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ABSTRACT

When do political parties give attention to gender-related political interests, and what determines their positions? We argue that progress in gender equality commitments is an essential component of democratisation, and backsliding in these indicates democratic decay. Using original data coded from party manifestos in Greece, Portugal, and Spain over recent decades, we investigate the role of party ideology and critical junctures in the political context. We find that left-wing parties give more attention to gender-related interests than other parties. Far-right parties also give significant attention to some interests and stand out for traditional positions. Further, the economic recession significantly decreased attention to gender-related interests. Our results suggest that economic crises and associated far-right party strength fuel gender backsliding and de-democratisation.

KEYWORDS

Gender; democratisation; political parties; recession; party manifestos; quantitative methods; structural topic model

Introduction

Fifty years after democratisation, women have made great strides towards gender equality in Greece, Portugal, and Spain, in crucial areas such as reproductive rights, parental leave, divorce, gender-based violence, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex (LGBTI*) rights. However, a growing number of scholars argue that, over recent decades, several European countries have been undergoing processes of de-democratisation with negative consequences for social justice, including setbacks in commitments to gender equality (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017; Verloo & Paternotte 2018; Krizsan & Roggeband 2021, 2018; Lombardo, Kantola & Rubio 2021; Graff & Korolczuk 2022; Fodor 2022).

Drawing on Krizsan and Roggeband's (2018) conceptual framework for gender policy backsliding, we contend that progress in gender equality commitments is an essential component of democratisation, and, conversely, backsliding in these commitments indicates democratic decay. While this new

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analytical framework for studying democratisation from a gender approach could be applied to many policy phases, here we study parties' electoral manifestos, a crucial early phase of the policy process. Our key research questions are, when do parties prioritise gender-related interests, and what are the contexts in which backsliding on gender equality, and thus de-democratisation, occurs?

While recognising de-democratisation is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes, in this paper we highlight two potential determinants of democratic setbacks. First, the Great Recession (2008–2013) was a critical juncture for de-democratisation in the most affected countries. Second, the rise of far-right parties in European countries in recent decades threatens progress in gender equality. How did these two critical shifts in the political context affect democratisation – understood here as the prioritisation of egalitarian gender equality policies? We focus our study on the 'most similar' systems of Greece, Portugal, and Spain. These three cases offer similar histories of democratisation, culture, and geography, in addition to being particularly affected by the economic crisis. However, the trajectories and success of far-right parties – which we understand to include both illiberal-democratic (radical right) and anti-democratic (extreme right) parties (Mudde 2019; Pirro 2023) – differ significantly.

Our analysis draws on the original coding of party manifestos from 1995 to 2022. Specifically, we focus on a) party attention to and b) party positions on five broad dimensions of gender-related political interests: gender equality, violence against women, work-family issues, reproductive issues, and sexuality. Studying broad gender-related interests (rather than, e.g. feminist interests) enables us to understand when and how parties articulate political concerns likely to be prioritised by women and LGBTQI* people in gender-traditional or gender-egalitarian ways (Beckwith 2014). Our novel data include 136 observations at the party-election year level, covering the most relevant parties across the three countries.[1] Using these data, we conduct three main analyses. First, we track the evolution of attention to gender-related interests and positions on these across countries over time. Second, we examine how party families have evolved, especially their response to the 2008 economic recession and the strength of far-right parties. Third, we employ structural topic models to assess parties' specific conceptions of gendered interests.

We find that the inclusion of gender-related interests in party agendas is driven by ideology; social democratic, communist, and left libertarian parties give more attention to these interests compared to other party families, although far-right parties also pay significant attention to reproductive issues especially. Importantly, the context of recession, and associated politics of austerity, halts the march of progress on gender-related interests. In addition, far-right parties are characterised by the most gender-traditional positions of

[1]The N drops in some models due to data availability of independent variables.

any party family by far, significantly tilting party positions towards preferences such as pro-natalism. Yet, we do not observe evidence of mainstream party accommodation of these positions in the election manifestos within our sample. Overall, the study contributes to the democratisation literature by integrating novel theoretical insights developed in gender and politics studies that explicitly connect (de)-democratisation and gender equality, and empirically applies this framework to the analysis of manifestos, providing new evidence on the determinants of gender equality prioritisation and backlash within parties across Southern Europe.

