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Introduction: The contestation of gender equality in Europe

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Gender equality has become one of the most visible and debated issues in European politics and society over the past decades. Issues ranging from violence against women and reproductive rights to LGBTQI+ rights and sexist discourses about women’s political leadership have become increasingly salient topics of public and political debate. Scholarly work highlights this increasing politicization of gender equality issues in public discourses, societal attitudes, as well as in political debates (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Off et al., 2025; Otteni, 2025; Wallaschek et al., 2024; Weeks et al., 2025). As a result, gender equality has become a key arena of political and societal contestation.

These contestations unfold in multiple arenas. Anti-gender actors and anti-feminist movements have gained visibility in electoral politics, public debates, and digital media environments, often linking opposition to gender equality with broader authoritarian, nationalist, or anti-liberal projects (Alexander & Off, 2025; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kantola & Lombardo, 2019; Luxton et al., 2025; Volk, 2025). At the same time, gender-related conflicts are increasingly intertwined with other societal tensions, including debates over migration, climate change, national identity, and democratic legitimacy (de Lange & Mügge, 2015; Indelicato & Magalhães Lopes, 2024; Off, 2024; Roth & Sauer, 2022; Vida, 2022). Social media platforms in particular have intensified the visibility, emotionalization, and polarization of these conflicts, enabling both progressive and anti-gender actors to mobilize transnationally and challenge existing social norms and national institutions (Reinhardt et al., 2024; Righetti et al., 2025; Tronina, 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, the special issue starts from the premise that contestations over gender equality should be understood through a multi-dimensional perspective. These contestations unfold across interconnected institutional, discursive, and societal dimensions. Political actors and institutions shape the boundaries of gender equality policies; discursive struggles construct competing meanings, identities,

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and symbolic boundaries around gender; and public attitudes and political behavior reflect broader processes of polarization, resentment, and democratic conflict. Bringing together contributions from political science, sociology and anthropology, this special issue examines how gender equality is currently being contested and transformed across Europe.

Gender equality contestation as multi-dimensional process

This special issue conceptualizes gender equality contestation as a multidimensional and dynamic political process and thereby moves beyond general claims about a ‘cultural backlash’ (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) or singular questions of resistance and opposition in one specific area such as a focus on LGBTQI issues or the politicization of the abortion issue (Ayoub, 2013; Ferree et al., 2002). The cultural backlash approach by Norris and Inglehart (2019) argues that the rise of authoritarian values, anti-gender discourses, and right-wing populist movements can largely be understood as a reaction of older generations to the progressive value changes and post-material transformations of recent decades. Anti-gender politics are hence understood as a defensive response to perceived threats against traditional values and long-standing social (and power) structures. While this structural approach captures the long-term social dynamics, the framing of anti-gender mobilizations as reactive processes overlooks the active, transnational and strategic dimensions inherent to anti-gender politics and discourses (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018). The backlash approach views gender equality as one issue among many. However, this perspective does not account for the fact that gender has become a highly politicized battleground on which far broader political, social, and cultural conflicts are played out.

While gender equality has always been a contested issue that has been stretched, bent and shrunk by different actors to fit their goals and wider ideas (Lombardo et al., 2009), in recent years, the politicization and polarization surrounding gender equality and even the term “gender” itself has sharply intensified (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Gender increasingly functions as a central cultural cleavage that structures political competition and public attitudes (Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024; Otteni, 2025; Wallaschek et al., 2024). Current contestations of gender equality unfold across different arenas – from politics over (digital) media and civil society – and should be understood as a symptom of broader conflicts over democracy and political community in Europe. Understanding contestation as a constitutive element of politics and social relations allows us to move beyond a narrow focus on explicit anti-feminist or anti-gender mobilization. It also directs attention to broader processes of identity formation, democratic representation, and social transformation.

To capture these contestation dynamics, the contributions to this special issue can be situated across three interconnected analytical dimensions. First, contestation

unfolds through political actors and institutional arenas, including political elites, parties, governments, and European institutions, which shape both the implementation and the politicization of gender equality (Ahrens & Meier, 2026; Kroeber & Dingler, 2026; Kugelmeier López, 2026). Second, contestation operates through discourses, frames, and identity constructions that structure how gender-related issues are publicly communicated, emotionally charged, and linked to societal conflicts (Kaushik, 2026; Wilhelmsen, 2026). Third, contestation becomes visible in public attitudes and political behavior, reflecting how gender equality increasingly functions as a marker of political, social and cultural division across European societies (Dietz & Otteni, 2026; Wallaschek & Minkus, 2026).

Importantly, the special issue shall enable readers to understand these dimensions in connection with each other. Institutional conflicts shape public discourse, discursive struggles influence political identities and attitudes, while societal polarization and attitudinal change feeds back into electoral politics and policy debates. While the single articles do not investigate all three levels, the special issue is able to highlight these dimensions across the seven articles. By doing so, we aim to spur the debate on a more integrated understanding of how gender equality is currently contested across Europe.

Studying gender equality contestation across dimensions

As argued above, the contributions to this special issue examine these contestations across three interconnected analytical dimensions: political elite actors (1), discursive struggles and identity constructions (2), and public attitudes and political behavior (3).

The first set of contributions focuses on how political actors and institutions shape and contest gender equality within European governance structures. Ahrens and Meier (2026) examine the European Parliament (EP) as a contested institutional arena and question its resilience against anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI+ mobilization. To analyze the representation of LGBTQI+ people in the EP, they expand the framework of Gender Sensitive Parliaments to include a LGBTQI+-sensitive perspective. Their contribution demonstrates how institutional mechanisms originally designed to advance equality and inclusion can also be used by increasingly influential conservative and radical-right actors to challenge these very principles.

Focusing on political leadership and elite discourse at the EU level, Kugelmeier López (2026) analyzes Ursula von der Leyen's rhetoric on gender equality during her first term as President of the European Commission (2019–2024), combining a quantitative dictionary-based approach with subsequent manual, qualitative coding. While gender equality becomes more visible in von der Leyen's speeches, the contribution highlights the persistence of rather traditional equal opportunity framings and the absence of more transformative concepts such as intersectionality or gender mainstreaming (Kugelmeier López, 2026). This renders visible the indirect

forms of contestation at the EU even as gender equality is formally endorsed. The contribution highlights that the contestation of gender equality occurs not only through open opposition, but also through the selective institutionalization and depoliticization of equality.

Moving from institutional discourse to elite perceptions, Kroeber and Dingler (2026) explore how political elites in Western Europe conceptualize ideal political leadership. Based on interviews with 31 members of parliament across five countries, their findings point toward a growing acceptance of integrative leadership styles traditionally associated with femininity, thereby complicating assumptions about persistent masculine leadership norms among mainstream political actors. The contribution moreover demonstrates that anti-gender discourses have so far had little impact on mainstream political elites' leadership ideals.

The second dimension addresses discourses, frames, and identity struggles surrounding gender equality and broader societal transformation. The two contributions demonstrate how gender-related conflicts are increasingly embedded in emotionally charged narratives about belonging, morality, crisis, and social order. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Southern Norway, Wilhelmsen (2026) examines how climate change scepticism becomes intertwined with anti-feminist resentment and threatened masculinity. Her contribution demonstrates how climate scepticism functions less as scientific doubt than as a form of identity work through which participants defend patriarchal privilege, express rebellious masculinity, and reject perceived "feminized" and moralizing forms of progressive politics. Contestation over gender equality thus becomes linked to broader anti-woke and anti-elitist narratives surrounding cultural change and social transformation.

Focusing on digital public spheres during the Covid-19 pandemic, Kaushik (2026) examines how feminist and anti-gender actors mobilize competing identity narratives under conditions of crisis and uncertainty. Combining feminist political theory, relational sociology, and digital communication research, the contribution distinguishes between exclusionary "control narratives" and inclusive "care narratives" grounded in solidarity and shared vulnerability. While exclusionary narratives generally benefit more strongly from platform logics and engagement dynamics, the findings also show that inclusive narratives gain traction during periods of heightened societal vulnerability. The contribution therefore shifts analytical attention from democracy-eroding dynamics alone toward the conditions under which inclusive forms of democratic resilience may emerge within digital environments.

The final set of contributions examines how contestations over gender equality are reflected in public attitudes, political behavior, and societal polarization. Together, the two articles demonstrate that gender-related issues increasingly function as markers of political alignment and societal conflict across European democracies. Drawing on original survey data from ten European countries, Dietz and Otteni (2026) examine how attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTQIQ+ rights shape

voting behavior. Their findings demonstrate that opposition to gender equality and especially LGBTQIQ+ rights constitute strong predictors of far-right voting, while progressive attitudes are linked more strongly to support for Green parties. At the same time, the contribution shows that LGBTQIQ+ rights are considerably more polarized and contested than support for women's equality, pointing toward differentiated dynamics within contemporary gender conflicts.

Wallaschek and Minkus (2026) similarly investigate how gender-related attitudes are embedded within broader cultural and communicative divides across Europe. Using cross-national survey data from six European countries, the contribution distinguishes between rights-based support for gender equality and affective anti-feminist resentment. The findings reveal that higher levels of social media use intensity are consistently associated with more regressive attitudes across both dimensions, even when controlling for political orientations. The article therefore highlights how digitally mediated communication environments increasingly structure cultural positioning and polarization surrounding gender equality.

Gender equality: Societal, affective and institutional contestation

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue point toward several broader dynamics shaping the contemporary contestation of gender equality in Europe.

First, the articles demonstrate how gender equality increasingly functions as a broader political and societal cleavage rather than merely a policy field. Conflicts over gender-related issues are closely intertwined with wider struggles over democracy, identity, representation, and social change. As several contributions show, contestations surrounding gender equality increasingly structure political behavior, institutional conflicts, and public discourse in the EU and across European societies.

Second, the contributions highlight the central role of affective, identity-based, and emotionally charged narratives in contemporary gender conflicts. Contestation is not only articulated through explicit policy disagreements, but also through symbolic struggles over masculinity, belonging, morality, and cultural change. Particularly in digital environments, anti-gender and anti-feminist narratives are often embedded in discourses that frame progressive social transformation as a threat to established identities and hierarchies. At the same time, the contributions also illustrate how crises create opportunities for both exclusionary and inclusionary mobilization around gender-related issues.

Third, the special issue points to persistent tensions between formal commitments to gender equality and the fragility of substantive transformation. While gender equality has become institutionalized within European governance structures and broadly accepted at the level of formal rights within societies, several contributions reveal the limits and vulnerabilities of this progress. Institutional support for gender

equality often remains dependent on political majorities and elite commitment, so that different forms of contestation operate not solely against institutions, but precisely through them. At the same time, public support for formal equality coexists with resentment, polarization, and resistance toward feminist politics and LGBTQI+ inclusion. Taken together, the contributions therefore suggest that gender equality in Europe is simultaneously normalized and contested.

Outlook

The special issue contains seven articles that, taken together, underline the necessity to analyze contestations over gender equality as multi-dimensional processes. The articles demonstrate how these dynamics mutually reinforce and reshape one another across different political and social arenas.

At the same time, the special issue also highlights several important directions for future research. First, more comparative and longitudinal approaches are needed to better understand how contestations over gender equality evolve across different national, institutional, and political contexts over time. Second, future studies should further integrate macro-, meso-, and micro-level perspectives in order to capture the complex interactions between political actors, mediated discourses, and societal attitudes. Finally, the contributions point toward the growing importance of digital media environments, affective polarization, and identity-based conflicts in shaping contemporary struggles over gender equality across Europe.

Overall, we hope that the special issue will not only be of interest to a wide readership but also shows that contestations over gender equality are not peripheral conflicts, but increasingly central to understanding contemporary democratic transformations in Europe.

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From gender equality champion to anti-gender battleground? The European Parliament and the contestation of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity

Abstract

The European Parliament's (EP) image as supranational gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity promoter is challenged by the increase of anti-gender claims and positions. We discuss what specific vulnerabilities and threats the EP's strong position in these matters currently experiences given the growing number of conservative, radical right and populist parties in the EP. To that end, we rely on the emerging international norm of a gender sensitive parliament. We first extend this norm to comprise both gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity to meet standards of equality and inclusivity, but especially to acknowledge the fact that anti-gender actors target LGBTQIA+ issues as much as progressive gender issues. Subsequently, we analyze where along the four dimensions of a gender and – in our case – LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament the EP could be vulnerable to anti-gender strategies exploiting institutional procedures, rules and practices detrimental to its equality and inclusivity commitments. Our findings highlight the fragility of much of the EP's gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity *acquis*, as well as tensions between formal commitments and daily (informal) procedures and practices. We conclude by outlining implications for prospects of gender equal and LGBTQIA+ inclusive futures in the EU in the face of anti-gender contestations.

Keywords: Anti-gender mobilization, European Parliament, gender-sensitive parliaments, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ inclusivity

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1. Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) was often characterized as a supranational equality promoter pushing for progressive gender and LGBTQIA+ politics in the European Union (EU) (Ahrens et al., 2023; van der Vleuten, 2019; Ayoub, 2016; Swiebel, 2009). Yet, this image is increasingly challenged by the changing political landscape, turning the EP into “a contradictory forerunner” (Kantola & Lombardo, 2023). In this article we discuss specific vulnerabilities and threats the EP's *equality acquis* currently experiences given the growing number of conservative, radical right and populist parties in the EP, and whether its (in)formal rules and practices can protect

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gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity measures (Ahrens et al., 2022; Kantola, 2022; Kantola & Lombardo, 2023).

Anti-gender actors create political projects opposing progressive gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity politics (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). They target gender equality and anti-discrimination policies, gender mainstreaming, sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, sex and gender education, etc. Propagated by the Vatican and evangelical groups, but also by radical right and conservative parties and groups, the term anti-gender actors comprises a broad range. We use the terms anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors, as we deem them more precise, next to the more generic term anti-gender actors.

We interrogate the vulnerabilities of and threats to the EP's *equality acquis* given anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors and discourses through a state-of-the-art literature study, which we combine with research on the international norm of a gender sensitive parliament (GSP). GSPs are conceptualized as political institutions that aim to change their (in)formal dimensions to value and prioritize gender equality by transforming their institutional culture, practice, and outputs (Childs & Palmieri, 2023). We analyse where and how along the four dimensions of this international GSP norm the EP could be vulnerable to (populist) radical right and other conservative strategies to exploit institutional procedures, rules and practices to the detriment of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights commitments.

While extant research focused on gender sensitivity, we extend it to comprise both gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. First, sensitivity to gender alone is not sufficient for a parliament to meet standards of equality and inclusivity. Second, anti-gender actors target LGBTQIA+ issues as much as progressive gender issues (which also justifies replacing the term anti-gender by a broader one; cf. Roggeband et al., 2025). While we stick to the predominant term GSP, we emphasize our understanding of gender as intersectional and reaching beyond a binary men/women construction, let alone a cisgender heteronormative definition of it (Ahrens & Meier, 2024). Having said that, we refer to both gender and LGBTQIA+ issues in our analysis, as LGBTQIA+ issues cannot be reduced to a subset of gender issues.

We first trace the history of the EP as a gender and LGBTQIA+ politics promotor. Next, we introduce the GSP concept and outline the four dimensions along which we approach the EP, adding LGBTQIA+ sensitivity. The subsequent four sections each address one of these four dimensions, namely representation, policy-making, participation of civil society and other actors, and parliament as a work organization. The article concludes by outlining the implications for prospects of gender equal and LGBTQIA+ inclusive futures in the EU in the face of anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ contestations.

2. The EP as gender and LGBTQIA+ politics promotor

Gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights have been embedded in the EU treaties with important extensions over time (Jacquot, 2015; Lomazzi & Crespi, 2019; Thiel, 2021). The Treaty of Rome (1957) introduced Article 119 on the principle of equal remuneration for equal work, later used by the Commission and the European Court of Justice to develop employment and social policy provisions extensively impacting member states (van der Vleuten, 2007). This, however, tied gender equality to employment and social policy, where the EP had no say originally, while LGBTQIA+ politics remained limited to soft law (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016). The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) changed this by introducing gender mainstreaming (Article 3.2) and anti-discrimination provisions (Article 13), including sexual orientation, followed by further developments such as the 2000 EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR). Together, the changes altered EU governance and shaped the image of the EU as a global gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights promotor (Abels et al., 2021; Mos, 2013; Thiel, 2021).

The EP plays a central role in this EU equality governance. Strengthened institutionally and legally by the Treaty of Lisbon 2007 (in effect 2009), it became an increasingly fierce defender of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights (Jacquot, 2015; Ayoub, 2016; Swiebel, 2009; van der Vleuten, 2019). Its actual power to act, however, remained constrained by largely indifferent or regressive positions under Commission Presidents Barroso and Juncker (Abels & Mushaben, 2020), despite constant civil society mobilization (Lang, 2021).

The EP's supranational character is unique: with 720 members (MEPs) directly elected every five years since 1979 through proportional list representation in its (by the time of writing this article) 27 member states, it is, after India, the second largest parliamentary assembly. EP political groups (conglomerates of national parties organized mainly along political affinity) are reconstituted after each election. Unlike many national parliaments, the EP cannot formally initiate legislation and acts as co-legislator with the Council of the EU, while legislative initiative remains with the European Commission.

Women's representation consistently increased until 2024, peaking at 40.5 % in 2019, placing the EP in the gender-balance zone (40–60 % women and men). This was considered “a mixed blessing” though, due to growing numbers of women MEPs in Eurosceptic and (populist) radical right political groups such as Identity & Democracy (ID), which promoted anti-equality agendas (Abels & Mushaben, 2020). The decrease to 39.5 % after the 2024 elections marks the first regression in the EP's history (Abels, 2025). Women's representation differs across the political groups but ranges usually between the so-called one-third-critical-mass and parity during the current legislature (see table 1). While some MEPs from a Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) minority are known, no official data exists.

Traditionally analysed along socio-economic left–right and integration–demarcation cleavages (Hix et al., 2007), the EP is increasingly structured by the TAN–GAL divide, which is particularly salient for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights (Hooghe et al., 2002; Brack, 2018; Ahrens & Kantola, 2023). Morality politics cuts across political groups (Mondo & Close, 2018). The TAN dimension comprises the European People’s Party (EPP), the Patriots for Europe (Pfe), the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), alongside many MEPs not belonging to any political group (NI). The Progressive Alliance of European Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Renew Europe (RE), the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), and the Left Group (GUE/ NGL) belong to the GAL dimension. The four political groups along the TAN dimension currently hold substantial seat shares in the 2024 EP (see table 1). We come back to this in section 4.

Table 1: Political Groups and Women’s Representation in the European Parliament, 2024

	EPP	S&D	Pfe	ECR	RE	Greens/ EFA	GUE/ NGL	ESN	NI
MEPs (n)*	188	136	84	78	77	53	46	25	32
Seat share in %	26.1	18.9	11.7	10.8	10.7	7.4	6.4	3.5	4.5
Women’s share in %	36.7	42.7	42.8	36.7	44.2	50.9	45.7	32.0	31.2

Source: N=719, 1 empty seat; Own Source

Over time, the EP continuously institutionalized gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights. Its key gender equality body established in 1979 is the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), (Ahrens, 2016; Nugent, 2019). Since 2003, the EP adopted several gender mainstreaming resolutions and extended breadth and depth continuously, monitored and advanced by the FEMM committee (Ahrens, 2019; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022; Shreeves & Hahnkamper-Vandenbulcke, 2021). LGBTQIA+ politics became more institutionalised since 1997 with the creation of the LGBTQIA+ Intergroup, an informal MEP network that nevertheless increased visibility through resolutions and reports (Ayoub, 2016). In 2004, the EP established the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) to oversee anti-discrimination policies, though its focus remains broader, prioritising rule of law and fundamental rights over LGBTQIA+ issues.

Commissioner hearings represent another key EP instrument for advancing gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights, as MEPs’ questioning has led to replacements and rejections of Commissioners (Abels, 2019). The EP also engaged in gender and sexuality politics through resolutions, for instance urging the Commission to defend gender equality and sexual rights in Poland and subsequently Hungary (European Parliament, 2021a,b).

Against this history, we analyse where the EP leaves loopholes and could be vulnerable to anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ attacks. Moving beyond immediate developments, we adopt a holistic view of the EP as a political institution, recognising that gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity can be contested not only at the policy level but across multiple institutional layers. To address complexity, we analyse the EP through the GSP norm which encompasses diverse parliamentary dimensions determining whether, and to what extent, gender equality and – in our case – LGBTQIA+ inclusivity are embedded as constitutive features of parliamentary practices.

3. GSPs: adding LGBTQIA+ inclusivity to an emerging international norm

Gendered representation in politics and policies was predominantly researched along Pitkin's (1967) classic distinction of formalistic (institutional rules and procedures), descriptive (numerical share), substantive (opportunities of interest articulation and responsiveness in policy processes), and symbolic (visual and spatial "standing for", including affects) representation (cf. e.g. Krook, 2009; Palmieri, 2018; Paxton & Hughes 2016), with the three representative dimensions mutually co-constitutive (Lombardo & Meier, 2019; Montoya et al., 2022). Extant parliamentary research provides rich analyses of political equality strategies like gender mainstreaming, the gendered impact of (in)formal rules from an institutionalist perspective (Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay, 2014), and, more recently, symbolic representation (Rai & Spary, 2019; Verge, 2022a,b). Erikson and Verge (2022) demonstrate that parliaments, when conceptualized as workplaces, require a specific angle accounting for issues like selection and recruitment policies; workplace rules, routines and practices; reconciling work and care responsibilities; well-being requirements and policies; codes of conduct, etc. (see also Frech & Kopsch, 2024).

Building on such insights, GSPs are an emerging international norm mainly promoted by international organizations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2011), the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2019), the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA, 2001; Smith, 2022) or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Palmieri, 2021). It transcends tools increasing women's descriptive or substantive representation and echoes extant research approaching parliaments as gendered organizations and workplaces functioning with (in)formal rules and routines that can either constrain or promote gender equality in their structures, decision-making, and policy-making (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Erikson & Verge, 2022; Palmieri et al., 2021). Childs and Palmieri (2023, 177) provide the most recent and comprehensive definition of GSPs: "A gender sensitive parliament values and prioritizes gender equality as a social, econo-

mic, and political objective, and reorients and transforms their institutional culture, practice, and outputs towards those objectives”.

Although there are differences in the order and specific content of GSPs’ dimensions, research defined roughly four dimensions (Childs, 2016, 2017; Childs & Palmieri, 2023; Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Palmieri et al., 2021; Smith, 2022), which we summarize in the middle column of table 2.

Table 2: Dimensions of a GSP and a Gender and LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament

Dimension	GSP	Gender and LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament
Equal representation in parliaments	relates to descriptive representation and captures equal access to and representation within the parliament, e.g., parity in leadership positions, committee membership, etc; includes overcoming a gender binary understanding of equality and addressing intersectional aspects, particularly along race, class, age	descriptive representation within parliament, committees and leadership positions, of MPs from different intersectional genders/gender identities and sexual orientation mirroring their share in the population; while gender identity and sexual orientation may not be known, a sensitivity to a descriptive representation of intersectional genders/gender identities, and diverse sexual orientations, at all levels, would help to meet this dimension
Equality in policy-making	relates to substantive representation and comprises the main duties of parliaments: legislation, budget control, legislative scrutiny, and ensuring policies address and reduce intersectional gender inequalities	substantive representation of intersectional LGBTQIA+ inclusivity along with gender equality in policies; legislation, budget control, legislative scrutiny, and other main tasks of parliament should be fulfilled in a way that policies address and reduce intersectional gender and LGBTQIA+ inequalities
Equal participation of societal interests	relates to both descriptive and substantive representation in connection with the broader public, e.g., experts, movements, and civil society in hearings and through other participatory tools	connecting with diverse experts, movements, and civil society from both the feminist and the LGBTQIA+ fields in hearings and through other participatory tools
Accessible and safe infrastructure and supportive work organization	mainly relates to symbolic representation, i.e., discussion styles, rituals, language, childcare facilities, but also room names and art, etc; it also leaps into descriptive and substantive representation, with topics like parental leave or pregnancy or securing a violence-free (working) environment for all	symbolic representation of intersectional gender identities and sexual orientation along with gender, but especially also the consideration of the needs and interests of MPs and employees with different intersectional gender identities and from sexual minorities when it comes to parliament as a work organization

Source: Own Source

While the GSP norm builds on knowledge developed through research on gendered politics and policies, we contend it can – and should – be expanded to LGBTQIA+ sensitivity. There is a more recent and less comprehensive, but nonetheless flourishing amount of research investigating the representation by and of members of the LGBTQIA+ community (cf. Bönisch, 2022; Chaney, 2013; Juvonen, 2016; Magni

& Reynolds, 2021; Tremblay, 2019). There are nuances between the two strands of research, but both underline the benefits of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation of MPs with a diverse range of socio-demographic features, including gender, gender identity and sexual orientation. In the right column of table 2 we conceptualize how we extend the GSP norm to LGBTQIA+ sensitivity.

We tackle these four dimensions of a gender- and LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament in the following four sections. This is our first innovative perspective on the use of the GSP norm: to add LGBTQIA+ sensitivity to its four dimensions. Also, the GSP norm is usually applied to contexts where there is commitment and less so when there is the potential of deteriorating previous achievements. This is our second innovative perspective on the use of this norm: to apply it to a case which was considered relatively safe for gender equal and LGBTQIA+ inclusive politics and work conditions, but might no longer be so. As there is more research on gender than on LGBTQIA+ issues related to the EP, our analysis will not be fully balanced. We nonetheless hope to convincingly show the challenges anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors can pose for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in the EP.

4. Equal representation

With women MEPs' share close to 40 %, the EP globally performs comparatively well regarding descriptive representation, the first GSP dimension (Palmieri et al., 2021). Nonetheless, disparities persist across countries, political groups, and the parties within them (Chiva, 2019; Frech, 2024, 2025). Greens/EFA and the Left maintain strong formal commitments and parity, especially in leadership, while S&D and RE – despite articulated commitment – lack formal rules, rendering gender equality negotiable and often disadvantaging women. Conservative and right-wing groups reject formal rules and fail to achieve gender-equal ranks and leadership (Ahrens & Kantola, 2023; Kantola & Miller, 2022). Member states without gender quotas usually arrive with very low women's representation (except for Sweden and Finland), though some feature a more gender-balanced EP delegation than in their national parliament due to greater career incentives for MPs than MEPs (Xydias, 2016). No data exists on MEPs from a SOGI minority, but the EP is not a microcosm of society when it comes to social markers.

Ample literature explains women's and other social groups under-representation (Frech, 2025; Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger, 2014, 2015). After the 2024 elections, partisan fragmentation increased with 195 national parties represented (previously 184), averaging 3.7 MEPs per party, and many holding only one or two seats (Abels, 2025). The increase in often male-dominated "single-seat parties" (driven by small national delegations and party system fracturing in low-threshold systems of larger member states) unfolds severe gendered implications, making parity unlikely (ibid.). While resisting equality-promoting measures is common, the

rise of anti-gender actors certainly intensifies it and reduces chances to adopt parity regulation in the suggested EP electoral reforms.

Two supplementary problems for equal representation occur with the rise of anti-gender and anti-LGBTQIA+ parties. First, equal representation requires traceable socio-demographic features. Citizens' registries trace women and men MEPs numbers but predominantly captures binary and cisgender male/female MEP classifications (sex assigned at birth). Some countries recently broadened their understanding and registry of gender identities, steered by pronoun use and other social identifiers, making recognizing diverse gender identities easier. However, higher numbers of TAN parties who often explicitly define gender as cisgender male/female assigned by birth may shrink or even reverse progress. Hence, MEPs may feel verbally, physically, politically, and legally (even) less safe to reveal a non-cisgender identity than in the recent past, rendering EP gender diversity increasingly invisible.

Sexual orientation is even harder to capture: not officially registered, awareness of MEPs from sexual minorities depends on voluntarily coming out. Given growing criticism, ridicule, or fear of punishment, non-re-election, or even violence, fewer may feel safe to come out reducing further visibility of the EP's diversity in sexual orientation. Although lacking legislation to promote gender equality and an adequate SOGI representation, a generally tolerant climate in some member states allowed the EP to appear gender- and SOGI-friendly. The harshening climate with virulent and growing influence of anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ parties reveals how shallow this surface tolerance likely is, and exposes the EP's vulnerability to anti-gender mobilization.

This amplifies the second problem of substantive representation. While not automatic, research proposes MEPs stand for their representatives, and shared socio-demographics increase this likelihood (Philipps, 1995). Gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity issues thus largely rely on engaged women and LGBTQIA+ MEPs (Dodeigne et al., 2025; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). The changed EP composition likely exacerbates their vulnerability and makes them targets of growing hostility, creating a trapping vicious circle (Meier & Verlooy, 2026): If they stay silent, progress stalls; but if they speak up, they may face verbal and/or physical violence and political and/or legal punishment.

Although even an EP with low women's representation can function as gender equality promoter if progressive forces use their power effectively, the rise of anti-gender actors and the increasing politicization of gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity within the EP impedes the FEMM committee to enact change towards gender equality (Ahrens et al., 2023). Anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors increasingly use the EP as arena, with radical right populists relying on traditional gender imaginaries to explicitly oppose equality (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021a,b). This is facilitated by the EP's limited dominant understanding of the term gender, where even in the FEMM committee gender is quasi exclusively used to refer

to homogenous groups of cisgender (heterosexual) men and women, while intersectional perspectives or positions challenging this gender binary are exceptional (Zimmermann, 2019).

Finally, when the EPP gives up the *cordon sanitaire* (Brack, 2018), the four political groups along the TAN dimension hold with 375 seats the majority (52 %) to adopt legislation, while the GAL political groups lack it (312 seats or 43.3 %) without EPP. The recent vote of the EPP with the radical right to cut green spending and monitoring rules set a key precedent in this respect (Gros & Griera, 2025), which may, in a later stage, also apply to gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity issues.

Lacking hard law and procedures, a socio-demographic division of the political labour of representation, the limited understanding of the term gender, and a majority along the TAN dimension, eases anti-gender actors' efforts to pressure against equal descriptive representation. Anti-gender mobilization exploits existing flaws and weaknesses regarding equal representation sensitive to gender identities and diverse sexual orientations.

5. Gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in policy-making

Facilitating the substantive representation of diverse groups of women and LGBTQIA+ people is a second GSP dimension. It appears through policy-making, comprising legislation, budget control, legislative scrutiny, and ensuring policies address and reduce gender and intersectional inequalities (Catalano Weeks, 2022; Joshi & Echle, 2023). GSPs require to “mandate an appropriate parliamentary body (or all parliamentary bodies) to undertake gender sensitive oversight” (Palmieri et al., 2021, 11). Such bodies rely on feminist critical actors, gender-focused parliamentary committees or working groups, individual feminist or LGBTQIA+ MPs, (cross-party) women's or LGBTQIA+ caucuses and committed staff (Childs, 2023; Chaney, 2006; Grace & Sawyer, 2016; Sawyer, 2020). Particularly gender-focused bodies have facilitated integrating gender perspectives into legislative processes (Sawyer, 2020; Sawyer et al., 2014) and, if equipped with enforcement mechanisms, can change rules, norms, and organizational memory (Erikson & Freidenvall, 2024).

The FEMM exemplifies these challenges. While it oversees EU gender equality policy, it lacks formal power to impose gender issues across committees, relying instead on informal institutional power play (Ahrens et al., 2023; Ahrens, 2016; Nugent, 2019). The “Union of Equality” agenda pursued by Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in her first term (2019–2024) provided important opportunities for the EP's substantive engagement with gender equality and LGBTQIA+ policies. The FEMM was exceptionally active and acted as lead committee for several directives, though its powers were constrained by compromise pressure in inter-institutional negotiations. Negotiating the Directive on combating violence against

women and domestic violence (European Union, 2024) showed, for instance, that even if the Commission and the EP agree on progressive policies, the Council can block them, revealing the limits of parliamentary gender mainstreaming in contested policy areas (Berthet & Rolandsen Agustín, 2025).

Despite its importance, particularly during the last legislature, the FEMM repeatedly faced abandonment threats – blocked in previous centre-group EP compositions but more likely to materialise under a strong TAN majority (Jacquot, 2015; Kantola & Lombardo, 2023). Moreover, even if not dissolved, interinstitutional negotiations reveal ambivalences: the FEMM depends on political group support and these likely shift to a more conservative positioning with a strong TAN majority in both EP and Council. Furthermore, LGBTQIA+ politics falling under the LIBE Committee's broader anti-discrimination remit even lack comprehensive legislative proposals although the LGBTIQ+ Intergroup, while without formal power, considerably increased issue visibility with EP resolutions and reports (Ayoub, 2016).

Regarding mainstreaming gender in policy-making, the FEMM continuously institutionalized it since 2003 (Ahrens, 2019; Shreeves & Hahnkamper-Vandenbulcke, 2021). The actor's network responsible for it broadened over time: next to one appointed MEP in each committee which form the Gender Mainstreaming Network with regular meetings, MEPs from EP delegations, and, since 2019, EP secretariat staff participate. Since 2019, the EP Rules of Procedure (EPRoP) which guide parliamentary work, include gender mainstreaming in Rule 249, and oblige since 2020 committees to adopt a Gender Action Plan.

Committee-level implementation resistance persists, and gender mainstreaming rules are frequently sidelined, especially in male-dominated committees like ECON and AFCD (Elomäki, 2021; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022). Seldenthuis (2024) found women MEPs advocate considerably for gender perspectives in early legislative stages by proposing amendments, but the effect diminishes in the legislative process. The FEMM committee's influence relies often on informal feminist networks and micro-political strategies such as cross-committee alliances and "Trojan Horse" tactics (Elomäki & Kantola, 2023). Moreover, the Gender Action Plans reveal gender equality is often still (mis)understood solely as a matter of gender parity (interlaced with gendered stereotypes) rather than addressing gendered policy aspects (Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022).

LGBTQIA+ issues lack a similar institutionalization, although the EP engages considerably in LGBTQIA+ policy-making. The EP successfully urged the Commission to include gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights in the rule-of-law infringement procedures against Poland and Hungary (European Parliament, 2021a,b). Yet, the power of the LIBE committee and the LGBTIQ+ Intergroup remain limited, given anti-discrimination policy (including on sexual orientation) falls under the unanimity rule in the Council. The EP shift to the right after the 2024 elections,

together with the more right-wing Council, likely further decreases policy-making on LGBTQIA+ issues.

Established FEMM and LGBTIQ+ Intergroup tactics may fail increasingly in shaping EP policy-making, thereby reducing the substantive representation of these topics. The ideological opposition culminating in TAN groups allows procedural obstruction and makes gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity efforts increasingly vulnerable in legislative negotiations and committee hierarchies. Likewise, the political groups' approach to mainstreaming gender reflects the GAL–TAN divide (Ahrens & Meier, 2024; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). Greens/EFA operate with an extensive internal gender mainstreaming plan, and the Left also adopted formal structures. The more centre parliamentary groups (EPP, S&D, RE) lack formal commitment while the radical right and populist political groups (now ECR, PöE, ESN) reject it (Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022).

The institutional setting – committee resistance, political group approaches – may make the EP lose ground regarding its strong gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights positioning in the current legislature. Previously, ECR and ID (now PöE) mobilized around EP debates and policy-making on the Istanbul Convention, reproductive rights, gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity strategies (Ahrens et al., 2022; Berthet, 2022b,c). They consistently framed gender as an externally imposed “ideology” threatening national sovereignty, traditional family structures, and religious values by promoting same-sex parenting and reproductive rights (Berthet, 2022b,c). Their parliamentary questions and plenary statements also contested EU competence over what they define as moral or cultural matters, insisting such topics should remain under national jurisdiction (Mondo & Close, 2018). So-called blue cards (asking or commenting on another MEPs' speech) were already harnessed by radical right populist MEPs to normalise “bad manners” and to distance themselves from the “politically correct establishment” of European politics (Kantola & Miller, 2021). The growing normalization of such rhetorics, particularly in plenary debates, risks reframing gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights as controversial or “foreign” agendas. The TAN majority could thus translate into systematically impeding gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights mechanisms across committees and legislation.

