritual aggression is a traditional feature of political debates? It is here, perhaps, that the stereotype of a politician conflicts with that of femininity and accords with that of masculinity. Aggressive women easily become "too much." On the other hand, they cannot - if they are to achieve visibility, authority and control - be too "soft." In the debates the non-aggressive women whom the viewers rated favorably compensated for their lack of aggressiveness by violating many of the other co-operative maxims. This behavior is in line with the "toughness" displayed by female politicians as revealed in the previous studies both in Norway (Krogstad 1994) and in Denmark (Gomard 1992). Likewise, male politicians rarely meet with success when adopting non-aggressive strategies. Unless they compensate for their lack of aggression in other ways, they easily fade into the background as compared with their more attack-oriented counterparts.

I also find that a male politician's display of aggression must be understood in the light of the position he holds. If he is already popular, he may challenge others; however, he does not need to. Doing so may put him on the same

(low) level as those he attacks. On the other hand, a man whose image needs bolstering ought to go negative. By attacking other debaters, he can draw attention to their weaknesses and upgrade his own position - and power - by implicit contrast. This shows that gender and status are closely intertwined and work simultaneously.

Less established politicians have two options, in the main, when it comes to discursive style. One is to imitate high-status politicians. By adjusting to a mainstream campaign discourse, they can demonstrate that they are doing politics as well as their high-status counterparts. This is what we have observed in the case of most of the party politicians and some of the grassroots ones. Another option open to low-status politicians is to show the world that they can “do” politics in another way - a more low-key way, and one more in accordance with everyday speech. Such behavior was exhibited by some of the less established party politicians and grassroots politicians. Still another option, observed in Gomard’s study, is to create a less hierarchical and competition-oriented panel.

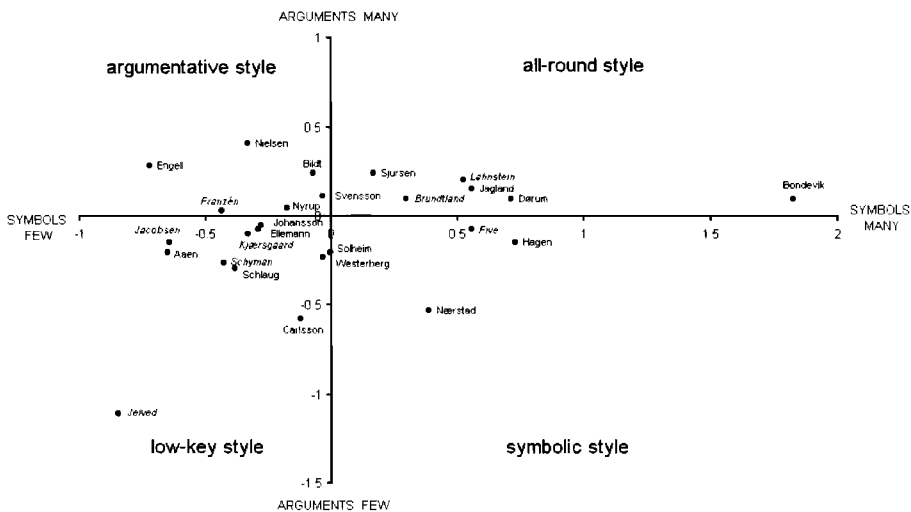
Symbolic and argumentative power

Nicklas Håkansson, a Swedish political scientist who has taken part in the Nordic project, examines symbolic and argumentative style in televised party-leader debates in Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Håkansson 2001). A symbolic style, as he defines it, is characterized by argumentation wherein meaning is not logically negotiated. Symbolic information is condensed, emotional, and often ambiguous. Such information may be seen as a shorthand method used by speakers to create unity between themselves and the voters. An argumentative style, by contrast, involves providing reasons for standpoints held and actions recommended.