Democratisation as progress in gender equality policy discourses and commitments

Democratisation is a constant process (Tilly 2007) in which gender matters. Gender matters in processes of transitions from autocracy to democracy – as the resulting polity and gender regime depend on the political actors participating in post-transition processes and the presence of women and feminists in the political system (Waylen 2007). Gender also matters in ongoing processes of democratisation, the rolling expansion of democratic rights and policies (Morlino 2020). One crucial aspect of democratisation is the substantive progress in gender equality policies that countries make, and it is this progress that defines our conceptualisation of democratisation here.

The interdependent relationship between democracy and gender equality is increasingly highlighted by scholars (Verloo 2016; Alonso & Lombardo 2018; Lombardo, Kantola & Rubio 2021; Walby 2009; Caravantes & Lombardo 2024). Mieke Verloo summarises this relationship by stating: 'The more democracy, the more chances for gender equality; the more gender equality there is, the more chances for democracy' (Verloo 2016, p. 36). Moreover, evidence for this interdependent relationship abounds (see Alonso & Lombardo 2018). Democracy correlates with the status of women's health, education, economic participation, and political empowerment (Tripp 2013). Democracies, as compared to autocracies, create citizens that express more egalitarian attitudes (Inglehart & Norris 2003). They create gender equality institutions dedicated to making and funding more gender equality policies than autocracies (Tripp 2013). Democracies also allow more freedom for civil society to organise. This, in turn, increases the influence of feminist nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) on the state (Htun & Weldon 2010), giving feminist movements the opportunity to further democratise the state by questioning gender inequalities in all areas of society (Pateman 1970), claiming new rights for formerly excluded subjects (Verloo 2016), and holding the state accountable (Galligan 2015).

Democratisation, though, is not a linear process; polities can and do de-democratise, shifting towards authoritarianism (Morlino 2024; Berman 2019). Scholars such as Tilly (2007) invite us to study democratisation and de-

democratisation as continuous, unfinished processes (see also Krizsan & Roggeband 2018; Rosanvallon 2004; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). We stand with Tilly in both the idea of (de)-democratisation as a constant process and the possibility of assessing shifts towards progress or backsliding based on the egalitarian content of policies (see also Lombardo 2024). These substantive rights, policies, and agendas – such as those related to gender that we address here – offer criteria for evaluating the extent to which democratisation is proceeding or retrenching.

The interdependent relationship between gender equality and democracy also means that when there is backsliding in gender equality, this also signals backsliding in democratisation (Roggeband & Krizsan 2024). Krizsan and Roggeband (2018) operationalise policy backsliding in gender equality along four complementary dimensions: 1) discursive (de)legitimisation of gender policy objectives; 2) dismantling and reframing existing policies; 3) undermining implementation; and 4) erosion of accountability and inclusion mechanisms. In this paper, we focus on the first discursive dimension of Krizsan and Roggeband's framework, applying it to the analysis of party manifestos. We interpret discursive attention and positionings about gender-related interests expressed in manifestos as indicators of progress or backsliding in gender equality discourses and commitments. This can signal democratisation – when more egalitarian attention is given to gender issues – or de-democratisation – when less and more traditional attention is given to gender issues (see section below).

When is gender on party agendas? The role of party ideology and critical shifts in the political context

Parties' policy agendas, as set out in manifestos, represent an important early phase of the policy process. Through manifestos, parties announce their policy intentions for the next mandate, which are then further disseminated to potential voters through interviews, debates, and so on. Crucially, there is a link between parties' preferences as expressed in electoral manifestos and policy outcomes (see, for example, Lundquist 2024). Furthermore, studies on pledge fulfilment have found that pledges expressed in parties' manifestos are often fulfilled, including in Portugal and Spain (Thomson et al. 2017). In both countries, opposition parties also follow through on a significant number of their promises (e.g. Artés 2011; Serra-Silva & Belchior 2020), justifying our inclusion of the most relevant parties instead of only governing parties. Taken together, these studies suggest that parties' policy agendas are not mere rhetoric. On a methodological note, party manifestos offer an appropriate way to systematically analyse parties' attention and positions on any topic over time across a relatively large number of parties and countries.

It is difficult to know the extent to which gender-related interests feature among party manifestos because important cross-national time-series datasets, such as the Comparative Manifesto Project or the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, do not code for attention to women as a group or gender-related interests (Cabeza Pérez, Alonso Sáenz de Oger & Gómez Fortes 2023).[2] To understand the level of attention that parties give to gender-related interests and their positions on them, we focus on two broad sets of explanations: 1) the role of party family or ideology; 2) the role of critical changes in the political context, including economic recession and the strength of far-right parties.