6. Equal participation of societal interests

A core parliamentary function is representing and engaging with the diversity of societal interests. In the GSP context, this encompasses connecting with the broader public, e.g., experts, social movements, and civil society organisations (CSOs) in hearings and through other participatory tools (Palmieri et al., 2021). Many parliaments allow creating additional informal bodies such as cross-party, single-party, or “friendship” groups on specific topics. In such groups, membership relies on interests and not parliamentary proportional representation rules. Often, groups

directly cooperate with CSOs. Parliamentary bodies with established CSO connections can improve attending to gender and LGBTQIA+ issues, because consulting with communities on lived experiences is a key aspect of parliamentary (committee) work. Some parliaments organize events together with civil society to guarantee their research and expertise are considered in the design and evaluation of policies and programs (Palmieri et al., 2021).

Connecting with broader societal interests by inviting CSOs, interest group representatives and (academic) experts to committee hearings or through liaising in Intergroups is common EP practice (Abels & Klöckner, 2025; Ayoub, 2016; Crespy & Parks, 2019). Hearings in the FEMM and LIBE committees play an important role in shaping the policy agenda and positioning the EP vis-à-vis the Commission and the Council (Ahrens & Woodward, 2020).

Yet, this also opens venues for anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ actors, who for more than a decade continuously extended their repertoire and their networks outside and inside the EP. One of the first and well-known cases of their impact in the EP was the 2012 European Citizens' Initiative 'One of Us', which claimed to organise around human embryonic stem cells research but factually mobilised against reproductive rights, specifically abortion. After collecting one million signatures and forcing a public EP hearing, organisers attempted to exclude opponents (Crespy & Parks, 2019). This was closely followed by mobilizing against the 2013 Estrela-Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, where similar religious and right-wing networks used an online petition, spammed the EP rapporteurs with emails, and attracted support of MEPs from EPP, ECR, and Europe of Nations and Freedom (by now PfiE) to replace the originally progressive version (Ahrens & Woodward, 2020).

While European Citizens' Initiatives were not utilised lately, transnational networks of conservative, religious, and nationalist actors adapted strategically to EP institutional rules, cultivated alliances with selected MEPs from EPP, ECR, ID (predecessor of PfiE and, partly, ESN), and reframed claims around family, freedom, and tradition (Mariani, 2025; Mos & Rubio Grundell, 2025; Ahrens et al., 2022). Well-resourced, they increasingly use public hearings, amendments, and coalition-building to amplify their EP presence (Mariani, 2025; Gilby & Koivusalo, 2024). Rather than dismantling equality norms directly, they dilute, delay, or reframe them, reshaping the EP's institutional equality culture. By invoking religious freedom, disability rights, or family values, they present themselves as conventional human rights actors and cooperate with EP Intergroups on "Demography", "Children's Rights" and "Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience" (Mos & Rubio Grundell, 2025). Despite the EP's formal commitment to equality, anti-gender actors exploit institutional openness and informal parliamentary channels to strength-

en networks, increase visibility, and gradually normalize their agendas (Mariani, 2025; Mos & Rubio Grundell, 2025).

With the EPP “sitting on the fence” (Ahrens et al., 2022), EP majorities may easily shift towards stronger reframing of equality issues and further restrict access for progressive equality CSOs. These effects are already visible, as the EWL and ILGA Europe have moved towards more informal participation channels to avoid polarisation and conflict (Ahrens & Woodward, 2020).

The substantial growth in TAN MEPs is mirrored in their increased presence in the FEMM and LIBE committees due to proportionality rules, shaping not only future EP positions but also which experts and organisations are invited to hearings. Inviting more conservative, religious, and nationalist actors risks undermining promoting equality as core democratic value. If the FEMM committee would be abandoned, ties with women’s and feminist CSOs could be cut. Similar dynamics apply to Intergroups: declining participation in the LGBTIQ+ Intergroup or rising MEP numbers in conservative Intergroups would shift power over EP resolutions.

Recent institutional reforms further illustrate how civil society access is increasingly contested. In 2025, EPP, ECR, and PöE established an EP Scrutiny Working Group under the Budgetary Control Committee to oversee the European Commission funding of NGOs and CSOs. The new EP body was established together by EPP, ECR, and PöE. Officially framed as enhancing transparency, GAL groups criticize it as a “Committee of Inquiry light” aimed at delegitimising NGOs active in environmental, human rights, and equality policies (Lehmann, 2025). Given new EP majorities, scrutiny could be applied selectively to disadvantage feminist and LGBTQIA+ organizations, while anti-gender actors remain unaffected due to alternative funding sources. Simultaneously, EU funding has increasingly flowed to these actors: a 2024 investigation revealed the Erasmus+ programme awarded €1.2 million to the World Youth Alliance (WYA), widely known for anti-abortion mobilization, including in women’s reproductive health projects (Norris, 2024). Despite several MEPs formally questioning consistency with EU funding values, it illustrates how anti-gender actors gained legitimacy and institutional resources through EU programmes, with the EP lacking either the power or political will to prevent such funding.

7. Accessible and safe infrastructure and supportive work organization

Accessible and safe infrastructure and supportive work organization relate to symbolic representation (Lombardo & Meier, 2019; Verge, 2022a,b), which is crucial to a GSP (Palmieri et al., 2021). Parliaments, like other male-dominated organizations, are permeated by a culture of masculinity, reflected in the formal rules and informal norms of how a (male) politician should behave, and rendering feminine political styles less legitimate while increasing expectations towards women’s perfor-

mance (Lovenduski, 2005). Likewise, parliaments are imprinted with a heteronormative architecture supporting a binary gender concept, for instance, when toilets are only assigned as female or male (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024; Childs, 2017), as is also the case in the EP.

GSP research on this dimension focused mainly on (1) whether parliaments are family-friendly (given women as main caregivers) and (2) tackling inappropriate behaviour such as condescending, sexist, racist or homo- and transphobe comments, hate speech, and sexual harassment. Driven mainly by centre-left political groups and women MEPs, the EP addressed – even if sometimes hesitantly – both topics.

Politics are characterized by a “motherhood penalty” with women often entering politics later than men, having fewer children, and facing unequal care burdens (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Franceschet et al., 2016; Joshi & Goehrung, 2021). Long commutes, irregular working hours, and the absence of comprehensive parental leave weigh disproportionately on mothers and reinforce gendered obstacles. Extant research focused on mothers and how they accommodate care responsibilities, but recently also fathers and parents moved into focus (Franceschet et al., 2024; Frech & Kopsch, 2024; Thomas & Bittner, 2017). Some parliaments address this demanding and time-intensive character of parliamentary work, especially for people with caregiving roles. They discontinue night sittings, align schedules with school calendars, allow for proxy voting and flexible working hours, provide financial support for care duties, or temporary replacements during maternity, parental, or other forms of leave (Ahrens & Erzeel, 2024).

Family-friendliness in the EP is confronted with a complex setting: While the EU adopted directives on maternity and parental leave, these exclude MEPs, whose mandates are considered personal and nontransferable (Frech, 2024; Frech & Kopsch, 2024). Some member states like Sweden offer parental leave rights in their national assemblies, others, like Poland or Germany, not (Lecerf, 2025). Yet, national rules are not enforced supranationally, because the EP operates with its own MEP Statute, and parental leave regulations could only be introduced by revising the statute. Past reform attempts failed, given the diverse traditions and political sensitivities around family policy (Frech & Kopsch, 2024).

The EP offers only limited provisions. Since 2008, mothers giving birth can be excused from meetings for up to nine months, but this excludes other parents (Frech & Kopsch, 2024; Lecerf, 2025). Leave provisions are further undermined, because the MEP cannot (temporarily) be replaced and – despite being used during the Covid-19 pandemic – remote voting is forbidden, bringing MEPs potentially in conflict with political group demands (Frech & Kopsch, 2024).

MEPs with children, especially mothers, have continuously lobbied for formal parental leave, remote voting, and temporary vote transfers (Frech & Kopsch, 2024). The 2022 proposed European Electoral Act reform included offering tem-

porary replacement “during maternity leave by the next candidate on the relevant list for a 16-week renewable period (Article 27(7) – Vacancies)” (Lecerf, 2025, 3). Yet, this reform likely fails, because it requires a unanimous vote in the Council and the consent of all member states.

In 2023, 13 MEPs launched a “Motherhood Manifest” to adopt parental leave, temporary leave and greater voting flexibility, but EP leadership responded cautiously. When three pregnant MEPs renewed the call in 2025, EP President Roberta Metsola tasked the EP’s Bureau to propose reforms. However, despite Metsola speaking of “parenthood” the reforms only address maternity leave, neglecting fathers and other co-parents. A related revision proposal for the European Electoral Act (independent of the 2022 proposed reform) called upon member states to introduce proxy voting with MEPs delegating their vote to another MEP. The European Parliament legislative resolution of 13 November 2025 on the amendment of the European Electoral act allows MEPs now to vote in plenary by proxy voting during pregnancy and after giving birth (European Parliament, 2025). Here, too, Metsola pointed out that the reforms target mothers, not fathers or transgender parents (Lecerf, 2025). This neglects the rights of LGBTQIA+ families. The currently achieved standard potentially deteriorates if support for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity measures diminishes among the TAN majority, because many provisions are not formally institutionalized. They can thus be undermined or abandoned if support is majority withdrawn. If the right-leaning EP leadership tightens attendance rules or reduces childcare support, it could further erode the limited rights.

Inappropriate behaviour, particularly sexual harassment is workplace violence and endemic to politics (Collier & Raney, 2018; Krook, 2018). Research shows women MPs, particularly young women, face more pressure, anxiety, and negative treatment than their male colleagues, while young men are least affected (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019, 2021; IPU, 2018). The #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements helped bringing issues of sexual harassment, sexism, and racism to parliamentary agendas, prompting many parliaments, among them the EP, to adopt new codes of conduct (Berthet, 2022a).

Despite the revised EP RoP in 2006/07, the EP long addressed harassment only superficially. The Anti-harassment Committee, created in 2014, lacked training, handled no cases by 2019, and imposed only financial sanctions, often relocating complainants instead of disciplining MEPs (Berthet & Kantola, 2021). In 2017, EP staff launched *MeTooEP* and demanded implementing the EP’s own 2017 Resolution (European Parliament, 2017), by introducing mandatory training, reforming the Anti-harassment Committee, and conducting an external audit. The campaign organisers – despite visibility and access to institutional platforms as insiders – clashed with the Anti-harassment Committee, the EP Secretariat and the Bureau,

who curbed reforms and prioritized an EP image as “good institution” (Berthet, 2022a).

In 2024, however, the EP leaped forward by changing Rule 11 “Standards of Conduct” of the EP RoP. Subclause 6 requires MEPs to sign a conduct declaration and complete mandatory training within six months on preventing conflict and harassment in the workplace. If failing, MEPs “may not be elected as office-holders of Parliament or one of its bodies”, including functions like rapporteur, delegation member or in interinstitutional negotiations. EPP, ECR, and ID originally announced to vote against the proposal, but it passed. The EP now faces new challenges: formal rules and resolutions exist, yet enforcement is weak and accountability minimal, especially, because the EP RoP can be changed with a simple majority – one that currently the TAN political groups hold.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we interrogated the vulnerabilities and threats the EP *equality acquis* experiences given the growing number of anti-gender actors and discourses in the EP. We built on the emerging international GSP norm, expanding it to also cover LGBTQIA+ sensitivity. Our contribution is threefold. First, we included LGBTQIA+ sensitivity in the GSP framework, because sensitivity to gender alone is insufficient to meet equality and inclusivity standards given anti-gender actors target LGBTQIA+ issues as much as gender issues. Future research should conceptually refine and empirically explore this extended framework. Second, we provided an innovative perspective by applying this framework to the paradigmatic EP case. The GSP framework is usually applied to contexts where there is commitment rather than the potential of previous achievements deteriorating. We demonstrate it can also be applied to cases which were considered relatively safe for gender equal and LGBTQIA+ inclusive politics and work conditions, but might no longer be so. Hence, we suggest using the GSP framework prospectively more flexibly for cases initially appearing stable regarding promoting gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights. Third, we conducted a detailed review of how the EP has developed along the different dimensions of this framework, and unpack specific vulnerabilities and threats it currently experiences given the growing number of conservative, radical right and populist parties in the EP. As the latter is the case in many parliaments, we strongly encourage to combine both research strands in future research to illuminate how the four GSP dimensions interact when facing opposition.

Analyzing where and how along the four dimensions of a gender and LGBTQIA+ sensitive parliament the EP could be vulnerable to anti-gender actors’ strategies to exploit institutional procedures, rules and practices to the detriment of the EP’s gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights commitments, our conclusion is twofold. First, the EP’s gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity *acquis* is not sufficiently anchored. It has been only partially supported by formal rules, especially when

it comes to the dimensions of equal representation and of parliament as a work organization, and many rather traditional perspectives on gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity prevail. This facilitates anti-gender actors putting the existing *acquis* under pressure by exploiting existing flaws and weaknesses. Second, and logically, anti-gender actors can use the same tools as progressive MEPs and political groups to make their points and claims. This is especially visible when it comes to the dimensions of policy-making and the participation of civil society and other relevant actors, but is also visible in the equal representation dimension, where anti-gender actors increasingly claim presence. While democratic parliamentary systems are designed to accommodate shifting majorities, declining support for gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights raises normative concerns because Article 2 TEU frames equality, human rights and non-discrimination as foundational EU values rather than optional policy priorities.

Facing anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ contestations, the prospects for an inclusive EU are rather bleak and it might lose ground in pushing for progressive EU equality policies. Institutional arrangements – rules, procedures, and practices – to enable gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity may even point to limited institutional resilience when core equality norms depend strongly on political majorities rather than entrenched procedures. That the EP was long characterized as progressive gender and LGBTQIA+ politics promoter is rather due to its composition and MEPs leeway to strive for such politics. Progressivity lacks enshrinement in formal rules and practices and this makes the EP gender equality and LGBTQIA+ *acquis* vulnerable to anti-gender attacks. Thus, current developments are shaped by lacking a structural lack of deep commitment by the EP and the EU at large to gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity.

Overall, we conclude the (still emerging) international norm of GSPs deserves more attention both in contexts with commitment and when there is the potential of deteriorating previous achievements. Furthermore, broadening its four dimensions to comprehend both gender- and LGBTQIA+ sensitivity is crucial given anti-gender actors target LGBTQIA+ issues as much as progressive gender issues. Our review was limited to the EP, but future research should – next to single case studies – approach parliaments comparatively to detect similarities, differences and patterns and how the four GSP dimensions interact in such different institutional settings.

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A feminist promise? Gender equality in the rhetoric of Ursula von der Leyen

Abstract

The President of the European Commission plays a pivotal role in setting the agenda of the European Union. This is crucial for gender equality policy, given its horizontal nature. Gender equality policy requires coordination across multiple policy areas and navigation of often unclear competencies. Consequently, strong institutional leadership is essential to generate political momentum. Political speeches by the Commission President are a core instrument for setting the agenda and demonstrating commitment to an issue. Therefore, this article examines how the current Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, framed gender equality policy during her first term in office, from 2019 to 2024. To understand how von der Leyen depicted gender equality policy, the article employs theoretical categories derived from concepts previously utilised by the European Commission. The analysis of the political speeches reveals a gap between the institutional ambitions of von der Leyen when she first became Commission President, as outlined in her initial inauguration speech, and the gender equality concepts advocated later. Overall, the initial rhetoric suggested a transformative and inclusive gender equality agenda, whereas later speeches on policy development tended to endorse more traditional ideas.

Keywords: Gender equality policy, intersectionality, Commission President, rhetoric, agenda setter, framing

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1. Introduction

The European Commission (the Commission) is the primary policy initiator in the European Union (the EU), and plays a vital role in setting the EU's policy-making agenda. With their growing significance as policy entrepreneurs and agenda setters, Commission Presidents play a key role within this institution (Kassim et al., 2017). The Commission President uses speeches as a key instrument to articulate and shape the broader agenda of the Commission (Müller, 2020). These speeches vary in scope, reach, and relevance, ranging from general addresses to more focused presentations of specific initiatives.

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The content of these speeches is particularly interesting in policy fields that require a strong agenda setter if they are to be included on the overall agenda of the Commission. While Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the gender mainstreaming article, obliges the EU to eliminate inequalities and promote equality between men and women in all its activities, gender mainstreaming horizontally across policy areas remains inconsistent (Ahrens, 2021). It demands coordination across multiple policy sectors and operates within a context of unclear competences (Abels et al., 2021), making its visibility on the agenda largely dependent on the initiative of the Commission President, who is the primary agenda setter (Ahrens & van der Vleuten, 2019). In this context, analysing whether and how a Commission President frames gender equality policy in their speeches helps to reveal their stance and, by extension, the underlying policy orientation of the Commission.

The current Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, began her first term in 2019, making history as the first woman to hold this position. In retrospect, her first presidency has been portrayed as highly influential, since her policy priorities and strong agenda have significantly shaped the Commission's overall programme (Abels & Klöckner, 2025; Kassim, 2023). To assert her role within the EU, von der Leyen rhetorically presented herself, in her inauguration speech in the European Parliament, as a strong leader, signalling her intention to unite the institution around the cause of equality (Abels & Mushaben, 2020; Mushaben, 2025). In this context, the von der Leyen Commission promised to revitalise efforts to achieve gender equality within the EU. She proclaimed a "Union of Equality" (European Commission, 2020), raising high expectations among feminist policymakers and gender scholars (Abels et al., 2025).

The research question for this article is therefore the following: How did Ursula von der Leyen, as the figurehead of the European Commission, promote gender equality policy through her speeches during her first term in office? The article examines all the 429 official speeches she delivered during her first term, starting with the inauguration speech on 27 November 2019 and ending before her re-election by the European Parliament on 18 July 2024. The analysis relies on a heuristic of gender equality policy concepts to classify the content of her speeches. The aim of this article is to deconstruct the gender narratives in von der Leyen's political discourse. The initial findings suggest a contrast between her agenda-setting speech as President-elect and her later rhetoric in which gender equality policy is often framed in more traditional terms, particularly regarding women in the workforce.

The article is organised as follows. The next section concentrates on von der Leyen's series of speeches in terms of agenda-setting. In the theoretical section, a heuristic of gender equality policy concepts is identified within the historical development of gender equality policy, both in the academic literature and in the Commission's policy-making practice. After a quantitative analysis is conducted to determine the

frequency of different forms of gender equality policy mentioned in the speeches, a qualitative content analysis is performed to examine these policy conceptions. The conclusion discusses the relevance of the traditional perception of gender equality policy, which von der Leyen predominantly promoted, for the overarching objective of gender equality.

2. The Commission President as agenda setter, speeches as indicators

Commission Presidents exercise political leadership within an institution that holds a formal monopoly to propose legislation in the EU. They strategically navigate political opportunities and leverage institutional structures. A “strong entrepreneurial” (Müller, 2020, 213) Commission President is not merely an administrator but an active agent who mobilises resources, engages proactively across institutional boundaries, and sets the agenda (Müller, 2020).

In this context, presidential speeches have become a crucial instrument for strategic agenda-setting in executive politics. Once considered to be routine technocratic interventions, speeches are now widely recognised as high-profile political acts. Through these speeches, Commission Presidents aim to shape public discourse, to assert leadership within the EU’s institutional framework, and to signal policy priorities to Member States, stakeholders, and EU citizens. Thus, speeches serve both symbolic and strategic functions (Kassim et al., 2017; Müller & Tömmel, 2022).

Political speeches can be categorised in a variety of ways depending on the institutional setting and the purpose of the analysis. Three central dimensions are essential for understanding the function of presidential speeches in agenda-setting: scope, reach, and relevance (Condor et al., 2013; Müller & Tömmel, 2022; Reisigl, 2008). **Scope** refers to the breadth of the agenda addressed in a speech. Some speeches focus on a specific policy issue or initiative, while others present a broader, more comprehensive political agenda. The inaugural speech and the annual State of the Union address are prototypical examples of the latter, as they are designed to outline the Commission President’s overarching political vision (Pansardi & Battagazzorre, 2018). **Reach** concerns the intended audience of the speech. While some addresses target specific institutional or stakeholder groups, others are directed at a broader public audience, thereby expanding their potential influence within and beyond EU institutions (Müller & Tömmel, 2022). **Relevance** refers to the political significance and context of the speech, including its prominence in public discourse and political debate (Van Dijk, 1997). Grand agenda-setting speeches are particularly valuable for analysing the Commission President’s programmatic intentions. However, precisely because of their broad and often symbolic nature, these speeches tend to provide limited insight into the practical implementation of policy measures. For example, they rarely reveal the extent to which cross-cutting

approaches, such as a horizontal gender mainstreaming strategy, are incorporated into specific policy actions.

In the case of the Commission President, the three dimensions enable five types of speech, varying considerably in scope, reach, and relevance, to be distinguished. Building on the work of Müller and Tömmel (2022), who classify presidential speeches according to topic and venue/audience, this article refines their typology by broadening the *scope* parameter to better capture agenda-setting functions, and by adding *relevance* as a third analytical dimension to capture the political significance and contextual impact of presidential speeches, as these are not fully reflected in *scope* and *reach* alone. The following refined typology of presidential speeches is therefore used in this study (the reader should note that potential overlaps between speech categories are omitted due to a delineation of the dimensions of scope, reach, and relevance within the context of the agenda-setting power of the Commission President; see Table 1):

General agenda-setting speeches are characterised by their broad thematic scope, high political relevance, and wide intended audience (ranging from EU institutions to the general public). These speeches, such as the inaugural speech or the annual State of the Union address, are designed to outline the President's overarching political vision and to legitimise the Commission's agenda.

Policy-specific speeches focus on concrete policy initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, and primarily address expert or stakeholder audiences, including national ministries, civil society organisations, and regional authorities. The aim of these speeches is to provide political direction, while also contributing to professional discourse around implementation.

Ceremonial speeches are characterised by their limited scope, as they do not address specific policy initiatives but instead serve a symbolic purpose. Delivered on occasions such as public events or award ceremonies, these speeches typically aim to engage a broad audience, including civil society, cultural groups, and the general public. In terms of relevance, these speeches mainly hold symbolic significance rather than having a substantive policy impact. Nonetheless, they play an important role in fostering public trust and enhancing the visibility of the EU leadership within the broader European community.

Representative speeches are delivered in diplomatic contexts with the primary aim of representing European values, promoting strategic interests, and fostering international cooperation. Their scope typically includes broad geopolitical or value-based themes rather than detailed policy content. The reach of these speeches extends to foreign parliaments, heads of government, and the international public, positioning the Commission President as a diplomatic actor on the global stage. In terms of relevance, these speeches carry significant political weight externally,

serving to project the EU's normative power and enhance its visibility in global affairs, while also reinforcing internal cohesion around shared principles.

Press statements are reactive in nature, and their aim is to clarify the Commission's position in times of uncertainty or crisis. They have a narrow and precise scope, and their reach includes the media, the general public, and relevant political or diplomatic actors, reflecting the need for the broad dissemination of timely information. While their relevance may be limited in long-term agenda-setting terms, such speeches carry significant short-term political weight, particularly in moments of crisis, as they serve to reassure audiences, shape public perception, and maintain institutional credibility.

3. Conceptualisation of gender equality policy in speeches

To analyse the way in which gender equality policy was addressed in von der Leyen's speeches during her first term as President of the Commission, it is essential to define this phrase. The term *gender* itself has a broad range of uses, from emphasising women to a synonym for the sociodemographic category of sex, or a socially and historically constructed set of relationships (Celis et al., 2013; Lombardo et al., 2017; Verloo, 2005). Gender equality policy encompasses the array of political measures, strategies, and discourses through which gender is recognised as a social and political category. It includes the way in which institutions prioritise gender issues on the political agenda, translate concepts of gender roles and relations into policy areas, and utilise tools to shape social, economic, and political structures along gendered lines (Lombardo et al., 2017). Gender equality policy ideally takes the intersectional diversity of individuals' social, economic, and cultural identity into account, with the aim of reducing or eliminating underlying gender-based hierarchies and inequalities in both private and public spheres. Since the early 2000s, the concept of gender equality policy has expanded to encompass broader gender+ equality approaches that tackle cross-cutting forms of discrimination and inequality, including those affecting LGBTQI* communities (Eigenmann et al., 2024; Mazur & Engeli, 2023).

Based on the gender literature and the Commission's political practice, five distinct conceptualisations of gender equality policy can be identified, reflecting how the Commission has approached the issue over time (Kugelmeier López, 2025). These categories have evolved chronologically, mirroring broader developments in feminist theory and EU gender policy-making (Ahrens & Kantola, 2025; Hartlapp et al., 2021; Jacquot, 2015; Verloo, 2005). Although in practice they are often applied simultaneously, the conceptualisations are analytically distinct. In this study, they are used as a heuristic to uncover the underlying principles, objectives, and strategic aims of policy designs.

Equal treatment means that women and men have the same rights. The legal position is that there is no difference between them as they are officially equal. This

involves existing inequalities being addressed through legislation, and individual citizens being held accountable for exercising their formal equal rights. The male norm is the standard to which women are expected to conform.

Equal opportunities involves providing equal conditions for women and men, with the aim of achieving equality in outcomes and addressing unequal starting points. An equal opportunities policy seeks to reduce the disadvantages faced by women, particularly those women already active in the labour market. The focus is on ensuring that women have equal access in public and private life through compensatory policies such as positive action or positive discrimination.

Equal impact aims to achieve the same societal status for women and men. This concept emphasises the creation of equality through policy design (formulation) by considering societal structures in all policies. In this case, the gender equality policy aims to transform societal structures that perpetuate gender inequalities, to broaden the promotion of equality beyond just employment, and to integrate gender issues into mainstream policies.

Anti-discrimination refers to the absence of all forms of discrimination. All marginalised and non-mainstream groups are treated as being equal to mainstream groups, and are protected from social exclusion. In the EU legal context, this is reflected in the following provision: “In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall aim to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation” (TFEU, 2012, Art. 10.).

Intersectionality refers to the elimination of systems of inequality that affect individuals across multiple, interconnected social categories. Women, as a diverse group, may experience overlapping layers of discrimination based on multiple factors, including race, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or migration status (European Commission, 2020).

These definitions will serve as the benchmark for the type of gender equality promoted in the speeches. The methodology will measure both quantity and quality.

4. Methodology

This article examines both the extent and the content of von der Leyen’s gender equality policy agenda. It uses a descriptive analysis of all 429 speeches delivered by von der Leyen.

First, these speeches were organised into the typology of speeches outlined in section 2, based on their scope, reach, and relevance.

Second, the frequency of 37 gender-related codes was measured across the speeches. These codes were derived from the conceptual framework. All analyses and visualisations were performed using R (version 4.5.1; 2025), with packages such as

pdftools, dplyr, tibble, purrr, stringr, textstem, and writexl. For the plots, packages such as ggplot2 and lubridate were used. To account for different grammatical forms of the same word, lemmatisation was applied. By reducing words to their root forms, known as lemmas, lemmatisation helps to standardise text. For example, *women* is reduced to its base form *woman*, allowing all related forms to be analysed together. Since the analysis was carried out across three languages; English, German, and French; special methodological considerations were necessary. Von der Leyen occasionally switched languages within a single speech, and lemmatisation is less reliable for German and French because of their complex inflectional systems. Therefore, the author cross-checked the output by searching for inflected variants using `stringr::str_detect()` to ensure that all relevant forms were included.

All terms were subsequently manually checked for plausibility in the context of gender equality policy. For instance, the word *Frau* in German was often used as a form of address rather than as a gender reference, and those instances were therefore manually excluded from the coding. Similarly, phrases such as equal treatment can only be partly considered as they also appear in non-gender-specific policy contexts, such as: “And trust in equal treatment for the manufacturing companies.” (von der Leyen, 2022d). Thus, contextual indicators were considered, as nearly all terms may be operationalised in different ways depending on the context of the speech.

Statements in which von der Leyen referred to her personal experiences, for example, as a mother of seven or as a working wife, were excluded. In addition, internal institutional measures, such as references to the Commission being the “the first gender-balanced College in the history of the European Commission.” (von der Leyen, 2023g), were not coded, as the focus was on policy-oriented rather than organisational aspects. Furthermore, references to topics such as migration, religion or age were not coded unless they were explicitly linked to the operationalised forms of anti-discrimination or intersectionality. Speech headings and titles were also excluded from the coding process. To cover all forms of discrimination, the forms of discrimination mentioned in Article 10 of the TFEU and the “Union of Equality” (European Commission, 2020) were used. The codebook also included the additional code *gender-based violence*, which was identified in an open category during the coding process.

A corpus of 95 speeches referencing gender equality policy was identified, providing insights into the frequency and context of these references. The gender equality conceptualisations were crossed with the speech categories. Temporal analysis was also carried out to investigate whether gender equality policy was especially prominent during specific periods, either related to particular initiatives or as part of wider communication strategies within the electoral cycle. This method underscores the broader political strategies and initiatives connected to gender equality policy.

Third, the 95 speeches were structured so that all principles of gender equality were treated equally, allowing an assessment of the meaning behind specific terms.

The qualitative coding in this section of the article was performed manually and deductively, with the main focus on policy intention and policy initiatives. In this way, the measurements reflect the nature of gender equality policy in terms of policy affiliations and connections to EU competences.

The methodology described above will be used to structure the discussion below, beginning with the classification of von der Leyen’s speeches into general agenda-setting speeches, policy-specific speeches, ceremonial speeches, representative speeches, and press statements.

5. Promoting gender equality: How often, what kind of speeches, and when?

Von der Leyen’s 429 speeches in her first term as Commission President serve various communicative purposes, each with its own scope, reach, and relevance. The following table summarises the categorisation and lists the number of von der Leyen speeches in each category.

Table 1: Classification of von der Leyen’s speeches by number and percentage of cases

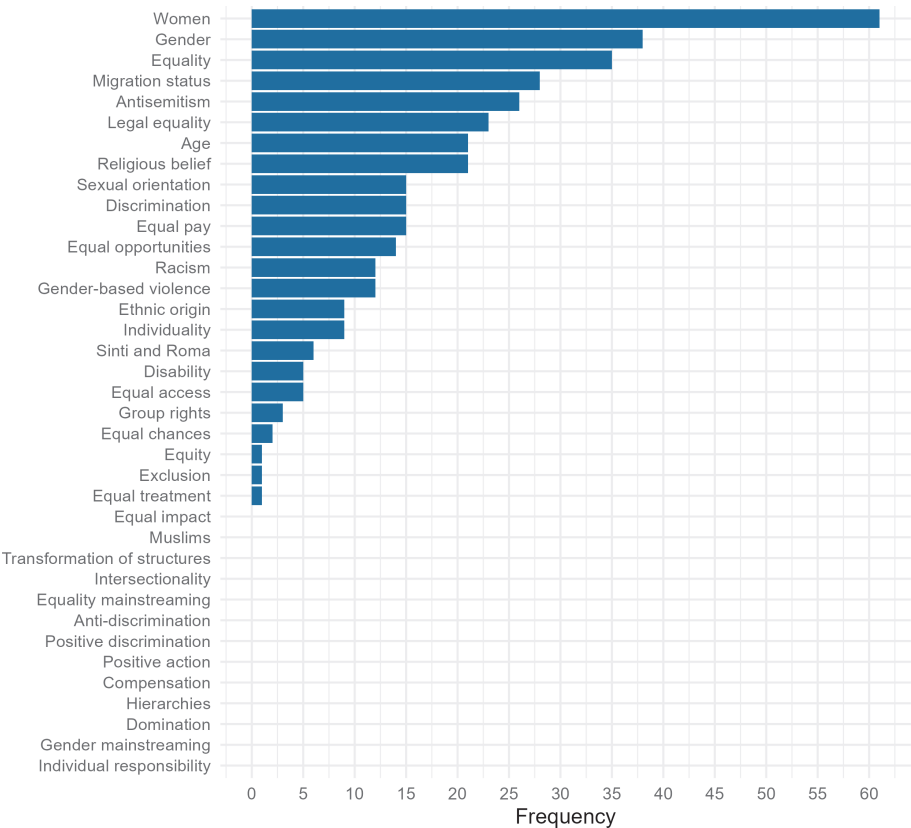
Type of speech	Scope	Reach	Relevance	Number/429 speeches
General agenda-setting	Broad thematic scope	European Parliament, EU citizens	High political relevance, legitimization, agenda-setting	5 1.17 %
Policy-specific	Concrete policy initiatives, concrete decisions	Experts, national ministries, EU institutions, civil society, regional authorities	Specific agenda-setting, expertise sharing, professional discourse	160 37.30 %
Ceremonial	Limited, symbolic scope	Civil society, cultural groups, general public	Symbolic significance, fostering trust, enhancing EU visibility	123 28.67 %
Representative	Broader geopolitical scope, value-based themes	Foreign parliaments, heads of government, international public	High external political relevance, projecting EU’s normative power, strengthening cohesion	123 28.67 %
Press statement	Narrow and precise scope, reactive	Media representatives, public, diplomats	Short-term political relevance, reassurance, clarification, maintaining institutional credibility	18 4.20 %

Source: 429 von der Leyen speeches, 27 November 2019 – 18 July 2024. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>

Out of the 429 speeches analysed, 95 contain at least one reference coded as being related to gender equality policy. In most of these 95 cases, a single speech includes several coded segments rather than just one isolated mention. This means that, in

quantitative terms, approximately 22.14 % of the 429 speeches address gender equality policy to some extent. Among these 95 speeches, 23 explicitly refer to the term gender and there are 38 references in total, while the remaining references concern specific policy aspects of gender. The term most frequently coded was woman, including all variations such as mother and female, listen in the appendix. This term was used a total 421 times. Most frequently, it appeared in the speech presenting an award to the Iranian Women Life Freedom movement at the M100 Media Award 2023 (von der Leyen, 2023a), where it was mentioned 43 times. The word woman was mainly used in connection with equal work for equal pay or descriptions of violence against women.

Figure 1: Number of speeches containing gender-related word groups



Source: 95 gender-related speeches of Ursula von der Leyen 27 November 2019 – 18 July 2024, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>. Generated with R Studio.

Graph 1 shows the number of speeches in which specific word groups appear. Each count indicates how many speeches contain at least one inflected form of a given term or its linguistic equivalents. For example, 61 speeches by von der Leyen include at least one inflected form of mother, woman, or female, or a corresponding term in French or German. For clarity, one representative word from each group was selected for Graph 1 to stand for the entire group. This is also reflected in the bold words in the appendix, which correspond to these selections.

The total number of words used in von der Leyen's 95 speeches is provided in the appendix. By contrast, the following terms did not appear in the speeches overall or in connection with gender equality policy: Muslim, transformation of structures, intersectionality, equality mainstreaming, anti-discrimination, equal impact, positive discrimination, positive action, compensation, hierarchies, domination, gender mainstreaming, individual responsibility.

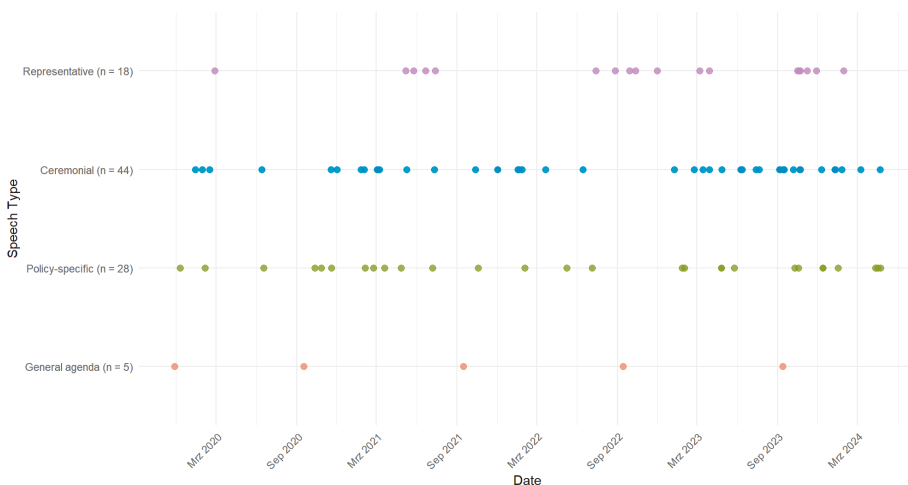
In terms of speech settings, gender equality policy is absent from the press statements, none of which contain any gender-related references. Among the policy-specific speeches, 28 contain references to gender equality policy. Speeches on von der Leyen's flagship policy initiative, the European Green Deal, do not refer to gender equality policy. By contrast, all speeches in which one would expect some attention to gender contain at least some engagement with the concept; see, for instance, her speech at the high-level conference on the European Pillar of Social Rights (von der Leyen, 2024a). In speeches with an overall theme not directly related to gender, references to gender tend to appear only when they are connected to the main topic. For example, von der Leyen (2022b) remarked: "Take gender equality, for example: Having access to sanitation and hygiene at home and at school is especially important for women and girls. It protects them against gender-based violence and provides privacy and dignity." Another notable example is von der Leyen's opening speech at the ETUI-ETUC Conference: Towards a New Socio-Ecological Contract (von der Leyen, 2021a). This speech addresses the topics of women at work and equal pay, engaging a wide range of stakeholders involved in the European market economy and discussing policy for a future economy. Explicit mentions of the term gender within policy-specific speeches are rare, occurring only four times.

