

From rainbow flags to red flags: How attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ shape voting behavior

Abstract

Post-industrial societies increasingly face conflicting forces that simultaneously advance and resist gender equality. While policy efforts have advanced women's and LGBTIQ+ rights, a reactionary discourse has gained traction in Europe, often framed as a "war on gender ideology". While research has extensively explored the role of sexism in voting behavior, comparatively less attention has been paid to attitudes toward LGBTIQ+. Notably, it remains unclear how social groups combine support for women and LGBTIQ+ rights and how they translate into voting behavior. To address this gap, this study poses two key questions: (1) To what extent do attitudes toward women and LGBTIQ+ rights differ in their degree of polarization? (2) How do these attitudes shape voting behavior, and are there discernible differences in their influence? Using original survey data from ten European countries, this paper demonstrates that LGBTIQ+ rights are significantly more contested than gender equality. Moreover, opposition to gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights is a strong and consistent driver of far-right support, whereas progressive views mainly benefit the Greens but translate into partisan loyalty less directly and consistently. As such, this study enhances the literature theoretically and empirically by linking attitudes on the two issues to political preferences in contemporary democracies.

Keywords: Gender Equality, LGBTIQ+, Gender Backlash, Voting Behavior, Polarization

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1. Introduction

In recent years, debates over gender equality, reproductive rights, and sexual orientation have become increasingly politicized across Europe and beyond. While over the past decades legal reforms and policy advances in many Western democracies have extended protections and rights for women and LGBTIQ+ (Otteni, 2025a), these gains are increasingly under pressure. Particularly far-right actors have been active in this regard, strategically mobilizing against what they disparagingly label 'gender ideology' (e.g., Murib, 2025). Scholars have described this opposition and counter-movement as a 'gender backlash' (e.g., Flood et al., 2021), which not only

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targets specific policies but seeks to preserve or restore traditional gender hierarchies by reframing gender and sexual diversity as battlegrounds over cultural identity and moral order. As a result, issues on gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights have moved to the center of political contestation, increasingly shaping how individuals identify ideologically, relate to political parties, and ultimately decide how to vote (e.g., Butler, 2024; Off, 2023). Gender-related issues have thus (re-)emerged as central arenas of political polarization (e.g., Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Hark & Villa, 2015; Otteni, 2025b).

A growing body of research has shown that modern sexism – the belief that women no longer face discrimination – and traditional gender role attitudes shape political preferences, especially for populist radical right parties (e.g., Anduiza & Rico, 2024; Christley, 2022; de Geus et al., 2022; Cassese & Barnes, 2019). However, much of the existing work has been conducted in single-country contexts, often focusing on the United States or selected Western European countries. Moreover, contemporary public and political debates on gender extend well beyond gender equality between women and men and include questions of sexual diversity, such as the rights and recognition of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and particularly in relation to trans, intersex, and queer people. Controversies over legal gender recognition laws, access to gender-affirming healthcare, adoption rights for same-sex couples, the inclusion of queer content in school curricula, and the participation of transgender athletes in sports have become central flashpoints in public and political debates across many countries and are prominent topics of mobilization by populist and radical right actors (e.g., Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Spierings, 2020). Yet, despite the prominence of these topics, we still know relatively little about how policy preferences regarding anti-discrimination measures for LGBTIQ+ translate into electoral choices in general, but especially in relation to support for far-right parties. Where such attitudes are studied, analyses often narrow their focus to views on homosexuality (e.g., Lancaster, 2020; Spierings et al., 2017), thereby overlooking the broader spectrum of public opinion on gender identity and sexual diversity. Additionally, attitudes toward gender equality and those toward LGBTIQ+ are frequently examined in isolation, making it difficult to grasp their intersection or how they jointly contribute to electoral behavior. Consequently, we lack a systematic and comparative perspective that would allow us to assess whether and how attitudes on both dimensions shape electoral choices across national and political contexts.

Our paper addresses these gaps by first explicitly incorporating attitudes toward anti-discrimination measures for LGBTIQ+ into the analysis and placing them alongside attitudes toward gender equality for women. Second, using original survey data from ten European countries, we adopt a comparative perspective to investigate how support for women's and LGBTIQ+ rights align – or diverge – within the public, and show how these attitudinal patterns are linked to electoral behavior. Specifically, we ask: (1) To what extent do attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights differ in their degree of polarization? And (2) how do

these attitudes influence voting behavior across different political contexts – both independently and in combination?

Our findings are threefold. First, support for anti-discrimination policies targeting LGBTIQ+ is significantly more contested than support for gender equality. The greater dispersion of opinions on this issue indicates a higher degree of attitudinal polarization, understood as the extent to which attitudes are distributed toward opposing positions rather than concentrated around the center. Second, opposition to either gender equality or LGBTIQ+ rights is most strongly associated with support for far-right parties, whereas endorsement of both dimensions is linked to voting for Green, (far-)left, and liberal parties, with the Greens benefiting most. Crucially, the divide is asymmetrical. While these attitudes matter in both directions, they are decisive for the far-right. Opposition to gender equality and minority rights is a strong and consistent predictor of far-right support, underscoring how effectively these parties mobilize around anti-feminist and anti-gender appeals. By contrast, while progressive views are most clearly associated with Green support, the relationship is weaker and less consistent, suggesting that pro-equality stances translate into partisan loyalty less directly than exclusionary ones. In short, both party families occupy opposing poles of the socio-cultural dimension of conflict (or Green Alternative Libertarian vs. Traditional Authoritarian Nationalist: GAL-TAN), but this alignment is far sharper and more politically consequential for the far-right. Third, gender equality emerges as the key dividing line in structuring partisan alignments. Green party support is concentrated among respondents who endorse progressive positions on both gender equality and minority rights, but declines sharply once opposition to gender equality sets in – even when respondents remain supportive of sexual minorities. By contrast, far-right support rises steadily with exclusionary views and is especially pronounced among those rejecting gender equality. In both cases, gender equality proves more decisive than attitudes toward sexual minorities in shaping electoral loyalties.

