



Utrecht University



# From Home to the Political Arena: How Children and Conservative Beliefs Shape Women's Political Self-Efficacy

## Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of having children on women's political self-efficacy, whether conservative beliefs influence women's political self-efficacy and to what extent conservative beliefs moderate this relationship. Using data from 431 Dutch women in the European Social Survey, the study measures political self-efficacy through respondents' confidence in their political abilities. Results show that having young children (under 12) negatively affects women's political self-efficacy, even when controlling for education, income, employment, political interest, and government trust. Older children (over 12) do not significantly impact political self-efficacy. Conservative beliefs do not affect political self-efficacy or moderate the relationship between children and political self-efficacy. The findings suggest that childcare responsibilities, especially for young children, reduce women's political self-efficacy. To enhance political engagement among women, policies regarding childcare leave and establishing a mentor network are recommended.

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### **Ethical statement**

The study has been approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University. The approval is based on the documents sent by the researchers as requested in the form of the Ethics committee and filed under number 24-1468. The approval is valid through June 24, 2024. The approval of the Ethical Review Board concerns ethical aspects, as well as data management and privacy issues (including the GDPR).

## 1. Introduction

### *Historical context*

On July 3, 1918, Suze Groeneweg became the first woman to enter the House of Representatives in the Netherlands. Highly unusual: after all, the norm at the time required women to take care of the household and family, and not to work after getting married. Suze did not marry, which paved the way for her to pursue a political career (Atria, 2022). While it was rare for a woman to be involved in politics, Suze was not the first to aspire to such a career. Long before Suze's time, women were already striving to participate in politics. For instance, Aletta Jacobs attempted to run for election in Amsterdam in 1883, but her candidacy was rejected by the city council. In 1887, the constitution was amended to explicitly state that only men had the right to vote (Atria, 2019). During this period, feminism was gaining momentum in the Netherlands. Organizations such as the Vrije Vrouwen Vereeniging (VVV) and the Vereeniging voor Vrouwenkiesrecht were established with the aim of amending the constitution to grant women the right to vote. Their efforts succeeded, and women gained the right to vote in the Netherlands in 1919. Despite these advancements, significant gender differences remained in Dutch politics. Since 1980, the number of women in the cabinet has gradually increased (Parlement, n.d.). Key milestones include Ria Beckers becoming the first female national list leader in 1977, Edith Schippers serving as the first independently acting informant in 2017, and Sigrid Kaag holding the positions of Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2021 and Minister of Finance in 2022. However, by 2022, women would make up only 37% of municipal politicians, 28.3% of aldermen, and 38.6% of the House of Representatives. Although the trend of increasing female participation in politics continues, a noticeable gap still exists between the roles of men and women in politics (Parlement, n.d.).

### *Problem definition and research questions*

These figures primarily reflect women who are already in politics. However, research suggests that there is a process prior to becoming a politician, and that there are challenges especially for women at the aspirational stage, i.e., the stage when a woman becomes politically active (LeDuc, Niemi & Norris, 1996; Matland & Montgomery, 2003; Kjaer & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019). Political activity is defined as *'the beliefs, commitments, and actions related to exerting power or influencing people and institutions with power on decisions about social issues; it can be formal or informal, legal or illegal, online or offline, and it can involve influencing from inside or outside the system'* (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Wray-Lake, 2019). It

refers to not only elected politicians but also those otherwise involved in politics. To understand the gender differences in political activity among women, it is essential to examine the underlying mechanisms. Do women simply have less interest in politics, or are there other explanations for the differences in political involvement?

Political self-efficacy can give valuable insights into answering these questions. Research shows that women, compared to men, have lower political self-efficacy (Hoskins et al., 2023), i.e. "*the belief that one's own political action can influence the political process,*" which can influence the gender differences in political involvement (Levy, 2013). Political self-efficacy is a crucial factor in political participation and can significantly impact whether individuals decide to participate in political activities (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Previous research on political self-efficacy distinguishes three types: 1) Internal efficacy, which is interpreted as an individual's belief in their own understanding and ability to participate in politics; 2) External efficacy, which concerns citizens' perceptions about the functioning and effectiveness of the political system; and 3) Collective efficacy, which relates to the assessment of whether a group can achieve shared goals through political action (Balch, 1974; Craig, 1979).

This thesis focuses on internal efficacy, which is whether a woman feels confident in her own ability to participate in politics. Internal efficacy is particularly relevant as it directly influences an individual's perceived competence in political arenas, which can be a determinant of their likelihood to become politically active (Madsen, 1987; Craig et al., 1990). Further research also indicates that there is a gender gap in internal political self-efficacy, mainly due to the incongruence between stereotypical female behavioral traits, and the behavioral traits often associated with politics. As a result, they often feel they lack the qualities needed to become politically active (Fraile & Marinova, 2024).