The role of party ideology

Political parties have a crucial role in democratisation and gender equality progress and backsliding. They can choose to either prioritise gender equality policies in their programs or sideline them and/or emphasise traditional gender policies. Left parties are traditionally found to be promoters of gender equality policies as compared to right wing parties (Beckwith 2000; Kittilson 2006). Yet, the relationship between political parties, ideology, and gender equality is complex (Erzeel & Celis 2016), due to heterogeneity within both sides of the ideological spectrum. Because of this, we look beyond the left–right binary and instead consider 'party families', which indicate sets of parties integrated in a similar conception of the world (Ware 1996).

Drawing on a comparative survey among legislators of 14 countries, Erzeel and Celis (2016) demonstrated that, within the left, the green parties stand out as presenting the highest feminist scores, followed by the socialist parties. In the same vein, one of the few studies that tackles issue attention to gender equality in party manifestos comparatively (O'Brien 2018) concludes that communist and green parties are significantly more likely to discuss concepts such as lesbianism, feminism, and sexism. In general, parties that embrace a post-materialist agenda, typically green and parties of the *new left*, tend to adhere more to a feminist agenda and to grant more space to gendered issues than parties that prioritise the materialistic scale, either on the left or on the right (Kittilson 2006). On the right side of the ideological spectrum, parties tend to defend nonfeminist or antifeminist claims (Curtin 2014) and, consequently, to act as representatives of the interests of conservative women (Celis & Childs 2018; Campbell & Childs 2015; Xydias 2013). Studies have pointed out differences between the several right-wing party families. For example, Christian democratic parties tend to prioritise policy areas such as maternity and child-care (O'Brien 2018).

On the other hand, far-right parties advance an ethno-nationalist and anti-feminist agenda that actively opposes gender equality, LGBTI*, and migrant

[2]Both the Comparative Manifesto Project and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey include gender equality as components of broader categories.

people's rights, with femonationalist and homonationalist components (Sauer 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte 2017; Norocel 2016). These parties have been described as *männerparteien,* because they are mostly led and supported by men (Coffé 2018). In Western Europe, many far-right parties increasingly give attention to gender-related issues, often criticising gender-inclusive policies (Abou-Chadi, Breyer & Gessler 2021). These parties typically espouse very conservative ideologies on the role of women in society (Spierings 2020). They often oppose gender equality – which some term 'gender ideology' (Kantola & Lombardo 2021) – in a strategy of 'anti-genderism' (Kováts, Põim & Peto 2015) that shows anti-feminist and/or homo-/transphobic components (Lombardo, Kantola & Rubio 2021).

What follows from this is that, although right-wing parties are more conservative, they nonetheless make gendered claims. According to Celis and Childs (2015), right-wing claims are gendered whenever they profess to represent women's interests, yet the extent to which they are also feminist needs to be assessed by considering the quality of the process of deliberation in relation to responsiveness, inclusiveness, and egalitarianism. In this article, we do not focus on the process of deliberation but rather on the content of issues in order to assess their egalitarian or traditional character. We thus expect significant differences between left- and right-wing party families on how they frame gender-related claims – expressing more egalitarian or traditional positions concerning gender equality (Celis & Childs 2012; Erzeel & Celis 2016). Far-right parties are distinctive for taking the most conservative positions and are likely to give gender-related concerns more attention than mainstream right parties. From all that has been said so far, we can derive our first set of hypotheses, namely:

H1a: Left-leaning party families are more likely to address gender-related issues in their party manifestos than right-leaning party families.

H1b: Left-leaning party families are more likely to adopt gender-egalitarian positions than right-leaning party families.

H2a: Within the right-wing side, the far-right family stands out for the greater weight attributed to gender-related concerns.

H2b. The far-right family is more likely to adopt gender-traditional positions.

The role of critical events in the political context: recession and far-right party strength

The process of (de)-democratisation is paved by critical moments that alter the path to democratic progress or backsliding. The 2008 economic crisis was a critical juncture for de-democratisation in Southern Europe, particularly in

Greece, Portugal, and Spain (Serapioni & Hespanha 2019). Austerity politics implied the strengthening of a neoliberal programme of market deregulation, privatisations, and a punitive program of European Union loans to Eurozone countries that led to cuts in social spending (Klatzer & Schager 2014). They also implied less democratic control over how states redistribute socioeconomic resources, and the transfer of state powers to non-elected global private and financial actors (Bruff & Wöhl 2016).