Gender equality policy is prominent in all general agenda-setting speeches, albeit to varying degrees. It is strongly present in ceremonial speeches, with 44 instances. In representative speeches, there are 18 instances (Graph 2).

Finally, the presence of references to gender equality policy varies over time, partly overlapping with the timing of specific speeches. General agenda-setting speeches appear at fixed intervals because of their structured nature. Representative speeches addressing gender equality policy tend to cluster around these general agenda-setting speeches, indicating a close temporal and substantive connection between the two types. By contrast, ceremonial and policy-specific speeches do not exhibit

notable clustering. Instead, they are distributed more evenly throughout the years, with each speech appearing to be relatively independent of the others.

Figure 2: Occurrence over time of speeches with references to gender equality policy



Source: 95 gender related speeches of Ursula von der Leyen, 27 November 2019 – 18 July 2024, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/home/en>. Generated with R Studio.

6. Policy intention, policy initiative: What kind of gender equality?

Based on the initial analysis, the conceptualisation of gender equality for policy formulation is examined in this section. Generally speaking, innovative concepts such as intersectionality or gender mainstreaming do not occur in any of von der Leyen's speeches. To some degree, speeches that are more policy-oriented refer to different groups of people who experience discrimination, but these cases do not reflect a comprehensive understanding of intersectionality. The most dominant concept is equal opportunity, referring to the role of women in relation to work and motherhood, and how women can be encouraged to participate in the workforce. The category with the most policy initiatives and the strongest policy intention is anti-discrimination.

Besides the theoretically derived frames, the connection between women and violence in conflicts, or women/gender-based violence, is especially identified in two State of the Union speeches, three policy-specific speeches, and seven ceremonial speeches.

The term *gender-based violence* appears twice in the corpus, and, in both cases, the references remain generic, with no attached policy initiative. The phrase *violence against women* is, in contrast, the more politically anchored concept. In her 2021

plenary speech, von der Leyen stated: “Violence against women and children is a crime. We must call it a crime and it must be punished as such. This is why I want the EU itself to join the Istanbul Convention. This remains a priority for my Commission” (von der Leyen, 2021c). This shows the concrete intention of the Commission. Additionally, she highlighted the global influence of women’s rights movements to protect women from violence (von der Leyen, 2023a).

6.1 Equal treatment

This section addresses the conceptualisation of gender equality policy in terms of equal treatment, with coded segments including the following phrases: women’s rights, equal rights, *legal equality*, *individuality*, and *equal treatment*. A substantial proportion of these passages consist of generic statements. These statements articulate general principles or normative claims, but do not outline concrete measures or evaluate specific outcomes. Illustrative examples include the connection between the Covid-19 pandemic and women’s rights (von der Leyen, 2020a) and the link between equal rights and equal access to care and careers (von der Leyen, 2022a).

What is interesting about this gender equality policy category is that it does not stand alone. Every time words from this category are mentioned, they are combined with words from another category. In particular, when policy initiatives are named, equal treatment appears in the same paragraph as equal opportunities or anti-discrimination.

For instance, regarding policy intention, von der Leyen states her aims, emphasising that equality and anti-discrimination are fundamental democratic values and that the EU is committed to upholding these principles.

“In a democracy, everyone must enjoy equal rights and opportunities. [...] For instance, the European Union has launched a new push for equality in the workplace; with equal pay for equal work, so that women earn the same as their male colleagues; or with a Child Guarantee, so that all families can afford childcare; or with a fair minimum wage, so that all workers can enjoy a decent living. We also set out a new initiative against racism, and anti-Semitism and strategies for the rights of persons with disabilities and LGBTIQ equality. That is the unique strength of democracy. Democracies deliver opportunities, for all.” (von der Leyen, 2023b)

Another example is found in the EU’s 2020 Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion, and participation, which is a structured initiative offering specific measures and institutional support for Roma communities.

“Even the most entrenched prejudices and discriminations can be eradicated, if public authorities and civil society work together with a shared sense of direction, towards equality and equal rights. This is why in 2020, we put forward a new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation.” (von der Leyen, 2023c)

Legislation to increase the number of women on the boards of major European firms, and the first-ever EU law to end violence against women, exemplify measures with tangible and measurable outcomes (von der Leyen, 2024b). In relation to

policy evaluation, President von der Leyen highlights progress in advancing equality and women's rights, noting that "in these three years, the European Commission has launched a new push for equal rights across our Union" (von der Leyen, 2023d) and "in the last five years, we have taken unprecedented action for women's rights in Europe" (von der Leyen, 2024b), including equal pay legislation, increasing the number of women on boards, and the first European law against violence toward women. These statements report concrete results and achievements, illustrating the effects of prior policy measures. She evaluates the challenges and risks, including the assessment of a judicial ruling in Poland that "calls into question the foundations of the European Union" (von der Leyen, 2021b), which underscores the potential impact on judicial independence and the protection of citizens' rights. While much of the focus is on women's work, von der Leyen also stresses equal treatment for all: "They wanted the rule of law and for everyone to be equal before the law" (von der Leyen, 2021d).

6.2 Equal opportunities

This category contains the highest number of coded segments, with terms such as *women*, *mother*, and *female* appearing most frequently. Dedicated speeches also specifically address women as a group.

Generic statements often emerge when discussing women, emphasising differences as opportunities arising from diversity, and thereby framing diversity as an asset. Women are also recognised as different from men: "Not because women are better than men per se. But they are different" (von der Leyen, 2020a).

Policy intentions primarily focus on addressing the balance between work and family across different sectors. In her speech at the 2020 Women's Forum Global Meeting, President von der Leyen emphasised that post-crisis recovery measures must ensure that women have the same opportunities as men, with a particular focus on digital skills and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education. Investments are directed towards encouraging more girls and women to enter STEM fields, which dominate green and digital job sectors. Currently, 41 % of scientists and engineers in Europe are women (von der Leyen, 2020a).

Concrete policy initiatives operationalise these intentions. One instrument mentioned is the Directive on Pay Transparency. Initially introduced as part of a policy proposal to address the gender pay gap and the gender employment gap, the Directive is repeatedly highlighted as a key legislative tool to put into practice the idea that "equal work deserves equal pay" (von der Leyen, 2023e). It is presented both as a forthcoming measure and, later, as a legally binding act. This demonstrates how proposals can evolve into binding legal instruments within the EU policy cycle. Other examples include the Women on Boards Directive, which addresses gender representation in leadership and was introduced after ten years of stalemate (von der Leyen, 2024a).

6.3 Equal impact

The terms *gender* and *equality* appear in the speeches, but their usage differs in depth and function, ranging from broad normative claims to concrete policy references. For the word *gender*, generic statements occur most frequently. President von der Leyen often gives credit to various institutions or addresses general concerns; however, concrete deliverables are less frequently specified. As she emphasises: “Because gender equality does not just ‘happen’. Progress is hard won and easily lost. Even in countries where there are no morality police. True equality requires daily attention and commitment” (von der Leyen, 2023a). Policy initiatives appear three times in the speeches, particularly at the start of her mandate, with specific references to the Istanbul Convention and the “Union of Equality” (European Commission, 2020), the new gender equality programme of the Commission. Policy intentions, including the Gender Equality Strategy, are mentioned three times, signalling planned actions and strategic priorities, while policy evaluations occur twice, reflecting assessments of progress and effectiveness. Generally, her claim that “this is what we are working on: putting women at the centre of all our policies” (von der Leyen, 2021e) seems interesting when set alongside the fact that she never uses the phrase *gender mainstreaming*.

6.4 Anti-discrimination

This section examines the conceptualisation of gender equality policy in relation to anti-discrimination, with reference to concepts such as *discrimination*, *equal chances*, *exclusion*, *equity*, and *group rights*. Dedicated speeches address issues concerning Roma communities, antisemitism, racism, and migration.

Although this category does not represent the largest share in terms of word count, it contains most of the concrete policy initiatives, proposals, and evaluations. These include the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC; von der Leyen, 2020c) and the Framework Decision on combating expressions of racism and xenophobia (2008/913/JHA; von der Leyen, 2020c). Both the Directive and the Decision address direct and indirect forms of discrimination. The EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (von der Leyen, 2021f) and the EU Roma Strategy (von der Leyen, 2023c), which aims to reduce the Roma employment gap and the early childhood education participation gap by 2030, are further examples of such initiatives. Furthermore, specific initiatives are often seen in combination, and address LGBTQI* rights, the renovation wave aimed at making cities greener, the rights of persons with disabilities, increased accessibility for all, and ways to combat racism.

“In these three years, the European Commission has launched a new push for equal rights across our Union. New initiatives against racism and to foster minority rights. Strategies for LGBTIQ equality and the rights of persons with disabilities. And a renovation wave to make our cities not just greener but more accessible to all” (von der Leyen, 2023d).

Additional initiatives include cooperation tools like the high-level group on combating racism, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance, as well as the European Network of Equality Bodies (von der Leyen, 2020c). She also addresses the rule of law, backed up by the European Charter of Human Rights.

“Likewise, Europe is rising up against discrimination. It is written in black on white in our European Charter of Human Rights. We will never accept EU funding going to countries that do not respect the principles of this Charter. We are implementing all our legal instruments to block EU funds to countries or regions that discriminate against LGBTIQ individuals or any other minority. Because Europe is Equality. And Europe is Diversity. This is why we are also fighting for respect for the rule of law and for judicial independence in particular. The lack of judicial independence undermines the very foundations of our democracies. It is a long and difficult struggle, but a struggle that is indispensable.” (von der Leyen, 2023f)

Policy proposals include the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (von der Leyen, 2020d), proposals to extend the list of EU crimes to all forms of hate crime including those based on race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation (von der Leyen, 2020e), the first European strategy to combat antisemitism (von der Leyen, 2022c), the Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (von der Leyen, 2023b), and proposals to strengthen LGBTIQ* rights, including mutual recognition of family relations across the EU (von der Leyen, 2020e). These proposals are intended to guide future legislative and programme development and to ensure a long-term, rights-based approach across the Union. She highlights evaluations of national Roma strategies, praising successful initiatives while identifying areas where further work is needed (von der Leyen, 2023c). Retrospective assessments also include reports on the implementation of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan and the Anti-Semitism Strategy, and measures to protect minority rights (von der Leyen, 2023d).

6.5 Intersectionality

The analysis of von der Leyen’s speeches shows that she does not explicitly mention *intersectionality*; however, her discussions of gender equality touch on themes related to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and include references to diversity. In her inauguration speech, von der Leyen (2019) introduced Helena Dalli as the EU’s first Commissioner for Equality; Dalli was tasked with advancing the EU’s equality agenda and serving as a key figure in dismantling barriers that restrict individuals on the basis of their identity, beliefs, or relationships.

She emphasised that “People care about fairness and equality in every sense of the word” (von der Leyen, 2019), already indicating a general understanding of the importance of addressing all forms of inequality and the general approach needed to combat them. Some speeches do address specific groups experiencing discrimination. For instance, she noted that: “Female and youth employment is too low – we all know that you cannot build a successful economy without youth and women” (von der Leyen, 2020b). She indicated in some speeches that equality needs to go beyond men and women, and that other categories of inequality also

need to be recognised: “When we speak about respect and dignity we must not only speak about men and women. This question is bigger than gender. We cannot allow LGBT-free zones to spread in our Member States” (von der Leyen, 2021c). This leads to the overall impression that, when she names more than one category or explains that people can face several forms of discrimination, she is urging the Union to take action. Otherwise, these references typically appear in combination with policy proposals targeting particular groups, such as the Roma strategy. Generally, intersectional or multi-category statements occurred six times throughout the speeches. Nevertheless, the explicit naming of groups and their overlapping social categories does not fully meet the standards of an intersectional approach.

7. Discussion

What overall picture emerges from this analysis, and what direction is indicated by von der Leyen’s speeches? The findings suggest several key observations regarding the framing and implementation of gender equality policy under her leadership.

First, the comprehensive anti-discrimination and women in the workspace acquis primarily derives from the EU’s core competences (Ahrens & van der Vleuten, 2019; TFEU, 2012, Art. 10.) Therefore, most policy initiatives are visible in areas in which the EU holds explicit authority. This implies that promoting gender equality is not, in itself, an EU policy competence, but must be adequately considered when designing policies in other domains.

Second, gender equality policy is typically addressed only when it is contextually appropriate or when a specific event requires it. Gender is not consistently mainstreamed across all policy areas. While it features regularly in speeches on equality and women’s issues, references in other domains remain limited and are often framed in general or rhetorical terms rather than embedded in concrete policy measures. Notably, gender is absent from speeches on the European Green Deal, which represents von der Leyen’s flagship initiative. However, several speeches focus on women in the workplace or highlight different forms of discrimination or violence against women as their central themes. This observation is consistent with earlier analyses that conceptualise gender as a foundational myth in the EU (MacRae, 2010), whereby commitments to gender equality are deployed strategically, often without corresponding substantive policy support.

Third, von der Leyen’s discourse relies heavily on the language of anti-discrimination, and repeatedly frames women as a category distinct from men. In this respect, she largely follows the approach of previous Commission Presidents, such as Jean-Claude Juncker and José Manuel Barroso, who mainstreamed equality policy primarily through anti-discrimination measures rather than through a transformative gender equality agenda (Ahrens, 2023; Hartlapp et al., 2021).

Fourth, von der Leyen's rhetoric does not explicitly address either intersectionality or gender mainstreaming. Regarding intersectionality, while her discourse occasionally addresses intersecting inequalities, it does so without explicitly naming or theorising them. It seems that there are significant barriers not only to incorporating intersectionality into policy but even to using the term itself (or a descriptive equivalent). The usage is often vague, falling short of the theoretical expectations of intersectionality, and typically refers only to a specific form of anti-discrimination (Eigenmann et al., 2024). This is a weakness of the approach; as a result, intersectionality remains implicit and underdeveloped. The absence of gender mainstreaming is even more striking. Given that gender mainstreaming is embedded in Article 8 of the TFEU (Ahrens, 2021), the complete omission of it from von der Leyen's rhetoric raises essential questions. If gender mainstreaming is the key policy instrument for integrating a gender perspective across all policy areas, its absence suggests a shift away from a structural, horizontal approach to gender equality towards a more isolated understanding. This omission is significant, as it indicates changing priorities in the EU's future gender equality strategies and a weakening of gender mainstreaming as a policy instrument within EU governance. Significantly, the issue extends beyond the well-documented implementation failures of gender mainstreaming; it begins at the discursive level, with the absence of gender mainstreaming in political rhetoric itself (Cavaghan, 2017). Consequently, her approach remains firmly rooted in the first- and second-wave conceptualisations of gender equality and does not engage with the third- or fourth-wave perspectives that foreground structural power relations and intersecting forms of inequality.

Fifth, von der Leyen's approach reflects her personal style and political positioning. Unlike policy documents such as the European Gender Equality Strategy which are developed through inter-service consultations and adopted by the College of Commissioners, her speeches are her personal responsibility and reflect her rhetoric. She could have used terms such as intersectionality or addressed gender issues horizontally across policy areas. Her speeches suggest that she approaches gender equality from the perspective of a conservative politician from Germany's Christian Democratic Party. This reading is further supported by the broader political context of her re-election, in which a strong European People's Party in the European Parliament played a central role; gender equality policy featured only marginally in these negotiations (Abels & Klöckner, 2025). Taken together, her personal rhetoric seems aligned with her party's priorities as a member of the leading parliamentary faction. This suggests that her selective engagement with transformative gender equality frameworks is a conscious reflection of her alignment with the priorities of the European People's Party, demonstrating that she chooses to ensure that her personal rhetoric follows the party line.

Sixth, concepts such as equal treatment often appear in the same paragraph as equal opportunities or anti-discrimination, suggesting that the terms build on one another or interleave, making it unclear which term is meant in a given context.

This indicates a certain flexibility or ambiguity in von der Leyen's rhetoric regarding gender terminology.

Seventh, the selective appearance of specific concepts in certain speech categories raises important questions. It indicates that von der Leyen's use of gender-related terminology may be strategic, reflecting the audience, context, or rhetorical goals of a given speech (Müller, 2020). The absence of references to gender equality in von der Leyen's speeches labelled as press statements may lead to the assumption that these issues are not prioritised in public messaging in this format. However, gender equality is addressed in other types of speeches, suggesting that the prioritisation of these issues varies depending on the communicative context rather than being universally neglected. While further research could benefit from the examination of document types beyond speeches, such as press releases, the present analysis of press statements classified as speeches made by von der Leyen indicates an absence of gender-related references.

Eighth, the fact that gender equality, even though it is not central to all policy areas, appears in about 22.1 % of all speeches is certainly significant. What is more interesting is the type of gender equality policy that has been promoted. The absence of certain terms or concepts in speeches suggests that these issues are not prioritised on the public agenda.

8. Conclusion

Commission Presidents exercise strategic political leadership within the EU, leveraging their formal monopoly to propose legislation. They act not merely as administrators but instead as active agents who mobilise resources, engage across institutional boundaries, and set the policy agenda, with their speeches being key instruments for communicating this agenda (Kassim et al., 2017; Müller, 2020). In this setting, speeches are highly individual forms of exercising leadership, with women leaders engaging more than men in highly-skilled speechmaking (Müller & Pansardi, 2022).

Von der Leyen has been recognised as a capable and strategic leader, effectively exercising her leadership powers with varying impact across key policy areas (Mushaben, 2025). At the start of her first term, her inaugural address to the European Parliament presented gender equality as a renewed priority, framing it as a unifying objective for the institution and underscoring the significance of her role as the first woman to lead the Commission. It was against this background that the von der Leyen Commission's pledge to build a "Union of Equality" was made (European Commission, 2020).

The analysis of Ursula von der Leyen's speeches during her first term as President of the Commission reveals a notable contrast between her initial feminist promises and the more traditional framing of gender equality policy that followed. While

her inaugural address signalled ambition for a transformative equality agenda, her subsequent rhetoric focused primarily on women's participation in the labour market, equal pay, and anti-discrimination measures, policy areas closely linked to the Commission's formal competences. Innovative approaches, such as gender mainstreaming or intersectionality, remained absent from her discourse. Women were often framed in relation to motherhood or as distinct from men, rather than as part of a broader structural analysis of inequality. Gender equality policy thus appears not to be an independent priority. Overall, von der Leyen's rhetoric reinforces first- and second-wave notions of equality, equal treatment and equal opportunities, while largely sidestepping more comprehensive, transformative approaches. Under her leadership, the gender equality policy appears constrained, retreating to formal competencies and limited engagement, and it is notably absent from flagship initiatives. This indicates that her presidency has promoted gender equality within the scope of EU competencies, although it has fallen short of advocating a truly feminist agenda.

The study has some limitations. The categorisation of speeches could have varied if additional dimensions beyond scope, reach, and relevance in the context of agenda-setting had been included. Similarly, focusing solely on von der Leyen's speeches rather than other document types, such as statements or press releases, restricts the scope of the analysis. Future research examining these other document types would therefore be very beneficial. The qualitative nature of the analysis means that the researcher's interpretation influences the results, and such potential bias should always be acknowledged. Further research could be carried out on the second von der Leyen Commission, which commenced in December 2024. Analysing gender equality in von der Leyen's speeches from that period becomes particularly intriguing, given the evolving EU institutional landscape.

This article leads to a broader question: why does von der Leyen speak about gender equality in the way she does? Ultimately, von der Leyen bears responsibility for the political messages conveyed in her speeches. Rhetorical leadership is a core dimension of political agency, and speech-making remains one of the most direct instruments through which a Commission President can signal priorities and articulate commitments. Certainly, successive crises (such as COVID-19) constrained her rhetorical space. However, even within a structurally constrained setting, von der Leyen was able to establish a dedicated portfolio across a variety of policy fields, including the European Green Deal, during her first term. Further, rhetorical leadership remains one of the few domains in which the Commission President enjoys substantial autonomy. The argument here is not that von der Leyen could have delivered a fully fledged feminist agenda under these conditions, but rather that the narrowing of her rhetorical trajectory cannot be explained solely by institutional or political constraints. It reflects a substantive downgrading of gender equality as a guiding narrative, marking a notable departure from the transformative vision she articulated upon taking office. The von der Leyen Commission has been

characterised by a highly centralised leadership style (Abels & Klöckner, 2025), which delegates implementation while retaining strategic direction at the top. In this context, her rhetorical choices should be understood as political decisions rather than mere structural inevitabilities, even if the European political climate has shifted further to the right, making ambitious equality agendas more difficult.

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Appendix

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Is the ideal political leader still a man? Gendered conceptions of political leadership in the contemporary political elite in Western European democracies

Political leadership has long been associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, toughness, and task-orientation. Contemporary politics challenges and reproduces this model. The growing presence of women in leadership and crises that highlight the value of cooperation and care foster more gender-balanced understandings of leadership. Yet, the rise of radical right parties and anti-gender movements reinforces masculinized leadership ideals. Against this backdrop, this article examines how political elites currently define the relationship between gender and good leadership. We conducted interviews with 31 Members of Parliament in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Spain in 2023/2024, asking: “What do you think are the most important attributes of a good minister?”. Qualitative content analysis shows that many MPs in our sample favor integrative leadership styles—cooperative, inclusive, attentive, interpersonally sensitive, and oriented toward the common good. By contrast, aggregative notions of leadership appear largely limited to assertiveness, while traits such as being forceful, controlling, or individualistic are viewed as detrimental to good leadership by many respondents. These findings suggest that many Western European elites embrace leadership ideals consistent with traits ascribed to women, even in societies far from gender parity and raise questions about the reasons behind persistent inequalities in political leadership.

Keywords: Gender, political leadership, stereotypes, parliament, government

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1. Introduction

Even in the 21st century, political elites assess women leaders less favorably than men leaders (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; Dingler & Kroeber, 2022; Erikson & Josefsson, 2023; O'Brien, 2015). To give an example, MPs valued former German Minister of Economy and Energy Sigmar Gabriel more than Brigitte

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Zypries, who succeeded him in this position in 2017 – although both brought comparable levels of substantial expertise and long-standing political experience to the job. In interviews, MPs describe Zypries as lacking the manipulateness and the assertiveness displayed by Gabriel. Even more so, MPs show appreciation for Gabriel's tactics: "What happened with Gabriel was that he also played dirty. You have to admire him. He understood our way of working, so to speak, and then [he] developed his own tools to catch us out, which meant we had to think along with Gabriel" (Interview GER01). To understand such unequal assessment of men and women political leaders, the literature builds on role (in)congruency theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Accordingly, elites assess the degree to which the traits they ascribe to an individual based on their gender corresponds to what they expect from an ideal leader (Berger et al, 1985; Foschi et al, 1994). Women are either perceived as not possessing the masculine traits and leadership style associated with an ideal leader, or if they do are punished since these traits are incongruent with the gender role expected from them (Bruckmüller et al, 2014; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Powell et al, 2002; Schein & Mueller, 1992). Yet, recent research indicates that in the highly gender-progressive case of Sweden, MPs actually depict ideal parliamentary leaders as displaying leadership styles consistent with feminine traits (Erikson & Josefsson, 2023). Following up on this work, the present study puts the basic assumption of a masculinized ideal leader under empirical scrutiny for a more diverse set of countries by asking: How are MPs' conceptions of good ministers gendered in contemporary Western Europe?

Contemporary politics provides reasons to both expect and to doubt that the ideal of a masculinized leader persists in Western European democracies. On the one hand, the region has been experiencing a shift in gender equality attitudes, which first enhanced women's economic inclusion and then led to changes in citizens' attitudes towards women's role in society and politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Moreover, democracies are currently facing multiple crises that demand the ability to transform political structures from ministers to handle democratic backsliding, racist events, or the long-term consequences of the global pandemic. Under these conditions, certain traits typically ascribed to women including, for instance, an empathic communication style, may become valuable assets for ministers (Kroeber & Dingler, 2023). Yet, at the same time, actors promoting the traditional division of labor, critical of women's equal political inclusion, are gaining ground (Jost et al, 2008). Far-right parties and anti-gender movements become increasingly influential in political discourses of mainstream parties (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Bale, 2003; Schain, 2016) and are likely to also shape how mainstream political actors perceive women ministers (Erikson and Josefsson 2024). Putting the persistence of the masculinized leadership ideal under empirical scrutiny in a cross-country study is thus timely.

We investigate MPs' depictions of good ministers using qualitative interviews with 31 MPs in five Western European democracies. We interviewed five to seven MPs

in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Spain and asked them about their conception of a good minister. The selected countries differ in gender progressiveness, the main factor that might arguably shape depictions of good ministers, hence allowing us to get an impression of the variation in leadership ideals found in Western Europe. We focus on gender bias in MPs' perceptions of good ministers as a critical case of political elites at large. First, MPs' assessment of a minister shapes policy outputs, as they will be more willing to wave through proposals by a minister perceived as rather capable and more prone to crucially revise or reject proposals from a minister perceived as less capable (Bäck et al, 2021). Second, whether MPs perceive ministers as suitable to lead shapes elite formation at the highest levels, as MPs' opinions are valued by gatekeepers in the decision of who is promoted to the most prestigious ministerial portfolios or who becomes head of government. Gendered descriptions of good ministers are thus particularly consequential for women political leaders. The qualitative content analysis of the interviews reveals to what extent MPs rely on traits linked to a masculine or feminine leadership style in their depiction of good ministers by using the concepts of aggregative and integrative leadership (Erikson and Josefsson 2023). Examining which of these styles MPs consider an asset of a good minister provides a useful lens for assessing how far contemporary ideals of leadership remain gendered.

Our analysis shows that many MPs depict good ministers as displaying traits linked to integrative rather than aggregative leadership styles. In particular a cooperative decision-making approach, asserting influence by listening to others, is mentioned favorably. Of the traits typically ascribed to aggregative leadership, only assertiveness features high in MPs' descriptions of good ministers, while being forceful, controlling, or individualistic are even mentioned as detrimental traits for good ministers. We observe larger numbers of MPs preferring integrative compared to aggregative leadership in all five countries, for MPs of both gender, across all age groups and belonging to parties with different ideological leanings. Overall, this evidence hints that preferences for a leadership style consistent with traits typically ascribed to men are less common than one might expect, while preferences for a leadership style consistent with traits typically ascribed to women are prominent in Western Europe – even in countries that are still far away from gender equality in society and politics.

These insights have important implications for our understanding of unequal conditions for men and women leaders. First, observing that leadership ideals are not necessarily masculine in contemporary Western Europe at large, indicates that gender parity is not a precondition for the dissolution of role (in)congruencies. At an abstract level, feminine traits are generally perceived as suitable for successful political leadership, despite women's numerical underrepresentation. Second, finding that gendered leadership ideals are not contradictory to feminine traits raises the question as to why women leaders continue to make different real-world experiences than men. Independent of transforming leadership ideals, barriers to

entering and advancing to influential party and government positions remain higher for women compared to men (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016; Kroeber & Hüffelmann, 2022; Krook & O'Brien, 2012), and women who reach these posts are particularly vulnerable to failure, standing on "quick sand" (Aldrich and Somer-Topcu, 2025, 53).

2. Literature engaging with perceptions of women political leaders

Women are still less likely than men to become political leaders including positions such as party leader (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; O'Brien, 2015), head of government (Jalalzai, 2018), or minister (e.g., Claveria, 2014; Goddard, 2021; Kroeber & Hüffelmann, 2022; Krook & O'Brien, 2012). Existing research has identified a multitude of factors explaining variation in the opportunities and constraints presented to women leaders. Most importantly, a gender progressive environment, both within the party, but also in the society at large, increase women's chances for reaching top political offices (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; Annesley et al, 2019; Dingler & Helms, 2023; Goddard, 2019). Additionally, women's access to leadership roles depends on substantial nature of the position. For instance during ministerial selection, women are most frequently selected to lead 'feminine' portfolios linked to women's traditional area of responsibility such as family, education, or health, but seldomly to 'masculine' portfolios such as security, finance, or the economy (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Goddard, 2019).

While research can explain – at least partly – under which conditions women become political leaders, substantially less is known about gendered working conditions in office. Descriptive evidence provides inconclusive evidence as to whether tenure length differs systematically for men and women political leaders. Some studies find that women are in office for shorter periods than men (Bright et al, 2015; Saaka, 2025), while others demonstrate that this effect is context-dependent (O'Brien, 2015; O'Neill et al, 2019) or absent altogether (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; Armstrong et al, 2024). More consistently, previous research finds that women's careers proceed less successfully than men's after entering cabinets. Women are less likely to be promoted to prestigious portfolios (Curtin et al, 2023) and need to prove themselves in leading less prestigious portfolios for longer durations before advancing into more prestigious ones compared to men (Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2022).

Role (in)congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) offers explanations for this pattern: In short, the theory suggests that women face prejudice so that they will not be perceived as good leaders, no matter which traits they display. This prejudice stems from the lack of congruity between expectations about how women should act and how leaders should act and materialize in two ways. First, women are less likely to be perceived as possessing the traits required for successful (political) leadership which align with traditionally masculine characteristics (Bruckmüller

et al, 2014; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Powell et al, 2002; Schein & Mueller, 1992). Men are typically associated with traits that are usually perceived as making a competent leader, these include, for instance, assertiveness, confidence, competitiveness, or ambition (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly et al, 2020; Rosenwasser & Dean, 1989; Thomas, 1994). By contrast, women are often ascribed traits such as affection, helpfulness, kindness, and sympathy, which do not align with conventional notions of competent leadership. Even if not all stereotypes linked to women equally apply to women politicians, Schneider & Bos (2019) indicate that women politicians fail to possess the strengths associated with being women (e.g., sensitive or compassionate), while they also lack leadership, competence, and other masculine traits in comparison to men politicians. Thus, overall, men possess “patriarchal resources” (Bjarnegård, 2018), a set of attributes that enhance their perceived competence as political leader, and they are largely inaccessible to women. Second, role (in)congruity theory proposes that, even when women exhibit the desired leadership traits, they will be given less favorable evaluation than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002) because these women fail to conform to gender role expectations (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Rudman et al, 2012). Given this double-bind, women in leadership positions frequently encounter skepticism about their leadership skills (Biernat & Fügen, 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Other prominent explanations for women’s unequal chances to enter political leadership positions and their unequal working conditions once in such posts refer to gendered networks and a hostile political culture decreasing ambition. First, the participation in elite networks tends to be gendered as they advantage men. Women legislators are less prone to have occupied the prestigious posts or follow party trajectories (Ohmura et al, 2018) that are often needed to launch high-profile national careers (Bjarnegård, 2015; Murray, 2010). Women are thus less likely to become “political power brokers” (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2013, 89). At the same time, resources like having a larger network benefit more than women as they are mostly valued in men candidates for prestigious positions in legislatures and governments (Verge & Claveria, 2016). Second, women increasingly experience a hostile political environment which depresses their political ambition. For instance, women policy makers are confronted with more hostility than men ranging from incivility to harassment, threats, and assault (Collignon & Rüdig, 2020; Håkansson, 2020; Herrick & Franklin, 2019; Mechkova & Wilson, 2021; Rheault et al, 2019). In particular, powerful and visible women are at a heightened risk of violence compared to their men counterparts (Håkansson, 2020; Rheault et al, 2019). Depressed ambition (Herrick & Franklin, 2019; Höhmann et al, 2025) and disrupted campaign activities (Collignon & Rüdig, 2021) among women are one result of violence in politics.

This paper investigates the theoretical assumption on which the first explanation for women’s unequal chances to enter and succeed in political leadership positions

stands, by asking whether political leadership ideals are indeed still gendered in contemporary Western European democracies as proposed by role (in)congruency theory. A recent study by Erikson & Josefsson (2023) sheds light on MPs' perceptions of committee and parliamentary party group leaders in contemporary Sweden. Based on a survey with MPs, the study shows that MPs' perceptions of ideal parliamentary leaders prominently feature characteristics of integrative leadership, typically ascribed to women. Characteristics of aggregative leadership, usually ascribed to men are considered less important by MPs. Hence, this research indicates that leadership ideals in highly gender progressive countries nowadays match a leadership style more consistent with feminine than masculine traits (Erikson and Josefsson, 2023). Based on these insights, we provide a first comparative investigation of this issue in Western Europe, shedding light on the traits that make a good political leader in the eyes of the political elite.

3. Theoretical expectations about the gendered nature of leadership styles in contemporary Western Europe

The multitude of leadership styles present in politics can be roughly clustered into two broader sets (Erikson and Josefsson, 2023):

- (1) Integrative leadership emphasizes cooperation, consensus, listening, and caring for others. It seeks to resolve common problems and promote the collective good (see also Silvia & McGuire, 2010). This includes, for instance, what is commonly labeled participatory or democratic leadership, transformational leadership, or servant leadership.
- (2) Aggregative leadership emphasizes conflict management through assertiveness, control, and the exercise of power over others to achieve goals (see also Rosenthal, 1998). This includes concepts such as directive or autocratic leadership, transactional leadership, or agentic or commanding leadership.

Leadership styles are gendered as they align with traits ascribed to men and women. Community-orientation, cooperativeness, and social responsibility describe women (Braun et al, 2017; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eckel & Grossman, 1998), who are stereotypically depicted as displaying traits linked to integrative leadership (Erikson & Josefsson, 2023; Rosenthal, 1998). Men are perceived as assertive, controlling, and individualistic (Braun et al, 2017; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eckel & Grossman, 1998) and, thus, should display traits linked to aggregative leadership (Erikson & Josefsson, 2023; Rosenthal, 1998).

MPs should traditionally favor aggregative compared to integrative leadership styles. This preference follows from the historical linkage between masculinity and political institutions (Krook & Mackay, 2010; Mackay et al, 2010). Men have made up the vast majority of ministers while women were mostly absent from politics. In consequence, masculinity shapes desirable traits (Franceschet et al, 2012) and MPs

should have internalized the traits linked to aggregative leadership, traditionally associated with men, as typical for a good minister. This rationale also finds support in research on industrial organizations which demonstrates that women in leading positions (e.g. as managers) more frequently face prejudices about their leadership competences than men (see Eagly & Carli, 2003) and that ‘masculine’ characteristics are more commonly ascribed to successful leaders (see e.g., Powell et al, 2002; Schein & Mueller, 1992)

A good example for this idea provides the seemingly functional depictions of the link between parliament and government (Miller, 2005; Strøm, 2000) which envision a good minister as balancing the needs for ministerial autonomy and parliamentary accountability. In this understanding, ministers’ main task is to work towards policies in the interest of the parliamentary majority avoiding agency slack, making use of the ministerial staff as resource towards this aim. Additionally, ministers ought to be responsive to the parliamentary majority. This depiction implies a hierarchical way of thinking about the minister’s sphere of influence and authority typical for aggregative leadership. In this logic, a good minister leads the ministerial organization effectively, indicating a goal-orientation that is more output than process based and assertive and controlling rather an affectionate and cooperative collaboration.

With the high value ascribed to aggregative leadership skills, the benefits of integrative leadership are traditionally overlooked by political elites. Interpersonal and contextual sensitivity, developed also through enhanced care responsibilities and the need to balance a multitude of private and professional tasks, are not perceived as beneficial traits by political elites (Murray, 2014, 528). Based on these considerations, we expect that MPs emphasize the importance of aggregative leadership when describing ideal leaders, while they neglect integrative leadership.

Hypothesis 1: MPs are more likely to positively mention traits associated with aggregative than integrative leadership when depicting a good minister.

Ascriptions of gender stereotypes and of feminine and masculine leadership qualities are generally flexible (Eagly et al, 2020; Erikson & Josefsson, 2023; Scott, 1986), even though they have been remarkably stable in the past (Burgess & Borgida, 1999). Contemporary developments in the political sphere provide at least two reasons to expect the transformation of gendered conceptions of good ministers in Western European democracies towards increasingly positive perceptions of integrative leadership styles.