### *Children*

Motherhood is possibly an important factor influencing women's political self-efficacy. Preece (2016) indicates that confidence in one's abilities plays a crucial role in political engagement, and this is particularly true for women. Additionally, the difference in political involvement is partly explained by lower internal political self-efficacy among women. Further research has shown that women with children often have less time and fewer resources to participate in political activities, which can diminish their internal political self-efficacy (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). The demands of motherhood can lead to less time and energy for political engagement, as well as a shift in priorities that may deprioritize political participation (Fox & Lawless, 2014)

Shames (2015) discusses how caring responsibilities and family structures leave women with less time to engage in politics, especially when they have children to care for. She notes that research repeatedly shows women experience disadvantages due to their greater role in raising and caring for children. Other studies also indicate that women are more likely to take on family duties, which can create career limitations (Fox & Lawless, 2004; Burns, Schlozman & Verba, 2001). These disadvantages not only affect women's professional lives but also their political aspirations and activities (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). This leads to the following research question:

*To what extent does having children influence a woman's political self-efficacy?*

### *Conservative beliefs*

Conservative beliefs, which often emphasize traditional gender roles, can have an impact on women's political self-efficacy. Research shows that individuals with conservative beliefs are more likely to follow traditional gender roles. This can limit women's chances to engage in politics and leadership (Campbell & Childs, 2015). For instance, conservative ideologies often promote the idea that men are more naturally fit for political and leadership roles, which can undermine women's confidence in their political abilities (Celis & Childs, 2018). Additionally, traditional gender roles, reinforced by conservative beliefs, can create psychological barriers that affect women's political self-efficacy. Women who internalize these roles may feel less capable of participating in political processes. This sense of inability can come from societal messages that don't appreciate women's work outside the home (Fraile & Gomez, 2017). Furthermore, politics is often viewed as a male-dominated field, further discouraging women from political activities (Lawless & Fox, 2010).

The way individuals are raised and the cultural norms they are exposed to also play a significant role. In conservative settings, girls are less encouraged to take on leadership roles or discuss politics, leading to lower political confidence as adults (Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Research indicates that women in these contexts are less likely to perceive themselves as suitable for political office and receive less encouragement to run, which diminishes their motivation to engage in politics. (Fox & Lawless, 2014). This leads to the following research question:

*To what extent do conservative beliefs influence a woman's political self-efficacy?*

To fully understand the impact of children on political self-efficacy, we should consider whether conservative beliefs have a moderating effect. These beliefs typically entail that women focus primarily on household responsibilities and caring for their children (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Buddhapriya (2009) found that family responsibilities make it harder for women to move forward in their careers. Traditional family structures, often emphasized by conservative beliefs, can limit women's political ambitions (Schlozman, Burns, & Verba, 1999). Research shows that women in these settings are expected to prioritize family over careers, which reduces their political engagement and confidence (Fox & Lawless, 2003). Moreover, societal pressures to fulfill traditional gender roles in which women are the primary caregivers may further limit their political ambitions (Schlozman, Burns, & Verba, 1999). This leads to the following research question.

*To what extent do conservative beliefs moderate the association between having children and a woman's political self-efficacy?*

#### *Scientific relevance*

While research on this topic is increasing, there is limited focus on the specific Dutch context. Despite the Netherlands' reputation for progressive gender equality, challenges and inequalities remain, especially in political representation and involvement (Mügge & Runderkamp, 2019). By looking specifically at the Dutch context, this research can provide a better understanding of the barriers faced by Dutch women.

Previous studies highlight significant gender disparities in political self-efficacy. For example, research has been conducted on housewives and their internal political self-efficacy (Black & McGlen, 1979), but the specific effects of motherhood and conservative beliefs have not been thoroughly examined (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Fox & Lawless, 2014). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how these factors influence women's political self-efficacy. By understanding how having children affect women's political self-efficacy, and the role of conservative beliefs herein, we can better identify the barriers to their political engagement.

#### *Societal relevance*

Better representation of women has positive effects on social cohesion, democratic functioning, trust in politics, acceptance of election results, and changing norms and stereotypes (Mügge, 2014). It is also crucial for women to be involved in decisions that affect them, as they

have unique insights into issues such as abortion rights, maternity leave, and childcare (Mügge & Runderkamp, 2019). Women's participation is not only valuable but necessary for inclusive and representative politics, leading to policies that better address their needs and concerns, resulting in fairer and more effective measures.

By studying how having children affects women's political self-efficacy and the role of conservative beliefs, this research can identify specific barriers faced by women with children. This can help inform targeted interventions and policies to reduce these barriers and enhance women's political participation, contributing to a more gender-equal and just society.

### *Research design*

This thesis aims to understand the influence of having children and conservative beliefs on women's political self-efficacy. The study seeks to provide insights into how these factors affect women's political self-efficacy. To achieve this, a quantitative approach will be used, measuring the effect of having children on political self-efficacy. Additionally, the direct effect of conservative beliefs will be measured. Lastly, the moderating effect of conservative beliefs on the relation between having children and political self-efficacy will be examined. The goal is to provide policy recommendations to enhance political self-efficacy among women with children, creating supportive measures for women balancing motherhood and political aspirations.

## **2. Theory**

In this chapter, the concepts of care culture and the social cognitive theory will be used to explain the relationship between having children and political self-efficacy, and whether conservative beliefs moderate this relationship. Additionally, social role theory will be used to explain the effect of conservative beliefs on political self-efficacy.

### 2.1 Children

#### *Care culture*

In the Netherlands, women are more frequently assigned care responsibilities. Van Wel & Knijn (2006) call this the care culture. This concept refers to the social expectations and norms that make women primarily responsible for caring for children, the elderly and household chores. Care culture creates a mechanism where women's caregiving responsibilities limit their time and energy for political engagement. This culture not only reinforces traditional gender roles, but it also keeps the gender gap in political participation by imposing additional burdens



on women, which men experience to a lesser extent, that restrict their involvement in political activities.