This study contributes to the growing literature on the politicization of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues and the role of public opinion in shaping electoral behavior in several important ways. First, while prior research has largely focused on attitudes toward gender equality for women, this study expands the analytical lens to include attitudes toward gender and sexual diversity, conceptualizing both as interrelated yet analytically distinct axes of contemporary political conflicts within the socio-cultural dimension of GAL-TAN. Importantly, voters' positions on gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights tend to align with the GAL-TAN profiles of political parties, most visibly in the contrast between the Greens on the GAL side and far-right parties on the TAN side. Second, by adopting a comparative approach, we generate systematic cross-national evidence on how these attitudinal dimensions intersect and relate to electoral behavior. This perspective not only enhances the generalizability of the findings but also enables an exploration of contextual variation in these patterns. Third, the study advances our understanding

of how gender-related attitudes structure voting behavior. It demonstrates the conceptual and empirical value of considering attitudes toward both gender equality for women and LGBTIQ+ by showing that while both play a notable role in explaining far-right support, their influence extends beyond this, affecting electoral choices in general.

2. The politicization of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues

As cultural conflicts have intensified in recent years, questions of gender equality and sexual diversity have moved to the forefront of public and political discourse in advanced democracies, becoming increasingly relevant for understanding contemporary patterns of political behavior. Their growing salience is closely tied to broader societal transformations that have reshaped the ideological landscape of many post-industrial societies. These developments are best understood through the lens of cultural value change and cultural backlash theories, which together provide a comprehensive framework explaining how and why progressive and anti-progressive attitudes have gained political and electoral significance.

Value change theory argues that since the 1970s, post-industrial societies have witnessed a gradual but long-term shift from materialist concerns, such as economic security and physical survival, to postmaterialist values emphasizing self-expression, individual autonomy, and equality (Inglehart, 1977). This shift has underpinned i.a., the expansion of rights and protections for women and LGBTIQ+, reflecting the increased public support for inclusive and egalitarian ideals. Accelerated by generational change, increasing education, urbanization, and economic development, this cultural transformation has deepened over time. However, for socially conservative individuals, these changes have provoked a sense of threat to their traditional beliefs and social status, eliciting a “cultural backlash” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The increasing prominence of cultural issues in politics and public discourse, such as the integration of ethnic minorities, same-sex marriage, and increasing gender equality, has intensified feelings of relative deprivation among those who perceive their cultural norms to be marginalized or under attack. Notably, this backlash often combines economic and cultural grievances. On one hand, perceptions of competition with immigrants and minorities can create a sense of declining social status (Gest et al., 2018; Rydgren, 2013), on the other hand, female empowerment has led some men to feel increasingly sidelined (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). These intertwined sentiments of neglect are closely associated with the endorsement of “redemptive politics” (Canovan, 1999), which seeks to restore emphasis on traditional welfare policies, male-dominated leadership, gender-stereotypical roles for women, and heteronormative family structures. As a result, individuals who feel culturally and economically threatened tend to gravitate toward socially conservative and authoritarian values (Allen & Goodman, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This reactionary behavior can be understood as a response to perceived

status loss, where individuals alter their political behavior and attitudes in order to defend their cultural identity and interests. Faced with the realization that their cherished cultural norms and values are no longer widely supported by the majority or political representatives, they express their discontent and reclaim a sense of belonging by aligning with socially conservative groups and parties (Ignazi, 1992; 2003).

These dynamics have fundamentally reshaped the structure of political competition across Europe, giving rise to a new socio-cultural cleavage. Rather than being organized along an economic left-right line, distinguishing positions regarding the relationship of state and market and focusing on questions about redistribution, a new line of conflict unfolds along a socio-cultural dimension that distinguishes parties and voters on their positions ranging from Green, Alternative, Libertarian (GAL) orientations to Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist (TAN) stances (Hooghe et al., 2002; Marks et al., 2006). While research on this cleavage initially pointed to issues of European integration, immigration, and environmentalism (Bornschieer et al., 2021; Hooghe & Marks 2018; Kriesi et al., 2012), more recent work has highlighted how gender equality, gender identity, and sexual diversity have become increasingly central to this new value conflict (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Sass & Kuhnle, 2023). What were once matters subsumed under the broader theme of societal liberalization have now become pivotal battlegrounds (Wallaschek et al., 2024), with gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues forming central lines of cultural contestations within this GAL-TAN framework (Campbell & Erzeel, 2018; Dietze & Roth, 2020; Hark & Villa, 2015; Siegel & Wang, 2018). These issues resonate because they crystallize deeper conflicts over belonging, equality, and identity in modern societies by tapping into fundamental questions about who belongs in the political community, what constitutes legitimate forms of family and social organization, and how societies should navigate the tension between individual autonomy and collective traditions.

Thus, gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues represent more than specific policy debates. They are central markers of broader cultural struggles over social order, morality, and national identity. Far-right parties, in particular, have seized on this terrain, deliberately amplifying opposition to progressive gender and sexuality agendas as a core component of their political strategy (e.g., Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). By framing such demands as threats to traditional values and national cohesion, they appeal to segments of the electorate who experience cultural change and economic uncertainty as destabilizing. In doing so, they not only mobilize resentment but also reshape the terms of political debate, transforming gender and sexuality into flashpoints of cultural resistance and rallying symbols for a broader backlash against liberal democratic norms.

3. Electoral relevance of gender equality and LGBTIQ+

In recent years, gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues have gained growing relevance in electoral politics across Western democracies, increasingly being part of political campaigns and party competition (e.g., Bernardez-Rodal et al., 2022; Magni, 2019). High-profile political events such as the election of an openly sexist U.S. president in 2016 and again in 2024, as well as the Supreme Court's repeal of *Roe vs. Wade*, have intensified public debates about gender roles and reproductive autonomy, contributing to the politicization of gender attitudes among voters. Meanwhile, the scope of these debates has moved well beyond traditional questions of gender parity between women and men to include issues of gender and sexual diversity, particularly the rights and societal recognition of trans, intersex, and queer individuals. Consequently, political parties increasingly adopt distinct positions on gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues and voters are more likely to sort themselves along these lines.

3.1 Supply side: Mapping party positions

Political parties differ markedly in how they position themselves in regard to gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues – either by championing them as part of a broader equality and inclusion agenda or rejecting them as emblematic of ‘wokeness’ or cultural decline. The socio-cultural GAL-TAN cleavage captures this divide, locating New Left parties on the libertarian side of the conflict and far-right parties on the opposite, traditionalist-authoritarian end (Bornschieer, 2010; Kriesi et al., 2008). Importantly, understanding party positioning requires recognizing that these are not merely policy preferences but contestations over the symbolic order of gender and sexuality, moral frameworks for organizing society, and the question of who warrants full citizenship and recognition as they fundamentally challenge social hierarchies in different ways (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Richardson, 2015).