First, generational value change has altered what individuals expect in good leaders as well as prejudice about women’s ability to govern. Inglehart (1990, 1997) proposes that economic and social developments create a process of cultural modernization, according to which younger generations increasingly value post-materialist values over materialist values, including preferences for individual freedom, subject-

tive well-being and quality of life, as well as gender equality. For one, this process results in stronger preferences for leadership based on cooperation rather than control (Anderson et al, 2017; Yeganeh, 2017). For another, the higher importance of gender equality transforms ideas about women as political actors (Inglehart & Norris, 2000) and opens the door to a less gender biased conception of who constitutes a good minister. These transformations might be self-reinforcing since they result in an increasing number of women leading. In turn, observing successful women leaders might shake the foundation of rule (in)congruency theory which is based on the idea that men define leadership ideals due to their dominance in these positions (see e.g., Krook, 2006).

Second, democracies are currently experiencing multiple crises that demand the ability to transform political structures from leaders – a trait typically ascribed to integrative leadership styles (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001). During crises, political actors lack information, face time pressure and complex decision-making situations (Rosenthal et al. 2001: 6–7). Under this condition of uncertainty, basic political and social structures and norms may be disrupted, altered, and even replaced (see e.g. Strolovitch, 2013, 2021). If addressing a crisis involves fundamental changes in the political system, political elites and citizens may start to prefer a feminine over a masculine leadership style (Kroeber and Dingler 2023, Davidson-Schmich et al. 2023). Typical examples for crises that may alter leadership ideals towards support for integrative leadership styles are the later phase of a pandemic (when leaders need to build trust for policy responses and recovery measures), democratic backsliding (as political leaders need to regain trust in the light of increasing support for non-democratic political actors), or racist events that emerge into larger protests (when leaders need to show empathy towards the victims while moderating conflict between communities). In these situations, a leadership style that includes, for instance, an affectionate communication strategy or inclusive decision-making, might become assets for ministers (Kroeber & Dingler, 2023) and political elites might value the traits linked to integrative leadership when thinking of an ideal minister. Based on these considerations, we expect that MPs nowadays value integrative rather than aggregative leadership styles in ministers.

Hypotheses 2: MPs are more likely to positively mention traits associated with integrative than aggregative leadership when depicting a good minister.

Current challenges, however, might also reinforce negative perceptions of integrative leadership. Actors promoting the traditional division of labor, critical to women's equal political inclusion, are gaining grounds. Far-right parties and anti-gender movements become increasingly influential in political discourses and are likely to also shape how mainstream political actors perceive women ministers (Erikson & Josefsson, 2024). As radical right parties shape electoral strategies on both sides of the ideological spectrum (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Bale, 2003; Schain, 2016), their success might also reinforce the idea that successful min-

isters display assertive leadership styles. Simultaneously, in a new political landscape in which conservative ideals are promoted by radical right parties and anti-gender movements, opponents of gender equal values in mainstream parties may become empowered (Erikson & Josefsson, 2024). In turn, the idea of women's inability to govern might be fueled by this trend, possibly leading to a particularly critical perception of integrative leadership. In other words, MPs might not just prefer aggregative leadership, but openly reject integrative leadership.

Hypotheses 3: MPs are more likely to negatively mention traits associated with integrative than aggregative leadership when depicting a good minister.

4. Research design

We study depictions of ideal ministers in Western European democracies. For that purpose, we ran interviews with 31 MPs in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Spain between September 2023 and July 2024 (see Appendix 1.1 for the documentation of the interview process). The selection of the five countries balances concerns about similarity necessary for a meaningful interpretation and diversity necessary for generalizable results. Leadership styles vary substantially across the globe with differences occurring also between developed industrial democracies in Asia, Europe, or Northern America (Montaudon-Tomas et al, 2020; Taleghani et al, 2010). We therefore focus our analysis solely on Western European democracies. Within that region, we observe substantial deviation in the degree to which gender equality is realized in politics and beyond. Table 1 highlights this variation by showing regional minima and maxima as well as values for the five cases under study for women in government, women in parliament, and the gender equality index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (2025). The sample includes not only cases that perform consistently rather low (Austria) or consistently rather high in Western European comparison (Spain and Belgium), but also cases that display varying success across these different components of gender equality (Denmark and Germany). Beyond mirroring the larger pattern of gender equality in the region, all five cases under study have been experiencing the kind of crisis that, as argued in Hypothesis 2, might provoke a change in the depiction of good ministers (as have most countries in the region). The countries were affected by the pandemic and experienced substantial political conflict about appropriate policy solutions. Moreover, in all countries, radical right parties occupy substantial seat shares in parliament, indicating that many voters show support for non-democratic actors and that democracy is backsliding. The cases are thus well suited to explore which leadership ideals predominate nowadays in Western Europe within the political elite.

The present analysis draws on MPs' responses to the open-ended question: "What do you think are the most important attributes of a good minister?" The open wording closely follows prior research on leadership characteristics (e.g. Nichols

2016) and avoids priming respondents toward explicitly feminine or masculine leadership styles. This design choice allows respondents to articulate evaluative criteria without being cued toward gendered frames.

Table 1: Overview of gender quality in Europe and in our sample

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Germany	Spain	Regional max.	Regional min.
% women in government (global ranking)	25.0 % (75)	42.9 % (19)	30.4 % (60)	46.2 % (14)	50.0 % (6)	61.1 %	12.5 %
% women in parliament (global ranking)	36.1 % (43)	41.3 % (24)	43.6 % (20)	32.4 % (57)	44.3 % (19)	46.0 %	14.3 %
Gender equality index (EU ranking)	71.7 (11)	76.1 (5)	78.8 (2)	72.0 (10)	76.7 (4)	82.0	68.6
Power, Gender equality index (EU ranking)	39.9 (11)	49.9 (8)	57.3 (6)	47.5 (10)	66.6 (3)	80.3	13.6

Annotations: Data on women ministers is from the UN/IPU Parline and refers to January 2025; Data on women in parliament is from IPU Parline and refers to September 2025 (Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline, 2025); the gender equality index from the European Institute for Gender Equality (2025). The gender equality index ranges from 1 (full inequality) to 100 (full equality)

The question was embedded in semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a broader project on gender bias in MPs’ interactions with men and women in government. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and primarily focused on legislative oversight activities and MPs’ assessments of the performance of specific men and women ministers. The question on the attributes of a good minister was asked at the very end of the interview (see Appendix 9.2). Placing this question last was intended to encourage a more reflective, abstract assessment.

Still, asking the question after a series of evaluations of real-world ministers raises potential concerns about halo effects or priming. We therefore implemented several measures to mitigate such risks. First, interviewers explicitly signaled a shift in topic by introducing the question as “a different kind of question”, inviting respondents to move away from concrete cases of ministers discussed earlier in the interviews. Second, while the preceding questions referred to past performance of specific ministers, the inquiry on the good minister was posed in the present tense, clarifying that it did not directly pertain to earlier evaluations. Third, throughout the interview, respondents were not primed toward particularly successful or unsuccessful men or women ministers. The men and women ministers discussed in the main body of the interview were carefully matched within countries by party affiliation, portfolio, timing in office, and levels of political experience (see Appendix 1.3). Fourth, variation in the ministerial cases was deliberately introduced

across countries, including ministers holding more and less prestigious portfolios, portfolios commonly perceived as feminine or masculine, and membership in left- and right-wing parties. This reduces the likelihood that depictions of a “good minister” across the five countries reflect idiosyncratic characteristics of the specific cases discussed earlier.

Interviewees were selected based on two criteria: variation in gender, party affiliation, government membership, and demonstrated knowledge of government oversight in relation to the ministers included in the case studies (see Appendix 1.4). While this sampling strategy was not designed specifically for the present analysis, there is no indication that it systematically selected MPs with particular views on ministerial leadership. The sample is not nationally representative, but it captures substantial variation in gender, ideological positioning, and age, allowing us to identify a broad range of leadership depictions across Western European democracies. Descriptive characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of interviewees per country.

	N Interviews	Of these are... Women MPs	MPs from leftist parties	opposition MPs	Aged <50	Aged 50–70	Aged >70
Austria	7	2	3	4	0	6	1
Belgium	6	3	0	3	3	3	0
Denmark	5	2	5	5	0	1	4
Germany	7	3	7	6	1	5	1
Spain	6	4	4	3	1	4	1

Annotations: Left-wing parties include SPÖ and Greens for Austria, Groen and Ecolo for Belgium, Endeslisten, SF and S for Denmark, Greens, Left and SPD for Germany, PSOE and ERC for Spain. Right-wing parties include ÖVP and FPÖ for Austria, CDV, N-VA and Open Vld for Belgium, CDC and CiU for Spain

Finally, we conducted several post-hoc checks to assess whether the broader interview context may nonetheless have shaped responses. First, if respondents had been strongly primed by their oversight role, one would expect frequent references to accountability, responsiveness, or transparency when describing good ministers. However, such attributes were largely absent from responses to this question (see Research Question 5 in the Qualitative Content Analysis). Second, we find no systematic correspondence between the specific ministers discussed earlier in the interview and the leadership attributes emphasized at the end. No cross-national differences emerge that could plausibly be attributed to priming emerging from the ministerial cases discussed. While we cannot entirely rule out subtle contextual influences, the available evidence suggests that the interview design successfully elicited abstract and relatively unprimed depictions of good ministerial leadership.

MPs' responses to the question inquiring about their depiction of good ministers were coded using Qualitative Content Analysis (see Appendix 1.5 for a description of the transcription strategy). The content analysis responds to five research questions:

1. Which traits linked to **aggregative** leadership do MPs mention **positively** when describing a good minister?
2. Which traits linked to **integrative** leadership do MPs mention **positively** when describing a good minister?
3. Which traits linked to **aggregative** leadership do MPs mention **negatively** when describing a good minister?
4. Which traits linked to **integrative** leadership do MPs mention **negatively** when describing a good minister?
5. Which other characteristics do MPs mention when describing a good minister?

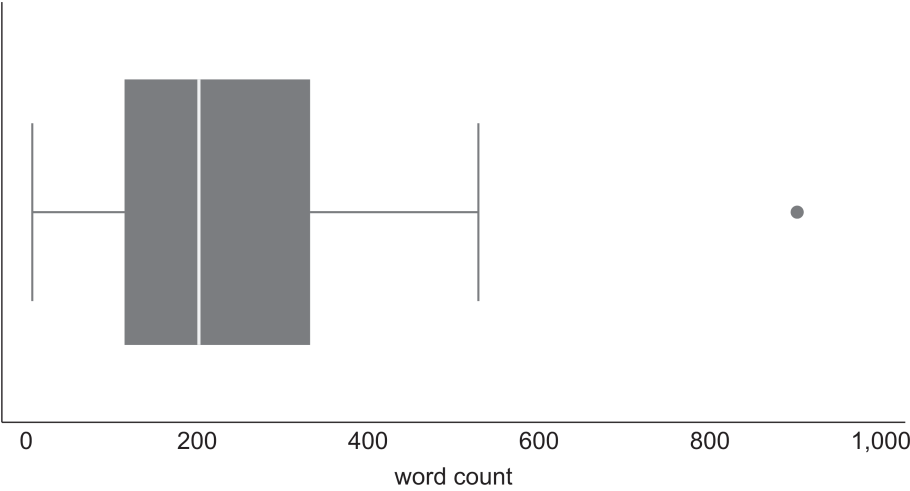
For the first four questions, we relied on the existing coding scheme of aggregative and integrative leadership traits provided by Erikson and Josefsson (2023). While we used the categories developed by the authors, we added category descriptions and anchor examples based on our material after 20 % of the material had been coded. Table 3 provides an overview of the coding scheme. Just like Erikson and Josefsson (2023), we identify a depiction as aggregative or integrative, if the majority of traits mentioned by a respondent link to this leadership ideal. For the fifth question, we developed an inductive coding scheme, aiming to capture rather nuanced aspects of the additional mentions of traits and characteristics of a good minister depiction. The software QCA Map (<https://www.qcamap.org/>) was used for the coding. All interviews were coded by two independent researchers. The inter-coder reliability measured as Gwet's AC1 is higher than 0.8 for all categories leading to confidence in the reliability of the assessment. Details on the Qualitative Content Analysis are provided in Appendix 2.

Table 3: Coding of aggregative and integrative leadership styles

Leadership Dimension	Aggregative Leadership	Integrative Leadership
Communication Style	Assertive Expresses views clearly and firmly, prioritizing clarity and direction <i>e.g.</i> decisive, confident, outspoken, firm	Affectionate Communicates with warmth, empathy, and personal connection <i>e.g.</i> caring, compassionate, supportive, personable
Decision-Making Approach	Controlling Directs and manages process and outcomes, enforces boundaries to avoid deadlock <i>e.g.</i> strong, authoritative, directive, determined	Cooperative Facilitates dialogue, seeks shared solutions and consensus <i>e.g.</i> collaborative, consensus-seeking, unifying, team-oriented
Orientation Toward Self vs. Others	Individualistic Relies on self-direction, independence, and personal drive <i>e.g.</i> autonomous, self-reliant, ambitious, independent-minded	Interpersonally Sensitive Attuned to others’ perspectives and emotions, responsive in relationships <i>e.g.</i> empathetic, considerate, respectful, attentive
Conflict & Influence Style	Forceful Pushes decisions through with authority, emphasizes strength and resolve. <i>e.g.</i> strong-willed, commanding, determined, tough	Listening Gives space for diverse voices, values input before deciding <i>e.g.</i> open-minded, attentive, thoughtful, responsive
Process Priority	Efficient Focuses on productivity, speed, and getting results; values decisiveness. <i>e.g.</i> pragmatic, results-driven, effective, action-oriented	Inclusive Prioritizes participation, ensuring all voices are represented even if slower <i>e.g.</i> fair, democratic, open, participatory
Motivation	Power-Seeking Motivated by influence, authority, and status; aims to consolidate leadership strength. <i>e.g.</i> ambitious, influential, commanding, authoritative <i>neg.:</i> seeking re-election, clientelistic policy-making	Striving for the Common Good Motivated by collective well-being and shared benefits <i>e.g.</i> principled, ethical, service-oriented
Structural Orientation	Hierarchical / Formalistic Relies on authority, rules, and rank to guide processes <i>e.g.</i> orderly, structured, disciplined, traditional	Context-Sensitive / Receptive Flexible and adaptive, receptive to situational needs and diverse input <i>e.g.</i> adaptive, flexible, open, responsive

Annotation: Key traits of the leadership styles, displayed in **bold and italic writing**, as in Erikson and Josefsson (2023)

Figure 1: Word count of responses



Source: Own source

Overall, respondents give rather detailed information on how they imagine good ministers to be. To some extent, this is visible in the length of the responses, visualized in Figure 1. On average, responses have a length of 240 words (median=202). But even the shortest response of 7 words – “It’s big ideas and a small ego” – still revealed meaningful information for our research question (BE01). This short response was coded as a negative reference to several traits typical for aggregative leadership (controlling, forceful, and individualistic), and a notion of the urge for good ministers to have a vision, coded as an additional demand outside the leadership styles (Research Question 5).

Moreover, MPs actually think of the traits linked to aggregative and integrative leadership when depicting good ministers, as all respondents make either positive or negative mentions of at least one relevant trait. Overall, we coded 53 statements linked to one of the styles traits. This stresses the importance of leadership traits for what makes a good minister, as we did not provide further information on our interest in the two sets of leadership traits to respondents, but asked the question on the qualities of a good minister in a very general manner.

The other aspects of a good minister that MPs mentioned (Research Question 5) fall into the following categories (with share of interviews mentioning this category in parentheses):

1. Portfolio-related expertise (categories emphasize the importance [or lacking importance] of portfolio-related knowledge) (51.6 %)

2. Cognitive and leadership capacities (categories reflect skills and capacities associated with leading and inspiring others, including vision, intelligence, and the ability to organize and guide a team) (45.2 %)
3. Work ethics (categories focus on work-related qualities such as being diligent and morally upright) (19.4 %)
4. Political competence (categories highlight the importance of political skill, experience, and knowledge) (12.9 %)
5. Personal qualities and character (categories capture how leaders are perceived in terms of their personality and authenticity and emphasizes traits related to being genuine, likable, and free from negative characteristics) (12.9 %)

5. Analysis

In this section, we provide an overview of the leadership traits that MPs state in their depictions of good ministers. First, we show that MPs frequently and extensively mention traits linked to integrative rather than aggregative leadership. We demonstrate that this pattern holds for all five countries, across ideological leanings and for respondents of both genders. Second, we provide evidence that negative references to certain leadership traits of ministers are limited to aggregative rather than an integrative leadership. We interpret these findings in the light of our theory in the subsequent section “Interpretation and critical reflection”.

The ranking of traits that MPs ascribe to good ministers illustrates their preference for integrative leadership. Table 4 shows an overview of the frequency of the categories for aggregative and integrative leadership in the interviews, the countries in which each category occurred, and exemplary quotes. Traits linked to integrative leadership are mentioned as five of the six most prominent traits that MPs seek in a good minister. Most frequently mentioned is a cooperative decision-making approach (mentioned by 32 % of all respondents), that facilitates dialogue, seeks shared solutions and consensus. This trait is prominent in all five countries, with MPs saying a good minister needs to “be a good mediator” (BE02) or should have the “capacity for agreement, the capacity for dialogue” (ES07). In the words of a German MP, “To come to a reasonable solution, one also needs the ability to compromise” (GER03). Some MPs explicitly justify the importance of this trait with the need to cooperate across parties (AT01, BE02, DK05), with committee members (DK04), or with other ministers (BE05). As an Austrian MP states it, good ministers “[...]need to be capable of bringing along all factions, including not only those of the governing partner but also the opposition” (AT01).

Nearly as many MPs emphasize that good ministers should be able to listen when handling conflict and influencing others (29 %) and should be striving for the common good as a process orientation (26 %). Still every fifth MP mentions the need to be interpersonally sensitive when interacting with others (23 %) and to show in-

clusiveness in processes (19 %). These traits are stated across either all countries (co-operative, interpersonally sensitive) or in four of the five countries (listening except Germany, integrative except Denmark, inclusive except Belgium). Interviewees speak only selectively about context-sensitivity or receptiveness (6 %), while no respondent referred to affectionateness as being a desirable trait in a good minister.

Assertiveness is also among the most frequently mentioned traits, but other traits linked to aggregative leadership are generally less common in MPs’ depictions of good ministers. Interviewees emphasize that good ministers should have an assertive communication style, that involves expressing their views clearly and firmly, providing directions and prioritizing. We find references to assertiveness in MPs’ depictions of good ministers across the five countries in our sample. For instance, a Belgian MP notes that “a really good minister would be able to do both. You know, you can function at the high levels among peers, but you can also kind of dumb it down [...]. Often in politics, people are willing to make sacrifices if they know what they’re for, if they know how long the sacrifice will last and when it will end. People are willing to do that if you can explain it to them” (BE03). Or, as a Danish colleague put it “[...] which is also very important is that you can communicate the decisions afterwards, which is often a special challenge [...]. [...] come out and explain to the general population, to the media what you have actually done” (DK03). All other characteristics ascribed to aggregative leaders are referenced substantially less frequently by MPs as making a good minister, including hierarchical or formalistic structural orientation (16 %), a forceful conflict style (13 %), and efficiency-orientation in processes (10 %). Other traits linked to aggregative leadership are either mentioned by few interviewees (controlling [6 %], individualistic [3 %]) or not at all (power-seeking).

Table 4: Frequency of notions of leadership traits in MPs’ depictions of good ministers

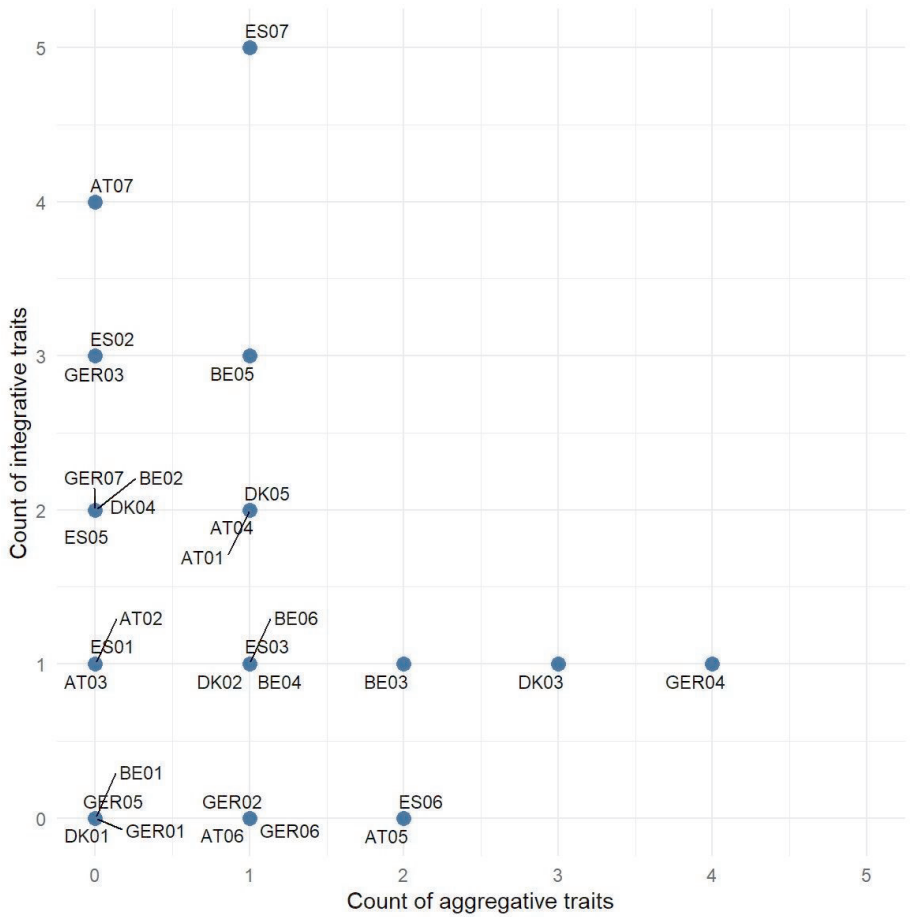
Leadership trait	Mean	Countries	Exemplary quote
Aggregative 1- Assertive	0.32	all	“So, you need to be able to come across as winning and able to hold the team together.” (GER06)
Integrative 2- Cooperative	0.32	all	„And it's difficult because you have to be in the cooperation. I believe in cooperation.” (BE05)
Integrative 4- Listening	0.29	AT, BE, DK, ES	„So, bringing the factions together, talking with them, meeting them at eye level — I believe that is a very essential aspect that a minister should have” (AT01)
Integrative 6- Striving for the Common Good	0.26	AT, BE, ES, GER	“[...] is very aware that their main function is to serve the citizens. That is the concept of public service and common good.” (ES05)
Integrative 3- Interpersonally Sensitive	0.23	BE, DK, ES, GER	„[...] knowing what is living between people, knowing what is going on in your region, in the country and being able to play in on those wishes of your region” (BE02)
Integrative 5- Inclusive	0.19	AT, DK, ES, GER	„In Denmark we have ten parties and I think a good minister will try to make more political parties involved in an agreement about a new law, then only the parties that are in the government” (DK05)

Leadership trait	Mean	Countries	Exemplary quote
Aggregative 7 – Hierarchical / Formalistic	0.16	AT, DK, ES, GER	„You need to be able to delegate” (GER04)
Aggregative 4- Forceful	0.13	BE, DK, GER	„And sometimes you have to be able to say: “No, I don't agree. [...] Or sometimes, “I don't agree because you didn't agree about my topic. If you change your mind, perhaps I can change my mind”. Yeah, it's the reality. It's something very hard to do [...], but sometimes you have to be out against your colleague.” (BE05)
Aggregative 5- Efficient	0.10	BE, DK, ES	„Then, I think there's something important, which is the ability to make decisions and to carry forward the policies with which you presented yourself in the election and which won the election” (ES07)
Aggregative 2- Controlling	0.06	GER	„I would really emphasize management skills. Management doesn't mean personally understanding every problem in detail, but making sure that, given the complexity of the tasks facing any ministry — and especially the Ministry of Economic Affairs — things are kept well organized.” (GER02)
Integrative 7- Context-Sensitive / Receptive	0.06	BE, GER	“[...] you have to have a good balance between coming up for your case, for your ministry, but also taking care of other problems or other things that are important.” (BE06)
Aggregative 3- Individualistic	0.03	ES	„You have to demonstrate political loyalty.” (ES03)
Aggregative 6- Power-Seeking	0.00		
Integrative 1- Affectionate	0.00		

Source: Own source

Beyond the explicitly positive mentions of integrative leadership traits, MPs' preference for integrative over aggregative leadership is visible in the combination of traits they emphasize. Figure 2 displays a scatter plot displaying a count of the leadership traits positively mentioned per interviewee, separated by aggregative leadership traits on the x-axis and integrative leadership traits on the y-axis. In their depiction of good ministers, less than one third of MPs make no reference to any trait linked to integrative leadership (29 %), one third mentions exactly one of these traits (32 %), and somewhat more than one third mentions two or more of these traits (39 %). The strongest depiction of integrative leadership stems from a Spanish MP, saying that good ministers have “[...] to have a great capacity to learn and to have that capacity to learn [they] have to have a great capacity to listen to the sector [they] work with. [...] [it's important to have] sensitivity, the ability to create agreement, the ability to create dialogue. [...] you have to have a commitment to the citizens” (ESP07). 32 % of MPs, spanning respondents from all five countries, provide descriptions that include only traits of integrative leadership styles and not a single mention of a trait typical for aggregative leadership. 48 % of responding MPs provide depictions of good ministers that are mainly emphasizing integrative leadership.

Figure 2: Scatter plot showing the count of the aggregative and integrative leadership traits mentioned by MPs.



Source: Own source

By contrast, positive mentions of aggregative leadership traits are absent in roughly half of the responses (45 %), while one third of the respondents mention only one of these traits - assertiveness (32 %). Only five respondents rely on two or more traits linked to aggregative leadership in their depictions of a good minister. The most pronounced portrayal of aggregative leadership is provided by a German MP, saying that a good minister “[...] must be able to deal with many people and be able to delegate, but also be capable of teamwork. I think that’s important. Making a selection of the people who support you is also important. Then I think you also need a certain public competence. That is, you have to be able to represent things

in public. You have to be able to answer questions and not look foolish [...], what is called leadership strength, I think that's also an important qualification" (GER04). Only 13 % of all respondents refer exclusively to the desirability of aggregative leadership in a good minister, including respondents in Austria, Spain, and Germany, but not a single MP from Belgium and Denmark. 35 % of respondents (from all five countries) describe a minister predominantly with traits linked to aggregative leadership as ideal.

Regarding the distribution of respondent characteristics, our (numerically small) sample shows no systematic variation in how MPs from parties with different ideological placements imagine good ministers. MPs from both left- and right-wing parties are equally likely to depict good ministers as those displaying integrative leadership (left=43 %, right=38 %), and equally unlikely to depict good ministers as those displaying aggregative leadership (left = 26 %, right = 25 %). Concerning MPs' gender, men seem to be equally likely to provide depictions of good ministers that are consistent with aggregative and integrative leadership styles (35 % each), while women are more likely to provide a depiction of integrative rather than aggregative leadership (integrative=64 %, aggregative=17 %). We also find support for integrative leadership across all age groups in our study. Within the small number of respondents below fifty (N=5, integrative 50 %, aggregative 50 %) and above seventy (N=7, integrative 40 %, aggregative 60 %), support for the two leadership styles is evenly distributed. Respondents aged fifty to seventy (N=19) show more support for integrative than aggregative leadership (integrative 29 %, aggregative 21 %).

Turning to negative notions, we observe only a single individual making a negative reference to integrative leadership. The Belgian respondent states that "[...] to listen to people and to the civil society, to have the capacity to cooperate with other ministers, but not being, naïve. I have to defend the party ideas in government." (BE05). With this notion, the respondent points out the limitations of prioritizing inclusiveness in decision-making processes. The MP seems to suggest that following a fully inclusive strategy indicates a lack of experience, wisdom, or judgment, is overly idealistic or simplistic and is generally incompatible with ministers' role as party player. Despite this negative notion of inclusiveness, the interviewee also emphasizes the importance of many integrative leadership traits, including to be cooperative, listen, and strive for the common good.

In stark contrast to the near absence of negative references to the traits linked to integrative leadership, negative notions of the traits linked to aggregative leadership are found in a substantial share of the interviews (42 %), spread over all five countries. Table 5 provides an overview of the frequency of the categories, the countries in which they occurred, as well as exemplary quotes. Every fifth respondent said that good ministers should not lead in a forceful manner (19 %). Some respondents also negatively mentioned being controlling, individualistic, and power-seeking (13 % each). Single mentions also occurred for assertiveness and efficiency. Most of

these individuals working with negative depictions of aggregative leadership generally depict good ministers as displaying traits linked to integrative leadership (46 %), making use of negative references to traits linked to aggregative leadership to further tease out certain aspects valuable in integrative leadership styles. So, for instance, an Austrian respondent argues “I think it’s very important to bring the administrative apparatus along. Some ministers come into the ministry and think they can just ignore it. But that doesn’t work. You have to draw on the knowledge and experience of the staff and involve them” (AT03). The respondent thus uses a negative notion of self-orientation to highlight the importance of listening to others for a good minister.

Table 5: Frequency of negative notions of aggregative leadership traits in MPs’ depictions of good ministers with exemplary quotes

Leadership trait	Mean	Countries	Exemplary quote
4 – Forceful	0.19	AT, BE, DK, GER	“On a more practical level – after all, most legislation is not just conflict but something that has to work – it is crucial that a minister can understand the arguments of others and is open to achieving a result rather than just sticking to the starting point” (DK02)
2 – Controlling	0.13	BE, ES, GER	“Don’t think that you know everything, some ministers think they are the smartest people in the world.” (BE04)
3 – Individualistic	0.13	AT, BE, DK, GER	“The most important thing is no vanity, or as little vanity as possible, because I believe vanity is what is most disruptive in politics. If you put yourself in the foreground or see only your own charisma as the criterion for your work, then it goes wrong.” (GER03)
6 – Power-seeking	0.13	AT, ES, GER	“The power you hold here should be experienced as responsibility, not as power in the usual sense.” (AT02)
1 – Assertive	0.03	BE	“some [...] communicate too fast. Sometimes you should wait a day. (BE04)
5 – Efficient	0.03	GER	“So is it a matter for ministers to do their work as well as possible, or to consolidate their political agenda and their position of power?” (GER05)
7 – Hierarchical	0		

Source: Own source

Regarding the distribution of respondent characteristics, MPs from right-wing parties are somewhat more likely to negatively reference aggregative leadership (5 of 8) than those from left-wing parties (8 of 23). Men MPs are somewhat less likely to make negative references to traits linked to aggregative leadership (6 of 17) than women MPs (7 of 14). This insight speaks directly to the observation above that men are more likely than women to positively mention aggregative leadership.

6. Interpretation and critical reflection

As the analysis of the interview material demonstrates, the vast majority of the traits that MPs expect from a good minister are those that link to integrative leadership styles. All attributes typical for this kind of leadership except context-sensitivity and affectionateness are frequently mentioned by MPs when depicting a good minister. By contrast, from the traits describing aggregative leadership, MPs only mentioned assertiveness as desirable for a good minister. Based on these observations, it is only consequential that roughly every second respondent seems to prefer integrative leadership, while only every third respondent desires aggregative leadership.

While we generally find a preference for integrative leadership, most frequently, MPs depict a good minister as someone who displays both integrative and aggregative leadership traits. MPs think of good ministers as someone with certain leadership traits, but they usually do not limit their ideal depictions to one or the other leadership style. This insight is consistent with the literature on leadership at large, which suggests that good leaders may switch between leadership styles depending on the situation at hand (see e.g., Meyer & Meijers, 2018). For instance, MPs may expect ministers to combine aggregative leadership for situations in which political actions need to occur ad hoc but integrative leadership in routine policymaking.

We observe respondents preferring integrative over aggregative leadership in all countries. In sum, individuals with preference for integrative over aggregative leadership occur all over Western Europe. This evidence lends support to Hypothesis 2, which argues that, nowadays, integrative leadership is favored over aggregative leadership, due to generational value change (Inglehart 1990, 1997) transforming both what individuals expect in good leaders as well as prejudice about women's ability to govern (Anderson et al, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Yeganeh, 2017), and due to the multiple crises currently experienced by democracies that might, from MPs view, be best handled with integrative leadership styles (Kroeber & Dingler, 2023). Interestingly, this shift in preferences is also visible in the negative notions of aggregative leadership. Our material suggests MPs explicitly refer to what used to be the norm for a political leader to define what, nowadays, they do not expect from a good minister. Aggregative leadership styles thus remain the point of reference against which desirable leadership is defined.

Our evidence also suggests that the transformation in preferred ministerial leadership styles goes beyond those political actors usually perceived as most gender progressive. While our sample of MPs is skewed to the left, interview partners belonging to right-wing parties generally also show support for traits linked to integrative leadership and frequently reject traits linked to aggregative leadership. Similarly, men in all five countries display support for integrative leadership styles – albeit to a smaller degree than their women colleagues. Variation between different actors warrants further investigation based on larger numbers. Nonetheless, our sample provides no indication that only MPs from left-wing parties or only women

display support for integrative leadership styles, while right-wing party members or men MPs continue to support aggregative leadership at large.

It appears consistent with these insights that our sample provides no supportive evidence at all for the idea that gender backlash motivates MPs to depict good ministers as not displaying integrative leadership (as proposed by Hypothesis 3). The only negative reference to integrative leadership styles was embedded in a positive description of this type of leader. This implies that the MPs sampled for the purpose of this project do not display such regressive perceptions of leading women politicians. Yet, notably, the sample contains only two politicians from far-right parties, meaning that those most likely to engage in gender backlash are not appropriately captured in our sample. Still, as three of the five countries in our sample have far-right parties that have been in parliament for decades (Austria, Belgium, Denmark) and two experienced recent entrance of such a party into parliament (Germany, Spain), the absence of backlash evidence suggests that hostile attitudes from far-right actors did not spill-over to mainstream political actors so far.

7. Conclusion

This study investigates the degree to which MPs' depictions of good ministers in Western Europe in the 2020s are gendered. We build our analysis on the distinction between aggregative leadership styles, characterized by traits typically ascribed to men, and integrative leadership styles, characterized by traits typically ascribed to women (Erikson and Josefsson 2023). Previous scholarly work has shown that Swedish MPs, operating in a highly gender-equal environment, display a strong preference for integrative over aggregative leadership in their parliamentary leaders (Erikson and Josefsson 2023). Based on interviews with 31 MPs from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Spain, this study finds that support for integrative leadership is not limited to gender-progressive contexts but occurs over a range of countries with broad variation in shares of women in parliament, in government, and levels of gender equality at large. The main contribution of this study lies in showing that leadership ideals that are largely consistent with traits typically ascribed to women occur at large in Western Europe. Also, in countries where women are still far away from parity both in politics but also in the society at large, we observe that many political elites depict good leaders as displaying integrative leadership. We argue that this pattern can be the consequence of value change and crisis experience. During the last decades, generational value change (Inglehart 1990, Inglehart & Norris, 2000) has been transforming both what individuals expect in good leaders as well as prejudice about women's ability to govern across the globe (Inglehart & Norris, 2000, 10–11; Yeganeh, 2017). Simultaneously, democracies currently face multiple crises that, from MPs' views, might be best handled through integrative leadership styles (Kroeber & Dingler, 2023). We find

no indication that MPs from mainstream parties reject integrative leadership as a consequence of the increasing discursive power of political actors hostile to women's political leadership.

While this study can show the existence of support for feminine leadership styles in Western Europe, the sample size per country is certainly too small to provide a representative picture of endorsement of different leadership styles in each country, different party families, or gender groups. Future research might want to develop a more complete picture, in particular of the degree of preference for integrative leadership by men and women MPs in countries with different levels of gender equality. Moreover, all countries in our sample are parliamentary democracies with proportional representation and coalition governments, which are arguably most likely cases for political elites to believe that political leaders should show traits such as the ability to compromise and to cooperate. Masculine leadership styles might remain prominent in more confrontational settings such as presidential systems or majoritarian democracies with single-party governments. Exploring such variation in gendered patterns of political leadership ideals across institutional contexts deserves further attention.