The division of household roles is deeply rooted in Dutch society and is reinforced by both cultural and policy factors. On average, women spend more hours caring for their children than men (Roeters, 2017). This pattern continues despite progress in women's participation in the labor market and higher educational attainment. In addition, women start working less when they have had children so that they have more time for tasks within the family (Wiesmann et al., 2008; CBS, 2016). Consequently, gender differences appear to increase when a heterosexual family has children; men work only 2 hours more per week, whereas women work an average of 10 hours more per week.

Care culture has significant implications for women who wish to engage in activities beyond their regular work and care duties. The additional responsibilities that come with caregiving often limit the time and energy women can dedicate to personal and professional development, including political engagement. Research by Poortman & Van der Lippe (2009) indicates that women's feelings of responsibility towards housework and childcare lead them to take on more of these responsibilities. This continues to make them mainly responsible for household chores. This situation aligns with the idea of 'maternal gatekeeping', where women, even if they have full-time jobs, still do most of the housework. In addition, women are more likely than men to give up their leisure time for unpaid caregiving duties, impacting their personal and recreational activities. Even when employed full-time, women still carry out most domestic tasks, further limiting their opportunities to engage in activities outside the home (Bittman et al., 2003). In terms of political activity, women with children are less likely than men to attend time-intensive activities such as political meetings or be active members of a political party (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). This finding is supported by the work of Schlozman, Burns, and Verba (1999), who argue that the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities contributes to the gender gap in political participation. Further evidence comes from a study by Fox and Lawless (2014), which showed that women with children are less likely to consider running for political office due to the perceived and real demands of balancing family responsibilities with the demands of a political career. Women who do get elected as politicians are more likely to start their careers later, have fewer children and spend more time caring for children than male politicians (Shames, 2015).

### *Social Cognitive Theory*

In examining the relationship between having children and political self-efficacy, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) can provide valuable insights into how women's caregiving roles and responsibilities impact their political self-efficacy. Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory explains how individuals learn and behave through interaction with their environment. The theory suggests that people do not merely react to what happens but actively make decisions to achieve certain goals, such as choosing to become politically active. According to Bandura (2001), political self-efficacy derives from four sources: performance experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. In the absence of these sources, self-efficacy may be diminished (Bandura, 1982).

First, performance experiences. These are experiences in which one builds political self-efficacy through achievement. Without these experiences, self-efficacy may decline (Bandura, 1982). Women with children often have less time for political activities due to their caregiving responsibilities (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). This limited engagement reduces their opportunities to develop political skills and confidence, thereby lowering their political self-efficacy.

Vicarious learning is the process of learning by observing others. Seeing similar individuals succeed at a task, it may reinforce their own belief that they can perform that task as well. Conversely, the absence of role models can lead to lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). There are fewer female politicians compared to male ones (Parliament, n.d) and the visibility of female politicians serves as role models for girls, encouraging political engagement (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). When there are more women in parliament, it encourages other women to become politically active (Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2007). However, when there are few visible role models for women, this causes women to be much less politically active (Elder, 2004). To an even lesser extent, there are role models for women with children (Campbell & Childs, 2014). According to SCT, a lack of role models for women with children is likely to contribute to lower levels of political self-efficacy.

Verbal persuasion refers to positive encouragement and affirmations from others that contribute to belief in one's own abilities. Lack of support and encouraging words may play a role in having less self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Women are less often encouraged to seek political office compared to men. According to Woerner (2020) women with young children face obstacles even more than women without children and men. They are more frequently questioned about their ability to balance motherhood and political responsibilities, whereas men

often do not receive these comments. Brechenmacher (2018) also observed that women receive less encouragement to become politically active, linking this to their caregiving duties at home.

Fourth, physiological and emotional states. Women generally experience more parenting stress than men (Seah & Morawska, 2016). Stress during the transition to motherhood can significantly reduce a woman's self-efficacy (Bentley & Zamir, 2021). Additionally, research by Houle et al. (2009) highlights that stress and low self-efficacy can lead to withdrawal from social and political activities. Women facing the challenges of parenthood may therefore be less motivated to participate in political processes. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H1: Having children has a negative effect on a woman's political self-efficacy*

## 2.2 Conservative beliefs

### *Social Role Theory*

One recurring mechanism seen in the relationship between conservative beliefs and political self-efficacy among women is the internalization of traditional gender roles, leading to decreased confidence and perceived capability in political arenas. This internalization often results in women feeling less qualified and less likely to engage in political activities, a pattern supported across various studies.

Conservative views frequently include traditional views of gender roles, particularly within the context of the family. These views stem from the idea that men are the primary earners and heads of the family, while women are expected to focus on household and family responsibilities (Zhu & Chang, 2019). According to social role theory, individuals internalize societal expectations regarding their gender roles, which then shape their aspirations and degree of self-efficacy (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Traditional gender roles reduce women's confidence in pursuing non-traditional careers, such as those in politics (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Coffman et al. (2016) showed that gender stereotypes significantly affect women's self-confidence, especially in male-dominated fields. Women have less confidence in their abilities in these fields, even when their performance is comparable to that of men. This lack of confidence extends to political involvement, where women feel less qualified to participate because of ingrained stereotypes (Coffman et al., 2016). Traditional socialization patterns and the male-dominated political system contribute to women's lower levels of political knowledge and engagement. This highlights, for example, the historical exclusion of women from politics and the lack of encouragement for women to engage in political activities. (Dolan, 2011). The

socialization patterns that contribute to lower political self-efficacy among women include various social and cultural influences. Traditional gender roles emphasize that men should be assertive and ambitious, while women should be nurturing and supportive (Bem, 1981). In addition, research shows that conservative women often exhibit lower levels of feminism and political self-efficacy, which contributes to reduced participation in political activities (Heger & Hoffmann, 2021). In addition, women who internalize conservative beliefs are more likely to distrust their political abilities. This distrust stems from societal messages that prioritize the role of men in politics and public life, leading women to feel less competent (Craig et al., 1990). This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H2: Conservative beliefs have a negative effect on a woman's political self-efficacy*