Historically, left-wing parties – especially social democratic, communist, and left-libertarian parties – have been the primary advocates of gender equality policies. Their support reflects a core normative commitment to equality and is embedded in broader agendas of social justice, dismantling structural inequalities, and inclusion (Beckwith, 2000; Pérez et al., 2023; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Weeks et al., 2024). Therefore, many of these parties also explicitly endorse LGBTIQ+ rights, advocating for the recognition of trans identities, support legal and societal reforms in education and healthcare, and embrace a pluralistic understanding of gender, sexual orientation, and family forms (e.g., Hunklinger & Ferch, 2020; Gwiazda, 2023; Schotel & Mügge, 2024; Tremblay & Paternotte, 2011).

In contrast, conservative and right-wing parties adopt more traditional or restrictive stances, particularly when it comes to issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Conservative and Christian democratic parties may support gender equality in principle, but often treat it with lower priority and ambition (e.g.,

Ahrens et al., 2022). More generally, these stances reflect a moral framework that emphasizes tradition and continuity, in which gender roles and family structures are seen as central pillars of societal cohesion. Consequently, claims for gender and sexual diversity are often perceived as destabilizing, prompting efforts to maintain established normative boundaries (Hunter, 1991; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Therefore, their positions are frequently shaped by national legal frameworks and prevailing public opinion, reflecting a cautious approach that aligns with dominant societal norms rather than pushing for transformative change (Akkerman, 2015; De Lange & Mügge, 2015). Such reluctance often translates into political strategies that aim at slowing or resisting advances in gender policy reforms (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2022; Akkerman, 2015; Henninger & von Wahl, 2014).

Meanwhile, far-right parties typically interpret demands for gender equality and recognition of LGBTIQ+ as troubling symptoms of moral decline or cultural disintegration (e.g., Sauer, 2017). Their opposition serves as a defense of a particular social order, actively preserving symbolic boundaries that define who belongs to the national community and which forms of personhood and family life count as legitimate (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). In their rhetoric, terms like ‘gender ideology’ serve as catch-all phrases to describe a perceived left-liberal agenda aimed at dismantling the heteronormative nuclear family and destabilizing binary understandings of gender. Consequently, preserving traditional gender roles and family structures as well as a biologically grounded binary gender system is portrayed as essential foundations of social cohesion and national identity (e.g., Erel, 2018; Gaweda et al., 2023; Reinhardt et al., 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2024). Next to opposition to gender equality, homo- and transphobic narratives in particular have become “one of the constitutive elements of a right-wing populist and extremist discourse” (Sauer et al., 2016, 104). Often framed in the language of protecting children, defending women’s spaces, or safeguarding the ‘natural family’, such positions serve to legitimize the reassertion of traditional gender norms (e.g., Reinhardt et al., 2024).

Country-specific evidence illustrates the extent of this opposition. In Germany, for instance, both the far-right AfD and the Greens take the most opposed positions on gender equality issues, while simultaneously giving these issues the highest salience (Wallaschek et al., 2024). Similarly, in Spain, both the New Left Podemos as well as the far-right Vox frequently raise gender equality issues, again from fundamentally different ideological standpoints (Lavizzari & Pirro, 2024; Weeks et al., 2024).

However, far-right actors have developed more selective and strategic positions on gender and sexual orientation, involving more complex stances than simple opposition. Concepts such as *femonationalism* and *homonationalism* (Farris, 2017; Puar, 2007) describe how far-right actors selectively instrumentalize support for certain gender and LGBTIQ+ rights – particularly women’s and gay rights – for their own ends. Here, endorsement of women’s rights and tolerance toward homosexuality

is not necessarily an expression of egalitarian values but a demarcation for the cultural superiority of a supposedly liberal, Western in-group. In this logic, ‘native’ European societies are portrayed as enlightened and tolerant, while racialized and religious ‘others’, particularly migrants and Muslims, are constructed as patriarchal, homophobic, and culturally backward (e.g., Meret & Siim, 2013). In doing so, selective support for women’s and gay rights thus becomes part of a broader nativist and anti-immigrant narrative.

3.2 Demand side: Voters’ attitudes and their electoral impact

As party contestation around gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues has intensified, recent research demonstrates that these topics have also gained considerable weight at the ballot box, with much of the literature focusing on far-right mobilization. In the case of gender equality, central mechanisms involve a growing sense of anxiety among men who perceive women’s social and economic advancements as a threat to their group status. This often coincides with a zero-sum perspective on gender relations, where women’s progress is seen as coming at men’s expense (Kehn & Ruthig, 2013), generating feelings of discrimination, anxiety, and anger and a loss of power among men (Breyer, 2024; Clayton et al., 2019; Kimmel, 2017). If men interpret women’s gains as their losses, they are more likely to oppose policies aimed at promoting gender equality, viewing them as a direct threat to the male-dominated status quo and leading them to favor the existing social order over potential disruptions (Jost et al., 2003; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008; Mutz, 2018).

Against this backdrop, recent scholarship has paid renewed attention to the concept of sexism and its varied manifestations in the political sphere. Sexism – understood as attitudes that negatively evaluate individuals based on their sex and reinforce sex-based inequality (Swim & Hyers, 2009) – encompasses various forms, such as hostile and benevolent sexism, rooted in antagonistic, restrictive, traditional beliefs about gender stereotypes (Glick & Fiske, 1997; Swim et al., 1995). While these forms of sexism continue to persist in societies and political rhetoric – especially in far-right discourse – sexism today often occurs in a more subtle way. As Anduiza and Rico aptly summarize, it is not a question of “whether women should work outside the home, for example, but rather around whether they are still facing discrimination when they do so, and what should be done about it” (2024, 480). This modern form of sexism operates mainly through three mechanisms: denying ongoing discrimination, delegitimizing complaints related to women’s discrimination and gender equality, and opposing measures aimed at rectifying inequality and discrimination – such as affirmative action. This way, calls for equality are framed as unnecessary, overreactive, unfair, and even discriminatory toward men (Swim et al., 1995; Swim & Cohen, 1997).