Håkansson finds that women and men use symbolic appeals with a similar frequency, and that such appeals are associated with the creation of identity

on various levels. Women and men also use “arguments” with a similar frequency. This finding refutes classic stereotypes to the effect that women’s language is emotional and non-argumentative, and that men’s is objective and rational. However, differences in styles of speech among female and male politicians often appear in the finer nuances or subtypes of a discourse category. They sneak in the back way, so to speak. The men are more inclined than the women to engage in elaborate reasoning - that is, to furnish more than one reason for their standpoint. This difference appears systematically throughout the three countries. In Figure 2 Håkansson presents an overview of four styles of debate discourse.

Figure 1. Four styles of debate discourse. Female participants in italics



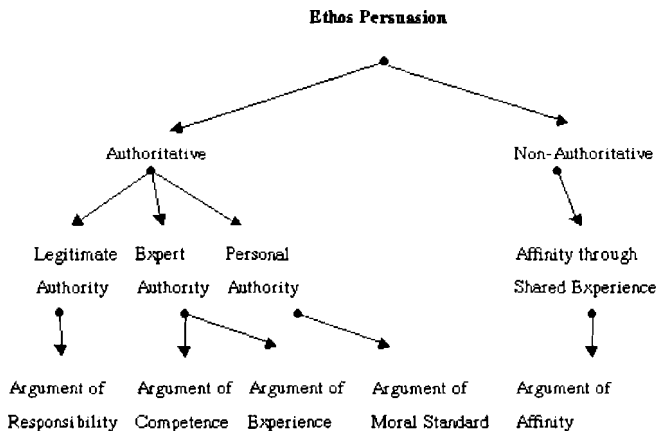
Håkansson’s study reveals that the typical politician is not the one who relies exclusively on either the symbolic or the argumentative style. Rather, it is the one who combines the two. Women are well represented both among the all-round debaters (those with a frequent use of both symbols and arguments) and among the low-key debaters (those who make little use of either). Interestingly, the politicians with the most one-sided symbolic style in

Norway are male politicians situated on the “far left” and the “far right;” Aksel Nærstad from “Rød Valgallianse” and Carl I. Hagen from “Fremskrittspartiet.”

The power of personality

Monika Bauhr and Peter Esaiasson, both political scientists from Sweden, present an analysis of ethos argumentation (Bauhr and Esaiasson 2001). The concept of ethos is a building block in classical rhetoric, but little attention has been paid to the problem of identifying ethos argumentation in political debates. An ethos argument is defined as an argument wherein speakers seek to persuade their audience by pointing explicitly to their character or personality. As regards types of ethos argument, Bauhr and Esaiasson distinguish between arguments of responsibility, arguments of competence, arguments of experience, arguments of (good) moral standard, and arguments of affinity with the audience (Figure 2).

Figure 2. A typology over types of ethos argument



When using any of the first four types of arguments, the persuader marks his or her superiority over the audience, whereas the fifth type of argument marks equality between persuader and audience. In the study Bauhr and Esaiasson use this framework to analyze persuaders' use of ethos argumentation in TV debates held during the final phase of the campaigns leading up to EU-related referenda in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Altogether they analyze 26 debates (136 politicians). The authors find no systematic differences between female and male politicians when it comes to the frequency with which they use ethos arguments. There are, however, some differences in the types of ethos argumentation women and men present. The women tend to mark affinity between themselves and their audience, while the men are inclined towards a somewhat more authoritative argumentation. There seems, in other words, to be a difference in the "distance" that female and male politicians create between themselves and the electorate.

Kjerstin Thelander's well-known study of the parliamentary language of Swedish politicians from 1986 indirectly supports this finding. It concludes that the use of the pronoun we is correlated with gender: female members of the Swedish Parliament more often said we; male members more often said I. The same thing is demonstrated by the Finish communication researcher Mats Nylund's analysis of how the use of the seemingly inconspicuous pronoun we relates to traditional issues within the area of doing politics.