### *Moderation*

Women with children often experience a significant increase in caregiving responsibilities (Poortman & Van der Lippe, 2009), which can limit their time and energy for political engagement (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). For women who hold conservative beliefs, these responsibilities are likely to be perceived as even more central to their identity and role (Zhu & Chang, 2019), thereby possibly further diminishing their political self-efficacy. Conservative beliefs can thus amplify the negative impact of having children on a woman's political self-efficacy.

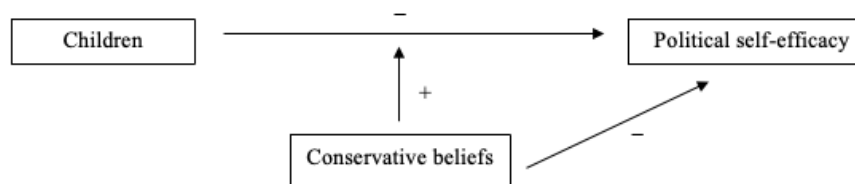
According to Bem (1981), individuals internalize societal norms about gender, which then guide their perceptions and behaviors. Within conservative frameworks, traditional gender roles are often emphasized, reinforcing the notion that women's primary responsibilities lie in caring for children (Campbell & Childs, 2014). This traditional outlook can lead to a heightened internalization of these roles among conservative women, making it more challenging for them to view themselves as capable or suited for political participation and leadership (Kittilson, 2006).

Additionally, progressive environments often provide more support and encouragement for women to balance political engagement with caregiving responsibilities compared to conservative circles (Van der Lippe & Van Dijk, 2002). This support can come in the form of policies that promote work-life balance, such as parental leave, subsidized childcare, and flexible work arrangements (USAID, 2021). Because women often have more caregiving responsibilities, especially in conservative environments, and there are fewer opportunities to reduce these responsibilities through supportive policies, the negative relationship between

having children and a woman's political self-efficacy may be strengthened by conservative beliefs. This argument leads to the following hypothesis:

*H3: The negative effect of having children on a woman's political self-efficacy is stronger for those with more conservative beliefs than those with more progressive beliefs.*

**Figure 2.1.** Visualization of the three hypotheses



### 3. Data & Methods

#### 3.1 Dataset and Sample

The data used for this study comes from the 9th round of the European Social Survey (ESS). Since 2002, the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC) has been researching attitudes within Europe and their interaction with institutions. The data is public and 40 European countries have participated in at least one round since the project began.

Each ESS round consists of a core module. This module remains the same in each round and addresses certain background characteristics and other relevant topics. Each round also includes an alternate round. The 9th round of the ESS concerns "Timing of life, Justice and fairness". To eliminate biases and imbalances from the sample, the data is weighted. In addition, an equal probability sampling design is used to take a representative sample of the entire population. In total, this dataset consists of 49519 observations (N=49519) throughout 40 European countries.

This study uses only data collected within the Netherlands. The data was collected by I&O Research, between August 2018 and January 2019. 3463 respondents were selected in 48 strata, which were split by region, gender, and age. The respondents were aged 15 years and older. To participate in the study, respondents must be residents of a private household. The interviews lasted one hour and were face-to-face. The response rate in the Netherlands was 49.6%, resulting in 1673 valid observations.

The study focused specifically on Dutch women. Therefore, we filtered the data by gender, selecting only women, and by country of birth, including only respondents from the Netherlands, resulting in 840 observations. Additionally, listwise filtering has been used to ensure that only complete cases without missing values were included in the final analysis. The variable regarding voting behavior consisted of a significant number of missing answers, probably due to respondents that did not vote, which were counted as missing. This resulted in a sample size of 431 observations (N=431).

### 3.2 Operationalization of variables

#### 3.2.1 *Dependent variable*

*Political self-efficacy* - Political self-efficacy is measured by the question “*How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics*” (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2023). Respondents were asked to choose from one of the following five response categories: (1) Not at all confident (2) A little confident (3) Quite confident (4) Very confident (5) Completely confident. This variable was standardized.

#### 3.2.2 *Independent variable*

*Children* – The independent variable is created by combining two indicators. The first indicator is the number of children and the second is the year in which the youngest child was born. The number of children was measured by the question: “*How many children have you ever given birth to/fathered?*”, to which the respondents had the opportunity where respondents could respond with the number of children. The answers had a range of 0 to 7. The age of children was measured by the question: “*In what year was your youngest child born?*”. Respondents were asked to indicate the year their youngest child was born, which eventually ranged from 1957 to 2018.