In this context, we argue that the severity of the economic crisis and subsequent austerity policies had a 'crowding out' effect on party attention to other political issues, including but not limited to gender-related concerns. Previous research demonstrates that, during the economic crisis, parties increased attention to economic issues, and this applies across party families and for parties in government and opposition (Bremer 2018; Traber, Giger & Häusermann 2018). Given the hegemony of the economic discourse during this time, gender equality interests were likely to be sidelined – despite the fact that women are at greater risk for poverty and were particularly negatively impacted by the increased precarity of labour markets and increases in unpaid care-work. Research demonstrates that the crisis contributed to gender equality policy backsliding (Kantola & Lombardo 2017; Karamessini & Rubery 2014).

The second critical event in the political context we focus on is the success of far-right parties, often linked to the economic crisis. In many countries, the crisis upended not only the economy but the traditional lines of party competition. New populist parties on the left and right seized the opportunity to make political headway. As mentioned before, the rise of far-right, anti-gender, populist parties challenges gender equality policies even further, as they tend to pay considerable attention to gender-related interests while defending very conservative positions. Kováts, Põim and Peto (2015) even introduce the notion of gender as the 'symbolic glue' uniting different far -right parties and anti-gender networks in a common anti-gender agenda – an agenda which also helps distinguish them from the mainstream right (see, e.g. Alonso & Espinosa-Fajardo 2021). As this gender-traditional and anti-gender discourse enters mainstream media and becomes less taboo (see, e.g. Mondon & Winter 2020), there is a risk that other parties threatened by the far-right might accommodate such positions by decreasing attention to gender-related concerns or shifting towards more gender-traditional positions.

We expect that party responses to far-right successes are conditioned by party family. Party family matters because of both ideology and where it places the party on the main lines of electoral competition. While feminism is a core political belief of many 'New Left' and green parties, liberal and conservative parties are far less likely to engage with feminist groups or promote state intervention on gender equality (Keith & Verge 2018). Far-left parties are also the least likely to compete with far-right parties for voters, given these party families are at opposite ends of the political spectrum. The combination of these

two factors makes far-left parties less likely to accommodate the far-right on gender issues. In fact, we expect such parties to respond by taking what Meguid (2005) terms an 'adversarial' approach, *increasing* attention to gender-related concerns in response to far-right success.

However, far-right parties can 'steal' voters from the mainstream right and left (Spoon & Klüver 2019). Thus, mainstream left- and right-wing parties threatened by a sizeable far-right party encroaching on their electorate might respond by de-emphasising gender-related concerns. While mainstream parties' engagement towards far-right challengers is contingent on national contexts, issue salience (e.g. migration), the newness of far-right actors and the radicalisation of their rhetoric (Heinze 2018), empirical research challenges the idea that accommodative strategies limit the success of the far right or benefit mainstream parties (Krause, Cohen & Abou-Chadi 2023). Instead, mainstream right-wing parties may opt to distance themselves from far-right anti-gender politics on established equality issues, such as gender-based violence and LGBTI* rights (Carvajal 2023; Del Riego 2023) or disengage from gender-based discussions (Bono 2023). Avoiding such issues is more likely than shifting the party position because parties need to uphold ideological consistency, and position shifts may be perceived by voters as sacrificing the party's policy goals for electoral benefits (Adams et al. 2006). Previous research finds some evidence of this; mainstream parties respond to the rising far-right by decreasing attention to non-economic identity groups (including women) (Weeks & Allen 2022).

To summarise, our second set of hypotheses are as follows:

H3: The context of national recession dampens parties' attention to gender-related concerns.

H4: The link between far-right party strength and party attention to gender-related issues is conditioned by party family, with far-left parties likely to increase attention and mainstream left- and right-wing parties likely to decrease attention when threatened by a strong far-right party.

The cases of Greece, Portugal, and Spain

To investigate these hypotheses, we leverage a 'most similar' systems comparison of Greece, Portugal, and Spain. These countries share relevant socio-economic and cultural factors affecting gender equality, including a strong influence of religion on social and political life (Orthodox in Greece, and Catholicism in Portugal and Spain) and a history of dictatorship that came to an end in Portugal and Greece in 1974 and in Spain in 1975. Under these regimes, women were construed as second-class citizens and deprived of

fundamental rights, including suffrage and freedom of movement, and confined to traditional roles as mothers and wives (Melo 2017).