A substantial body of research has established a robust and positive link between various sexist attitudes and support for right-wing populist and far-right parties and

actors. For instance, studies on the 2016 U.S. presidential election show a strong association between sexist views and voting for Donald Trump (Knuckey, 2019; Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Valentino et al., 2018). In Great Britain, sexism explains support for Brexit (Green & Shorrocks, 2023) and the Conservative Party in the 2019 British elections (de Geus et al., 2022). Beyond the Anglo-American context, recent literature has also highlighted the growing politicization of gender relations and the importance of sexism and male resentment in explaining support for the radical right in a European context, such as Spain (Anduiza & Rico, 2024), Sweden (Off, 2023), and Germany (Fortin-Rittberger & Eder, 2025).

Opposition to LGBTIQ+ rights has likewise become a core element of far-right mobilization strategies, however, these insights have yet to be systematically integrated into quantitative electoral research. Existing studies tend to focus on selected aspects, mostly notably attitudes toward homosexuality. Even then, these attitudes are rarely analyzed for their direct, independent effect on voting behavior. Instead, they are most often studied in combination with nationalism or nativist sentiments, a relationship most prominently conceptualized through *sexually modern nativism* (e.g., Spierings et al. 2017). Empirical studies in this field have shown that attitudes toward homosexuality can be bound up with ethno-nationalist ideas and can thus contribute to support for far-right parties that present themselves as alleged defenders of modern values against perceived external threats (e.g., Lancaster, 2020; Spierings et al., 2017). However, this is highly context-dependent and far-right parties do not adopt uniform stances on homosexuality across countries (Spierings et al., 2017). Moreover, the focus on the intersection of support for homosexuality and xenophobia leaves the independent role of attitudes toward gay rights in shaping electoral behavior underexplored. Even more absent from empirical research are attitudes toward trans, intersex, and queer people. Despite their prominence in public and political discourse and being a distinct theme in far-right rhetoric and agendas (e.g., Murib, 2025), we still know remarkably little about how public attitudes toward these groups shape electoral choices.

What becomes clear from this overview is that the literature has devoted considerable attention to exclusionary attitudes and their role in driving far-right support. Yet this focus leaves a critical gap. If opposition to gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights is understood as a broader orientation toward (gender) hierarchy, social closure, and authoritarian order, then support for these rights should likewise be theorized as more than the mere absence of such opposition. Understanding inclusive attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights and their link to voting behavior is equally critical for explaining contemporary electoral dynamics. Feminist and queer scholarship offers important theoretical grounding here, interpreting progressive support for gender and LGBTIQ+ equality as part of a wider normative orientation toward democratic deepening and intersectional social justice (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). In doing so, the struggle for recognition of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations and redistribution of economic and social resources

are seen as interconnected dimensions of justice (Fraser, 1995). Inclusive attitudes embody an understanding that full democratic participation requires extending recognition and inclusion to encompass gender equality as well as diverse gender and sexual identities beyond heteronormative constraints (Richardson, 2015).

Taken together, the literature on attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ and electoral behavior remains fragmented. The relationship between sexist attitudes and far-right voting is well documented, yet research is largely confined to single-country analyses, with systematic cross-national comparisons still being rare (Christley, 2022). Furthermore, the focus on the far-right sidelines the broader relevance of attitudes toward gender equality across the political spectrum, leaving open the question of their role in shaping support for other party families. What is missing is a theorization of supportive attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ as a political orientation with implications for progressive voting across party families. Meanwhile, LGBTIQ+ attitudes, although highly contested in political debate, are rarely analyzed as independent predictors of electoral behavior. When they are, the emphasis remains primarily on homosexuality, but often in combination with nationalism or nativism, obscuring their direct effects. Lastly, the combined effect of attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ has not yet been studied. This paper addresses these gaps by laying the groundwork for a systematic and comparative analysis of both the independent and joint effects of attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ on voting behavior across party families, explicitly accounting for both exclusionary and supportive attitudinal profiles.

4. Empirical strategy

4.1 Data

This study sets out to examine the link between attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ and voting behavior. To this end, we make use of original online survey data, fielded in ten European countries with around 2,000 respondents per sample (20,449 in total and 16,569 after listwise deletion). The countries include Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden. The survey was fielded in fall 2022 and conducted by YouGov. The fieldwork coincided with the General elections in Italy on September 25, but as gender equality was not a highly salient topic in the elections, we believe that this does not influence the results of the analyses. Respondents were recruited using quota-sampling (quota-representative according to gender, age, education, and region) through YouGov's online access-panels. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the only datasets including questions on policy preference for both political measures for gender equality and anti-discrimination of LGBTIQ+, as well as voting intention.

The countries covered include a broad range of political-cultural and regional diversity in Europe, and the sample-population combined makes up about 80 percent of

the EU population. Moreover, the selected country cases reflect a broad range of variation in gender equality and LGBTIQ+ inclusion within the European Union. While all selected countries exhibit relatively high levels of gender equality and inclusion of LGBTIQ+ in a global comparison, they differ significantly within the EU context. In fact, according to the 2024 European Gender Equality Index, which ranks the level of gender equality of EU countries with regard to seven different aspects on a 100-point scale, Sweden (82.0) represents the most gender-equal country among the sample, whereas Greece (59.3) ranks lowest. The sample is evenly split: five countries score above and five below the EU average, ensuring a balanced representation of gender equality outcomes (EIGE, 2024). Similarly, the V-Dem women's political empowerment index score in the year 2022 ranges between 0.84 (Poland) and 0.95 (Germany and Spain) on a scale from 0–1, indicating broad variation among otherwise highly empowered countries (V-Dem, 2025).

Similar variation is observed regarding LGBTIQ+ inclusion. Based on the 2022 V-Dem indicator of power distribution by sexual orientation, which compares the political power of LGBTIQ+ individuals to that of heterosexuals on a four-point ordinal scale, Hungary (0.68) and Poland are the least inclusive cases. Although the remaining eight countries show less pronounced differences, the Netherlands (2.83), Spain, and France consistently rank among the most inclusive, while Czechia and Greece occupy lower positions (V-Dem, 2025). This pattern is mirrored in the 2023 ILGA Rainbow Map, which ranks 49 European countries from 0–100 % on their respective legal and policy practices for LGBTIQ+ people regarding seven thematic categories. Spain (74 percent), Sweden, and France rank at the top, followed by the Netherlands, Germany, and Greece in the middle, while Poland (15 percent), Hungary, Italy, and Czechia are rated lowest (ILGA-Europe, 2023). Together, these cases offer substantial variation on the key dimensions of interest, making them well suited for comparative analysis and allowing to draw broader conclusions for Europe overall.