A new variable has been created, and the indicator asking about the age of the youngest child has been recoded. The specified years from 2007 to 2018 have been recoded to (1) children under 12, and the specified years from 1957 to 2006 have been recoded to (2) children over 12, given that the questionnaire was mainly administered in 2018. Subsequently, the number of observations of the respondents who answered zero on the first indicator (the number of children), was added to the new variable. It was also possible to assume that the number of missing at the age indicator would represent the respondents who did not have children, but the number of misses at this indicator and the number of respondents who indicated '0' at the number indicator did not correspond. These were higher values for the age indicator. Therefore,

the values from the number indicator were used. These categories were summarized into (0/reference) No children, (1) Youngest child is aged under 12 and (2) Youngest child is aged over 12.

### 3.2.3 Moderating variable

*Conservative beliefs* - The degree of conservative beliefs was measured by the respondent's voting record in 2017, the most recent election before the questionnaire was administered. The question "*Which party did you vote for in that election?*" could be answered: (1) People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), (2) Labour Party (PvdA), (3) Party for Freedom (PVV), (4) Socialist Party (SP), (5) Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), (6) Democrats '66 (D66), (7) Christian Union (ChristenUnie), (8) Green Left (GroenLinks), (9) Reformed Political Party (SGP), (10) Party for the Animals (Partij voor de Dieren), (11) 50PLUS, (12) DENK, (13) Forum for Democracy (FvD), (14) Article 1 (Artikel1/Bij1), (16) Other and (17) Blanc. The last two categories are reported as missing. The other categories are recoded to scale, where a lower score represents progressive beliefs, and where a higher score represents conservative beliefs, based on the Kieskompas (2017). The Kieskompas is compiled based on 20 relevant political statements. Political parties, based on their responses to these statements, are scaled on two axes, from left to right and progressive to conservative. Based on this information, the following classification is made: (1) Article 1 (2) Democrats '66 (3) Green Left (4) DENK (5) Party for the Animals (6) Labour Party (7) Socialist Party (8) 50PLUS (9) Christian Union (10) Christian Democratic Appeal (11) Reformed Political Party (12) People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (13) Party for Freedom (14) Forum for Democracy. It is important to note that the place of political parties on the axes can change due to changing political views, for example. In addition, this classification was made based on the party programs and words of political parties, not actually on a party's behavior, such as, for example, motions they do or do not support. This variable was standardized.

### 3.2.4 Control variables

*Educational level* - Individuals with higher education levels tend to have a greater interest in politics, vote more frequently, and engage more actively in political activities compared to those with lower education levels (CBS, 2017). The level of education among women accounts for variations in fertility (Dreze & Murthi, 2000). The level of education was asked as follows: "*About how many years of education have you completed, whether full-time or part-time?*". The answers were then reported in full-time equivalents. The range of responses

ranged from 0 to 40 years and were recoded to (0/reference) No formal education (0 - 5 years) (1) Primary education (6 - 8 years) (2) Lower secondary education (9 - 12 years) (3) Upper secondary education (13 - 16 years) (4) Tertiary education (17+ years).

*Age* - To accurately represent the different stages of life for women, the variable age (in years) was recoded into two categories: (1) women in the fertile stage of life (18-45 years) and (2) women no longer in the fertile stage of life (46-90 years). This recoding distinguishes whether a woman is in the stage of life where she can have children (WHO, 1996). Women in the childbearing stage may still be able to have children and are generally in a different stage of life than older women. Additionally, women in a later stage of life often have fewer caregiving responsibilities as their children are usually older, which can have an influence on the time she has for political activities. Life stage also influences prevailing norms about women. (Wiel, 2014; Orgad & Rottenberg, 2023). Furthermore, the stage of life affects the level of political self-efficacy: the older a woman is, the lower her political self-efficacy (Stauffer, 2021), making it relevant to include this control variable.

*Paid work* - Having paid work can affect the time and energy women have available for political activity, particularly when they also need to care for a child (Bianchi et al., 2000). Having paid work was measured by asking: "*Which of these descriptions applies to what you have been doing for the last 7 days? In paid work (or away temporarily)*". Where respondents could mark the appropriate description. The variable was constructed from (0) not marked and (1) marked.

*Household income* – Higher income leads to less parenting stress regarding the care of children (Fang et al., 2022), which can subsequently influence political self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982). Household income was questioned as follows: "*Please tell me which letter describes your household's total income, after tax and compulsory deductions, from all sources?*". The possible answers were: (1) J – 1<sup>st</sup> decile (2) R – 2<sup>nd</sup> decile (3) C – 3<sup>rd</sup> decile (4) M – 4<sup>th</sup> decile (5) F – 5<sup>th</sup> decile (6) S – 6<sup>th</sup> decile (7) K – 7<sup>th</sup> decile (8) P – 8<sup>th</sup> decile (9) D – 9<sup>th</sup> decile, and (10) H – 10<sup>th</sup> decile.

*Political interest* – Being interested in politics correlates with political self-efficacy (Matthieu, 2023). Women generally have lower levels of political interest, and that having young children affects the level of interest in politics (Campbell & Winters, 2008). Including this variable helps to provide a clearer picture of the primary relationship. How interested a person is in politics was questioned by: "*How interested would you say you are in politics?*", with the response options being: (1) Very interested, (2) Quite interested, (3) Hardly interested



and (4) Not at all interested. The response directions are reversed, with a low score indicating less interest, and a high score reflecting much interest.

*Trust in government* - This research focuses on internal political efficacy. To eliminate any confounding effects of external efficacy (Balch, 1974; Craig, 1979), this is included as a control variable. Further research also shows a relationship between trust in government and desires about family composition (Zheng et al., 2024). The following question was asked: "*How much would you say the political system in the Netherlands allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?*", with the response options being (1) Not at all, (2) Very little, (3) Some, (4) A lot and (5) A great deal. This variable controls for trust in the political system. It measures more purely the effect of children on political self-efficacy because it now looks only at a person's intrinsic confidence to become politically active.