The transition to democracy represented a turning point for gender equality. Legal equality between women and men was finally achieved through the signing of new constitutions in the three countries shortly after the transition. Left-wing parties were a driving force in the advancement of gender policies in the three countries. In Spain, state feminism started with the creation of the Woman's Institute in 1983 following pressures especially from women of the socialist party Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party), leading to the adoption of a variety of gender equality policies (Valiente 2008). Spanish gender equality policies were also boosted as the country entered the European Community (EC) in 1986, since the EC pressured Spain to adopt gender equality policies during the accession process (Lombardo 2004). Gender equality institutions and policies were further advanced under socialist rule from 2004 to 2008 with the creation of a Gender Equality Policies State Secretary and a Ministry for Equality, and the adoption of milestone legislation on gender equality, gender-based violence, and LGBT rights (Bustelo 2016; León & Lombardo 2015). Recent years of left-coalition government (PSOE and Unidas-Podemos (United We Can) 2020–2023) led to the adoption of crucial legislation on paternity leave, sexual violence, sexual and reproductive health, and LGBT rights.

In Portugal, important legislation was adopted from the first decade after the transition to democracy in key areas of family law, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence (Melo 2017). Portugal's early institutionalisation of gender equality, with the creation of the Commission for the Feminine Condition in 1977, was decisive for the development of equality policies (Monteiro & Ferreira 2016). Unlike Greece and Spain, Portugal had already integrated European Union (EU) gender equality requirements into its legal framework by the time of its accession in 1986, making the EU's impact more noticeable from the 1990s onwards. Throughout the entire democratic regime and until now, legislative advances related to gender equality have resulted from the influence of left-leaning parties, particularly the Socialist Party (PS), which has governed for a longer period than the centre-right (Espírito-Santo & Weeks 2022). The Left Bloc has also contributed to pushing the PS to prioritise these issues since its creation in 1999.

In Greece, the determining factor for the advancement of gender equality occurred in 1981, when social democratic party the Panhellenic Social Movement (PASOK) took power for the first time, with an absolute majority in parliament for 8 years, establishing equality machinery and adopting key gender equality legislation. PASOK and the main conservative party Nea Democratia (New Democracy) alternated rule for a total of 20 years each since the Greek transition to democracy. The EU played a relevant role in that both parties developed policies according to the European structural fund priorities and

rules in the areas of women in entrepreneurship, reconciliation measures, and vocational training for women. The far-left party Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance (SYRIZA) government, in power for 5 years (2015–2019), continued the existing gender equality policies and introduced important legislation on gender-based violence through the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 and adoption of the Law for Substantive Gender Equality in 2019 (Stratigaki 2021).

Out of the three countries, Spain exhibits the most robust gender equality performance, as indicated by its 2023 European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) Gender Equality Index score of 74.6 out of 100, surpassing the European Union's average of 70.2. In contrast, Portugal and Greece scored below the average, with the former displaying a considerably higher level of gender equality (67.4) than the latter (58.0). A similar pattern emerges when we consider the percentage of women in national parliaments. As of February 2024, the percentage of women in Spain's national parliament stands at 44 per cent, positioning the country at 18th place in global rankings. Portugal follows with 37 per cent (43rd position) while Greece, with 23 per cent, occupies the 104th position (IPU Parline). Indeed, Greece has taken the last place in the EU Gender Equality Index since its first edition in 2013. This long standing 'delay' has been linked to the ongoing prevalence of patriarchal social structure and the strength of the Greek Orthodox Church (Karamanou 2015; Papageorgiou 2017). The modern Greek state was established in 1830 after a four-century occupation by the Ottoman Empire. Today, Greece is still a non-secular state.