4.2 Operationalization

Independent variables

The analyses focus on two key variables: attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights. We draw on two survey items. The first measures views on gender equality policies, asking respondents to place themselves on an 11-point scale from “0 – measures do not go far enough” to “10 – measures already go much too far”. The second captures attitudes toward anti-discrimination measures for sexual minorities (such as homosexuals and transsexuals), again using an 11-point scale from “0 – much more needs to be done” to “10 – measures already go much too far”. While “sexual minorities” is not fully synonymous with gender minorities, the explicit reference to transsexuals in the item wording ensures that both groups are considered.

Both survey items focus on a policy dimension of their respective fields, and both questions are intentionally formulated in broad terms to accommodate the diverse political contexts across the ten EU countries included in the study. Depending on their national context, respondents may associate different specific policies or priorities with these items, but this broad framing allows a range of interpretations shaped by local debates and policy environments to be captured. In the realm of gender equality, for instance, countries differ in their legislative approaches, but there is widespread engagement with common challenges such as the gender pay gap, the underrepresentation of women in political and corporate leadership, and the prevention of sexual violence. Many states, including Spain, France, and Germany, have introduced or debated quota systems, while others are progressing with legislation on wage transparency. At the same time, reproductive rights remain contested, with more restrictive approaches in countries like Poland and Hungary contrasting with liberalizing reforms in places like Spain and France.

Similarly, anti-discrimination policies for sexual minorities are discussed and implemented unevenly across the ten countries. Yet, despite legal and institutional differences, political discourse increasingly converges around core themes such as equal treatment, protection from discrimination, and the rights of transgender, intersex, and queer individuals. Even in more restrictive environments, such as Hungary and Poland, LGBTIQ+ rights have become politically salient, often tied to wider concerns about democracy and human rights. In more inclusive contexts, such as Sweden, Spain, and the Netherlands, public debates focus on deepening inclusion, addressing trans healthcare, or improving education. Across all countries, civil society activism, EU-level standards, and media coverage contribute to a shared framing of these issues as matters of fundamental rights (ILGA-Europe, 2023). The broad wording of the survey items thus allows respondents to project context-specific meanings onto commonly debated themes, enabling the study of both variation and convergence in public attitudes across different national settings.

Dependent variables

Voting intention serves as the key dependent variable. The survey asked: “Which party would you vote for if there was a federal election on the next day?”, with all relevant parties (presidential candidates in France) serving as answer categories. We recoded the variable to represent relevant party families, based on the classifications provided by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). These party families are: (far-)left, Green and environmental, social-democratic, liberal, conservative and Christian democratic (combined as one party family), far-right, and other parties. An additional category captured non-voting (Table A1).

Control variables

The analyses include several sociodemographic and political control variables, which have been shown to be related to voting intention: gender (categorized as male or female), age (continuous), and highest level of education (standardized into three levels: low, medium, and high). The models also include the following political control variables: respondents' political interest (on a five-point scale) and self-placement on an eleven-point political left-right scale. All included variables are central determinants of electoral behavior in contemporary party systems (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960).

4.3 Methods

In a first step, we inspect the distribution of attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minorities to assess the extent of attitudinal polarization regarding the two issues. We can speak of attitudinal polarization when respondents' positions strongly diverge, potentially resulting in a bimodal distribution with individuals clustered at opposing extremes and few moderates. Next to visual inspection, we make use of Van der Eijk's Index of Agreement, which captures the extent of consensus or disagreement in the distribution of attitudes toward an issue. Lower values indicate greater polarization, while higher values reflect stronger agreement within the population (van der Eijk 2001).

To test the link between attitudes toward gender equality, sexual minority rights, and voting intention, we run multinomial regression models. In the first two models, we introduce attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minorities separately. Finally, in the third model, we introduce an interaction term between the two variables to test how these two attitudinal predispositions interrelate. As an additional robustness check, we run the regression separately for each of the ten countries. Importantly, the analyses do not allow to derive causal inference, given endogeneity and possible reverse causality. However, correlational analyses offer an overview and a comparative scope of the relationship between attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minority rights and voting behavior.

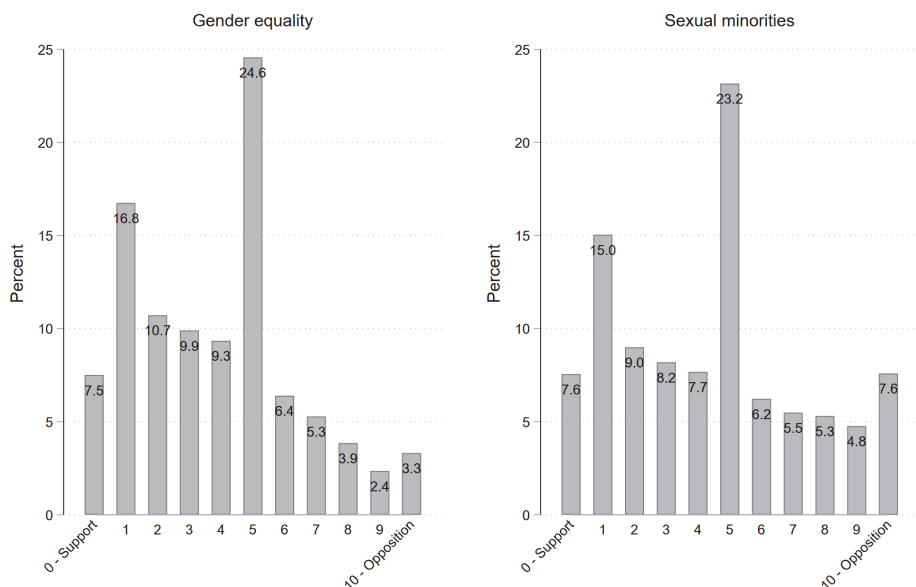
5. Results

5.1 Descriptive results

Before moving on to the multivariate analyses, we present a descriptive overview of our two key independent variables. Across the full sample, respondents express on average substantial support for both policy measures: 54 percent are in favor of increasing political measures to promote gender equality (answering with values between 0 and 4), while 21 percent oppose such policies (responding with values between 6 and 10). Support is somewhat lower for extending anti-discrimination laws protecting sexual minorities, with 48 percent in favor and 29 percent opposed

(Figure 1). This suggests that, although majorities tend to endorse both policy areas, sexual minority rights are far more contested than gender equality measures. This visual inspection indicates that attitudinal polarization remains modest for both attitudes, although views on sexual minority rights appear slightly more dispersed. A further inspection using Van der Eijk's Index of Agreement confirms this pattern, with higher agreement, i.e., less polarization, on gender equality (0.31) than on attitudes toward sexual minorities (0.17).