### 3.3 Analytical Strategy

To test the hypotheses of this study, a multiple linear regression analysis with moderation was conducted, represented in three different models. The first model examined the main effect of children on political self-efficacy. Control variables were added to the second model. In the third model, the moderation effect with two interaction terms is added. Furthermore, a line graph based on the predicted values of political self-efficacy is constructed. These analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 29.

### 3.4 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4.1 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analyses. Most respondents (51.4%) indicated that their youngest child was born before 2007, meaning their child is older than 12 years. Only 17.4% of respondents have the youngest child under the age of 12, and 30.2% of respondents have no children. The distribution of education levels is also notable. A significant portion of respondents (36.7%) have completed upper secondary education, 32.3% have tertiary education, 6.3% have primary education, and only 2.1% have no formal education. This indicates a higher level of education compared to the general Dutch population, where 25.8% have a lower level of education, 37.9% have a medium level of education, and 35.5% have a higher level of education (CBS, 2022). Household income ranges from 1 to 10, with a mean of 6.480 and a relatively high standard deviation of 2.762, indicating a wide spread of income levels within the sample. When it came to employment, 59% of respondents indicated that they were in paid employment. This is slightly below the labor force participation rate among women in the Dutch population, which was 63% in 2018 (CBS, 2019).

The mean scores for interest in politics (2.34 on a scale of 1 to 4) and confidence in the influence of politics on the government (2.61 on a scale of 1 to 5) indicate moderate levels of engagement and trust among respondents. The standard deviations (.741 and .874, respectively) suggest a wide variation in both political interest and external efficacy.

**Table 3.1. Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Min	Max	Mean/ percentage	Std. Dev.
<i>Independent variables</i>					
Children					
Having no children	130			30.2%	.460
Children under 12	75			17.4%	.380
Children over 12	226			52.4%	.500
<i>Dependent variable</i>					
Political self-efficacy (z-score)	431	-.914	3.214	.000	1.000
<i>Control variables</i>					
Education level					
No formal	9			2.1%	
Primary	27			6.3%	
Lower secondary	98			22.7%	
Upper secondary	158			36.7%	
Tertiary	139			32.3%	
Age	431	0	1	.3643	.482
Household income	431	1	10	6.480	2.762
Paid work	431	0	1	.590	.493
Interested in politics	431	1	4	2.230	.672
Trust in influence politics	431	1	5	2.630	.858
<i>Moderator</i>					
Conservative beliefs (z-score)	431	-1.591	1.737	.000	1.000
Valid N (listwise)	431				

#### 4. Results

To test the hypothesis, multiple regression was used to test the relationship between having children and political self-efficacy, the effect of conservative beliefs on the dependent variable, and the moderating effect of conservative beliefs on the effect of having children on the dependent variable.

*Model 1* examines the direct effects of having children on political self-efficacy, distinguishing between children under 12 and children over 12, with no children as reference. The model shows that the effect of children under 12 is negative but not significant ( $t(428) = -1.254$ ,  $p = .210$ ). This suggests that having younger children may be related to lower political self-efficacy, but this effect is not significant. Having children over the age of 12 has a significant and negative effect ( $t(428) = -4.044$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that having older children is associated with lower political self-efficacy. This model explained 3.8% of the variance ( $R^2 = .038$ ,  $F(2, 428) = 8.489$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Model 2* adds the control variables education level, household income, paid work, life stage, political interest, trust in the political system and conservative beliefs. This model is significant and explains 21.3% of the variance ( $R^2 = .213$ ,  $F(10, 418) = 9.435$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This means that these factors significantly contribute to understanding the differences in political self-efficacy among women. When other factors are considered, the effect of having a child under 12 remains negative and becomes significant ( $t(418) = -2.049$ ,  $p = .041$ ), suggesting that having younger children is associated with lower political self-efficacy. The effect of having children over 12 years old remains negative but no longer significant after adding the control variables ( $t(418) = -1.493$ ,  $p = .136$ ). This implies that hypothesis 1 can partially be confirmed, finding only evidence for the impact of young children. We found no significant relationship between the control variables of education level, age, and household income. Next, the effect of having an interest in politics was measured. This effect was found to be significant ( $t(418) = -4.843$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that a higher level of political interest may be associated with a lower sense of political self-efficacy. Furthermore, confidence in political efficacy also has a significant effect ( $t(418) = 4.236$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Individuals who believe that the political system in the Netherlands can influence government generally tend to have higher levels of political self-efficacy. The study finds no significant effect of conservative beliefs ( $t(418) = 1.495$ ,  $p = .136$ ), indicating the rejection of hypothesis 2.

*Model 3* shows the two interaction effects. The results show that the interaction effect of conservative beliefs on the relationship between having a child under 12 years old and political self-efficacy is not significant ( $t(416) = 1.153$ ,  $p = .250$ ). It was also found that the

interaction effect, applicable to children over 12 years old, is not significant ( $t(416) = 1.732, p = .084$ ). Hypothesis 3 is therefore rejected. This model did prove to be significant ( $R^2 = .219, F(2, 416) = 8.334, p < .001$ ).