The finding of this study that many and diverse MPs depict good ministers as displaying integrative leadership, puts spotlight on an interesting puzzle: Why do we still observe an unequal treatment of women in political leadership positions by political elites? In the past, when women were mostly absent from political leadership positions, masculine traits were equivalent to political leadership (Bruckmüller et al, 2014; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Powell et al, 2002; Schein & Mueller, 1992) and this was used by scholars to explain barriers for women to enter and perform in high-profile political offices (e.g., Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; Bjarnegård, 2018; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2016; Kroeber et al, Forthcoming; Krook & O'Brien, 2012). If elites envisage good political leaders to display traits that are largely consistent with traits generally ascribed to women, we would expect them to give women leaders a fair chance to also proof their leadership skills. Yet, scholarly work indicates that women political leaders are still perceived more negatively than their men colleagues, are judged harsher when loosing elections (Aldrich & Somer-Topcu, 2025; O'Brien, 2015), are perceived as less competent (Dingler & Kroeber, 2022), are scrutinized more carefully than their men colleagues (Kroeber et al, 2026), and, experience "gendered practices" at large (Erikson and Josefsson 2023, 2). Hence, while this study sheds light on MPs depictions of good ministers, we need new explanations as to why women are perceived as less capable to govern in contemporary Western Europe and how actual practices in political institutions remain gendered.

Particular attention should be paid by future research to the question as to whether displaying integrative leadership is equally valued for men and women leaders. Management studies indicate that men leaders are appreciated more for displaying

a feminine connotated leadership style than women leaders (Gentry et al, 2015; Wang et al, 2013). Translating this finding to the political context, men leaders who display integrative leadership might be viewed as extraordinarily good leaders by political elites – but also the public. By contrast, women leaders displaying this style might not benefit to the same extent from this more feminine connotated leadership style while at the same facing backlash when appearing too masculine. Providing more insights into the who benefits from integrative leadership or is punished for aggregative leadership appears to be a timely avenue for future research.

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Appendix

<https://www.nomos.de/zeitschriften/cpe/#zusatzmaterial>

“We like to provoke the ladies” – A qualitative study of climate change skepticism as masculinity expression in Southern Norway

Abstract

This article examines how climate change skepticism (CCS) intersects with sexism and masculinity in Southern Norway. It reveals how CCS can serve as a tactic to reject the perceived feminized and moralizing power of climate attitudes. Drawing on three years of ethnographic fieldwork (2022–2025) and qualitative interviews, this article explores how participants mobilized skepticism as a form of identity work and defense to protect threatened masculinity and justified patriarchal privilege. Using frameworks of system justification and aggrieved entitlement, the research demonstrates how participants framed climate policies as feminized and moralizing threats and used CCS to signal rebelliousness, rationality, and group belonging. CCS thus operated not merely as scientific doubt but as a cultural strategy for maintaining patriarchal privilege. Conducted in Norway, a country celebrated for egalitarian and gender equal values, the findings demonstrate how gendered narratives shaped climate attitudes. By engaging with skeptics who typically distrust researchers, this paper examines how CCS served as a tool for expressing masculinity. Climate communication that is sensitive to identity, avoids gendered framing, and engages masculine norms may reduce defensive resistance and open more inclusive dialogue.

Keywords: climate change skepticism, masculinity, identity, ethnography, Norway

1. Introduction

Adam (student and administrative worker, 25–35 years) points around the office and said, “Us guys are conservative [points to one side of the room with two desks], and the ladies sit over there”. The desks were organized based on the job positions they held, not because of opinions. However, he joked about it and pointed to a line in the middle of the room from where a wall had previously been. The “conservative men” sat on one side of the line, and “the liberal women” on the other. “You see our [the men’s] opinions on the walls here” he laughs and points to the posters and reads some of them out loud. David Goggings: “It’s so easy to be great nowadays because everyone else is weak” and two of Jordan Peterson: “Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping” and “it’s like... yeah... if you want to shut down their freedom of speech and use the violence of government to harm them then you are the fascist”. He looks at me and says: “So, then we provoke the ladies a little. We like to provoke”. Adam noted that although the women in the office disliked these posters, he and his boss Daniel, who is also part of this research, kept them regardless. (April 2022)

This encounter mirrored broader themes of resistance, patriarchal masculinity, dominance, and rebellion, and suggested deeper societal tensions between patriarchal masculine identities and egalitarian social norms. Adam explicitly identified himself as conservative and divided the office not only by political stance but also by gender. His remarks and the display of posters underscored gendered identity tensions and a pride in provoking women. His humor and frankness were more

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than workplace banter; they functioned as performative practices that established and reinforced a particular masculine identity that I later found to be pervasive among many participants. In Norway, a country with egalitarian values (Flemmen et al., 2022; Ljunggren, 2017) and grappling with climate contradictions (Boasson & Lahn, 2017; Norgaard, 2011), it offers a particularly interesting backdrop for exploring climate change skepticism (CCS) and masculinity. This empirical paper explores how CCS is not merely a scientific contestation, but an expression of masculinity which can be motivated by justifying patriarchal systems.

2. Climate change skepticism, Norway and masculinity

Research on CCS is characterized by a diversity of approaches, leading to a variety of terminologies that can sometimes create confusion. Scholars have employed different terms to describe the nuances and variations within climate attitudes, reflecting the complexity of the phenomena. It is thus essential to clarify the specific terms and definitions used to capture the distinct aspects of CCS effectively. Climate *denialism* describes arguments that attack climate science (Jylhä et al., 2019; Krange et al., 2019; McCright & Dunlap, 2011), and Stanley Cohen (2013) included explanations of denial not only being a rejection of information, but rather a refusal to transform the information into social action and integrate the knowledge in everyday life (Cohen, 2013). This version of climate denial was used in the influential ethnographic research by Norgaard in a Norwegian town in the beginning of the 2000s (Norgaard, 2011). Climate *obstruction* has become an increasingly used term which refers to deliberately slow down or stop policies that aim to address climate change (Brulle & Roberts, 2024). *Skepticism* tends to create confusion by casting doubt (Almiron & Moreno, 2022), and Van Rensburg (2015) categorized climate change skepticism arguments in a hierarchy, with different critiques focusing on evidence, process, and response (Van Rensburg, 2015) while Rahmstorf (2004) distinguished trend, attribution, and impact skepticism. Impact skepticism, which questioned the severity or consequences of climate change aligns with my findings where the participants' skepticism primarily targets climate action strategies and impacts, typically questioning policy responses and impacts rather than participating in organized obstruction. My participants were generally unconcerned about climate change, and frustrated about what they perceived as an excluding climate debate. An illustrative and typical exchange between two participants, centering on uncertainty, was:

Daniel (25–35 years): [...] and they [climate scientists and politicians] don't think about the positive outcomes with CO2. Like the worst thing is that the ocean rises, it can become a little bit hotter and then maybe we can grow food in more places in the world. But there are a bunch of positive things!

Gaute (25–35 years): They talk about CO2 like it is an environmental toxin.

Daniel: Maybe it is not that dangerous, we can't know for sure.

Gaute: Too much of everything is dangerous.

When I write about CCS in this article, I refer to impact skepticism. This research identified the intersection between skepticism and expressions of masculinity, offering insight into the social dimensions shaping climate perceptions, with a particular focus on masculinity expression. Norway's complex and contradictory context and the empirical material generated made this a compelling case: a society known for gender equality and high levels of education provided a distinctive setting to examine links between CCS and masculinity.

2.1. The Norwegian context

Although perceived as socially and environmentally conscious, Norway grapples with contradictions between its high carbon emissions and self-considered climate innocence, showcasing tensions between environmental justice and privilege (Norgaard, 2011, 2012). Even though Norwegians think of themselves as environmentally conscious, like many other high-income countries, Norway has quite a few climate change skeptics. Wealthier nations like Norway are more likely to exhibit higher CCS due to increased CO₂ emissions per capita and decreased climate vulnerability (Sandvik, 2008; Tranter & Booth, 2015). Although Norway's politics has been characterized by consensus (Krick & Holst, 2019; Ljunggren, 2017), recent years have seen more polarized debates over climate policy (Fjellheim, 2023; Mósesdóttir, 2024; Aasen & Sælen, 2022). Norway's high level of CCS despite its environmental self-image could be understood in light of the influence of the Norwegian oil industry on public narratives.

The Norwegian oil industry's framing of "climate-friendlier" production has shaped policy debates, balancing economic dependency on oil with political aspirations for climate leadership (Boasson & Lahn, 2017; Sæther, 2017). This paradox highlights the significant influence of industry interests on public opinion and policy. Norgaard argued that cultural norms among privileged groups encouraged CCS and avoidance to protect identity (Norgaard, 2011). My research extended this argument by exploring how CCS functioned as an identity expression that rejected perceived feminized and moralizing climate narratives.

Amid Norway's renowned cultural egalitarianism (Flemmen et al., 2022; Ljunggren, 2017; Mangset, 2015) and contradictions in climate advocacy (Boasson & Lahn, 2017), CCS emerged as a fascinating expression of masculinity. Norway is known for gender equality, exemplified by parents receiving 12 months of paid parental leave, with a non-transferable 15-week quota reserved for each parent, every big or medium sized company must have at least 40 % gender balance in their board (Revisorforeningen, 2025), from 2013–2021 Norway had a female prime minister called Erna Solberg from Høyre, the biggest right-wing party (Statsministerens kontor, 2026) and the last 10 years cabinet positions have been relatively evenly distributed between women and men (Bufdir, 2023). Yet, surveys indicated shifts among Norwegian youth, including lower support for gender equality among some

cohorts and gendered differences in attitudes (Egge, 2025; Hystad & Lystad, 2025). These developments suggested a partial departure from traditional consensus-building. Southern Norway, often called by its municipality name Agder, is a region culturally inclined to avoid open conflict, nonetheless, it experienced mobilization around climate issues, making southern Norway a particularly useful site for examining the social dimensions of CCS. Overall, Norway's combination of egalitarian norms, narrative of economic dependence on fossil fuels, and changing political attitudes provided fertile ground for studying CCS as masculinity expression. I was intrigued to explore what CCS could represent. Researchers like Kidder (2018) and Wagner (2024) applied the concept of ideological performance in their studies, demonstrating how conservatives used symbolism and self-presentation (Wagner, 2024) and how participants' discussions about policies were primarily focused on asserting a conservative social identity and shaping a desired life narrative rather than genuinely showcasing preferred policy stances. The conversations around policies served as a means for individuals to establish belonging within a particular social group (Kidder, 2018). To explore how CCS could similarly assert a masculine identity rather than being a scientific climate stand, the following sections demonstrate the connection between climate attitudes and masculinity.

2.2. Masculinity

In recent years, the interplay between gender dynamics and climate concern has gained scholarly attention, including regarding how sexist attitudes influence CCS (Benegal & Holman, 2021). Researchers have proposed that Norwegian men's CCS partly stemmed from defending masculine identities threatened by a shift from fossil fuel reliance (Sælen & Aasen, 2023). Hegemonic masculinity, an idealized form of masculinity with privileged access to power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), has been linked to the maintenance of patriarchal and capitalist structures. Climate change can reflect patriarchal capitalist systems that concentrates wealth and power rather than distributing it (Stephens, 2024), and patriarchal systems and dominant male power encourage behaviors such as anti-environmentalism, among men (Rome, 2006) or an exaggerated set of traits such as dominance, stoicism, and rationality, often opposing emotionality (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988; Vokey et al., 2013). The masculine Western identity is often linked to reason, while emotions have been coded feminine (Ahmed, 2015). This masculine identity often rejects the feminine as "unmanly" to protect threatened masculinity, and men who perceive threats to their masculine identity sometimes adopt CCS as a defense against shifts in gender dynamics (Remsö et al., 2024; Renström & Bäck, 2024). Such masculine overcompensation can function symbolically to reinforce the social dominance and perceived superiority of masculinity over femininity, rather than merely reflecting biological sex differences (Carian & Sobotka, 2018). Instead of labeling climate change skeptics as merely anti-science or anti-political, climate science can present

a challenge to a masculine identity (Anshelm & Hultman, 2014). This study builds on that and explores how these traits contributed to the persistence of skepticism.

Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally dominant ideal of manhood that legitimates men's collective dominance over women and structures hierarchies among men. It is an idealized, normative pattern of practice, not necessarily the most common form, to justify gendered inequality. It is reproduced and enforced by social actors and institutions to maintain existing social, political, and economic orders (Connell, 2020). When using the term masculinity in this article, I connect it to a form of hegemonic masculine overcompensation involving toughness, emphasizing dominance, avoidance of femininity, and opposing emotionality based on explanations from the participants. These masculine traits not only reinforce gender norms but also play a critical role in upholding existing social hierarchies.

Cross-country research such as that of Remsö et al. (2024) indicates that men in wealthier, gender-equal nations perceive higher costs of climate change mitigation due to potential threats to hegemonic masculinity. They suggested that future research should examine the connection between gender gaps in CCS and gender equality, focusing on the role of threatened masculinity, which this article explores by looking at the role of hegemonic masculinity, with its emphasis on dominance and rationality, in sustaining resistance to pro-climate policies by engaging theoretical frameworks such as system justification (Feygina et al., 2010), and aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel, 2019).

2.3. Aggrieved entitlement and justifying patriarchal systems

As progressive societal shifts aim to realign power dynamics by granting rights to minorities and women some men react with radicalization rooted in feelings of “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel, 2019). This refers to a sense of being unfairly deprived of deserved status and benefits that produce resentment and victimhood. This is also connected to relative deprivation which is when you compare yourself to a reference group and feel as though your aspirations are blocked by societal conditions, leading to feelings of discontent (Kimmel, 2019; Manning & Stefanovic, 2024) as a reaction rooted in threatened masculinity. Often, relative deprivation can refer to how people in the middle class feel blocked by people above them on the ladder of mobility. The angry white men Kimmel spoke with in his research, seemed to look downwards instead of upwards on the ladder of mobility. It is not the ladder upwards that was blocked for them, but that the downward pressure from people they have been thought to feel superior, such as minority groups, women, LGBTQ+ and immigrants, were now pushing them downwards into the groups of the marginalized. Instead of focusing on coming up, they want to prevent being pushed down (Kimmel, 2019).

These feelings often arise amid socio-economic insecurities and societal changes such as progressive climate policies and are often misdirected at scapegoating

minorities and women (Manning & Stefanovic, 2024). Relative deprivation and aggrieved entitlement often fuel resentment among those whose social status is threatened by policies that benefit "others" at their expense, leading to polarization and support for ideologies that promise to restore lost status and privileges, similar to Hochschild's findings on the right-wing populists in Louisiana claiming that minorities were taking away what they felt belonged to them (Hochschild, 2016). Thus, these concepts can help explain resistance to climate policies perceived as undermining personal or group interests.

Masculinity intertwining with CCS can be explored through system justification theory which describes the psychological inclination to defend existing social and political systems for perceived stability (Feygina et al., 2010). This motivation appeared in CCS, where defending economic hierarchies aligns with maintaining patriarchal capitalist structures (Jylhä et al., 2016; Norgaard, 2011; Stephens, 2024). Benegal and Holman examined sexist attitudes' role in system justification in shaping CCS and argued that climate change policies represent a threat to gender hierarchy. CCS could thus be used to justify patriarchal systems, intertwining misogyny and political constructs of masculinity (Benegal & Holman, 2021). Other research showed how traditional masculine roles linked to rationality and industrial prosperity fostered resistance to environmental policies in various global contexts (Allen, 2022; Anshelm & Hultman, 2014), mirroring strategies found in research on Alberta's oil cultures, where local responses to Thunberg could be seen as an anxious reaction to perceived threats to colonial and patriarchal land ownership and ideas of gender and the future (Keller, 2021). These political and ideological responses often manifested as anti-feminist, anti-woke (a derogatory way of saying anti-progressive), or anti-environmental stances, with masculinity protection behaviors serving to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and resist progressive change (Vowles & Hultman, 2021). To explore CCS as masculinity expression and system justification, an ethnographic approach was used, as explained in the following.

3. Methodology

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork from 2022 to 2025 in Southern Norway. The primary data is from unstructured, in-depth interviews, both individual and group interviews, to explore masculine identity among CCS men. Participants were selected based on their CCS and came from various towns within the same geographic area of Southern Norway. The ethnographic approach and thematic analysis process used for this paper are explained in the following.

3.1. Ethnographic approach

Given the political sensitivity of CCS, the combination of repeated encounters and ethnographic observation supported trust-building. My interpretive stand shaped

four central methodological commitments. First, I explored emic meanings: the study aimed to understand how participants themselves made sense of climate change and masculinity. Second, I adopted a flexible, iterative design typical of ethnography: research questions, sampling decisions, and analytic categories were refined in response to emerging data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010; Ormston et al., 2014). Third, I combined interviews with participant observation to access both articulated beliefs and embodied practices that interview talk alone might obscure (Bond et al., 2020; Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Fourth, reflexivity was fundamental: I acknowledge that my positionality and interactions influenced data generation and analysis, and I documented these effects systematically (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018). Interviews with key participants lasted 1–3.5 hours, typically 2–2.5 hours. I took field notes when possible and adequate. I did not take field notes during conversations if we walked in the park for instance due to it being impractical, or if it was the first encounter with the participants, I usually did not have my notebook as it could create a clearer distinction between researcher and participants. I wanted the participants to feel comfortable, and I adjusted whether I took notes or recorded the conversations depending on what they wanted. Interviews were conducted in Norwegian and translated into English for analysis; I retained colloquial phrasing and slang where relevant to preserve the voice of the participants. The ethnographic approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010) was inspired by Hochschild’s (2016) empathic method to researching someone with a different perspective than yourself and by Clifford’s (2010) emphasis on contextual meaning and thick description.

Table 1: overview over the key participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age bracket	Occupation	Family status	From
Adam	Male	25–35	Economy, Administration	Single	Agder
Carl	Male	20–25	Student, humanities	Single	Agder
Eskild	Male	75–85	Physicist	Single	Agder
Daniel	Male	25–35	Social sciences, administration	Girlfriend	Eastern Norway
Gaute	Male	25–35	Teacher	Married, kids	Eastern Norway

Source: Own source

The participants were predominantly highly educated, many with a master’s degree or currently doing a master’s, lived in urban parts of Agder, and were not directly employed in carbon-intensive industries. This profile contrasted with prior CCS research that emphasized older men with industry ties (Anshelm & Hultman, 2014). Although participants came from diverse professional backgrounds such as social science, teaching education, humanities, administration, and finance, only one (Eskild) had worked some years in the oil industry. Participants were initially introduced to the study as research on diverse perspectives on climate policy. Starting conversations about road tolls provided a somewhat neutral entry point

since it was a widely discussed climate related policy at the time and allowed engagement without directly confronting skeptical views. By employing snowball sampling, participants vouched for me, enhancing credibility and enabling access to individuals hesitant to discuss their views publicly. Using existing social networks of the participants enriched the data generation process, with group dynamics offering insights (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016; Wilkinson, 2016) linking CCS to gender related attitudes. Establishing trust and credibility was crucial for gaining access and for navigating the field (Evereti, 2004). Over several encounters with five key participants, their trust increased, revealing intricate narratives that were crucial for deeper insight into participants' values and identity work. Over multiple meetings I saw participants' accounts shift from guarded and provocative to more candid, suggesting that repeated engagement reduced performativity. This positioning enabled analysis that stayed close to participants' lived contexts while contributing to broader literatures on climate attitudes and masculinity. Some participants expressed that they finally had someone to talk to about these topics and voiced frustrations about not being able to discuss this with others. The fact that many had claims I found offensive and provocative, such as sexist views about women and their perceived irrationality and emotionalism, while I identify as a woman, indicates that they did not necessarily try to create an impression of themselves that did not fit with who they were. Some seemed to be intentionally provocative in the first meetings, to test how I would respond. While offensive statements remained after several encounters, the same provocative testing seemed to decrease.

In addition to the five key participants, approximately 50 individuals contributed to the study, ranging in age from their 20s to mid-80s, with the majority in the 25–35 bracket. Most participants were white, native Norwegians of middle socio-economic status with academic education, generally aligned with right-wing populist views but not holding political office. This study focused on non-organized individuals without formal group identities, which provided insights into social networks lacking communal or organizational ties. By avoiding recruitment from political figures or social media comment sections, the study aimed to capture perspectives embedded in local contexts and identity expressions outside formal affiliations.

3.2. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis provided a systematic, flexible method for identifying and comparing patterns across interviews and field notes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Bryman, 2008; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I recorded conversations with consent and kept a field note diary to capture reflexive impressions and emerging analytic ideas. I used a reflexive thematic analysis within a interpretivist frame inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Analysis proceeded inductively: I coded openly and iteratively over several rounds across four years, moving from initial semantic codes toward latent, interpretive themes. I conducted all coding alone using manual methods (transcripts, field notes, and analytic mem-

os), developing themes through repeated engagement with data and reflection. I engaged in peer debrief and returned repeatedly to participants for follow-up conversations, which helped refine interpretations and preserve participant perspectives. This reflexive, context-sensitive approach prioritized interpretive depth, attention to meaning-making, and the co-constructed nature of findings.

Coding focused on features such as repetitions, metaphors, similarities and differences, transitions, and notable absences (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I coded iteratively, moving between raw data, analytic memos, and relevant literature to develop and refine conceptual clusters and subthemes. Repetitions both within interviews and across data sources were used as a principal exploration for identifying themes (Bryman, 2008; Saldaña, 2021). Consistent with Clifford's (2010) critique of totalizing representation in ethnography, themes were treated as interpretive and partial rather than as objective statements. The thematic analysis did not aim to quantify codes; instead, the emphasis was on interpretive depth and the situated meaning of patterns. While I identified patterns, similarities, and differences among participants, this qualitative case study does not aim to generalize. Nevertheless, these patterns could be relevant in other contexts and offer insights beyond the immediate scope of the research, such as informing policymakers and communicators seeking to bridge ideological divides and foster more inclusive climate conversations.

Ethical and representational considerations were central throughout the research process: I sought to stay true to participants' viewpoints while being mindful of not legitimizing harmful or radical claims (Tebaldi & Jereza, 2024). Where relevant, I note disagreements between participants, and I anonymized extracts to protect identities. One theme that emerged early and remained analytically salient was the use of CCS as a resource for performing masculine identities. The processes described above — iterative coding, contextualization, and reflexive engagement — led to the development of the gender cluster that formed the focus of this paper.

4. Climate change skepticism as masculine identity expression and resistance

In the analysis, the conversations with the key participants served as the principal empirical evidence; however, quotes from non-key participants, whom I did not meet multiple times, are also incorporated to demonstrate nuances of the data. These non-key participants are identified by their gender ("male") and age bracket.

4.1. Climate change skepticism as resistance against progressive pressure

Participants, like Adam from the example in the beginning of this paper, illustrated how questioning climate narratives could be perceived as embodying anti-woke claims and daring to be politically incorrect. Adam exhibited a "dare to say it as it is" attitude, reflecting a hegemonic masculine and anti-woke stance. He expressed enjoyment in challenging norms and provoking others, yet was wary

of judgment, a contradiction common amongst participants. When asked about stereotypes encountered when discussing climate change, Adam, responded: "If you ask questions, then you are suddenly a racist, man chauvinistic transphobe". Despite discussing climate change and climate policies, Adam's arguments often turned into gender and race, highlighting the entanglement between CCS and broader societal grievances, including sexism, racism, and transphobia. CCS could provide a platform for expressing resistance to progressive societal changes, particularly regarding gender. Adam's 'questions' often challenged progressive norms, embodying a hegemonic masculine, anti-woke stance that appeared to rebel against a perceived feminized society. Adam and Daniel explicitly talked about what they called a "feminization of society", and how the climate debate was "feminized". Such argumentation could be a way to protect threatened masculinity by rejecting a progressive agenda as being unmanly (Remsö et al., 2024; Renström & Bäck, 2024), being provocative to demonstrate masculine overcompensation to symbolically reinforce the social dominance and perceived superiority of masculinity over femininity (Carian & Sobotka, 2018).

Several of the participants believed that those being pro-climate were based on emotions rather than looking at facts. There was a constant claim of a dichotomy between emotions and rationality amongst participants, as demonstrated by this conversation I had with two men in their 60s and 70s:

"There are so many emotions [in the climate debate]. Why is it not allowed to believe something else? [...] the climate people [climate activists, climate friendly politicians and the media] don't have facts, they don't care about facts. When I mention facts and research, they have nothing to say". (male, 60s talking to male 70s)

As noted by Mosher and Thomkins (1988) and Vokey et al. (2013) masculinity can involve opposing emotionality. A typical argument amongst participants was that: "The climate debate is steered by emotions; we use factual facts" (male, 25–35), and "Women are emotional. We [men] are rational" (Daniel) and were thus better equipped in the climate debate as they were not led by emotions. Participants expressed pride in their perceived rationality, using CCS to challenge the 'emotional' climate agenda, seen as crafted by a climate elite and equated with feminine weakness. This emphasizes the normalization of viewing women as emotional and men as rational is in line with tropes of irrational femininity to defend environmental privileges (Vowles & Hultman, 2021). This viewpoint underscored broader concerns among participants regarding women in positions of influence, whom was deemed emotional and irrational, unworthy of power and lacking decision-making abilities. The frequency of how often I heard such claims, initially surprised me, as I am a woman and I would assume that they would be more cautious about expressing such views around me. The "matter of fact" manner which many said this, indicated that this was not necessarily looked upon as a radical viewpoint, but a mainstream statement. Some also told me that "you women

are emotional". Thus, it did not seem to be about them separating me from other women. They were well aware of me being a woman.

Participants expressed pride in perceived rationality (Inge), using skepticism to challenge the 'emotional climate discourse' (Adam), seen as crafted by a climate elite and equated with feminine weakness (Daniel). Gaute was a teacher and expressed frustration over the prevalence of women teachers and the focus on "soft" skills in school, claiming children should learn facts, not empathy. In a conversation with him, Daniel and Adam, he claimed: "You love your mother, but you respect your father", when talking about how kids these days needed more discipline and masculine influence. This mirrors the argument of a feminization of society, and that progressive shifts were associated with weakness and soft skills, including empathy. Pro-climate attitudes were equated with feminine, emotional and weak, and CCS was equated with masculine rationality. Then, CCS could become a way to express masculine identity and show resistance towards the perceived feminization of society. Labelling emotions as feminine and unmanly, and connecting the pro-climate attitudes with being feminine and emotional, can function as a masculine protection behavior serving to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and resist progressive change and protecting patriarchal privilege (Remsö et al., 2024; Vowles & Hultman, 2021).

Many participants scapegoated minorities and women for frustrations about progressive policies, which seemed to be represented by climate change policies. Claims of progressive pressures were thus used to legitimize CCS attitudes. CCS could operate as a vessel for defending patriarchal hierarchies: participants framed climate policies as threats to gender order, thereby intertwining sexist attitudes with social constructions of masculinity. This pattern aligns with system justification theory, which describes the psychological motivation to defend existing social and political arrangements (Benegal & Holman, 2021; Feygina et al., 2010), linking defense of economic and patriarchal structures to CCS (Jylhä et al., 2016; Norgaard, 2011; Stephens, 2024). Patriarchal systems and dominant male power encouraged hegemonic masculine behaviors, such as anti-environmentalism, which CCS could symbolically endorse (Rome, 2006). By having a binary view of feminine and masculine and connecting these to pro-climate and CCS respectively, these concepts can become intertwined. So much so that expressing one, can mean expressing the other, such as expressing CCS to express anti-progressive stances, like Adam did when claiming he was viewed as a sexist and racist transphobe when he asked questions about climate policies. These views, particularly pronounced among younger participants aged 20–35, shed light on collective anxiety over perceived threats to freedom of speech and hegemonic masculine values. Participants often did not explicitly reflect on the blurriness between CCS and gender or race, underscoring how these issues were intertwined. These narratives indicate CCS reflects resistance to societal changes perceived as threatening masculinity, reinforcing masculine identity

by rejecting what they perceive as "unmanly" feminine aspects (Remsö et al., 2024; Renström & Bäck, 2024). CCS could serve as a platform to express masculinity.

Skepticism represented more than factual conflict; it was an ideological stance against perceived invasions on patriarchal gender roles, resulting in defensive attitudes in the face of threatened masculinity. This mirrors Anshelm and Hultman's suggestion to understand masculine identity formation and how climate science challenges that identity, leading to environmental policy resistance as a means to preserve group identity (Anshelm & Hultman, 2014). An interesting difference between our research is regarding the participants. While they researched older men in the fossil fuel industry and saw CCS as a way to protect an industrial masculinity, my participants were mainly under 35 years old, with different educational backgrounds. Most of them had not worked with the fossil fuel industry, and most either had office jobs or worked with people, such as being teachers. Yet, the influence the Norwegian oil industry has had on the climate narrative in Norway, detaching oil from climate, and making claims of climate friendly oil, and oil dependence, there might not be a surprise that Norwegians who have not worked with the oil industry was still heavily influenced by this narrative. The unique empirical data shows the significant influence of industry interests on public perception and policy, despite the participants not being employed by the oil industry.

4.2. Climate change skepticism as masculinity expression

Participants challenged what they perceived as feminized or moralizing power narratives by claiming hegemonic masculine identities. This pattern was particularly striking given Norway's egalitarian ideals. CCS allowed demonstration of hegemonic masculinity by deviating from feminine traits, such as emotionality by claiming that the pro-climate arguments were filled with emotions, and that they, in contrast, were rational men. Being pro-climate was perceived as weak and feminine and could lead to provocative statements opposing perceived speech limitations imposed by a perceived woke agenda. Consequently, CCS could serve as a tool to restore masculinity, framing pro-climate attitudes and policies as emasculating. This is similar to Kidder (2018) and Wagner's (2024) findings on ideological performance demonstrating how participants discussions about policies were primarily focused on asserting a conservative social identity and shaping a desired life narrative rather than genuinely showcasing preferred policy stances, demonstrating ideological belonging. CCS did not seem to be the goal, but rather a vessel to express masculinity through being politically incorrect and rebellious and protect male privileges threatened by progressive shifts. This desire for domination indicates grievance over perceived loss of power, potentially fueling CCS as individuals struggle with feelings of disempowerment and being judged, like in this quote by Daniel:

If you mean something that is not a part of the dominating [climate] discourse, then you are seen as a bad person by those who consider themselves to be good people [progressive people]. It is very contradictory: "I am a good person, but I judge you immediately!" [laughs]. (Daniel)

Claims of societal feminization were linked to beliefs about feeling forced to be ashamed, with feminism viewed as a tool for indoctrinating shame. Adam articulated this sentiment by saying Norwegians "love to whip ourselves with a whip", claiming that progressive people constantly have a need to feel shame. Participants' definitions of masculinity frequently centered around themes of dominance, asserting control over the climate debate by resisting its perceived feminization and moral undertones, glorifying authority and individual success, and exerting power over territories such as Norwegian boundaries and being able to drive wherever without road tolls (Carl) and historical narratives, such as claiming that the gladiators were Norwegian (Adam) indicating a desire for domination that suggests grievance over perceived loss of power, potentially fueling CCS as individuals struggle with feelings of disempowerment and being judged. Men who feel their masculine identity and privileges is under pressure may embrace CCS as a defense against changing gender roles (Remsö et al., 2024). This can symbolize a sense of threatened masculinity, prompting CCS as a method to reassert dominant masculine norms. This type of reaction can channel socio-economic anxieties toward marginalized communities, including minorities and women. This mirrors the concepts of aggrieved entitlement and relative deprivation where individuals feel unjustly deprived of status and privileges they believe they are entitled to, resulting in resentment (Kimmel, 2019; Manning & Stefanovic, 2024) prompting polarization and supporting ideologies that promise to restore lost privileges.

Similarly to the angry white men Kimmel spoke with in his research, my participants seemed to look downwards instead of upwards on the ladder of mobility. It is not the ladder upwards that was blocked for them, but that the downward pressure from people they have been thought to feel superior, such as minority groups, women, LGBTQ+ and immigrants, were now pushing them downwards into the groups of the marginalized. Instead of focusing on coming up, they want to prevent being pushed down (Kimmel, 2019). Efforts for equality can thus seem like a "reverse discrimination", when feeling that something is being taken away *from* them, when male privilege is unquestioned and feels as though it belongs to you. This is similar of the sentiments of Hochschild's (2016) participants who felt as though someone was cheating in front of them in line in society, and politicians and representatives of a climate elite were helping them do so.

Participants criticized Norwegian society as "too woke" and weakened by perceived feminization, focusing excessively on women, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ communities, mirroring threatened masculinity (Remsö et al., 2024) redirecting their anger towards women, by using CCS claims. The perceived feminization of climate perception was intertwined with broader societal grievances, where CCS was tangled with gender, power dynamics, and identity concerns. Climate related policies were

not only seen as benefiting others, but also as being at the expense of themselves, taking away something that they felt entitled to (Inge, 55–65). Participants, lacking involvement in CCS organizations, had few avenues to express discontent, nor symbols or other explicit identity markers. Using CCS as resistance to societal change could become a tool to "provoke the ladies", as Adam suggested, supporting hegemonic masculine traits like being rebellious, politically incorrect men who speak candidly. The framing of gendered narratives in climate perceptions represented another layer of identity construction, where skepticism intertwined with masculine, rational identities, creating ideological boundaries against woke perspectives.

Changes in gender norms can trigger social distress (Kimmel, 2019) and identity crises along with negative associations with progressive policies and attitudes. CCS can become a vessel to signal identity, in this case, a courageous masculine identity. Masculine overcompensation can then symbolically reinforce social dominance by elevating perceived masculine superiority over femininity (Carian & Sobotka, 2018), upholding gender norms and existing social hierarchies. The findings mirrored claims of Norwegian men's skepticism often functioned to protect threatened masculine identities and associated privileges amid transitions away from fossil-fuel dependence (Krange et al., 2019; Sælen & Aasen, 2023). Initiating arguments with phrases like "everyone knows that...", "every rational person can see that..." and other variants was often used by participants and could serve as a rhetorical technique to establish beliefs as common sense, implying widespread agreement. This narrative strategy legitimizes CCS, aligning beliefs with rationality and common sense to bolster credibility and acceptability of skeptical perspectives.

In Adam's office, the posters were used to demonstrate his pride in challenging norms by being politically incorrect and ignoring others' requests to remove them. This act of rebellious provocation, especially against women, is noteworthy in Norway: one of the world's most egalitarian countries, typically driven by consensus and collaboration (Krick & Holst, 2019; Ljunggren, 2017). Active provocation does represent a "non-typical Norwegian" action, yet there might have been a shift, as demonstrated by the increased polarized debates on climate policies and decreased loyalty to democratic values, including lower support for gender equality (Egge, 2025). Though lacking explicit symbols, participants could signal their masculine identities through ideological alignment, resisting perceived progressive social pressures that threatened hegemonic masculinity, seen as rational and rooted in practicality. This ideological performance (Kidder, 2018; Wagner, 2024) could symbolically mark their opposition to the dominant norms they rejected. This suggested that CCS could operate as a tactic to reject perceived feminizing or moralizing debate and can have implications for crafting climate communication and policies that attend to the intersection of scientific arguments and cultural identity.