Figure 1: Distribution of attitudes toward political measures for gender equality (left) and anti-discrimination of sexual minorities (right)



Source: Own data

These patterns are broadly consistent across countries, though there is notable variation. Approximately one-fifth of respondents in each country oppose gender equality policies, while a clear majority express support. In contrast, attitudes toward anti-discrimination measures for sexual minorities exhibit greater heterogeneity across countries. Opposition is particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern European countries such as Czechia, Hungary, and Poland, as well as in Greece, where between 33 and 38 percent of respondents oppose such policies (Figure 2). Across all countries, attitudes toward sexual minorities exhibit a stronger polarization than attitudes toward gender equality, according to the van der Eijk index.

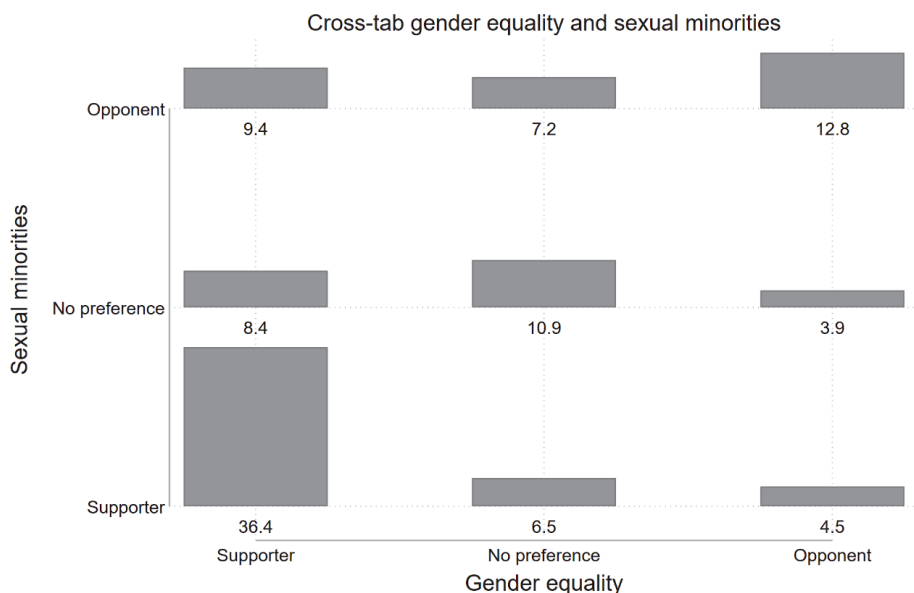
Figure 2: Country-wise distribution of attitudes toward political measures for gender equality (left) and anti-discrimination of sexual minorities (right). Note: Values of 0 to 4 indicate support, 6 to 10 indicate opposition. A value of 5 denotes no preference for policy change.



Source: Own data

How are attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minority rights related? The two measures are positively correlated (Pearson’s $r = 0.49$), yet the relationship reveals important areas of divergence (Figure 3). A relative majority of respondents (36.4 percent) express support for both advancing gender equality and strengthening anti-discrimination protections for sexual minorities, making this the most common attitudinal profile. By contrast, approximately 13 percent oppose both policies. There is also a significant proportion of respondents with ambivalent views. Around nine percent support gender equality but oppose sexual minorities, whereas roughly five percent take the opposite stance. These patterns highlight that although the two attitudes are related, support for gender equality is more widespread and less contested. Notably, respondents who favor anti-discrimination policies for sexual minorities almost always also endorse gender equality measures. This suggests that support for gender equality is a prerequisite for broader support of LGBTIQ+ rights.

Figure 3: Cross-tabulation of attitudes toward political measures for gender equality (x-axis) and anti-discrimination of sexual minorities (y-axis). Note: Values of 0 to 4 indicate support, 6 to 10 indicate opposition. A value of 5 denotes no preference for policy change.

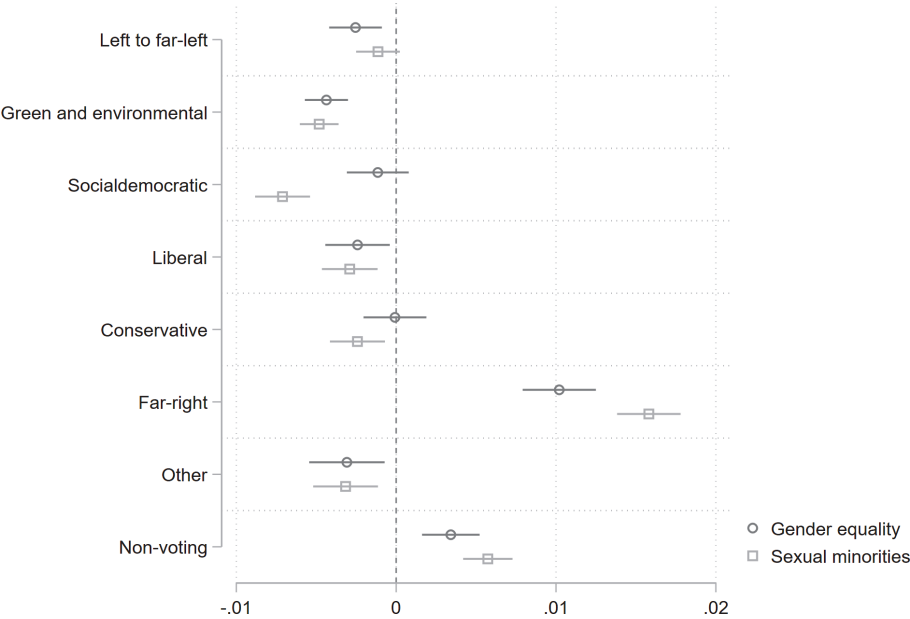


Source: Own data

5.2 Regression results

Turning to the results of multinomial regression analyses, the findings underscore the electoral relevance of both attitudinal predispositions. On the one hand, there is a strong link between opposition to progressive values and support for the far-right. Comparing both variables, opposition to LGBTIQ+ anti-discrimination policies has an even stronger association than opposition to gender equality. Conversely, progressive attitudes on both dimensions increase the likelihood of voting for Green and (far-)left, and liberal parties. For social democratic, as well as conservative and Christian democratic parties, the results are less clear. Whereas support for sexual minority rights is the only factor positively associated with voting intentions, attitudes toward gender equality are less consequential. Taken together, these results indicate that the far-right and the Greens are most clearly structured by these attitudinal divides, with the far-right benefiting most from exclusionary views (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Average marginal effects of attitudes toward gender equality (circles) and anti-discrimination policy (squares) on the probability of voting for different party families (based on Table A3, M1 and M2).