The power of being one of us, or the power of being above us

According to Nylund, who is part of the Nordic group, politicians are essentially faced with two problems when confronting voters during election campaigns: they must show that they are one of us; and, simultaneously, they must show that they are somewhat above us - that is, capable of representing us on complex political issues (Nylund 2001). In other words, the dilemma politician's face is that they must, at one and the same time, communicate

both intimacy with the audience and distance from it. Nylund focuses on electoral debates in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and he first asks what the word we refer to. Table 2 presents ten reference groups to which debaters are referring when they say we.

Table 3. The categories referred to by we. Female participants in italics

	Debaters	Government	Party	Politicians	Yes/no side	Age group	Gender	Nation	Scandinavia	Europe
Ingvar Carlsson	•	•	•	•				•		
<i>Anne Enger Lahnstein</i>	•		•	•	•			•		
<i>Mona Sahlin</i>	•		•				•	•		•
<i>Gro Harlem Brundtland</i>	•	•	•	•				•	•	
<i>Gudrun Schyman</i>	•		•	•				•		
<i>Elisabeth Rehn</i>	•	•						•		
Hans Engell	•			•				•		•
Martti Ahtisaari	•					•		•		
<i>Agneta Stark</i>	•							•		
Søren Krarup	•							•		•
Total	33	10	28	18	1	3	15	239	1	17

Nylund found that women used we (and the variants us/our/ours) a little more than twice as often as they used I (me/my/mine). Men, by contrast, used we only about one-and-a-half times as often as I. This may be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the women (whether it is conscious or not) to include the audience, and thus to project intimacy with the voters and to downplay status and authority. Only one woman (Mona Sahlin from Sweden) - and no men - used we to indicate gender: i.e., we women. What these differences mean in terms of voter turnouts, we do not know.

Negotiating gender and politics

Even though the similarities in the political communication of female and male politicians far outweigh the differences, we must conclude that there are, nonetheless, gender differences among Nordic politicians. Women are still less numerous than men in television debates, and where the micro-level of the discourse is concerned, the working conditions of female politicians are still, in subtle ways, slightly worse than the working conditions of their male colleagues. The good news is that most of the differences in working conditions are small, the bad news is that they are there.

In interactional patterns and styles of speech the differences appear in the length of talking, in the way the internal floor distribution is handled, in the extent to which negative attention is paid towards fellow debaters, in the degree to which arguments are elaborated, in the types of argumentation used, and in the degree to which speakers project distance from the voters or intimacy with them.

It is tempting to speculate that some of these methods - bringing the political discourse closer to everyday speech, being attentive to the balance among a group of colleagues, and refraining from aggressiveness - are a way of negotiating cultural accountability as a woman (West and Zimmermann 1987) along with the negotiation of an image as a competent politician, and thus represents an attempt to overcome the dilemma faced by female politicians. Drude Dahlerup (1988) observes that Scandinavian female politicians seem to be caught between two conflicting expectations: they must prove they are just the same (i.e., just as able) as men, and at the same time they must prove they make a difference. The women studied in the Nordic project prove, to a great extent, that they are just as able as the men are. As they negotiate gender and politics, many of the women (and some of the men) do indeed expand the repertoire of political discourse. But leaving aside a few notable exceptions in

the Danish single-party debates, it is harder to see that the women change the very rules of the game - i.e., that they make a difference concerning the premises upon which the discourse of politics in electoral debates is based. And we might add: why should they? Is this a woman's task only?

What, then, about the men? Is it possible to interpret a less aggressive attitude on the part of male politicians as a modern way of doing masculinity and politics? This question must be considered in the light of voters' evaluations. For instance, I found that non-aggressive men were assessed negatively if they did not demonstrate dominance in other ways (e.g., by violating cooperative principles during a debate). The material on this matter is scarce, but one may speculate that these negative evaluations on voters' part mean that male politicians enjoy, in comparison with their female counterparts, fewer opportunities to transgress traditional gender boundaries. The strong association between doing masculinity and doing politics might thus constitute a handicap for some men. They have fewer opportunities to play with the repertoire of political discourse and to expand it, at least where national television debates are concerned. The conditions in this regard might be different, however, on the local political level as suggested by Gomard (1997).