4.3. A political barometer

Although the participants in this study were often politically conservative and many times held right-wing-populist views, this raised a further analytic question: do their CCS positions reflect partisan alignment only, or also personal and social identity? I argue that these are not mutually exclusive. Participants were proud of their CCS yet often felt the need to navigate where and with whom they felt comfortable expressing these views. CCS could act as a political barometer: expressions of skepticism could signal readiness to contest narratives and, depending on audience reaction, opened pathways to discussions about gender, race, and sexuality. Second, CCS mediated visibility and risk: participants used humor, and in-group venues to signal affiliation cautiously where overt expression might provoke sanctions. Political talk often constructs group membership and coherent personal narratives rather than simply signaling policy preferences, echoing findings by Kidder (2018) and Wagner (2024). Participants could thus express and find belonging in their skeptical claims, and these informal communities validated identities the participants claimed were missing from broader public perception, also about other topics. Conversations with Adam and Daniel exemplified this, as they voiced concerns over men's issues being overlooked and feared backlash if they openly expressed their opinions. When I asked what would happen if they voiced their opinions on this, Adam laughed and said that they would get death threats at the door. Even though they had to navigate when to speak up about their CCS views, it seemed as though they could “never” talk about their views on gender. Adam's joking remark about “death threats at the door” symbols both perceived social risk and the performative toughness that such risk helps display. Far from simple policy preferences, such talk constructs a narrative of CCS as masculinity expression to claim status, test boundaries, and secure validation among like-minded others. CCS can thus express masculinity and simultaneously be an indicator of a package of anti-woke opinions. While sexist attitudes might bring “death threats at your door”, claiming uncertainty of climate change and climate related policies might be a less risky way to express an anti-woke opinion, and thus be an indicator of how perceptive the people around are to such views. However, it is important to note that even though the patterns in this study indicate that CCS could be an expression of right-wing populist views, not all skeptics are right-wing populist, nor are all right-wing populists climate change skeptics. There are variations in climate change positions within similar ideologies. Research has proposed that RWP use climate positions as tactics to gain power, treating them as campaign strategies rather than fixed value issues like immigration (Delin, 2023). Studies show that right-wing populist parties like Germany's AfD (Alternative for Germany) and France's RN (The National Rally) adjust their climate stances based on political opportunities (Oswald et al., 2021). This results in a range of climate positions among European right-wing populist parties, from denying climate science to accepting evidence but rejecting mainstream policies (Delin, 2023). This can help explain why even

though right-wing populism and CCS are often connected, there are examples of the opposite, such as ecofascism. This describes how right-wing populist parties can weaponize environmental issues as a racialized tool to blame non-white populations and reinforce white supremacy (see Iossifidis, 2024 and; Moore & Roberts, 2022 for extensive overviews). In Austria, the Freedom Party opposes international climate cooperation while supporting domestic decarbonization, anchoring it in national energy sovereignty (Selk & Kemmerzell, 2022), demonstrating how right-wing populist parties' climate policy attitudes are contextual. The relationship between climate change attitudes and right-wing populism is nuanced and not absolute. The patterns demonstrated in this paper are context specific, and do not aim to generalize, in line with ethnographic goals of not quantifying or totalizing.

5. Discussion

Climate change skepticism (CCS) was not just climate-related but deeply intertwined with masculinity. This article explored the complex relationship between CCS as masculinity expression, revealing CCS as a vessel for asserting hegemonic masculine identities against perceived progressive societal norms. This ethnographic study showed that CCS in Southern Norway is not merely a dispute about evidence but a form of identity work: a culturally embedded practice through which skeptics performed masculinity, created moral boundaries, and reproduced privilege. Drawing on system justification, aggrieved entitlement, and ideological-performance literatures (Feygina, 2021; Fuist, 2014; Kidder, 2018; Kimmel, 2019), the findings indicate that CCS signaled rebelliousness and claimed rationality while framing pro-climate attitudes as feminine, weak, and moralizing — thereby sustaining patriarchal hierarchies even in an egalitarian context (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Norgaard, 2011) in Norway. Participants used skeptical talk and provocative performance to manage threats to masculine status: CCS functioned as masculine overcompensation and a way to reassert dominance (Carian & Sobotka, 2018; Remsö et al., 2024). These dynamics map onto aggrieved entitlement and relative-deprivation processes, whereby perceived loss of status amid socio-economic and cultural change is channeled into symbolic resistance (Kimmel, 2019; Manning & Stefanovic, 2024).

The article demonstrated that CCS could function as an ideological stance rather than a factual debate, serving to challenge perceived feminization and justify existing power structures. Skeptics often presented themselves as rational truth-tellers, contrasting their position with emotionally driven pro-climate attitudes. This emotional-rational dichotomy supports patriarchal hierarchies, with CCS acting as both a system justification tool and an expression of masculinity amid threatened masculinity. Resistance to progressive norms reflected anxiety over shifts challenging patriarchal systems, using CCS to reclaim masculine identity and privileges. The article also highlights how CCS could be intertwined with broader socio-political

narratives, including freedom of speech and societal feminization concerns. This empirical research can enhance our understanding of CCS, emphasizing the importance of considering socio-cultural factors.

Practically, these results imply that fact-based persuasion alone is unlikely to shift CCS where it serves identity and status functions. Communication and policy strategies should engage identity concerns by depoliticizing gendered framings, using credible in-group messengers, and emphasizing universal, non-moralizing benefits (e.g., economic security, local resilience). Climate communication that is sensitive to identity, avoids gendered framing, and engages masculine norms may reduce defensive resistance and open more inclusive dialogue.

Methodologically, combining ethnographic depth with comparative, survey, network, and experimental work could help assess how widespread these repertoires are and which identity-sensitive interventions reduce defensive resistance (Kidder, 2018; Remsö et al., 2024; Wagner, 2024). Treating CCS as both political stance and performative identity links micro conversational repertoires to broader sociological accounts of masculinity, moral evaluations, and system justification — highlighting that climate debates are often struggles over who counts, who speaks, and how social worth is secured. The generalizability of this study is limited, as this is ethnography. However, the richness and depth of the findings can shed light on patterns that might exist in other contexts as well. Future research could focus on similar aspects amongst women, and other contexts to further explore these dynamics and examine the evolving nature of CCS and how similar mechanisms within pro-climate narratives might similarly express identity. Effective communication should focus on universal benefits and depoliticize gendered aspects to foster understanding to develop more effective climate communication and policies that incorporate identities. While I have aimed to be consistent with ethnography, including treating the themes as partial and interpretive, I acknowledge that some of the nuances might get lost in the format of an article.

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Care or control in times of crisis? Gendered identity narratives and democratic resilience in digital public sphere

Abstract

Crises intensify struggles over collective identity, as political actors compete to define who “we” are under uncertainty, within digital environments where algorithms shape which narratives gain visibility. While existing research shows how exclusionary identity narratives align with platform logics and contribute to democratic backsliding, less is known about how inclusive narratives that might sustain democratic resilience perform in the same settings. This article argues that democratic resilience depends on whether narratives that transform uncertainty into solidarity grounded in shared vulnerability can gain traction in the digital public sphere. Drawing on relational sociology, feminist political theory, and digital communication, it distinguishes between exclusionary identity control narratives and inclusive identity care narratives. To examine their relative performance, the study analyses 13,866 Facebook posts from Spain and Italy (2019–2021), using the COVID-19 pandemic as a quasi-natural experiment and scaling qualitative coding of identity narratives through a large language model to compare engagement patterns. The findings show that control narratives have an inherent engagement advantage across crisis periods and national contexts. However, care narratives significantly exceed their own baseline engagement during the crisis, indicating increased audience receptivity to messages of care under conditions of social vulnerability. These results shift analytical attention what erodes democracy to the narrative construction that may sustain it, highlighting the contingent potential of inclusive identity politics in digital public spheres.

Keywords: identity narratives, democratic resilience, digital public sphere, social media, natural language processing

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1. Introduction

Crises test the narratives of collective identity through which democratic communities make sense of uncertainty and mobilise response. When pandemics, economic shocks, or terrorist attacks undermine established expectations about social stability, societies confront profound uncertainty about the future (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Primig, 2025). In these moments, political actors compete to advance narratives that restore collective coherence by defining who

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“we” are, often along lines of race, nation, class, and gender (Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Wimmer, 2002; Breakwell & Jaspal, 2020; Sapiro, 2022).

In contemporary democracies, these struggles increasingly unfold within digital platforms, which have become central arenas for identity-based political contestation (Papacharissi, 2015). Within these environments, narratives circulate on a structurally uneven terrain shaped by platform architectures. Algorithmically optimised to maximise engagement through emotional arousal and cognitive simplicity, digital platforms shape which political stories gain public visibility and which remain marginal (Brady et al., 2017; Tufekci, 2018). Extensive empirical research has examined the affinity between exclusionary identity narratives and digital media affordances, showing how such alignment contributes to democratic backsliding (Ganesh & Froio, 2020; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023). Meanwhile, research on feminist digital politics has documented how inclusive identity movements struggle for visibility on the same platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Edwards, Philip & Gerard, 2020; Divon, Are & Briggs, 2025).

While this body of work has produced a rich account of what erodes democratic politics, these literatures have developed largely in parallel with distinct agendas and methods (Freelon, Marwick & Kreiss, 2020), and far less attention has been paid to what sustains democracies in this media environment. Recent scholarship has called for digital political communication research to move beyond diagnosing threats toward understanding what preserves democracy (Weinhardt et al., 2024), recognising that democratic resilience is as much about the narratives a society can sustain as the institutions that protect it (Angus, 2024). Yet the narratives through which democratic resilience is built online remain empirically underexamined, and few studies compare their performance against exclusionary narratives within the same platform environment.

This article addresses this gap by asking: do digital platforms systematically privilege exclusionary identity narratives over inclusive ones during periods of crisis? The paper argues that democratic resilience depends on whether narratives that transform uncertainty into collective response can gain traction in the digital public sphere. Drawing on relational sociology, feminist political theory and digital media literatures, the study conceptualises two competing narrative strategies. Identity control narratives tighten group boundaries through exclusion, channelling anger, fear, and nostalgia for a lost social order (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023), while identity care narratives surface shared vulnerability, building solidarity across intersecting identities through hope and empathy (Tronto, 1993, 2013; Butler, 2015; Kelleher, Murphy & Su, 2022; Holdo, 2025). In reframing feminist mobilisation from “soft politics” to a strategic politics of democratic resilience (Tronto, 2013; Butler, 2015; Kelleher et al., 2022), the study contributes to an emerging research agenda on the digital conditions under which inclusive identity narratives can sustain democracies in an era of compounding crises.

To examine whether platforms structurally advantage one over the other, the study analyses 13,866 Facebook posts from Spain and Italy between 2019 and 2021, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a quasi-natural experiment. The pandemic intensified conditions favouring both types of narratives. It exacerbated care burdens through lockdowns, domestic violence, and labour market shocks for women, while generating the fear and uncertainty that exclusionary narratives exploit (Power, 2020; Smith et al., 2021; Martinsson & Ericson, 2023). Spain and Italy were both severely affected, but differ in the strength of their feminist institutional infrastructure (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2012), allowing the study to disentangle platform effects from national context. If control narratives outperform care narratives even when a crisis heightens the salience of care and even where feminist values are embedded offline, platform architecture plays an independent role in determining which identity narratives can sustain public attention.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework connecting identity narratives and digital platform logics. Section 3 describes the analytical strategy of combining human annotation with large language model classification to scale the analysis of identity narratives. Section 4 presents the results, and Section 5 discusses their implications. Section 6 concludes with contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Uncertainty, identity, and gendered political narratives in the digital public sphere

2.1 Narrative identity during crises

Relational sociology and political theory treat identities as ongoing narrative accomplishments rather than fixed categories such as “woman,” “immigrant,” or “nation”. In this view, an identity takes shape within historically embedded social networks, as actors narrate connections between protagonists (“who”), events (“what happened”), and moral evaluations (“why it matters”) (Calhoun, 1994; Somers, 1994; Emirbayer, 1997; Tilly, 2002; White, 2008).

Narratives are broadly defined as “representations of connected events and characters, bounded in space and time, and containing implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed” (Kreuter et al., 2007, p. 222). Somers’s (1994) concept of narrative identity proposes that to be a social actor, i.e., an individual’s or collective’s identity, is to be located and positioned in these narratives or stories. Because stories have beginnings, middles, and futures, they enable individuals and collectives to make sense of continuity and change in their social world. As White observes (2008: 222), “narrative acts in development of an [identity] regime much as DNA does in bodily development.”

During crises, collective uncertainties about group status and shared knowledge disrupt existing narratives of who “we” are, generating a need for the psychological

and collective understanding that “we are still ourselves” (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Primig, 2025). Narratives address this need by imposing order on chaos and making sense of causality and agency (Adaval & Wyer, 1998). Crises therefore create strategic openings for political actors who deliberately craft and circulate stories that position individuals, groups, and events into competing frameworks of belonging (Gkeredakis et al., 2021; Kern, 2021).

One prevalent response to crisis-induced uncertainty is what this study conceptualises as identity control, a narrative strategy that seeks to assert control over power through exclusionary boundary-making. These narratives demarcate rigid categories of “us” and “them,” calling for the restoration of traditional gender roles and social hierarchies based on race and citizenship (Mudde, 2007; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Koenig, 2024). Radical-right political actors have been particularly effective at deploying these narratives during crises, mobilising those who perceive a loss of status amid rapid social change (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023).

Central to identity control narrative is the positioning of women as both biological reproducers and symbolic signifiers of national identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Farris, 2017). Online communities such as the “manosphere” illustrate this, promoting exclusionary nationalism through narratives that call for the protection of women from external enemies while framing feminists as internal traitors (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Gerrand et al., 2025). Through emotionally arousing content, these communities channel alienation and anxiety into collective mobilisation aimed at reasserting social control (Sugiura, 2021; Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021; Lindsay, 2022).

Control narratives are especially sustained by “restorative” nostalgia, an emotional longing to rebuild an idealised past (Boym, 2001). This nostalgia provides a cognitively simple explanation of uncertainty by morally casting the in-group as victims or defenders of a righteous order and outsiders as agents of its corruption who “broke” the social order (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2018).

In contrast, identity care narrative responds to uncertainty by surfacing shared vulnerability and building solidarity across intersecting identities through a discourse of care. Rather than seeking to restore control over a destabilised social order, these narratives frame dependency and mutual exposure as the foundation for a collective identity, leveraging the crisis as an opportunity to reckon with structural inequalities (Lugones, 2003; Carastathis, 2013; Butler, 2015; Holdo, 2025). Often advanced by feminist and decolonial movements, identity care challenges the tendency of defining an individual or society as self-sufficient and in control, arguing that the attempt to master uncertainty is a masculinist and colonial ideal (Carastathis, 2013).

Feminist mobilisations during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how care narratives surfaced disproportionate burdens of domestic labour, frontline exposure, job losses, and gender-based violence, framing these as intersectional injustices demand-

ing collective response (Andrade, Hoyle & Burnell, 2023). This justice orientation called for resourcing resilience through more attuned services and adequate policy responses, morally positioning in-groups as agents of transformation rather than victims requiring protection (Camponeschi, 2022).

Where identity control is sustained by “restorative” nostalgia, identity care draws on “reflective” nostalgia (Boym, 2001), invoking the past not to restore it but to draw emotional resources for present solidarity. Historical memory of self-help activism in the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, mobilises hope and empathy by positioning caring for others as a core characteristic of a feminist collective identity (Quéré, 2021). Evoking past practices becomes a matter of ‘imaginative identification with the details of others’ lives, rather than a recognition of something antecedently shared’ (Rorty, 1989, p. 190).

Narratives of identity care therefore provide democratic resilience through three interconnected mechanisms. First, they seek to transform vulnerability from individual weakness requiring in-group protection into shared precarity that necessitates collective response. Second, rather than consolidating identity through exclusion, they build coalitions across groups that recognise internal heterogeneity and intersecting forms of inequalities. Third, instead of promising restoration of a past order, they promote care infrastructures that enable more robust collective responses to systemic crises.

It is important to note that identity control and identity care represent ideal narrative strategies and are not exclusive properties of any actor. A radical-right politician may appropriate care vocabulary, framing anti-immigration policy as “protection of our women”. Yet, the narrative still draws boundaries between a worthy in-group and an externalised enemy, and orients toward restoring a lost social order. Conversely, feminist actors may deploy control vocabulary when attacking perpetrators of violence or constructing sharp boundaries against “patriarchy,” and yet call for mutual recognition of women across the world. Control and care identity narratives are thus distinguished by their relational logic—specifically how each constructs boundaries of belonging, orients toward the past, and assigns moral responsibility.

2.2 Digital platforms and the structural asymmetry between identity narratives

The emotional flow of a narrative, i.e., the pattern and progression of emotional states it produces, is a key determinant of the narrative’s persuasive influence (Nabi & Green, 2015). Moral emotions have a particularly strong mobilising affect, signalling clarity and urgency by shifting the blame on “others” (Brady et al., 2017; Van Bavel et al., 2024). Control-based narratives of identity often begin with high-arousal negative emotions, containing anger at feminism, fear of national decline, and contempt of rising social groups such as immigrants, which immediately grab attention and trigger engagement (Brady et al., 2017; Salmela &

von Scheve, 2017). By contrast, care-based identity narratives emphasise long-term transformations, often through more reflective, positive emotions, which require time to unfold (Wajcman, 2007).

On algorithmically governed digital platforms, where attention spans are short and content is judged in seconds, only the beginning of the emotional arc matters most, creating a structural bias. In this environment, argues Ahmed (2004), negative emotions like fear, anger, and disgust “stick”, attaching to stereotypical identity narratives and making them politically salient. In comparison with positive emotions, negative emotions spread more widely online, conflating the relative performance of these narratives compared to their proportional content production (Schöne et al, 2023).

Radical-right actors have proven adept at exploiting this alignment between their narratives and platform affordances (van Dijck, 2013; Brady et al., 2017; Tufekci, 2018; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023). Recent research has highlighted the spread of such narratives among men and boys, who are falling through the significant cracks of neoliberal capitalism, such as unemployment, social stigma and alienation (Lacalle et al., 2023). This creates what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls a “mediated economy of visibility” in which emotionally fast content dominates and what Noble (2018) terms “algorithmic oppression” of complex, counter-hegemonic narratives.

This asymmetry is compounded by the conditions feminist actors face online. Feminists, pro-feminist journalists, and women frontline workers encounter escalating harassment, abuse, and verbal violence, suppressing their voices and exposing them to intersectional risks (Henry & Powell, 2015; Ging & Siaper, 2019). In addition, platform content moderation policies disproportionately demote content related to reproductive health, transgender or LGBTQ rights, and sexuality (Divon et al., 2025).

However, these structural disadvantages may be moderated by offline institutional contexts. Countries with stronger gender equality infrastructures, such as dense networks of state equality bodies, civil society organisations, and institutionalised gender equality norms, may provide legitimacy that enhances the performance of care narratives online, particularly when care burdens become acutely visible. In such contexts, feminist actors can draw on symbolic and organisational capital to counterbalance the emotional-algorithmic bias toward control-oriented narrative identity (Htun & Weldon, 2010; Pain, 2020).

2.3 Hypotheses

This integrated theoretical framework thus yields hypotheses at four levels. At the actor level, radical-right actors will be more likely to construct identity control narratives (H1a) and generate higher negative emotional engagement (H1b), while

feminist actors will be more likely to adopt identity care narratives (H2a) and generate higher positive emotional engagement (H2b).

At the crisis level, the onset of crisis will increase radical-right actors' reliance on control narratives relative to the pre-crisis period (H3a), and these narratives will outperform their other content in engagement (H3b). Feminist actors will similarly increase their use of care narratives during the crisis (H4a), but these narratives will perform the same or worse in engagement relative to their other content (H4b).

At the platform level, the engagement gap between identity control narratives and identity care narratives will widen during the crisis period relative to the pre-crisis baseline, regardless of which actors deploy them (H5).

Finally, at the country level, the engagement gap between control and care identity narratives will be narrower in national contexts with stronger feminist infrastructure than in contexts with weaker feminist infrastructure, particularly during crisis periods when gendered care burdens are acutely visible (H6).

3. Research design

3.1 Quasi natural experiment and comparative design

The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a crisis that simultaneously disrupted healthcare systems, economic structures, and care infrastructures while intensifying ideological boundary-making (Smith et al., 2021). On one hand, feminist movements and some female world leaders attempted to advance care narratives that challenged the traditional divide between the (feminine) private sphere of the home and the (masculine) public sphere of politics, performing protective femininity by valuing traits of affection and empathy, in stark contrast with “strong-man” approaches (Johnson & Williams, 2020). Radical-right actors, meanwhile, pivoted public anxiety from health to issues of gender equality and threat from minorities, instrumentalising protests around women's day as super-spreader events and portraying feminism itself as a societal disease, transforming the crisis into a boundary-making struggle between “true” citizens and the “others” (Osuna & Rama, 2021; Labio-Bernal & Manzano-Zambruno, 2023; Majumdar & Tewatia, 2024; Levi, 2025).

Thus, the pandemic was endogenous to gendered structures of care, exposing and intensifying pre-existing inequalities (Power, 2020). However, the timing and intensity of the pandemic were uncorrelated with pre-existing political mobilisation around gender equality. Early waves in Italy were shaped by contingencies such as population density, first-case timing, and initial response gaps, while Spain followed a broadly comparable trajectory (Mathieu et al., 2020). Both countries faced severe impacts, which created a quasi-experimental window. They were exposed to similar shocks, yet differed in their pre-existing institutional and cultural support for gender equality.

This contrast between Spain and Italy motivates the “most similar” comparative design. First, both belong to the Southern European gender regime characterised by familialist welfare states, strong Catholic influence on gender policy, and historically late but accelerating feminist mobilisation (Alonso, Ciccio & Lombardo, 2023). Second, both countries experienced intense anti-gender mobilisation in the 2010s, with radical-right actors running campaigns that explicitly contained anti-gender frames (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Ramis-Moyano, Pasadas-del-Amo & Font, 2023). Third, Facebook penetration is comparable with 55 % of Spanish adults and 61 % of Italian adults use the platform monthly (Meta Transparency Report, 2024), making it a relevant arena for political discourse in both contexts.

However, Spain and Italy exhibit different gender policy frameworks and feminist organisational strengths. Spain ranks among the top performers in the EU Gender Equality Index (2021 score: 73.7/100, 6th place), whereas Italy scores lower and occupies a mid-range position (2021 score: 63.8/100, 14th place) (EIGE, 2021). Spain features a progressively consolidated gender machinery, including a General Secretariat for Equality Policies, a dedicated Ministry of Equality and a robust network of feminist organisations, providing strong institutional support. Italy’s gender institutions, like the Ministry for Rights and Equal Opportunities (1996), are weaker and more vulnerable to government shifts (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2012).

This design allows testing of whether digital engagement with identity narratives is shaped primarily by offline contexts or by platform effects. If national context dominates, care narratives should achieve higher engagement digitally in Spain during crisis, benefiting from stronger institutional support and cultural resonance. If platform algorithm dynamics dominate, engagement patterns should be similar across countries during crisis, with exclusionary narratives maintaining a structural advantage regardless of offline context.

3.2 Data

The analysis draws on publicly available Facebook posts from Spain and Italy, collected using keywords (Appendix A1) related to debates on gender equality from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2021. Data is collected via CrowdTangle API, a now-defunct data collection tool for researchers, which captures the content, its metadata such as timestamp of posting, and the reactions it receives (“Love”, “Wow”, “Haha”, “Sad”, “Angry”, “Care”).

A total of 4,10,321 posts are collected over the three-year span. These are filtered in three stages. First by geolocation, assigning posts to Spain or Italy based on account administrative location to exclude Latin American and diaspora accounts; second by follower threshold, retaining only accounts with 100,000 or more followers after testing multiple thresholds, as these accounts generate disproportionate engagement despite representing only one-third of total posts (see Appendix A2 & A3 for sensitivity tests justifying this threshold); and third by topical relevance, using a

lexicon-based function that scans for co-occurrence of gender-related keywords (e.g., woman, feminism, gender violence, abortion) and politics-related keywords (e.g., political party names, laws, government, policy names) (Appendix A4). From these posts, a stratified 10 percent random sample is drawn from each of three time periods (pre, during, and post pandemic) for each country. A final sample of 5,410 Spanish posts (pre crisis = 2,375 posts, during crisis = 1,452 posts, post crisis = 1,584 posts) and 8,456 Italian posts (pre crisis = 2,505 posts; during crisis = 3,038 posts; post crisis = 2,913 posts) is retained for analysis.

3.3 Operationalisation of narrative identity and classification with LLMs

Identifying the narrative identity of an online post presents distinct methodological challenges, compared to coding its discrete discursive features such as keywords, topics, issue position, emotions, or actors. Narratives of identity are not reducible to lexical markers as they emerge from the relational-temporal-moral organisation of actors, events, and meanings, linked across time through specific causal logic. Hence, an analysis of discursive features alone would be an unreliable indicator of the narrative. For example, a control identity narrative may deploy care motifs (e.g., “protection of vulnerable children,” portraying concern for children but still emphasising threat from corrupting forces of “gender ideology” and restoration of natural family order), just as a care identity narrative can invoke control like claims when confronting policy neglect or gender violence (e.g., “judges protect abusers,” expressing outrage against institutional accountability but emphasising shared vulnerability of women and societal change).

The study thus develops a human annotated dataset (n=100 posts per country) using a codebook that operationalises narrative identity through five constitutive dimensions (Somers, 1994): relationality (how actors position themselves and others within networks of belonging and exclusion), causal plot (the temporal logic linking past, present, and projected future), selective appropriation (which events, actors, and emotions are foregrounded), moral evaluations (justification of inherent “right” or “wrong”, moving discourse from policy to ethical grounds) and temporality (whether the narrative orients toward restoration or transformation). The full codebook (Appendix A5) provides operational definitions and examples from the dataset that illustrate the classification.

Following this codebook, sample posts are assessed for whether they employ a narrative of identity control or identity care. Specifically, posts are coded as identity control narratives if they appropriate crisis as a temporal rupture from the power order in society, position an endangered in-group against enemies, orient temporally toward recovering a lost hierarchical society, and morally frame the group as victims or defenders of tradition. Posts are coded as identity care narratives if they appropriate crisis as exposure of structural inequalities, position actors as interconnected and vulnerable, orient toward reconfiguring power relations and

changing the social order, and morally frame the group as agents of transformation. Posts lacking this relational-temporal-moral structure are coded as “none.”

Next, the study uses Large Language Models (LLMs) to scale classification of narrative identity from the human-annotated sample (200 posts) to the full dataset (13,866 posts). LLMs are computational tools trained on massive text corpora whose billions of language parameters are adjusted to predict contextually appropriate language, achieving high proficiency in understanding and producing human-like text (Argyle et al., 2023; Chae & Davidson, 2025). These computational tools have recently and rapidly gained traction, a phenomenon that scholars describe as super-charging social sciences research, especially in language processing of textual data, through their accuracy-enhancing and time-saving capabilities (Bail, 2024; Chen et al., 2025).

Model selection proceeded through comparative testing of available free, open-source LLMs suitable for multilingual annotation of posts in Spanish and Italian. I initially evaluated models with large parameters, Qwen 8B and Llama-2 13B, but both proved computationally prohibitive on available hardware, with processing time exceeding practical limits for the full corpus. Smaller models, Llama-2-7B-Chat and Qwen3-4B, struggled at distinguishing narrative logic from surface vocabulary, over-relying on lexical cues, classifying posts mentioning “family” or “protection” as control narratives regardless of relational structure and producing inconsistent and made up output schemas, indicating unstable comprehension of the coding task. Mistral 7B (Jiang et al., 2023) achieved strong contextual reasoning at 7 billion parameters, offering the best balance of speed and performance. On the 200-post human-coded sample, Mistral achieved highest agreement with the human coder (99.2 % on narrative identity classification), substantially outperforming Qwen3 4B (88.1 %) and Llama-2-7B-Chat (76.4 %).

The Mistral model is deployed locally via Ollama (2025), an open-source tool for running LLMs offline, ensuring full data control without reliance on external providers. The model is trained in Python using few-shot prompt engineering, where it learns to label data according to the codebook from examples of human-coded inputs and outputs (Chen et al., 2025). The prompt is iteratively refined on small training sets until satisfactory performance is achieved. Full classification took five days on an Apple M1 chip (8GB RAM).

Classification proceeded in two stages: first classifying who is speaking, i.e., the actor’s political orientation toward gender, and then classifying what narrative strategy each post employs. Importantly, these two classifications operate independently and actor type does not determine narrative coding. In the first stage, each unique Facebook account (N=6,927) is classified by its overarching orientation toward gender politics. The distinction between “feminist” and “anti-gender” actors follows established operationalisations in the literature on gender politics and anti-gender mobilisation. Feminist actors are defined as those advocating for gender equality

and challenging patriarchal structures, encompassing diverse organisations from institutional feminist organisations to grassroots collectives (Htun & Weldon, 2010; Pain, 2020). Anti-gender actors are operationalised as those who oppose feminism, gender equality policies, or LGBTQ+ rights, encompassing actors who explicitly reinterpret gender equality as “gender ideology”, a perceived ideological indoctrination of youth and women, as well as traditional conservative or religious actors opposing feminism (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Farris, 2017; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Ging & Siapera, 2019; Graff & Korolczuk, 2021).

The LLM is prompted to analyse a random sample of 10 posts from each unique account alongside the page’s metadata (name, description, category) to determine primary purpose (Appendix A6). The model labels each actor as a feminist actor (Spain: N=1,377, 34 %; Italy: N=975, 33 %) or anti-gender actor (Spain: N=275, 7 %; Italy: N=415, 14 %). Any page that does not clearly and primarily fit into one of the two groups above is coded as other (Spain: N=2,349, 58 %; Italy: n=1,536, 52 %) (Appendix A7). Feminist actors substantially outnumber anti-gender actors across both countries, reflecting the broader organisational coalition that feminist actors draw on compared to the narrower ideological formation of anti-gender actors concentrated around radical-right parties, certain media outlets, and influencers. Crucially, the theoretical framework does not predict that anti-gender actors will be more numerous, but that their control narratives of identity will achieve greater engagement due to alignment with platform architectures.

In the second stage, the narrative strategy at the post level is classified by the LLM against the codebook categories, with the human-coded 200-post sample serving as few-shot training examples (Appendix A8 and A9). This stage operated independently of actor classification, so that the model assessed each post’s relational-temporal-moral narrative structure without reference to the posting account’s categorisation. Following automatic classification, a human audit of randomly sampled posts confirmed approximately 99.9 % accuracy, with rare errors limited to over-coding of topics or misinterpretation of satirical posts (such as those containing irony).

3.4 Analytical strategy

The analysis employs a series of regression models to test each hypothesis. All models include country (Spain vs. Italy), number of followers (logged) and post length as a control variables, unless otherwise specified.

To capture the pandemic’s effects on narrative strategies and engagement, the study divides the observation window into three periods: pre-crisis (January 2019 to February 2020), during crisis (March 2020 to February 2021), and post-crisis (March 2021 to December 2021). The onset date reflects the World Health Organisation’s declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and the near-simultaneous imposition of national lockdowns in both Spain and Italy in

early March 2020. The post-crisis period begins in March 2021, coinciding with the acceleration of vaccination campaigns in both countries, which marked a shift from acute crisis management to recovery.

The actor-level expectations about narrative strategies (H1a, H2a) are tested through a multinomial logistic regression where the dependent variable is narrative type (control, care, none) and the independent variable is actor type (anti-gender, feminist, other).

The emotional engagement expectations (H1b, H2b) are assessed with two linear mixed-effects models accounting for posts nested within actors. The dependent variables are the Negative Emotion Ratio ($NER = [Angry + Sad] / \text{Total Reactions}$) and Positive Emotion Ratio ($PER = [Love + Care] / \text{Total Reactions}$), with narrative type as the independent variable.

Whether each actor group shifts toward its respective narrative strategy during the crisis (H3a, H4a) is estimated via two logistic regression models with standard errors clustered by page. The first predicts identity control narratives (1 = control, 0 = other posts), with feminist actors as the reference category; the second predicts identity care narratives (1 = care, 0 = other posts), with anti-gender actors as the reference category. In both models, the independent variables are actor type, a binary crisis indicator (1 = during crisis, 0 = otherwise), and their interaction.

Engagement efficacy of the narrative shifts (H3b, H4b) is captured through linear mixed-effects models for each actor type. The dependent variable is the overperformance score, which compares a post's engagement (likes, shares, comments) against the average of the previous 100 posts from the same page, expressed as a multiplier (e.g., 3x means three times the page average). The independent variable is the interaction between time period and narrative type, testing whether identity narratives resonate more with an actor's audience during the crisis.

The platform-level expectation that the engagement gap between control and care narratives widens during the crisis regardless of who posts them (H5) is tested with a linear mixed-effects model. The dependent variable is total interactions per post and the independent variable is the interaction between time period and narrative type.

Finally, whether national context moderates this engagement gap (H6) is tested by extending the previous model with a three-way interaction: narrative type $\times$ time period $\times$ country.

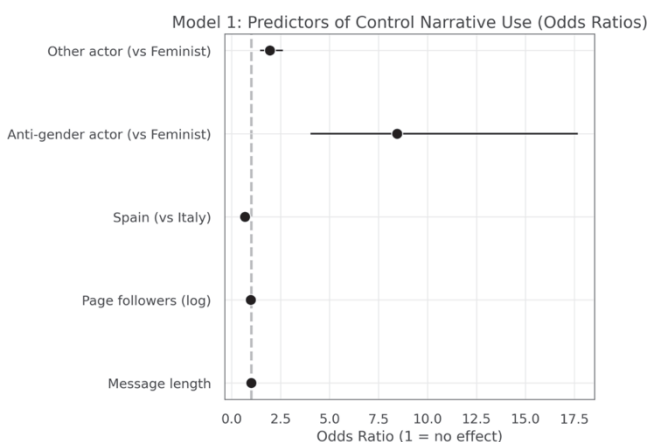
4. Results

This section presents regression results from the seven models outlined in the analytical strategy (for descriptive analyses, see Appendix 10). Coefficient plots are presented in the main text to visualise key effects, while full regression tables with

all coefficients, standard errors, and model diagnostics are reported in Appendix A11.

Model 1 (Fig. 1, Appendix A11.1) tests whether actor type predicts the use of identity control versus care narratives in gender-political Facebook posts. Consistent with H1a, anti-gender actors, including radical-right politicians, anti-feminist media outlets, and influencers, have over eight times the odds of posting control narratives compared to feminist actors (OR = 8.44, 95 % CI [4.03, 17.68], $p < .001$). Other actors (neither explicitly feminist nor anti-gender) also show elevated odds of control narrative use relative to feminists (OR = 1.96, 95 % CI [1.46, 2.62], $p < .001$), though the effect is considerably smaller. The inverse supports H2a. Feminist actors are substantially less likely to use control narratives, indicating a preference for care-based framing in their gender-political communication. Both H1a and H2a are supported, confirming that identity control and care function as actor-aligned narrative repertoires. Posts from Spain showed significantly lower odds of containing control narratives than those from Italy (OR = 0.68, 95 % CI [0.51, 0.91], $p = .008$), suggesting baseline cross-national differences in narrative prevalence. Page follower count had no significant effect, while longer messages were associated with marginally lower odds of control narratives (OR = 1.00, $p = .006$).

Figure 1



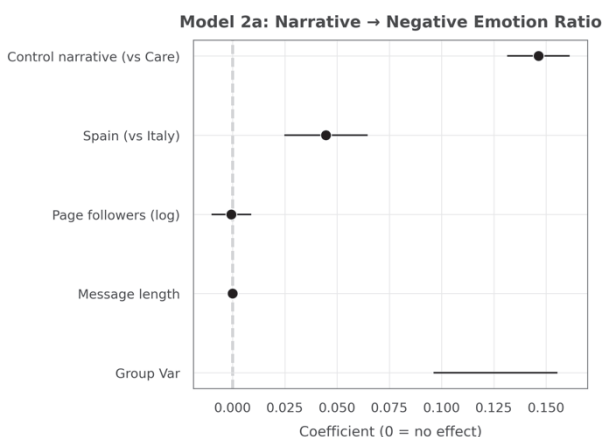
Source: Odds ratio from logit model predicting narrative identity of control by actor type

Models 2a and 2b (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3, Appendix A11.2 & 11.3) test whether identity control and care narratives evoke distinct emotional responses from audiences, measured through the composition of Facebook reactions. Supporting H1b and H2b, posts employing control narratives were associated with a higher negative emotion ratio ($\beta = 0.146$, 95 % CI [0.131, 0.161], $p < .001$) and a lower positive emotion ratio ($\beta = -0.035$, 95 % CI [-0.040, -0.029], $p < .001$) compared to care narratives.

This represents a substantial effect with control narratives eliciting a 14.6 percentage point increase in the share of negative reactions and a 3.5 percentage point decrease in positive reactions relative to care narratives.

The intraclass correlation of Model 2a (ICC = 0.112) indicates that approximately 11 % of variance in negative emotions is attributable to differences between pages. The higher ICC in Model 2b (0.273) suggests that positive emotional engagement varies more substantially across pages than negative engagement. Posts from Spain showed higher negative emotion ratios than those from Italy ($\beta = 0.045$, $p < .001$), though no significant cross-national difference emerged for positive emotions. Log-followers had no significant effect in either model. Message length was statistically significant in both models but with negligible substantive effect.