While Europeanisation has been an important force towards democratisation and gender equality in our southern cases, the EU also opened the way for backsliding in gender equality policies due to the severe neoliberal austerity measures that were implemented in the Eurozone in response to the 2008 economic crisis. The three countries were all hit hard by the economic crisis and associated austerity measures. For example, in Greece, where the austerity policies dictated by the troika of the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund in return for loans were particularly strict, the political response to the crisis provoked the 'deterioration of employment and social conditions of both women and men' (Karamessini & Rubery 2014, p. 183). In Portugal, while both men and women workers were negatively affected by a deregulated labour market in terms of precarity, gender inequalities in pay, part-time, and precarious work increased, as well as women's care work (Prata 2017). Similarly in Spain, the alignment of a conservative central government with the EU's neoliberal priorities led to a shift in the country's gender regime towards a more neoliberal form, characterised by backsliding in gender equality policies, funds, and institutions (Lombardo 2017).

While our three cases are thus similar in terms of geography, socio-economic level, and recent history of dictatorship, they offer interesting variations in the presence of far-right parties. Far-right parties have an older history of

parliamentary rise in Greece, where the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) managed to achieve a number of parliamentary seats in the 2007 national elections and the Golden Dawn experienced impressive electoral growth in the two elections of 2012. Golden Dawn's success is primarily attributed to the deep, protracted Greek recession (Ellinas 2013). Out of the three countries, Greece is also the only one where far-right parties have formed part of the national (technocratic) government (LAOS 2011–12). In Spain, Vox (Voice) has been in governing coalitions with the Popular Party (PP) but only in regional governments for a short period in 2023–2024.

In contrast to Greece, the economic crisis in Portugal and Spain did not lead directly to the emergence of far-right parties, although it did have notable consequences for the Spanish party system (Morlino & Raniolo 2017). Only in 2019 did far-right parties enter the national parliaments of Portugal and Spain, ending the notion of 'Iberian exceptionalism' (Mendes & Dennison 2021). Despite their recent entry, these parties have demonstrated a successful trajectory in both countries. At the time of writing this article, Portugal has the highest representation of far-right parties, with Chega (Enough) members of parliament (MPs) constituting 20 per cent of the seat share since 2024, up from 5 per cent in the 2022 elections. The Spanish far-right party Vox decreased its share of MPs from 15% in 2019 to 9 per cent in the 2023 elections. In Greece, the far-right maintains its parliamentary representation through the party Greek Solution, which secured 3 per cent of seats in the 2019 elections and 4 per cent in the June 2023 elections.[3]

The differences between the three countries offer good leverage to test party attention to and positions on gender-related concerns. Specifically, we expect that the historically longer parliamentary presence of far-right parties in Greece – together with the strength that the Greek Orthodox Church still has in the country – should reduce attention to gender-related interests.

Data and methods

To test our argument about democratisation understood as the prioritisation of gender equality concerns in party manifestos, we rely on an original dataset of political party attention to and positions on gender-related interests from 1995 to 2022. The analysis starts in the mid 1990s to avoid the exceptional politics of the 1980s, when democratic systems were in construction and the gender equality framework was not yet developed. For each country, we include the five largest parties by seat share in each election in the time period. Because we are theoretically interested in the rise of far-right parties, we include any far-right party (including radical right and anti-democratic, extreme right) that

[3]Note that the 2023 Greek and Spanish elections, as well as the 2024 Portuguese election, fall outside of our dataset.

gained seats in the parliament, even if it was not among the five largest parties. Appendix Table A1 in the online Supplemental Material lists all the political parties and elections included in the analysis. Our dataset includes 28 parties, with an average of 9.3 parties per country (10 Greek, 7 Portuguese, and 11 Spanish). Fifty-three percent of the party-election observations in our dataset are present over the whole time period. The data thus include several party entries and exits, reflecting the reality of the party system in these countries.

To test our hypotheses, we use multivariate ordinary least-squares regression and structural topic models. Because our data are time-series cross-sectional, estimating a simple regression on the pooled data might lead to erroneous conclusions if the data are characterised by serial correlation. For example, if parties copy and paste large portions of text from election-year to election-year, these observations would not be independent. We performed Lagrange multiplier tests which fail to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation for the majority of models. Still, to address these concerns we employ standard errors clustered by political party (Rogers 1993). To complement our regression analysis, we also employ structural topic models (STM) which do not rely on our hand coding of positions. As an unsupervised machine learning algorithm, STM identifies topics and their corresponding features (words) with the highest conditional probability of occurring in documents.