Cross-national similarities and differences

The Nordic countries share many economic, cultural and political features. In view of this, we expected many similarities to be evident in the political discourse of these countries. Even so, we have found certain cross-national differences, differences that cannot be explained by differences in debate format. When summing up these differences, there is a possibility of carrying things too far. Therefore, it is important to stress that our conclusions are based on the empirical materials we have examined, and that more comparative research with a similar focus is required.

In Håkansson's evaluation of whether politicians provide reasons for their actions or standpoints, he maintains that arguments are provided in 48 percent of the contributions made by the contestants in the Norwegian, Danish and Swedish debates. The Norwegian politicians use the most elaborate argumentation, the Danes come in a good second, and the Swedes take last place. On a general level, only small differences can be attributed to gender. There are some cross-national differences, however, in the argumentative discourse of women and men. In Norway, the women are slightly more argumentative than the men are. In Denmark, it is the men who make more extensive use of this discursive style. In Sweden, finally, no differences are to be found.

Another aspect of election discourse is the use of symbolic appeals associated with the creation of identity. Håkansson finds that symbolic appeals are more common in the Norwegian debate than in the Danish and Swedish ones. While exercising caution in the matter of generalizations, Håkansson still finds these differences to be consistent: all of the Norwegian debaters save one use identity symbols in a higher degree than their counterparts in the other two countries.

On another matter of political style, more specifically ethos argumentation, the study of Bauhr and Esaiasson provides some interesting findings. In the three countries they study, superiority arguments are more common than equality arguments. In other words, the similarities are greater than the differences when it comes to the priority politicians assign to the use of authoritative versus non-authoritative ethos arguments. Cross-national differences do appear, however, in the overall frequency with which ethos arguments are used. Swedish politicians are more inclined to present ethos arguments, and especially arguments of responsibility and competence. This means that Swedish politicians underline a distance between themselves and

the people. Danish politicians use arguments of moral standard the most, while Norwegian politicians are distinguished by a heavier use of arguments of experience. Also the Norwegian politicians use superiority arguments the least and equality arguments the most. Does this indicate the methods by which politicians seek to persuade voters?

The large number of ethos arguments used in Sweden may indicate that political personality play a more important role in the Swedish EU campaign. Personality may also play a more prominent role in the Danish campaign than in the Norwegian one. Perhaps, then, we could sum up by saying that the discourse of Swedish politicians is more politician-centered, while that of Norwegian politicians is more voter-centered. Denmark is the unmarked case. The discourse of Danish politicians displays certain elements of a politician-centered rhetoric and certain elements of a voter-centered rhetoric.

Most studies in this field have found that female politicians have little to gain by stressing firmness, strength or toughness (Vatanen 1988; Karvonen, Djupsund and Carlson 1995). Yet we have noticed some changes in this respect (although it bears stressing that our investigations into effects have been limited). On the discourse side, we find that, although the women are careful not to show aggression, they do reveal firmness and strength. And when they do show toughness, they combine it with culturally accepted forms of femininity. Where the reception side is concerned, meanwhile, we note that voters in both Sweden and Norway not only are able to accept two equal genders; they also welcome firm and powerful women. Powerful women do not get bad reviews for doing gender "inappropriately." Rather, it seems they get good reviews for combining politics and gender "appropriately." This is a reason to view the future optimistically.

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Summary

Ideally, political debates provide politicians with equal opportunities for airing their positions. However, debates are rarely ideal. Rather than allowing everyone an equal opportunity, they often become events in which prior inequalities - e.g., gender, age, class, and status - are re-enacted. The question is whether and how such “brought along” parameters are made relevant, or “brought about,” in actual debate situations in Nordic political debates. More specifically, how do political actors present themselves and their message in televised election campaign debates in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden? How do they employ, bend, or violate canonical debate rules in order to portray themselves as powerful and trustworthy female and male politicians? A wide spectrum of phenomena related to women’s and men’s campaign discourse is covered, including discursive styles, rhetorical strategies, and conversational tactics.