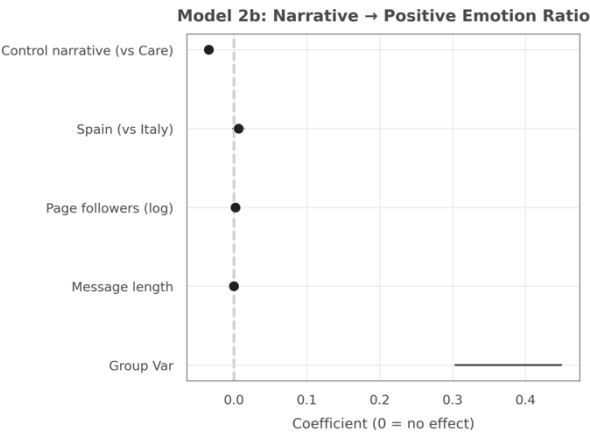
Figure 2



Source: Coefficients from linear regression predicting negative emotional reactions by narrative identity type

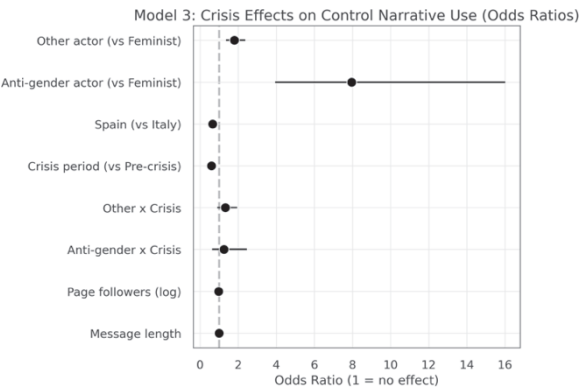
Models 3 and 4 (Fig. 4 & Fig. 5, Appendix A11.4 & A11.5) test whether the onset of the COVID-19 crisis altered actors' narrative strategies. For the use of identity control narratives, Model 3, the main effect of actor type remains strong with anti-gender actors having nearly eight times the odds of posting control narratives compared to feminists (OR = 7.95, 95 % CI [3.95, 16.01], $p < .001$), replicating the baseline alignment found in Model 1. However, the Anti-Gender Actor $\times$ Crisis interaction is not statistically significant (OR = 1.25, 95 % CI [0.64, 2.46], $p = .512$), indicating that anti-gender actors did not significantly increase their use of control narratives during the crisis relative to their pre-crisis baseline. Thus, H3a is not supported. Interestingly, the main effect of crisis period is negative and significant (OR = 0.61, 95 % CI [0.44, 0.84], $p = .003$), suggesting that across all actors, the proportion of control narratives actually declined during the crisis.

Figure 3



Source: Coefficients from linear regression predicting positive emotional reactions by narrative identity type

Figure 4

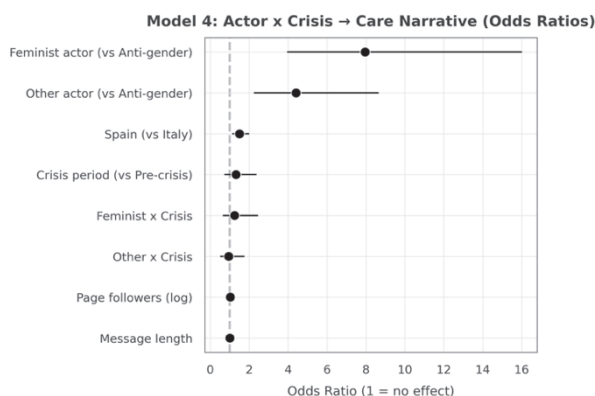


Source: Odds ratios from logistic regressions predicting narrative identity of control by actor and crisis period

For the use of identity care narratives, Model 4, feminist actors have substantially higher odds of posting care narratives compared to anti-gender actors (OR = 7.95, 95 % CI [3.95, 16.01], $p < .001$). However, the Feminist Actor $\times$ Crisis interaction is not statistically significant (OR = 1.25, 95 % CI [0.64, 2.46], $p = .512$), indicating that feminist actors did not significantly change their use of care narratives during the crisis. Thus, H4a is not supported. Posts from Spain showed higher odds of care narratives (OR = 1.50, 95 % CI [1.13, 2.00], $p = .005$) and correspondingly

lower odds of control narratives compared to Italy, consistent with Spain's stronger feminist infrastructure.

Figure 5

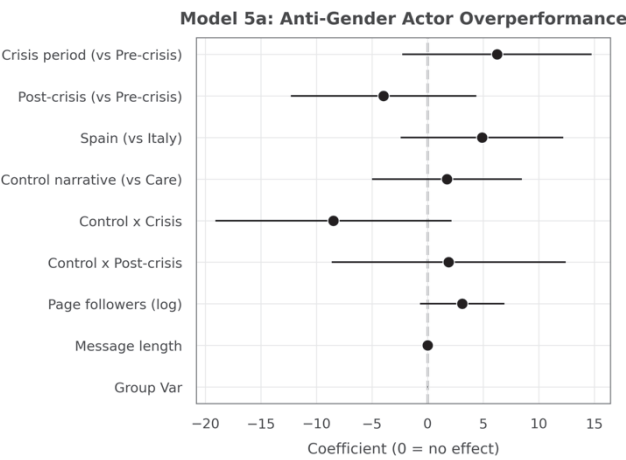


Source: Odds ratios from logistic regressions predicting narrative identity of care by actor and crisis period

Models 5a and 5b (Fig. 6 & Fig. 7, Appendix A11.6 & A11.7) evaluate whether identity control and care narratives overperformed or underperformed relative to each actor's typical content during the crisis. For anti-gender actors' control narratives, neither the direct effect of the control narrative and crisis period, nor their interaction (control narrative $\times$ crisis period) reached statistical significance. H3b is not supported since anti-gender actors' control narratives did not gain an engagement advantage during the crisis relative to their typical content.

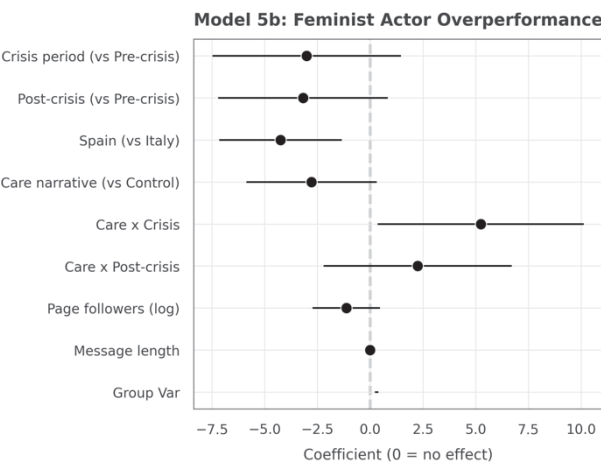
Model 5b examines feminist actors' posts. Here, an unexpected pattern emerges. The Care $\times$ Crisis interaction is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 5.24$, 95 % CI [0.36, 10.13], $p = .035$), indicating that care narratives posted by feminist actors during the crisis outperformed their baseline content by approximately 5.2 points on the overperformance scale. The main effect of care narrative is marginally negative ($\beta = -2.78$, $p = .078$), suggesting that outside of crisis periods, care narratives slightly underperform relative to feminist actors' other content. However, this pattern reverses during the crisis, although does not persist into the post-crisis period (Care $\times$ Post-Crisis: $\beta = 2.25$, $p = .323$). Thus, H4b is not supported in the expected direction. Rather than performing the same or worse, feminist actors' care narratives gained a significant engagement boost during the crisis. Additionally, feminist actors in Spain showed lower overperformance scores than those in Italy ($\beta = -4.25$, $p = .004$).

Figure 6



Source: Coefficients from linear regressions predicting the overperformance of identity narratives in terms of engagement during crisis by anti-gender actor

Figure 7

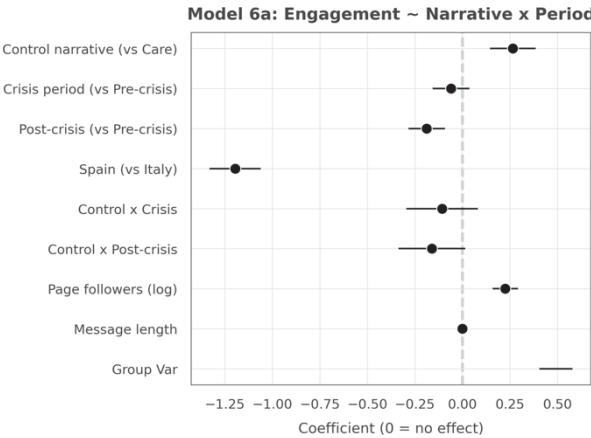


Source: Coefficients from linear regressions predicting the overperformance of identity narratives during crisis by feminist actor

Model 6 (Fig. 8, Appendix A11.8) tests whether control narratives gain a growing engagement advantage over care narratives during the crisis, regardless of who posts them. The results reveal a baseline advantage for narrative of control, receiving significantly higher engagement than care narratives ($\beta = 0.265$, 95 % CI [0.145, 0.385], $p < .001$). However, this engagement gap did not widen during the crisis. The Control $\times$ Crisis interaction is not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.107$, 95 % CI

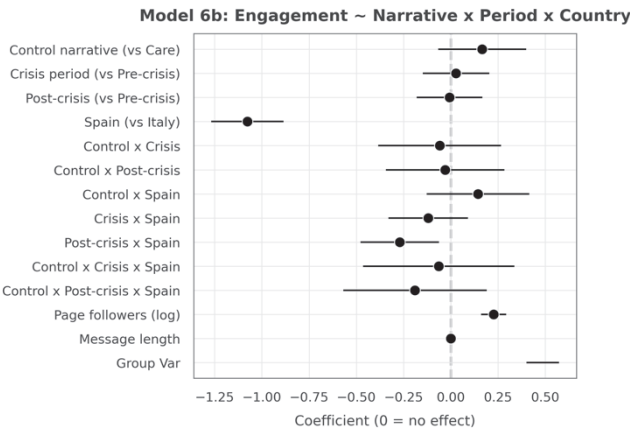
$[-0.296, 0.081]$, $p = .265$), indicating that the relative advantage of control over care narratives remained stable during the pandemic period. The negative coefficient suggests a slight narrowing of the gap, though the effect is not significant. In the post-crisis period, there is marginal evidence of convergence (Control $\times$ Post-Crisis: $\beta = -0.161$, 95 % CI $[-0.337, 0.015]$, $p = .072$). Thus, H5 is not supported because while control narratives consistently outperform care narratives, this advantage remained stable rather than widening during the crisis.

Figure 8



Source: Coefficients from a linear regression predicting log-total interactions patterns across narrative type and crisis period

Figure 9



Source: Coefficients from a linear regression predicting log-total interactions patterns across narrative type, crisis period and country

Model 7 (Fig. 9, Appendix A11.9) extends this analysis to test whether national feminist infrastructure moderates the overall engagement dynamics, introducing a three-way interaction between narrative type, time period, and country (Spain vs. Italy). Posts from Spain showed significantly lower overall log-engagement than those from Italy ($\beta = -1.077$, $p < .001$), and engagement in Spain declined further in the post-crisis period (Post-Crisis $\times$ Spain: $\beta = -0.270$, $p = .011$). However, the triple interaction terms were all non-significant (e.g., Control $\times$ During $\times$ Spain: $\beta = -0.063$, $p = .758$; Control $\times$ Post $\times$ Spain: $\beta = -0.190$, $p = .327$). Thus, H6 is not supported. While control narratives consistently outperform care narratives, this asymmetry does not vary significantly between Spain and Italy, suggesting that platform-level dynamics override national institutional differences.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the strategic deployment and engagement performance of identity control and identity care narratives in gender-political discourse on Facebook across Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal a more complex dynamic than the theoretical framework initially anticipated, confirming some expectations while challenging others in ways that strengthen our understanding of how platform architectures interact with crisis politics to shape democratic resilience.

The analyses strongly confirm actor-aligned narrative repertoires. Anti-gender actors were significantly more likely to employ identity control narratives characterised by exclusion, victimhood, and traditional hierarchies, while feminist actors predominantly drew on identity care narratives emphasising solidarity, transformation, and shared vulnerability. This division holds across both Spain and Italy, suggesting robust ideological grounding for these communicative strategies. Importantly, the crisis did not alter these repertoires. Neither anti-gender actors nor feminist actors significantly shifted their narrative strategies during the pandemic. Rather than indicating a lack of crisis responsiveness, it suggests that narrative identity operates as a durable repertoire embedded in actors' relational networks and organisational cultures. Actors do not switch narratives when crisis strikes; they continue narrating from within the frameworks already available to them.

Furthermore, the study found compelling evidence for the affective asymmetry of these narrative strategies. Narratives of identity control consistently generated higher negative emotional engagement, aligning with theoretical expectations about how such narratives social mobilise status loss and threat perception (Mercer, 2014; Brady et al. 2017; Salmela & von Scheve 2017), while identity care narratives were associated with greater positive emotional resonance.

Regarding actor adaptation to specific narrative identity online during the crisis, anti-gender actors did not significantly increase their use of control narratives during the crisis, contrary to expectations. One possible interpretation is a saturation effect.

Anti-gender actors might already operate at a high level of employing narratives of identity control, such that a crisis does not necessitate a further statistically significant increase in their rate of use. Similarly, their audiences might be accustomed to these narratives, meaning that control posts during the crisis do not inherently overperform their already established engagement patterns. The novelty required for increased engagement during this period might diminish if a narrative style is already pervasive.

The most striking finding is that feminist care narratives significantly outperformed their baseline content during the crisis, directly contradicting the hypothesis, despite no significant increase in their rate of use. As domestic labour, frontline care work, and gendered precarity became acutely visible (Power, 2020; Smith et al., 2021), audiences responded to care narratives with engagement levels exceeding what these actors typically achieved. This implies that while care narratives may be structurally misaligned with platform mechanics under ordinary conditions, crisis moments can temporarily amplify their resonance, perhaps due to increased care burdens.

However, the care narrative boost did not persist into the post-crisis period, and it did not close the overall engagement gap between control and care narratives. Control narratives continued to attract significantly higher levels of overall engagement, indicating a persistent baseline advantage, although this advantage did not increase during the crisis period, nor was it driven by a corresponding rise in their strategic use by anti-gender actors. Thus, care narratives of feminist actors gained traction during the crisis, yet not to an extent sufficient to significantly alter the overall hierarchy of engagement.

A central hypothesis of this study was that the crisis would widen the engagement gap between control and care narratives at the platform level, regardless of who deploys them. The results partially support and partially complicate this expectation. Control narratives do hold a significant baseline engagement advantage over care narratives. However, this asymmetry did not widen during the crisis, as the interaction between control narratives and the crisis period was non-significant.

Two factors may contribute to these patterns. First, the analysis defines the crisis period temporally rather than thematically. While all posts fall within the pandemic timeline, many may have continued to address gender politics without direct reference to COVID-19, potentially diluting crisis-specific amplification of narrative strategies. A more granular analysis filtering for posts explicitly engaging with the pandemic might reveal what the temporal approach could not capture. Second, social media platforms dramatically increased content moderation measures to combat misinformation and harmful content during the crisis (Facebook Community Standards Enforcement Report, 2020). Control narratives, particularly those using uncivil discourse to emphasise exclusion and impose traditional order using xeno-

phobic and sexist framing, could have overlapped with flagged content, potentially removing the most inflammatory control narratives.

Rather than undermining the platform architecture argument, this null finding deepens it. The structural alignment between control narratives and platform affordances does not require crisis activation; it operates as a standing feature of the digital environment, rewarding exclusionary identity construction under ordinary conditions as much as during exceptional ones. For democratic resilience, this persistent asymmetry may be more consequential than a crisis-specific surge, precisely because it is not contingent on external shocks.

Regarding the role of national context, the results indicate Spain's stronger feminist infrastructure did not translate into a differential engagement advantage for care narratives during the crisis relative to Italy. Platform dynamics imposed a relatively uniform logic of visibility regardless of institutional differences. While national contexts shape which narratives are more prevalent, with care narratives appearing more frequently in Spain, they do not substantially alter which narratives are most rewarded with engagement. However, this finding should be interpreted at the aggregate level of analysis. The models do not include a four-way interaction with actor type, and it is possible that more fine-grained differences in engagement performance across countries emerge within specific actor groups.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the strategic deployment and engagement performance of identity control and identity care narratives in gender-political discourse on Facebook across Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis presented here suggests that the threat to democratic politics does not primarily stem from crises amplifying exclusionary narratives, as control narratives neither increased in frequency nor gained more engagement during the pandemic. The more fundamental concern is that platform architectures sustain persistent engagement asymmetry, disadvantaging care narratives.

Yet this disadvantage is not absolute. During the pandemic, care narratives significantly outperformed their own baseline engagement, even without increased deployment by feminist actors. However, this temporary boost did not close the overall engagement gap with control narratives, nor did it vary across national contexts.

This advances understanding of digital political communication in several ways. First, the study demonstrates that care narratives can break through platform constraints during crisis. This matters because it reveals that digital publics are not uniformly unreceptive to inclusive identity narratives. Audiences responded when shared vulnerability was salient, showing that democratic resilience exists within digital public sphere and can be activated under specific conditions.

Second, the results reveal how national discursive infrastructures and platform affordances intersect. In Spain, where feminist institutions are stronger, care narratives are more prevalent, confirming that offline infrastructure shapes digital narratives. Yet platform mechanisms govern engagement, such that the relative engagement performance of control versus care narratives does not significantly vary across countries.

Finally, these findings address a scholarly and methodological gap left by studies focusing on backsliding and radicalisation. By documenting both persistent disadvantage and crisis-activated potential of care narratives, as well as focusing on narratives of identity politics as unit of analysis and using LLMs to scale human annotated data, this study provides an empirical foundation for research on sustaining democracies in digital environments.

The study also comes with important limitations. The keyword-based sampling focused on salient gender-political vocabulary, likely undercounting care-related pandemic discourse that did not engage with explicitly political terms, such as posts discussing school closures, care exhaustion, or work-life conflicts without feminist or anti-gender framing. Consequently, the findings do not capture all possible crisis-related gender political discussions. Second, the reliance on Facebook restricts generalisability to platforms with different affordances, and relatedly, the 100,000-follower threshold prioritises visibility over representativeness, excluding smaller influential actors and their narrative repertoires. Third, automated classification struggles with narrative classification and cannot operate without supervision, thus requiring manual coding, and while larger language models may improve on this, they demand computational resources that raise their own ethical and practical concerns.

These limitations also point to promising avenues of research. Extending this inquiry to platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or Telegram, each with distinct content distribution mechanisms, would clarify whether the structural disadvantage of care narratives is a general feature of engagement-driven digital architectures or specific to Facebook. Future research should also examine how care narratives perform when they intersect with other axes of identities, such as race, class, sexuality, and citizenship, given an extensive body of research that argues that intersectional feminist actors negotiate algorithmic biases while building solidarities across diverse communities (Jackson, Bailey & Welles, 2020; Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021). Third, extending this framework beyond Europe to Global South contexts can show how different political cultures and digital governance regimes create conditions under which care narratives can more effectively challenge control narratives. Finally, a more refined exploration of identity control narratives should acknowledge the complex social marginalisation that draws vulnerable groups into these networks, moving beyond a framework that treats control narratives solely as instruments of power to examine the genuine uncertainties they address. This

mixed-method, comparative and interdisciplinary work is crucial for understanding identity politics through political communication research and, ultimately, to strengthen democratic resilience by building more inclusive digital public spheres.

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Appendix

<https://www.nomos.de/zeitschriften/cpe/#zusatzmaterial>

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.

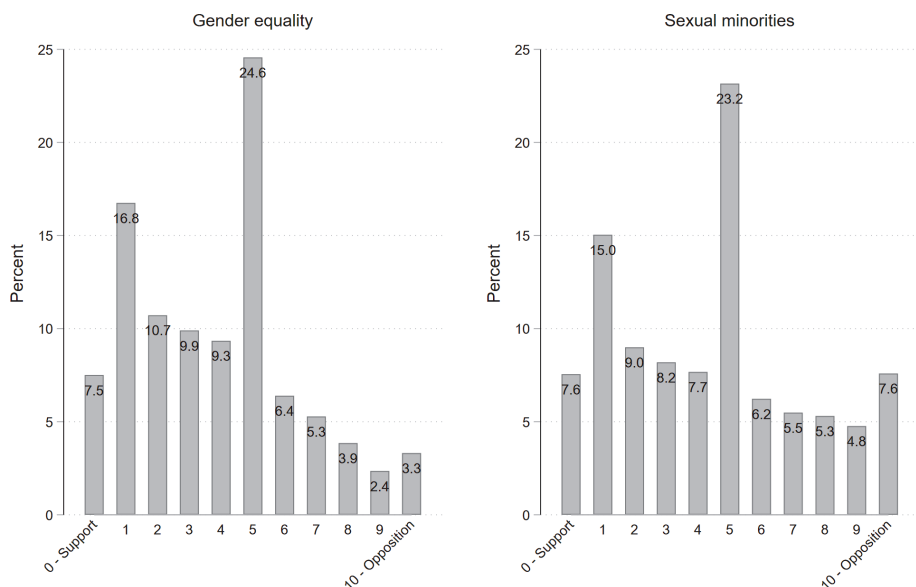
5. Results

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.

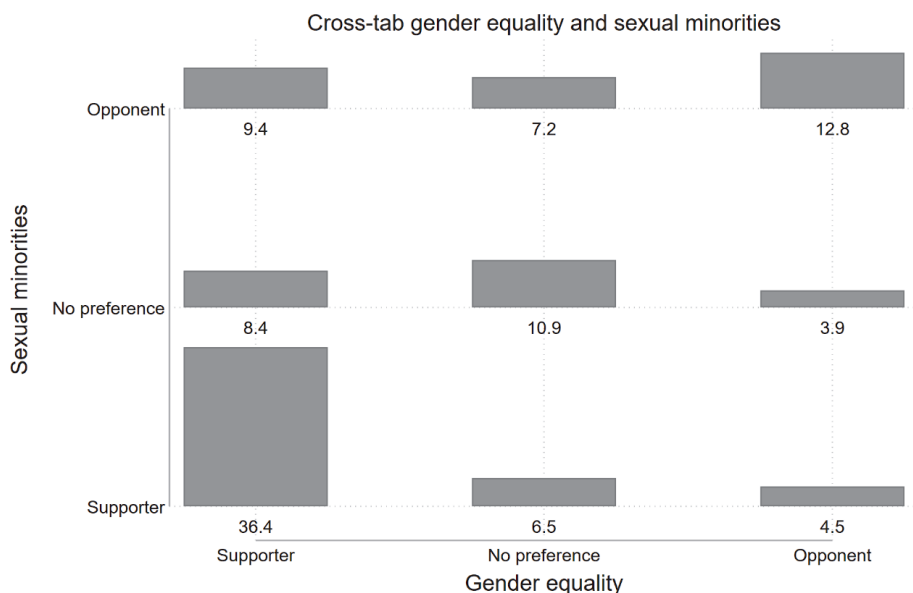
Figure 2: Country-wise distribution of attitudes toward political measures for gender equality (left) and anti-discrimination of sexual minorities (right). Note: Values of 0 to 4 indicate support, 6 to 10 indicate opposition. A value of 5 denotes no preference for policy change.



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.

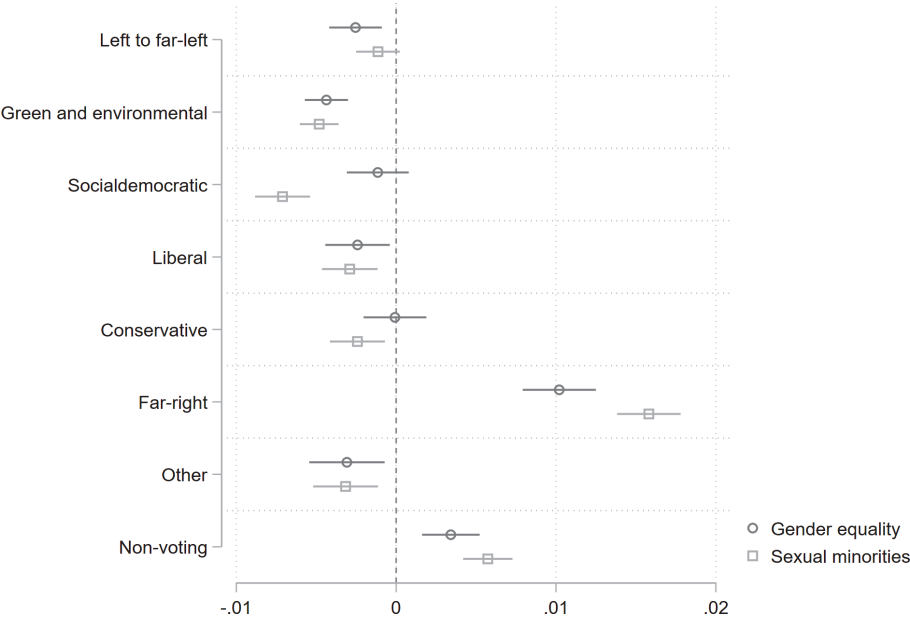


Source: Own data

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).



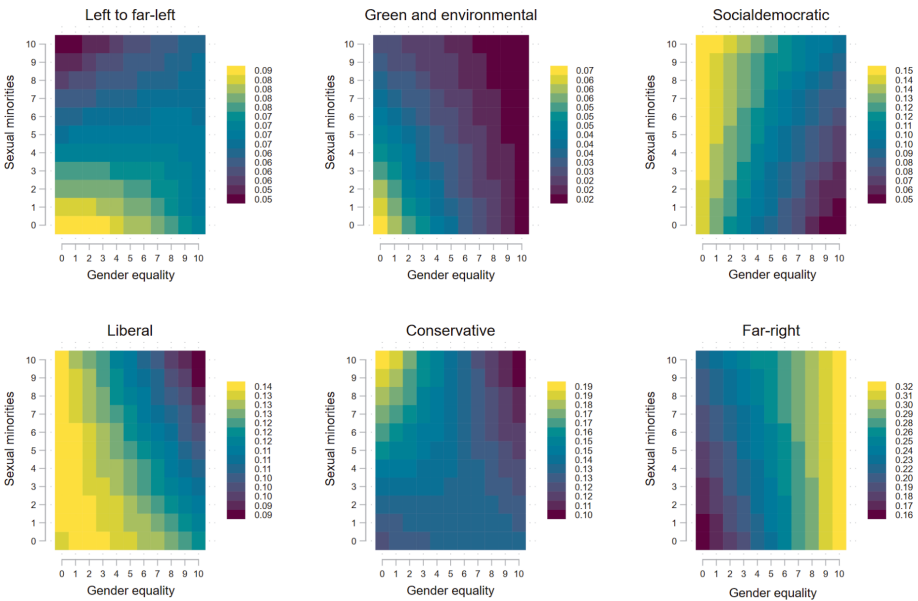
Source: Own data

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.

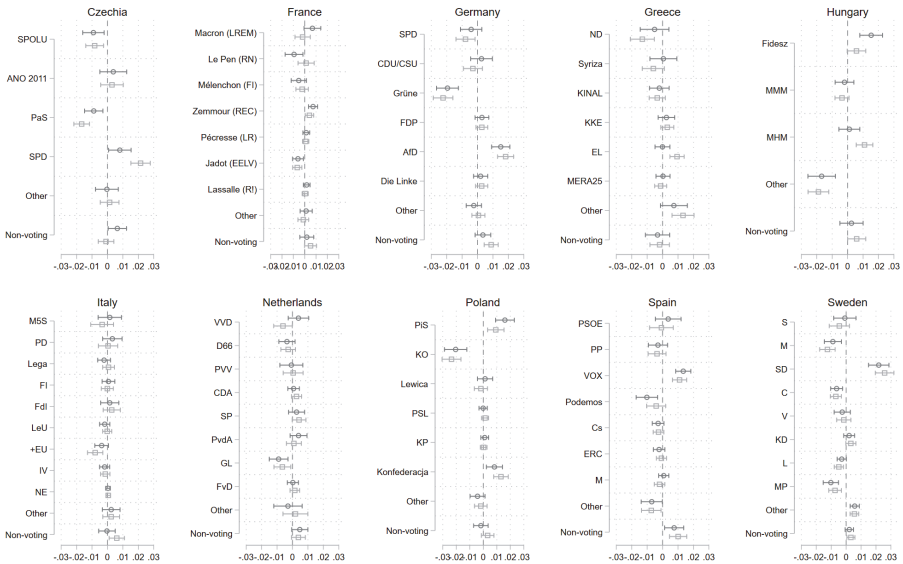
Taken together, these findings suggest that attitudes toward gender equality and sexual minorities are both salient and distinct predictors of voting intention in contemporary Europe. While they are correlated, they are not interchangeable, and their joint inclusion in the models improves explanatory 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.

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Appendix

<https://www.nomos.de/zeitschriften/cpe/#zusatzmaterial>

Gender equality between rights and resentment: Social media engagement and gender attitudes across Europe

Abstract

This study examines how gender-related attitudes are structured within contemporary cultural conflict lines and whether digital communicative engagement is associated with regressive positioning on gender issues. While support for formal gender equality has become widely institutionalized across Europe, feminist mobilization and anti-gender counter-movements have increasingly embedded gender in broader value-based divides. We conceptualize gender-related attitudes along two dimensions: rights-based support for equality and affective anti-feminist positioning. Using an original 2021 cross-sectional survey from France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Spain (N = 12,000), we analyze whether the intensity of social media use – understood as the degree to which individuals are embedded in digitally mediated communication environments – is associated with these attitudinal dimensions. Social media intensity is measured as time spent on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter/X, and Instagram. Ordinary Least Squares regressions with country fixed effects indicate that higher levels of social media use intensity are consistently associated with more regressive views on gender-related attitudes across both dimensions. The findings contribute to debates in political sociology and digital communication research by highlighting the association between communicative embeddedness of citizens in digital arenas and cultural positioning on gender equality.

Keywords: attitudes; antifeminism; Europe; feminism; gender equality; LGBT; social media

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1. Introduction

Gender politics has long been contested but has become increasingly politicized in recent years across many countries in the Global North, unfolding in both public

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and digital arenas (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Jackson et al., 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018). At the same time, gender disparities in the labor market, political life, and private relationships persist (Auspurg et al., 2017; Bernhard et al., 2021; Minkus et al., 2022; Waitkus & Minkus, 2021). The increasing politicization of gender issues alongside the persistence of gender inequalities suggests that gender issues are increasingly embedded in broader cultural conflicts that structure contemporary European politics and societies. While earlier research documented a long-term modernization trend and rising aggregate support for egalitarian values and women's rights in particular worldwide (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Welzel et al., 2002), more recent scholarship highlights the growing salience of cultural value divides, often conceptualized as a cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage or along the GAL–TAN (Green–Alternative–Libertarian vs. Traditional–Authoritarian–Nationalist) dimension (Bornschieer et al., 2021; de Wilde et al., 2019; Kriesi et al., 2012). Within this broader cultural conflict, gender equality has gained increasing scholarly attention as a key issue linking debates on family norms, sexual diversity, political authoritarianism, and social hierarchy (Alexander & Off, 2025; Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024; Schäfer et al., 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2024).

At the same time, political contestation increasingly unfolds within digital communication environments. Social media platforms have become routine components of everyday political engagement and information exchange (Bail, 2021; Barberá, 2020; Jungherr et al., 2020). While early debates emphasized filter bubbles and echo chambers, empirical evidence suggests that the relationship between social media use and political attitudes is small and inconsistent (Boxell et al., 2017; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Eady et al., 2019; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). This may in part reflect a research focus on digital political news consumption rather than broader forms of social media engagement. We therefore shift the analytical focus beyond the distinction between users and non-users or politically interested users toward differences in the intensity of social media use. Building on the mediatization approach (Couldry & Hepp, 2020; Hepp et al., 2015) as well as on arguments that contemporary social and value conflicts are deeply mediatized (Eigmüller & Trenz, 2020), we conceptualize use intensity as an indicator of how deeply individuals are embedded in digitally mediated communication environments in which political and cultural conflicts are articulated and publicly contested.

Against this background, this study examines whether and how the intensity of social media use is associated with individual attitudes towards gender-related issues. To address these questions, we draw on an original cross-sectional survey dataset from six European countries (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Spain) collected in 2021 (Díez-Medrano et al., 2024). This dataset uniquely allows us to study how time spent on social media platforms is associated with gender-related attitudes, using three different indicators: gender equality on the labor market, same rights for LGBT persons, and whether feminists hate men. We conceptualize these

three items as belonging to two different dimensions of gender-related attitudes: On the one hand, a normative rights-based support, referring to endorsement of equal rights and equality principles, and on the other hand, an affective anti-feminist positioning, referring to negative evaluations of feminism and feminist actors. This distinction allows us to capture both institutionalized support for gender equality and the more symbolic and contested aspects of contemporary gender politics.

The results of our Ordinary Least Squares regressions with country fixed effects indicate that higher levels of social media use intensity, measured as time spent on major social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter/X, Instagram) are consistently associated with more restrictive views on gender-related issues across all three indicators. These associations remain robust, controlling for socio-demographic characteristics as well as political orientations and authoritarian values, and further hold across a wide range of robustness checks. While platform-specific differences are limited, the use of traditional media such as TV and radio is either unrelated to gender-related attitudes or associated with slightly more pro-gender equality positions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Contested gender equality

Previous studies have widely demonstrated that egalitarian principles concerning women's labor market participation, political representation, and equal rights have become widely accepted normative standards (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Knight & Brinton, 2017; Welzel et al., 2002). However, recent scholarship suggests that cultural conflicts in Western democracies have increasingly crystallized around a new value-based divide, often described in terms of cosmopolitan versus communitarian orientations, universalist versus particularist principles, or libertarian versus authoritarian values (Bornschieer et al., 2021; de Wilde et al., 2019; Kriesi et al., 2012). While such analyses of this emerging conflict line focused primarily on issues such as immigration or European integration, more recent developments indicate that gender-related questions are becoming more tightly integrated into these broader cultural struggles (Off, 2024; Otteni, 2025; Schäfer et al., 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2024).

In fact, previous research has demonstrated that feminist mobilizations have contributed to making persistent inequalities visible and politically salient (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Verloo, 2018), while counter-mobilizations have framed gender equality reforms as unwanted cultural transformation as well as introduced by external forces such as the EU (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Lombardo et al., 2025; Off, 2023). Scholars have highlighted for different European countries, that varying coalitions of ultra-religious groups, conservative think tanks, right-wing populist parties, and right-leaning media actors have mobilized against what they describe

as “gender ideology,” targeting policies on abortion, gender-inclusive language, family law, and LGBT rights (Gwiazda, 2023; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018; Vida, 2022). Norris and Inglehart (2019) interpret such dynamics as part of a “cultural backlash,” whereby older cohorts, who tend to hold more traditional views, perceive rapid social change as well as intergenerational value change as threatening and respond with more conservative attitudes and support for right-wing populist parties.

2.2 Two dimensions of gender-related attitudes

Existing research suggests that attitudes toward gender equality are not uniform but consist of distinguishable components that vary in their degree of contestation (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Elder et al., 2021; Knight & Brinton, 2017; Schäfer et al., 2024). Building on this literature, we distinguish between *two dimensions of gender-related attitudes*: normative rights-based support, referring to endorsement of equal rights and equality principles, and affective anti-feminist positioning, referring to negative evaluations of feminism and feminist actors. This distinction allows for a more fine-grained analysis of how individuals position themselves within contemporary cultural conflicts over gender equality.

On the one hand, *rights-based support for gender equality* refers to endorsement of general egalitarian principles and equal rights claims, such as equal participation in the labor market or equal rights for sexual minorities. A substantial body of research shows that such principles have become widely accepted across advanced democracies, reflecting long-term processes of value change and institutionalization (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Evans, 2003; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Even individuals who do not identify as feminists frequently support concrete policy goals associated with gender equality (Elder et al., 2021). In this sense, normative support for equality can coexist with disagreement about how these claims should be framed politically or implemented in practice.

On the other hand, *affective anti-feminist positioning* refers to symbolic and emotional opposition to feminism and feminist actors. Recent scholarship shows that gender conflicts increasingly unfold at a symbolic and affective level rather than through explicit rejection of equality principles. Identifying as a feminist remains stigmatized in many contexts, and women who publicly embrace feminist identities often face negative stereotypes (Conlin & Heesacker, 2018; Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Moreover, opposition to feminism often reflects perceptions of cultural or status threat and out-group hostility rather than explicit rejection of formal equality principles (Anduiza & Off, 2026; Otteni, 2025). Research on anti-feminist attitudes and hostile sexism shows that feminist movements and activists can be framed as undermining traditional social hierarchies, challenging established gender roles, or privileging women at the expense of men (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987; Díaz Fernández et al., 2023; Off, 2024; Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Moreover, empirical work further suggests that while majorities may endorse equality norms in

abstract terms, identification with or hostility toward feminism can remain highly contentious (Elder et al., 2021; Off, 2023; Ogletree et al., 2019). As these studies demonstrate, such perceptions are closely linked to broader orientations toward authority, hierarchy, and social order. Rather than targeting specific policy measures, affective anti-feminist positioning involves symbolic boundary drawing and the delegitimization of feminist actors (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Díaz Fernández et al., 2023; Vida, 2022).