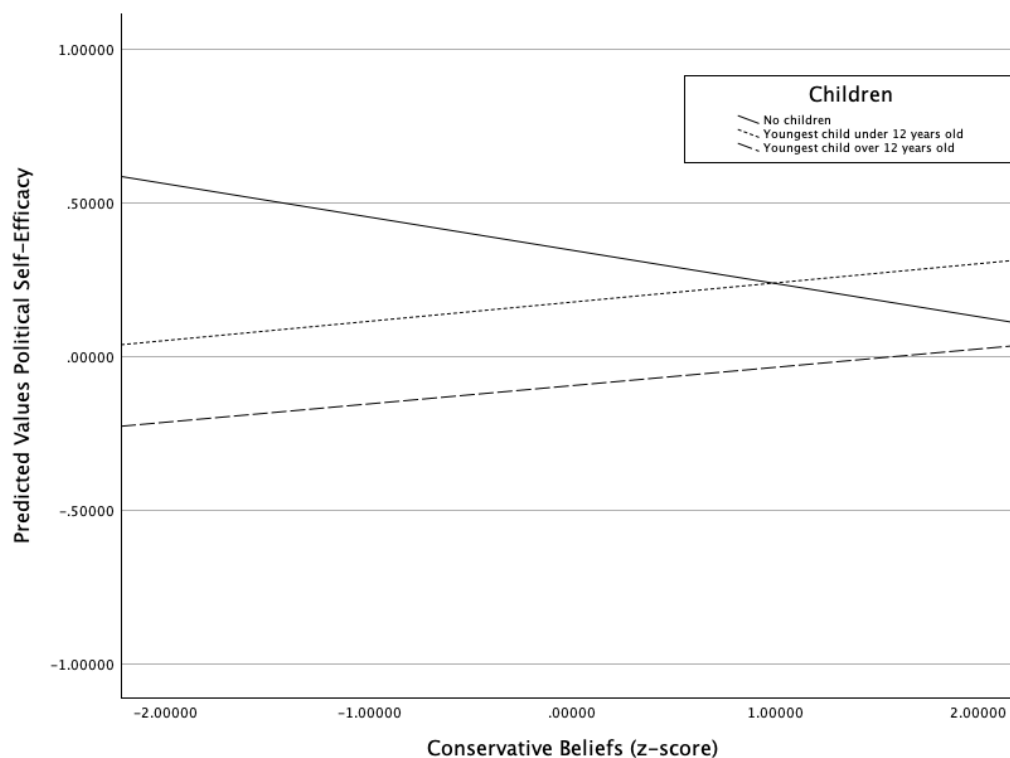
**Table 4.1.** Regression models for political self-efficacy ( $N = 431$ )

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Constant	.356***	.088	.112	.400	.096	.142
<b>Children</b>						
Children under 12	-.183	.146	-.290*	.141	-.274	.142
Children over 12	-.448***	.111	-.194	.130	-.190	.130
<b>Education</b>						
Primary			.003	.356	.011	.356
Lower secondary			-.169	.322	-.170	.322
Upper secondary			.052	.318	.050	.318
Tertiary			.248	.323	.257	.323
Age			.175	.139	.161	.139
Household income			.002	.018	.003	.018
Paid work			.204	.108	.209	.107
Interested in politics			-.340***	.070	-.337***	.070
Trust in influence politics			.240***	.057	.237***	.057
Conservative beliefs			.069	.046	-.048	.081
<b>Child under 12 * Conservative beliefs</b>						
					.153	.133
<b>Child over 12 * Conservative beliefs</b>						
					.176	.102
R2	.038		.213		.219	
F change	8.489***		9.435***		8.334***	

\* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Although the moderation effects of conservative beliefs did not have a significant effect. Nevertheless, the signs of the effects are explored (Figure 4.3). For individuals without children, a negative relationship can be seen between conservative beliefs and political self-efficacy. As these individuals become more conservative, their sense of political self-efficacy decreases. This finding suggests that conservative individuals without children have less confidence in their own ability to participate in politics. However, for parents with a child under 12, there is a positive relationship between conservative beliefs and political self-efficacy. This suggests that the more conservative beliefs one has, a parent of a young child experiences a stronger sense of political self-efficacy. For parents with the youngest child older than 12, there is also a positive relationship between conservative beliefs and political self-efficacy, although it is somewhat less pronounced than for parents with younger children. This may indicate that women who have conservative beliefs and have only children aged over 12 years old have a stronger sense of political self-efficacy. It is important to note that none of these results proved to be significant. There is no clear evidence that conservative beliefs influence the relationship between having children and political self-efficacy.

**Figure 4.1.** Predicted values of children by political self-efficacy, considering the interaction with conservative beliefs.



## 5. Conclusion & Discussion

This thesis examined whether and to what extent having children affects women's political self-efficacy, to what extent conservative beliefs moderate this relationship and if conservative beliefs influence political self-efficacy. A quantitative study was conducted among a sample of 431 Dutch women, analyzing data collected through the European Social Survey (ESS).

The study found that having young children (under the age of 12) reduces women's political self-efficacy when considering variables such as education, income, employment, political interest and trust in government, compared to women with no children. Young children's additional caregiving responsibilities, which limit the time and energy women can devote to political activities, explain the negative impact on political self-efficacy. In addition, these women have fewer role models, and receive less support from the environment. This result is consistent with previous studies showing that caregiving responsibilities hinder women's political participation. This effect was not significantly observed in women with older children (over 12 years of age). We need additional research to draw further conclusions about the relationship between having older children and women's political self-efficacy. A possible explanation for this is that older children require less physical care (Yogman et al., 2018), leaving women more time for other matters, which may increase their sense of self-efficacy. Again, further research may provide more insights.