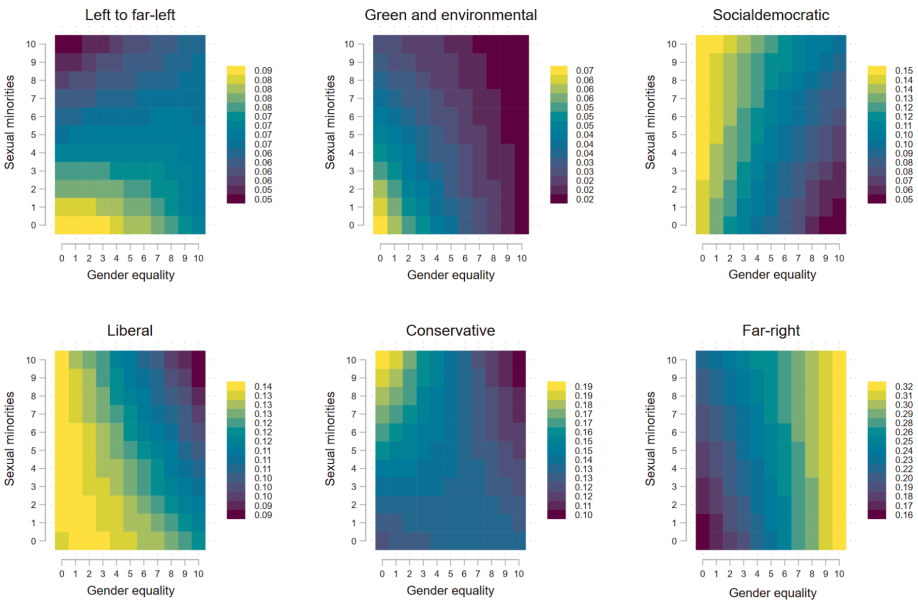
Source: Own data

Including both attitudinal dimensions, as well as their interaction, simultaneously provides additional insights into the intersection of attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minority rights. The results reveal the strongest divide between far-right voters on the one hand, and supporters of the (far-)left, Greens, and, to a lesser extent, liberal parties, on the other. For the far-right, the probability of support roughly doubles as respondents shift from support to opposition on both issues, increasing the probability of voting for them from 16 to 32 percent. By contrast, the (far-)left, Greens, and liberal parties attract their strongest support among respondents, who endorse both gender equality and sexual minority rights. Green parties benefit most from attitudinal predispositions regarding the two issues, with the voting probability ranging from 2 to 7 percent when comparing the extreme values (Figure 5).

Mainstream parties, such as social democratic, conservative, and Christian democratic parties, display a somewhat different pattern. Respondents who support gender equality but are sceptical about expanding sexual minority rights are most likely to support these parties. Importantly, the relationship is asymmetric. For social democratic parties, the lowest probability of support is found among respondents

who oppose gender equality while simultaneously favoring sexual minority rights. Conversely, for conservative parties, the lowest probability of support occurs among both those who strongly oppose and those who strongly endorse both dimensions.

Figure 5: Heatplot showing predicted probabilities of voting for different party families by attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minorities (based on Table A3, M3). Note: Colors represent predicted probabilities of voting for a party family: yellow denotes the highest predicted probability, while progressively darker shades of blue indicate lower probabilities



Source: Own data

A closer look at the heat plots for Green and far-right party voting reveals intriguing inverse results. In the case of the Green parties, support is concentrated among respondents who hold progressive views on both dimensions. The predicted probability of voting Green is highest for respondents who support both gender equality and sexual minority rights. The decline in the predicted probability is much sharper with greater opposition to gender equality than with greater concern about sexual minority rights. Strikingly, for respondents who strongly oppose gender equality, a more progressive stance on sexual minority rights does not alter the predicted probability of voting Green. This suggests that attitudes toward gender equality are central for Green Party supporters: even respondents who support sexual minorities are much less likely to vote Green if they simultaneously oppose gender equality.

The pattern for far-right voting reveals the inverse dynamic. Here, the predicted probability of supporting the party is lowest among respondents with inclusive

attitudes on both issues, rising steadily as opposition to both increases. Among those who are already sceptical of sexual minority rights, further opposition to gender equality substantially increases the probability of voting for a far-right party. However, among those who strongly oppose gender equality, stronger opposition to sexual minorities does not increase the predicted probability of voting for a far-right party. In other words, attitudes toward gender equality serve as a critical dividing line and appear to play a more consistent and central role in shaping alignment with either party.

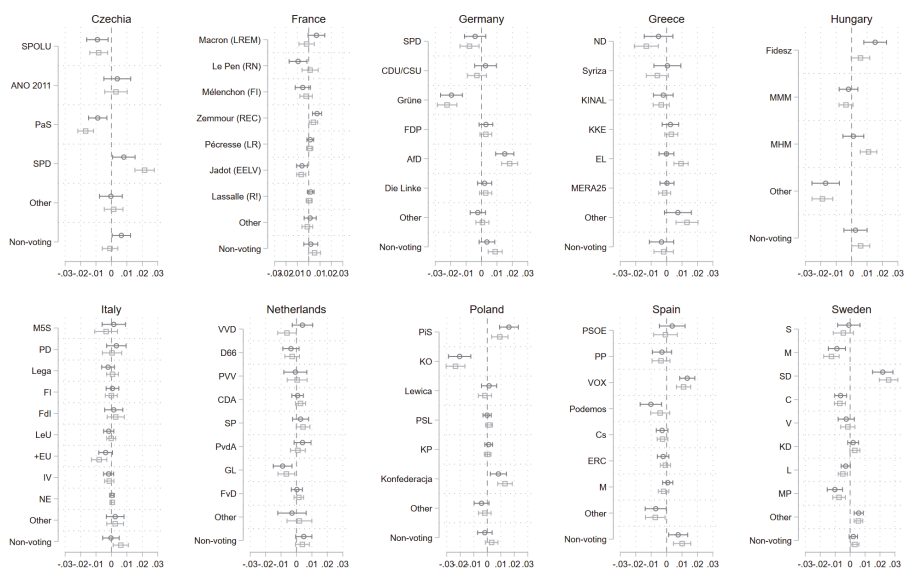
Taken together, these findings suggest that attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minorities are both salient and distinct predictors of voting intention in contemporary Europe. While they are correlated, they are not interchangeable, and their joint inclusion in the models improves explanatory power. Notably, the interaction term reveals that these effects are not simply additive. While individuals with strictly exclusionary views on both dimensions are most likely to support far-right parties, moving toward inclusion on either dimension substantially reduces this likelihood. Conversely, the combination of inclusive positions on both issues creates a clear attitudinal profile that favors Green, (far-)left, and liberal parties. By contrast, the electorate that combines progressive views on gender equality with scepticism toward minority rights is most likely to vote for mainstream parties, suggesting that they occupy a more ambivalent position in this attitudinal space. Notably, the asymmetric patterns for social democratic and conservative parties indicate that not all cross-pressures carry the same electoral weight. Social democratic parties have the lowest probability of being voted for by respondents, who oppose gender equality while supporting sexual minorities, whereas conservative parties lose support among both the most inclusive and the most exclusionary respondents.