2.3 Social media communication practices

Social media platforms have become routine arenas of information and news consumption, online communication, political expression, identity signalling, and value contestation for almost all citizens (Bail, 2021; Jungherr et al., 2020). A substantial body of research shows that social media use is closely linked to partisan self-expression, selective engagement, and identity-confirming communication practices and interactions (Bail, 2021; Osmundsen et al., 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2021).

Within these digital environments, gender-related hostility and misogynistic discourse represent a recurring feature of online communication. Studies show that female politicians and journalists are disproportionately exposed to hateful comments and online harassment (G. M. Chen et al., 2020; Esposito & Breeze, 2022). At the same time, right-wing populist parties and fringe actors strategically use social media platforms to mobilize supporters and disseminate anti-gender and anti-feminist frames (Knüpfer et al., 2022; Righetti et al., 2025; Wallaschek et al., 2022). Consequently, individuals who spend more time on social media are more likely to encounter incivility, trolling, and hostile interactions and may adopt or reciprocate such communicative styles (Frischlich et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021). Exposure to uncivil and antagonistic discourse not only shapes user's perceptions of online communication – particularly for women (Sobieraj, 2022) – but can also increase negative affect toward political out-groups and reinforce adversarial perceptions (Frischlich et al., 2021; Schöne et al., 2021).

Although the extent to which these dynamics translate into societal polarization and a decline of democratic values remains debated (Jungherr et al., 2020; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022), digital communication spaces facilitate the visibility and circulation of emotionally charged and identity-relevant content. At the same time, media-effects studies frequently find small or inconsistent associations between social media use and political attitudes (Boxell et al., 2017; Jungherr et al., 2020). However, less attention has been paid to differences in the intensity of social media use and how these relate to individuals' embeddedness in digitally mediated communication environments.

Building on insights from the mediatization approach (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hepp et al., 2015) and research on networked publics (boyd, 2010), we conceptual-

ize *social media use intensity* as a multidimensional practice that reflects the degree to which individuals are embedded in digitally mediated communication environments. The mediatization perspective emphasizes that “everyday experience with media” (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 193) has become all-encompassing, as social interactions, information consumption, and cultural practices increasingly unfold across intertwined online and offline contexts. As a result, the distinction between offline and online spheres becomes less meaningful, as digital environments enable continuous participation in social, economic, and political life (Hepp et al., 2015). Social media platforms provide infrastructures for sociability and communication across contexts, while the boundary between media audiences and content producers has increasingly blurred through the co-constitution of media content by users (Baym & Boyd, 2012; Jungherr et al., 2020; Papacharissi, 2015).

Individuals who spend more time on social media are not merely exposed to more content, but are more deeply embedded in communicative practices that include information seeking, interaction, and identity formation (Bail, 2021; Baym & Boyd, 2012; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). As Baym and Boyd (2012, p. 326) argue, online environments introduce “new social dynamics, requiring people to manage invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and a blurring between the public and private.” These dynamics suggest that intensive use reflects a stronger engagement with communicative processes in which identities are negotiated and social interactions take place in partially public settings (Papacharissi, 2015). Consequently, it has been argued (Eigmüller & Trenz, 2020) that individuals who spend more time on social media are more likely to encounter, observe, or participate in ongoing social and political interactions, including conflictual exchanges about key democratic norms and values. Therefore, *we expect that individuals who are more intensively engaged on social media platforms may be less likely to support gender-related issues.*

2.4 Different social media platforms

An increasing number of scholars have voiced concerns about how social media shapes the public debate. One key mechanism that has been studied extensively is homophily as individuals are more likely to engage with others who share similar identities and preferences. While users may still encounter diverse information, such exposure does not necessarily weaken existing identities and may even reinforce them (Bail et al., 2018). In general, homophily seems to influence whether social media, offline personal networks, or both amplify or mitigate social conflicts (Van Bavel et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2025). For instance, scholars have suggested that Twitter’s architecture encourages the formation of homogeneous groups and tends to connect like-minded individuals who reinforce existing views rather than bridging partisan divides (Jakob et al., 2023). Settle (2018) examines how users engage with Facebook groups focused on political content. She demonstrates that political interactions on Facebook often reflect negative perceptions of out-groups and

the reinforcement of positive attitudes toward one's in-group, ultimately fostering communication and exchange among like-minded individuals. This is particularly strong for those Facebook users who use the platform to confirm their political interests and tend to one side of the political spectrum (Praet et al., 2022).

Studies on the “platform effect”, understood as the influence of platform-specific features on user behavior and content circulation, yield contrasting results. For example, Verbalyte and Eigmüller (2022) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Twitter and Instagram users were less critical of lockdown measures than Facebook users – a divergence they link to differences in user composition (elite versus ordinary users). Similarly, Jakob et al. (2023) report that Facebook debates exhibit higher toxic outrage than those on Twitter, likely because the blend of public and private contexts on Facebook elicits more emotional, personal reactions. Moreover, while Kligler-Vilenchik et al. (2020) show that emotion-driven conflicts are more prevalent on Twitter and Facebook than on WhatsApp, Yarchi et al. (2021) argue that Twitter's heterophilic user structure fosters heated interactions among diverse social groups, potentially sparking broader societal conflicts.

Research on political and social conflicts often focuses on social media alone, overlooking legacy media's influence. Feezell et al. (2021) demonstrate that “non-algorithmic news consumption” – via newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio – does not appear to increase partisan conflicts or predict higher levels of partisanship, as traditional news does not seem to have become more partisan over time. Nonetheless, Boxell et al. (2017) note that in the US, older cohorts with lower internet usage experienced the largest rise in partisan views; even as social media use among adults increased from 50 % in 2011 to 72 % in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021), and in Europe from 36 % in 2011 to 59 % in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). In sum and given that the literature provides conflicting evidence on the platform effect, *we expect that different platforms are differentially associated with gender-related attitudes.*

2.5 Authoritarian preferences and party alignment

In addition to the previously discussed aspects, political orientations also play a role in explaining the current gender backlash, as studies demonstrate. One relevant dimension concerns preferences for authoritarian governance. Psychological research on authoritarian orientations shows that individuals who prioritize social order, conformity, and deference to authority are more likely to reject pluralism, diversity, and social change (Feldman, 2003; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Accordingly, authoritarian predispositions are consistently linked to more restrictive attitudes toward minority rights, immigration, and gender equality (Alexander & Off, 2025; Duncan et al., 1997; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Empirical studies further show that such orientations are linked to more traditional gender role attitudes and higher levels of hostile sexism (Duncan et al., 1997; Peterson & Zurbriggen, 2010). Political science and political sociology also focus more concretely on explaining

the support for authoritarian governance, measured through preferences for strong leaders who can govern without institutional constraints such as parliaments or courts (Anderson et al., 2022; Dahlum et al., 2024; Malka et al., 2022). In this regard, Anderson et al. (2022) recently show that, based on World Value Survey data, around 35 percent of all global respondents prefer a strong leader in their country and 45 percent of the respondents evaluate men as better leaders than women. These “strong leader” preferences are widely used as indicators of support for illiberal governance and democratic backsliding in the population (Malka et al., 2022; Sprong et al., 2019). Conversely, individuals who support gender equality and LGBTQI rights are significantly more likely to reject authoritarian leadership preferences (Alexander & Off, 2025).

Beyond individual-level orientations, political parties play an important role in structuring public debates and mobilizing for or against gender equality by providing programmatic and symbolic cues on gender-related issues (Kittilson, 2013). In recent years, right-wing populist parties have increasingly incorporated masculinity and anti-gender frames and anti-LGBTQI* rhetoric into their political agendas and strongly mobilize on these issues (Sauer, 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2024; Weeks et al., 2025). Research on cultural backlash and political divides suggests that voters who perceive rapid social and cultural transformation as threatening and who are more culturally conservative are more likely to align with such parties (Anduiza & Off, 2026; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Off, 2024; Schäfer et al., 2024).

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data

We use data from the ValCon Survey, conducted in six European countries (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Spain) in April and May 2021. The survey was administered by the public opinion research company IPSOS and is based on an online access panel (IPSOS, n.d.). The target population consists of residents aged 18 to 65 with internet access in each of the six countries. From this online access panel, 2,000 respondents per country were recruited using quota sampling for age, gender, and education (in total 12,000 individuals). The data is publicly available through the GESIS research data repository (Díez-Medrano et al., 2024).

The ValCon Survey includes various items on people’s value orientation, socio-demographic characteristics, political participation, and media use. The survey design and questionnaire were identical across all six countries. Respondents were asked how often they used different traditional media sources such as TV, radio, newspapers (print or online) as well as the four major social media platforms Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram in the last month. Response options ranged from “never used this source” to “every day”, and a “don’t know” category. In the sample, almost half of the respondents are male, the average age is 49 years, and the

mode for education is middle education. A detailed description of the dataset and summary statistics can be found in the appendix (Table A.1.).

3.2 Variables

The central outcome of our analysis concerns individual attitudes toward gender-related issues. Since attitudes toward gender equality are latent constructs that cannot be adequately captured by a single indicator, we rely on three survey items reflecting different aspects of gender-related attitudes. Building on our conceptual distinction between normative rights-based support for gender equality and affective anti-feminist positioning, the selected indicators capture both dimensions. The first item taps affective anti-feminist positioning while the last two capture rights-based support for gender equality.

Respondents were asked whether they agree with the following statements: “Most feminists just hate men”; “Women should be treated equally to men in the labor market” as well as “Lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual people should have the same rights as the rest of the population”. All three variables were measured using a four-point Likert scale without a middle category. To account for this, we recoded “don’t know” as the middle category, resulting in a five-point scale. Robustness checks excluding the “don’t know” were also conducted (see section “Robustness Analysis”). Additionally, a factor analysis shows that all three items load on a single factor (results not shown).

The central independent variables in our study relate to social media use. The data provide information on respondents' engagement with Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter. In addition, the survey includes information on the consumption of traditional media sources such as TV, radio and newspapers, which serves as an additional control group in the analysis. Respondents were first asked how often they had used different media sources in the past month (response categories: “Every day”, “Almost every day”, “Two or three times a week”, “Once”, “Never this last month”, “I have never used this source”, and “don’t know”). If respondents indicated that they had used a media source at least “Once” during the previous month, or selected “don’t know”, they were asked a follow-up question about the average time they spent actively using that source on a typical day. Response options included: “less than half an hour”, “more than half an hour but less than an hour”, “more than 1 hour but less than 2 hours”, “more than 2 but less than 5 hours”, to “5 hours or more”, as well as the option “don’t know”. The response categories for the filter question on daily usage are not fully exhaustive. Respondents who reported using a media source only once a month in the previous question were nevertheless asked to estimate their usage in hours “on an average day”. For such non-daily users, the only plausible response category was “less than half an hour (daily)”, which does not accurately reflect their actual usage patterns.

Alternatively, respondents could select “don’t know” since none of the remaining response options correspond to their type of media use.

For each platform, including TV and radio, we construct two dummy variables: The first indicates whether the platform was used at least once in the past month (ever = 1), or not used during the past month (never = 0). The second captures usage intensity. High-intensity use is defined as two or more hours per day ($\geq 2\text{h} = 1$), while low-intensity use is defined as less than two hours per day ($< 2\text{h} = 0$). Sensitivity checks were performed using alternative time thresholds.

We include several control variables. Specifically, we control for age (in categories), gender, paid employment, educational attainment (based on ISCED), urbanity, and self-assessed financial situation. To adjust the models for country-specific attributes, country fixed effects are included in all models. Note that sample sizes for high-intensity users per social media platform are too small to run regression models for each country separately.

3.3 Sample

For the subsequent analysis, we pool the six countries and use the full dataset of 12,000 respondents. Since “don’t know” responses were coded as the middle category, the outcome variables do not contain missing values. However, excluding observations with missing values on the independent variables results in a final sample of 11,318 respondents. As opposed to social media use in general, where the sample size remains consistent across platforms, the sample sizes are smaller and vary across social media platforms when examining intensity of use, since information on time spent is only available for respondents who reported using a given platform. The respective sample sizes for intensity of use models are reported in Tables A.1.–A.6. in the appendix.

3.4 Method

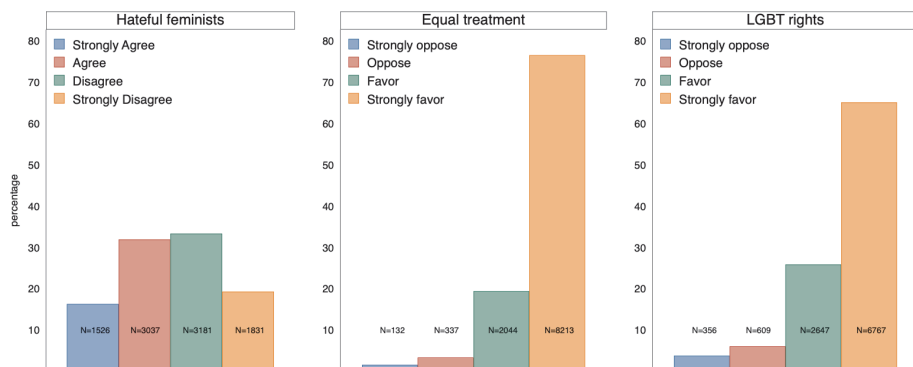
We present the results in three steps. First, we provide a descriptive overview of gender-related attitudes and social media uses. Second, we employ a multivariate analysis to examine whether attitudes toward gender-related issues differ by overall social media use and by intensity of use, while controlling for socio-demographic characteristics. More specifically, we use ordinary least squares regression (OLS) to test the association between social media use and attitudes towards gender-related issues. Firstly, we include a simple dummy variable indicating whether respondents used a given social media platform at least once in the past month, allowing us to compare users with non-users. Secondly, we focus on usage intensity, comparing high-intensity users with low-intensity users. In addition, we also estimate the association between gender attitudes and traditional media sources ("TV/Radio"). This allows us to assess whether the association between social media use and gender-related attitudes differs systematically from the relationship between gender-related

attitudes and traditional media consumption. We estimate separate OLS regressions for each platform, including the respective platform indicator and the full set of control variables. These models are estimated for all three outcome variables. In total, the main analysis consists of thirty models (3 outcomes [feminism, labor market equality, LGBT rights] x 5 media platforms [YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TV & Radio] x 2 measures of media use [never vs. ever, low vs. high intensity]). The results are presented as graphs showing only the estimated associations between media platform use and the outcome variables. This presentation reduces each model to the coefficient of the central dependent variable. Full regression tables for each platform and outcome including control variables are reported in the appendix (Table A.2.-A.6.). Third, to examine whether the association between social media use intensity and gender-related attitudes persists when accounting for political orientations, we re-estimate our regression models by stepwise including variables capturing authoritarian governance preferences and right-wing populist party alignment. Due to the additional variables, the sample sizes here are also slightly smaller; the sample size is specified in the caption of the relevant figure. Authoritarian governance preferences are measured as agreement with the statement “The own country should be governed by a powerful leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections”. Right-wing partisanship is captured by an indicator for voting for a right-wing populist party in the respondent’s country. Lastly, we perform several sensitivity checks to assess the robustness of the results (see section “Robustness Analysis”).

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive findings

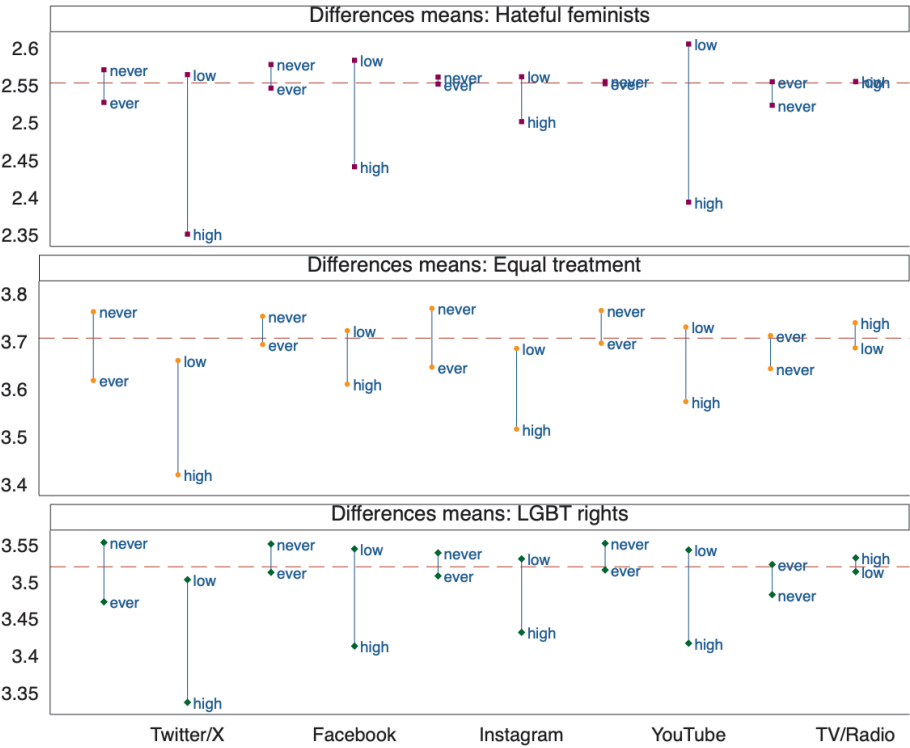
Figure 1 presents the distribution of three outcome variables. Regarding the first one on “hateful feminists”, almost 50 % of the sample agrees with the statement that “most feminists just hate men” (16 % “strongly agree”, 32 % “agree”). The other two outcome variables display considerably less variation. A large majority (76 %) strongly agree that men and women should have the same rights in the labor market, and only 4 % express disagreement. Similarly, about 90 % agree that LGBT people should have the same rights as the rest of the population while roughly 10 % disagree. Thus, there is very little variance in the normative rights-based support for gender equality items whereas the item on affective anti-feminist positioning shows greater disagreement.

Figure 1: Description of gender attitudes

Note: Frequency distribution of the three outcome variables on gender attitudes, “hateful feminists”, “equal treatment” and “LGBT rights”. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

We next examine how the descriptive means of the outcomes on gender issues vary by the use of different media platforms and sources. Figure 2 shows that individuals who report using social media platforms less than once a month (“never”) display slightly more progressive attitudes than those who report using these platforms at least once a month (“ever”). However, these differences in means remain relatively small. When considering usage intensity, a clearer pattern emerges. High-intensity users ($\geq 2\text{h/day}$) are, on average, the least supportive of gender-related issues. This pattern appears consistently across all social media platforms and the differences in means are more pronounced. A different pattern emerges for the use of traditional media (“TV & Radio”). Here, both monthly and heavy users show attitudes toward gender-related issues that differ only marginally from those respondents who report not using these media sources regularly.

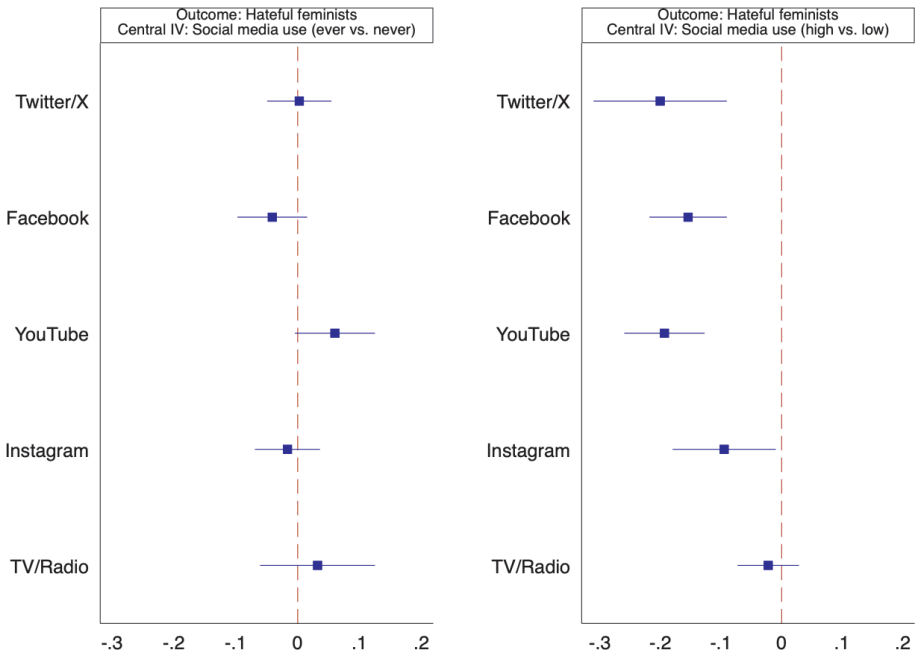
Figure 2: Media platform usage and means on gender attitudes



Note: The red-dashed line depicts the overall survey mean of the respective item on gender-attitudes. While colored markers represent varying means by general social media use (less than once a month [“never”] vs. at least once a month [“ever”]) and frequency of use (more [“high”] or less than two hours [“low”] a day). Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

4.2. Attitudes toward gender and social media

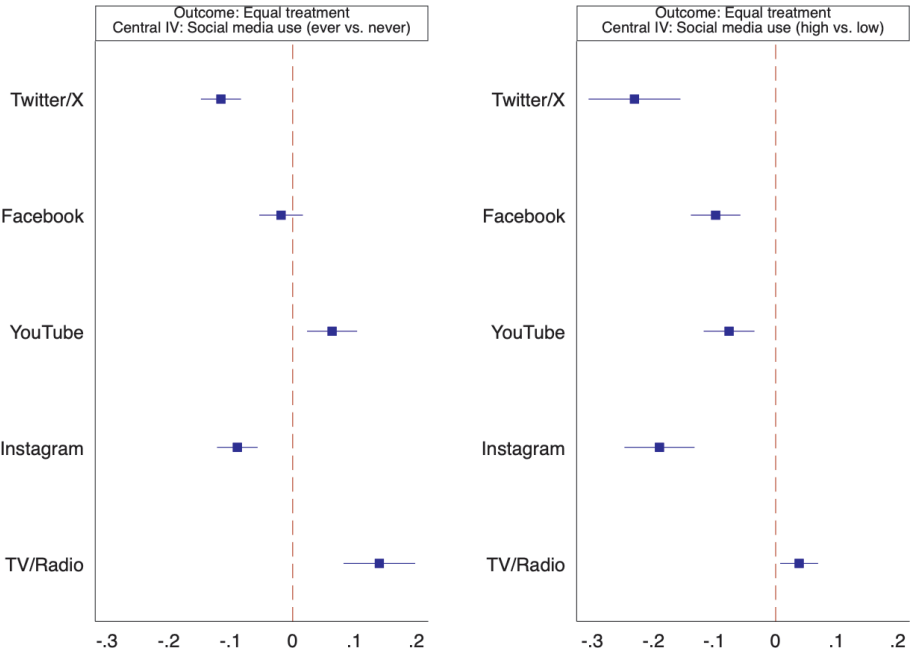
We now turn to the multivariate findings. Beginning with attitudes toward feminists, Figure 3 illustrates that using any social media platform on a monthly basis is not significantly associated with viewing feminists as hateful toward men. The same holds true for the use of traditional media (TV and radio). A different pattern emerges when considering usage intensity. Respondents who use social media platforms for more than two hours per day demonstrate significantly stronger resentment toward feminists across all platforms. In contrast, more than two hours per day of TV and radio consumption is not significantly associated with this outcome. Overall, these results suggest that higher-intensity social media use is consistently associated with resentment toward feminists, whereas such a pattern does not appear for traditional media use.

Figure 3: Media platform usage and views on feminists (OLS)

Note: Control variables: age (in categories), gender, paid employment, education (in categories), urbanity, financial situation, country fixed-effects. Full models in Appendix Table A.2.-A.6. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

The second outcome concerns attitudes toward equal treatment of men and women in the labor market (see Figure 4). Monthly use of Twitter and Instagram is significantly negatively associated with support for gender equality, whereas YouTube shows a positive association, and Facebook does not display a statistically significant relationship. When daily usage exceeds two hours, all social media platforms are associated with lower support for equal treatment. In contrast, consuming TV and radio for more than two hours per day is significantly associated with higher support for equal treatment.

Figure 4: Media platform usage and views on equal treatment (OLS)

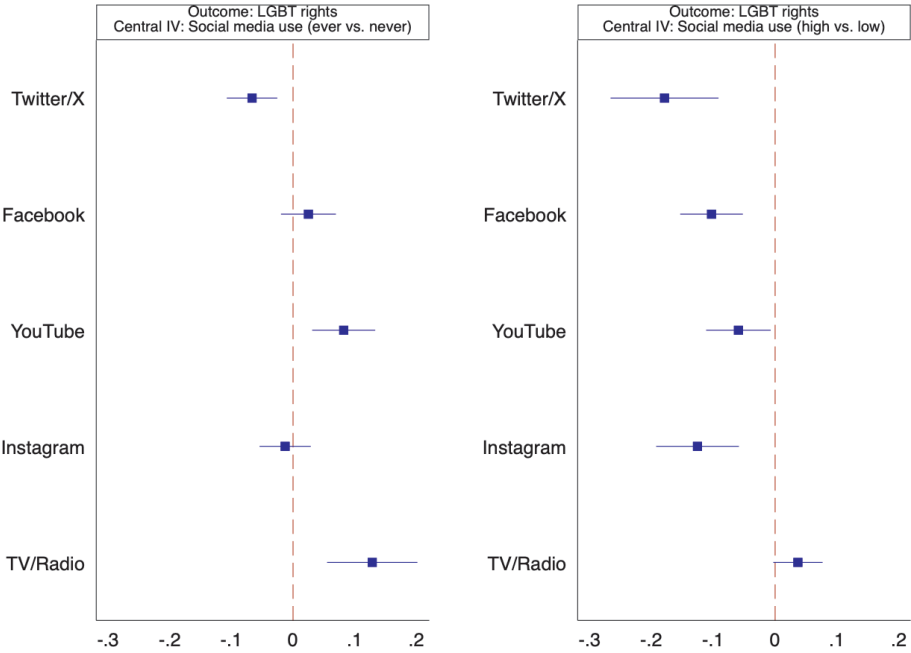


Note:Control variables: age (in categories), gender, paid employment, education (in categories), urbanity, financial situation, country fixed-effects. Full models in Appendix Table A.2.-A.6. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

We now turn to the association between social media use and support for LGBT rights (Figure 5). Similar to the findings for attitudes toward equal treatment in the labor market, monthly Twitter use is negatively associated with support for LGBT rights, whereas monthly YouTube use shows a positive association; Facebook and Instagram display no statistically significant relationships. Figure 5 also indicates that the use of traditional media (TV and radio) is associated with slightly higher support for LGBT rights.

In contrast, high-intensity social media use ($\geq 2\text{h/day}$) is significantly associated with lower support for LGBT rights across all platforms. TV and radio use, however, continue to show a modest positive association.

Figure 5: Media platform usage and LGBT rights (OLS)



Note: Control variables: age (in categories), gender, paid employment, education (in categories), urbanity, financial situation, country fixed-effects. Full models in Appendix Table A.2.-A.6. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

To sum up, these results support our expectation that respondents who spend more than two hours per day on social media platforms tend to express less support for gender equality across the three outcome measures. By contrast, our expectation regarding platform-specific differences receives only limited support, as we observe some differences between “ever” and “never” users, but hardly any variation across platforms among high-intensity users.

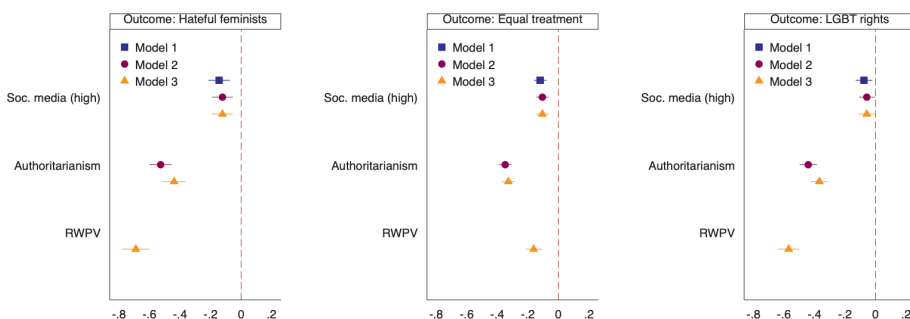
4.3 Attitudes toward gender and social media use, political authoritarianism, and right wing populist voting

In the next step, we examine whether these patterns remain robust when accounting for political orientations and alternative model specifications. Besides the variables already included in the main models, previous research suggests that political authoritarian governance and right-wing populist party voting are important predictors of gender-related attitudes. We therefore examine how these factors are associated with gender-related attitudes and whether the association with social media use persists after controlling for them.

Since the previous analysis showed that social media use is mainly relevant through usage intensity, we focus here on high-intensity social media use. To simplify the analysis, we pool all platforms into a single indicator. Namely, the variable takes the value 1 if a respondent reports using any platform for more than two hours per day, and 0 otherwise.

The additional variables on political authoritarian governance and right-wing voting are included stepwise. The results are presented in Figure 6. Model 1 includes only the pooled high-intensity social media use indicator, Model 2 additionally includes political authoritarian governance, and Model 3 further includes right-wing populist party voting (RWPV). Both, political authoritarian governance and right-wing populist voting are strongly associated with the outcome variables, with particularly large associations for attitudes toward feminists and LGBT rights. These political orientations exhibit larger coefficients than social media use. However, the coefficients for high-intensity social media use remain largely unchanged after including these variables. This suggests that while political orientation variables are relevant predictors of gender attitudes, intense social media use is independently associated with more regressive views on gender-related issues.

Figure 6: Social media use, authoritarianism, and right-wing populist voting (OLS)



Note: Control variables: age (in categories), gender, paid employment, education (in categories), urbanity, financial situation, country fixed-effects. Full models in Appendix Table A.7.-A.9. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

4.4 Robustness Analysis

In the next step, we assess whether these findings remain robust across alternative model specifications. To this end, we conducted several additional sensitivity tests.

First, our main results indicate that it is not social media use per se but rather the intensity of use that is associated with less support for gender-related issues. To further examine this pattern, we replicated the analysis using different time thresholds. First, we compared respondents who use social media for more than one but less than two hours per day with those who use social media for less than one

hour per day. In this case, many of the previously significant associations become statistically non-significant (see Figure A.1). Second, we compared respondents who spend five or more hours per day with those who spend less than five hours. Here, the clear patterns from our main analysis reappear (see Figure A.1). These findings suggest that regressive gender attitudes appear to be more strongly associated with the amount of time spent on social media, rather than with the specific platform used.

Second, we re-estimated the models excluding respondents who answered “don’t know” to the three gender-related items (on equal treatment, LGBT rights, hateful feminists). In the main analysis, “don’t know” responses were treated as the middle category of the four-point Likert scale. The revised results, shown in Figure A.2, closely resemble those of the main analysis. The estimated effects appear slightly stronger, with more statistically significant associations. This pattern is not unexpected, as “don’t know” responses may capture both respondents who lack a clear opinion and those who selected the category due to the absence of a neutral response option. Including the former in the analysis may have also introduced some ambiguity to the results presented in the main models.

Third, we estimated ordered logit models to account for the ordinal nature of the outcome variable. The results largely replicate those of the main OLS models (Figure A.3), suggesting that the findings are not model-dependent.

5 Conclusion

This article examined the relationship between social media use and attitudes toward gender-related issues across six European countries. Rather than distinguishing only between users and non-users of social media or looking exclusively on digital news consumption, we focused on the intensity of engagement. By conceptualizing social media use intensity as a form of embeddedness in digitally mediated communication environments, this study contributes to research on mediatization and digital political communication (boyd, 2010; Couldry & Hepp, 2020). Our key findings indicate that high-intensity social media use is consistently associated with more regressive attitudes toward gender-related issues across all three outcome measures. While platform-specific differences appear when comparing “ever”- and “never”-users, these differences largely disappear when focusing on high-intensity use. Hence, the relevant distinction is not between users and non-users of social media, but between low- and high-intensity users.

Importantly, this pattern emerges across two dimensions of gender equality attitudes. On the one hand, we examine normative rights-based support for gender equality captured through attitudes toward equal treatment in the labor market and equal rights for LGBT individuals. On the other hand, we analyze affective anti-feminist positioning, measured through attitudes toward feminists. Across both dimensions, individuals who spend more than two hours per day on social media

platforms show significantly lower support for gender equality. In contrast, the use of traditional media such as TV and radio is either unrelated to gender-related attitudes or associated with slightly more pro-gender equality positions.

At the same time, the descriptive findings show that support for rights-based gender equality is broadly shared across the sample, while attitudes toward feminists display substantially greater variation. This pattern aligns with recent research highlighting that contemporary conflicts around gender increasingly unfold at the symbolic and affective level (Anduiza & Off, 2026; Díaz Fernández et al., 2023; Otteni, 2025; Schäfer et al., 2024). In this sense, gender equality seems less openly opposed on the level of formal rights but instead contested through anti-feminist identity constructions, sexist narratives and delegitimizing frames. Future research could further examine this conceptual distinction across national contexts and with more fine-grained measures.

Importantly, the association between intensive social media use and gender-related attitudes remains visible after accounting for political orientations. Both authoritarian governance preferences and right-wing populist party voting are associated with more regressive gender attitudes. However, the relationship between high-intensity social media use and gender-related attitudes remains largely unchanged after including these variables. Taken together with the robustness checks conducted in this study, these findings suggest that on the one hand intensive social media engagement represents an additional factor associated with contemporary gender conflicts that should be further examined in future research on political attitudes and gender conflicts. On the other hand, we contribute to research on the asymmetric polarizing effects of social media use depending on political orientation (Bail et al., 2018; Barberá, 2020), while highlighting that intensive social media use is strongly associated with regressive – but not progressive – gender-related attitudes, spurring future research to examine this relationship more closely.

The mechanisms underlying the observed association remain an open question. Nonetheless, several mechanisms appear plausible but are beyond our study design and dataset. One possibility, as previous studies have shown, is that emotionally charged or moralized content tends to spread particularly rapidly on social media platforms (Schöne et al., 2021). Individuals who spend substantial time on social media could be more frequently exposed to such content. Other scholars have demonstrated that online communication environments often exhibit high levels of homophily and selective exposure, meaning that users are more likely to encounter content that aligns with their existing views and networks (Bail et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2025). Consequently, intensive social media use may reflect greater involvement in online discussions and identity-driven communication, where political attitudes are expressed and reinforced through both intensive content consumption and social interaction. Algorithmic curation systems may further amplify such dynamics by prioritizing engaging or controversial content on social media platforms.

At the same time, recent research suggests that recommendation algorithms may not be as influential as often assumed in systematically promoting extremist content (A. Y. Chen et al., 2023). Because our data do not allow us to test these potential mechanisms, future research should examine more directly how different forms of digital engagement such as content consumption, online social interactions, and network composition, shape exposure to gender-related debates and attitudes.

Our study has several limitations. First, the data is based on an online access panel which means that the sample is non-probabilistic and may therefore overrepresent individuals who are more digitally engaged. Second, causal inference remains limited with cross-sectional survey data (Gattig & Minkus, 2021). Although our robustness checks consistently show that intense social media use is associated with more regressive attitudes toward gender equality, future research would benefit from longitudinal designs and panel data to better examine how changes in social media use relate to changes in attitudes over time. Third, our measures rely on self-reported estimates of time spent on social media platforms, which may be subject to reporting bias. Future studies combining survey data with digital trace data or qualitative approaches could provide more precise insights into how individuals encounter, interpret, and respond to gender-related conflicts in everyday communication environments.

Overall, our findings highlight the importance of considering the depth of individuals' engagement with social media platforms when studying contemporary gender conflicts. Understanding how individuals engage with these environments – and how deeply they are embedded in them – may therefore be crucial for explaining how gender attitudes are shaped and contested in contemporary societies.

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Appendix

<https://www.nomos.de/zeitschriften/cpe/#zusatzmaterial>