Conservative beliefs were not found to have a significant direct impact on political self-efficacy, nor did they moderate the relationship between having children and political self-efficacy. It was hypothesized that women with conservative beliefs internalize traditional gender roles and therefore feel less qualified to enter politics. Research on political self-efficacy suggests that there are several other psychological factors that influence this, such as a high degree of extraversion (Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). It is possible that other factors underlie political self-efficacy, rather than internalized gender roles. The limitations provide a possible explanation for this non-significant relationship.

### *Limitations*

This study explored the relationship between having children, conservative beliefs, and political self-efficacy in women. It is important to recognize limitations and provide suggestions for future research.

Firstly, this study looked at women in different political roles, including regional water authorities (waterschappen), municipal councils (gemeenteraden), and the national parliament (Tweede Kamer), without distinguishing between these levels. This approach didn't consider the different time commitments and responsibilities each political layer requires. Each level of political engagement demands different amounts of time, public exposure, and complexity. For example, municipal councilmembers are expected to have a job next to their councilwork. While national parliamentary roles do not anticipate this, members of the House of Representatives often put in longer hours. Future studies should differentiate between these political levels and examine how these levels affect women's political engagement. This can help identify specific support measures that can be implemented at each level to encourage more women, especially mothers, to participate in politics.

Secondly, in this study, political self-efficacy was measured by asking respondents to rate their confidence in their ability to enter politics. This measure does not necessarily translate into actual political participation. Someone may have the confidence to engage in politics but choose not to due to other personal or professional reasons. Confidence in one's ability to engage in politics is important, but it doesn't capture the full picture. It's important to differentiate between self-efficacy and the actual intention to participate in politics. This allows us to better understand the factors that drive political engagement and address specific barriers that prevent women from entering politics. Future research could include measures that not only look at political self-efficacy but also the intention and willingness to engage in politics.

Thirdly, this study relied on cross-sectional data, which only tells something about the population at one point in time. While this method allows for identifying associations between variables, it does not provide insights into causality. It remains unclear whether having children affects political self-efficacy, if women with higher political self-efficacy are more likely to have children, or whether other factors might influence both variables. Future research could use longitudinal designs, which track the same individuals over time to see how changes in one variable affect changes in another. Also, qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could add an important perspective into the personal experiences and motivations of women and encourage them to become politically active.

As previously mentioned, Kieskompas (2017) serves as the basis for classifying political parties from progressive to conservative. Subsequent research could possibly focus on other ways of framing the progressive-conservative scale, including consideration of the left-right divide that is often made in the Netherlands. This can give more insight into the degree of conservative beliefs a person has.

## 6. Policy Advice

The results of this study indicate that mothers with children under 12 have lower self-efficacy than women without children. Women typically take on more caregiving responsibilities, which leaves them with less time for political ambitions. There are also fewer role models, and the environment is less supportive. This chapter will offer two policy recommendations regarding childcare policies and establishing a mentor network.

### *Childcare policies*

The current employment policies in politics offer little support for women with young children. Women cannot take advantage of flexible working hours or parental leave as regular employees can. The Work and Care Act (2001) states that an employee may take 26 weeks of leave per child within the first eight years after the child's birth. However, at present, there is no similar arrangement for politicians. Adjusting these regulations can make political roles more attractive to women with young children who might not currently consider a political career. De Jong (2023) also advocates for adjustments to parental policies, such as informal arrangements and flexible working hours. This flexibility can help improve the balance between work and caregiving. Although this measure may not directly influence women with young children who are not yet politically active or have low political self-efficacy, policy changes can have an indirect effect: more female politicians with young children can serve as role models for women with low political self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982; Elder, 2004; Campbell & Childs, 2014).

### *Mentor network*

Stem op een Vrouw has established several mentoring networks to support women in taking their first steps towards politics. These networks pair women who are not yet politically active, or are not yet politicians, with female politicians. Some of the mentees have some political experience, such as membership in a party, but others are new to the political world. 65% of the participants became politically active (Stem op een Vrouw, 2023). Other research also indicates that mentorship helps in learning skills (Cooke et al., 2017) and has a positive effect on the self-efficacy of mentees (Poon, 2006).

Stem op een Vrouw can enhance the political self-efficacy of women with young children by offering a mentor program specifically targeting this group. It is important to adhere to the sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) and focus on them during the program.



According to Cognitive Social Theory (Bandura, 1982), performance experiences are crucial in gaining political self-efficacy. Small-scale projects and tasks within politics can be organized for mentees to engage in, ranging from drafting motions to organizing debates. Good guidance is essential, as only successful experiences contribute to increased self-efficacy.

When it comes to vicarious learning or observing others, mentees are paired with politicians who have young children. For these mentors, it is important to highlight their experiences of managing young children and how they handle these responsibilities. Additionally, verbal persuasion, or positive encouragement, can be incorporated into feedback sessions where mentors provide encouragement and positive reinforcement to mentees.

Finally, physiological and emotional states, specifically parenting stress, should be addressed. *Stem op een Vrouw* can offer workshops and trainings for members of this network on balancing work, family life, and time management. It is evident that support from partners is a significant factor for women to become politically active (Bernhard et al., 2021). Therefore, these women's partners could also be included in these discussions to explore ways to create a supportive home environment.

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