Dependent variables

To measure party attention and positions on gender-related interests, we build upon recent research by Meguid et al. (2022), who hand-code the manifestos of populist far-right parties based on the attention they pay to women's interests, and their positions (egalitarian or traditional) on these interests. Our analysis highlights five dimensions of gender-related interests identified in Meguid et al. (2022, p. 1) gender equality (including topics such as women's employment, gender pay and leadership gaps, underrepresentation of women in politics, gender quotas, women's health); 2) work-family issues (such as family allowances or child benefits, child care provision, maternity, paternity, and parental leave, flexible working, gender gap in unpaid work); 3) gender violence (including topics such as domestic violence, sexual discrimination and harassment, femicide, human trafficking); 4) reproductive issues (including abortion, contraception, reproductive health, surrogacy); and 5) sexuality (including LGBTI* rights, sexual identity and orientation, sex education). All of these interests emerge from gendered life chances and gendered power structures – for example, shared experiences of discrimination and the gendered division of labour (Beckwith 2014). As Beckwith (2014) highlights, similar experiences form the basis of broad interests, but women and LGBTQI* people can and do have different preferences (positions) on specific issues within this broad set of interests.

To build our dataset, we first used a dictionary method to identify relevant sentences in party manifestos. Starting with existing dictionaries of relevant words, word stems, and phrases ('tokens') for each topic (Meguid et al. 2022), we further developed the dictionaries for this project through close reading of relevant out-of-sample texts within each country context. Specifically, we read through country-specific glossaries of gender-related words: these include 'PhyloPaideia', an online Greek encyclopaedia on gender issues, the Portuguese Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality's glossary, and several Spanish glossaries, including those published by the Institute of Women and Equal Opportunities and the University of Valencia. The full dictionary can be found in the online Supplemental Material Table A2.

Manifestos were translated into English using Google Translate. While this is not perfect, we found it more than adequate for identifying attention to gender-related interests, and it allowed us to discuss coding decisions in a common language. Using Python, we then collected all manifesto sentences including our dictionary tokens, also gathered total sentence counts for each manifesto, and manually checked each sentence to confirm that it is related to gender. Some words related to gender were too broad to fit into one topic (e.g. 'women', 'female'), and so for these, we collected the relevant sentences and then manually coded them into one of the five topics listed above. At the same time, we manually coded the position of each sentence as gender-egalitarian, gender-traditional, or neutral. Our position coding reflects the distinction between traditional gender roles which value women's place in the home (for example, references to women's value as mothers, long maternity-only leaves, positions against reproductive rights, support for traditional families) versus egalitarian gender roles (for example, women's employment, shared parental and paternity leave, reproductive rights, support for all families including single parents and same-sex couples and parents).

Several topics related to gender are controversial within the feminist community, and lack a clear position coding (for example, prostitution/sex work, surrogacy). Given this, our decision rule was that policies that extend more rights to more people should be coded as egalitarian. The neutral category includes sentences where political parties describe the positions of other parties but do not specify their own or sentences that detail facts about general issues like violence against women or policies such as parental leave, without taking a specific position. Coders flagged any sentence on which they had doubts. Inspired by feminist methodologies for social science research (Ackerly & True 2011), we sought to be attentive to both the context of analysis and our positionality, engaging in an iterative process of reflection and debate among the authors who are expert on the three countries. Altogether, we coded 6,396 sentences related to gender within 136 party manifestos, which we used to create aggregate measures of party-level attention and position.

Each of our attention dependent variables measures the share of party attention to that issue (sum of relevant sentences divided by total sentences in the manifesto). Our position dependent variable measures the share of gender-related sentences that are egalitarian minus the share of gender-related sentences that are traditional (relying on the subset of party manifestos which give some attention to gender issues). Positive values indicate more egalitarian, while negative values indicate more traditional.

Independent variables

To explain how parties prioritise gender-related concerns, we consider two main independent variables: party family and recession context. We code parties into five party families, following schemes used by the ParlGov project, the Manifesto Project Database, and the party's self-identification in EU parliamentary party groups: Communist/Left Libertarian, Social Democrat, Liberal, Conservative/Christian Democrat, and far-right (see online Supplemental Material, Table A1 for a list of parties included in each party family). While we would ideally distinguish parties further on both the left and right (for example, comparing communist parties with left libertarian parties), this is not possible in our dataset of parties due to a lack of cases. We include a binary variable coded as 1 if the country was in a national recession following the Great Recession that began in 2007 and 0 otherwise. For Greece, this includes election-years 2009, 2012, and 2015, for Portugal 2009 and 2011, and for Spain 2008 and 2011. To test H4, we include a measure of far-right vote share in the previous election and the interaction with party family. If a country had more than one far-right party (Greece in some election-years), the sum of vote shares is used to measure the overall strength of far-right parties.