Country-level analyses confirm that opposition to gender equality and anti-discrimination policies for sexual minorities predominantly benefits far-right parties. However, the strength and pattern of this association varies across countries. The strongest correlations are observed for the Sweden Democrats (SD) in Sweden, VOX in Spain, and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, all of which exhibit a robust positive relationship with opposition to both policy areas. In Poland, both Law and Justice (PiS) and Confederation (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość, KON) attract voters with critical views on gender and rights for sexual minorities, although the link is comparatively weaker. In Czechia, the SPD similarly benefits, with opposition to policies protecting LGBTIQ+ individuals showing a particularly strong association. In France, the far-right candidate Éric Zemmour, but not Marine Le Pen, appears to mobilize voters with antagonistic attitudes toward progressive policies. In Hungary, opposition is divided among parties: while the far-right MHM gains support from those who oppose anti-discrimination policies, Fidesz attracts voters who are critical of gender equality. In Greece, the Greek Solution (EL) draws support from voters who oppose rights for sexual minorities. Interestingly, no significant relationship is observed between

opposition to these policies and support for any party in Italy and the Netherlands (Figure 6).

In contrast, Green or (far-)left parties tend to benefit from support on both dimensions. This pattern is particularly evident for the German Green party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), the Czech Pirate Party (PaS), and GroenLinks in the Netherlands (GL). In Sweden, the main beneficiaries are the Green Party (Miljöpartiet, MP), but surprisingly also the conservative Moderate Party (Moderata samlingspartiet, M). In Poland, it is the liberal Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO) that gains most from progressive positions on gender equality and minority rights (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Average marginal effects of attitudes toward gender equality (circles) and sexual minority rights (squares) on the probability of voting for different parties (full regression results available upon request)



Circles: Gender equality · Squares: Sexual minorities

Source: Own data

6. Conclusion

This article examined how attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights differ in terms of their degree of polarization, and how they relate to voting behavior. Drawing on original survey data from ten European countries, the analysis yields three key findings.

First, rights for sexual minorities are significantly more contested than gender equality, indicating higher levels of attitudinal polarization around LGBTIQ+-related issues. Second, both attitudinal dimensions are systematically linked to electoral behavior, with the far-right and Green parties being the only party families that consistently benefit from variation in these attitudes, marking the poles of a socio-cultural cleavage. Third, and most importantly, the combined effects reveal distinct sorting patterns across party systems. Far-right parties consistently profit from exclusionary stances, while Green and environmentalist parties are the main beneficiaries of progressive views on gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights. Yet this divide is asymmetrical. Opposition to gender equality and minority rights is a strong and reliable predictor of far-right support, underscoring how successfully these parties mobilize around anti-feminist and anti-gender appeals. By contrast, the link between progressive attitudes and Green party support is weaker and less consistent, suggesting that pro-equality stances translate into political loyalty less directly than exclusionary ones. In other words, regarding gender equality and LGBTIQ+ issues, both party families clearly occupy opposite ends of the GAL-TAN dimension, but this stance is much clearer for the far-right.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, by examining attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights simultaneously, it highlights the variation in the degree of attitudinal polarization and demonstrates how each issue influences electoral behavior differently (Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2025). Second, the study shows that these attitudes are systematically sorted along a socio-cultural cleavage, with far-right and Green parties anchoring opposing sides of this conflict line. Taken together, the results suggest that both attitudes constitute a key site of contemporary polarization. While the level of attitudinal polarization remains limited, both issues form a stable axis of political competition along the socio-cultural divide. Third, by conducting a comparative analysis across ten European countries, the study moves beyond evidence from a single country and shows that these dynamics are not confined to specific contexts, but are instead observable across a range of different party systems and political cultures in Europe.

While the study provides important insights into the distribution of attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights in Europe and their impact on voting behavior, it is important to consider some limitations. Although our theoretical framework assumes that attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minorities shape vote choice, it is also possible that these attitudes are influenced by party cues, with voters adjusting their views to align with the positions of the parties they support. Both mechanisms are likely to operate simultaneously. Future research could address this issue by employing longitudinal data, experimental designs, or other methods better suited to identifying causal direction.

Moreover, the analysis does not account for the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which progressive values can be co-opted within exclusionary politi-

cal projects. *Homonationalism* and *femonationalism* illustrate how political actors, specifically from the far-right, may selectively endorse gender equality or LGBTIQ+ rights as a means of reinforcing nationalist, anti-immigrant, or Islamophobic agendas (Farris, 2017). Consequently, expressed support for sexual minority rights or gender equality does not always signal inclusive or egalitarian commitments. This raises the possibility that some respondents may support certain “progressive” policies in ways that serve illiberal or exclusionary logics. Future research could explore how support for gender and LGBTIQ+ rights varies by asking about more specific policy proposals (Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2025).

Taken together, the results of this study demonstrate that attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights constitute central axes of political conflict in contemporary Europe. Recent research suggests that the widening gender gap in youth voting can be traced back to diverging attitudes among young men and women (Mathisen, 2025; Milosav et al., 2026). This development may be just the beginning of a broader realignment: as these issues become more salient, they are likely to further deepen the socio-cultural cleavage and solidify as key fault lines shaping the evolution of party systems and political contestation in Europe.

7. References

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Appendix

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