Our models include a binary indicator for whether the party had a woman leader before the election (when manifestos are written), because previous research finds that women leaders increase the diversity of issues considered by parties (Greene & O'Brien 2016) and that women in the executive can boost attention to certain gendered concerns (Kroeber 2022; Weeks 2022). We control for the government status of the party (previous term), following research which finds that being in government leads parties to expand their agenda (Greene 2016). We control for the total number of sentences in the manifesto to account for differences in the text length, which could correlate with attention to certain less-salient issues. Our specifications also include a time trend and country fixed effects to account for differences over time and across national contexts. Table A3 in the online Supplemental Material presents summary statistics for all variables included in analyses.

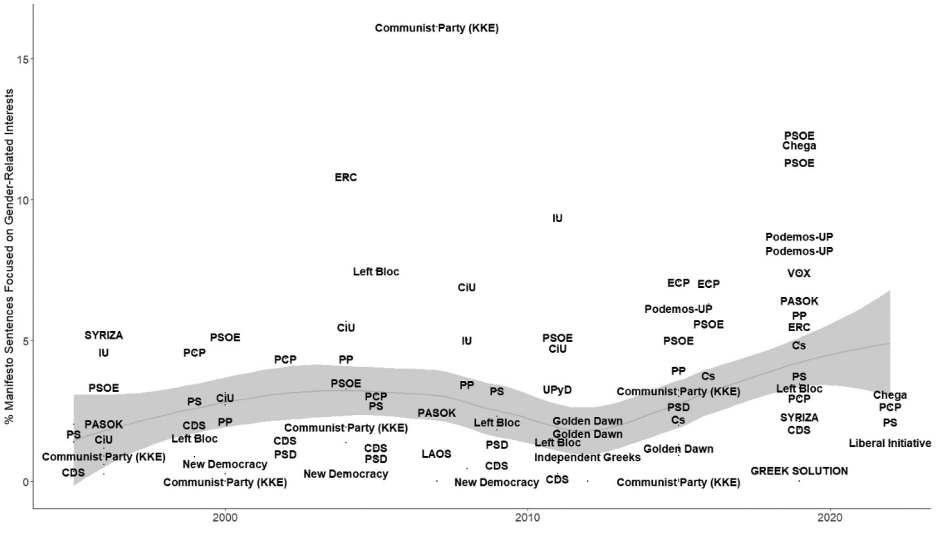


Figure 1. Mean party attention to gender-related interests over time, loess smoothing. Shading indicates 95 per cent confidence interval. Greece: Communist Party (KKE), Golden Dawn, Greek Solution, Independent Greeks, Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS), New Democracy, Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance (SYRIZA); Portugal: Democratic Social Center (CDS), Chega, Left Bloc, Liberal Initiative, Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), Sociality Party (PS), Social Democratic Party (PSD); Spain: Convergence and Union (CiU), Citizens (Cs), Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV), In Common We Can (ECP), Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), United Left (IU), Podemos-UP, Popular Party (PP), Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), Union, Progress, and Democracy (UPyD), Vox.

Analysis: progress and backsliding on gender-related interests

Figure 1 plots party attention to gender-related interests (share of manifesto sentences) from 1995 to 2022, including all topics we coded for irrespective of position. This includes sentences coded as egalitarian, traditional, or neutral. The figure shows a gradual upward trend in attention over time, with a noticeable ebb in the early 2010s, when all three countries were deeply impacted by the Great Recession. Before the year 2000, the mean attention given to gender-related interests in party manifestos was 2 per cent. In the last 5 years of our data (2018–2022), this more than doubles, reaching 4.9 per cent. We note certain outliers – the Greek Communist Party (KKE) in 2007, for example, published a short manifesto with a good deal of attention to women's employment.[4] The parties that give the most attention to gender-related interests tend to be communist/left libertarian (such as Spain's United Left, Podemos (We Can), and the Republican Left of Catalonia, and Portugal's Left Bloc), as well as social democrats (Spain's PSOE). However, far-right parties Chega and Vox are also among those parties devoting the *most* attention in recent years. Overall, the patterns suggest that parties have been increasing attention to gender-related

[4]We reran Figure 1 dropping the KKE 2007 outlier, and the pattern observed does not change.

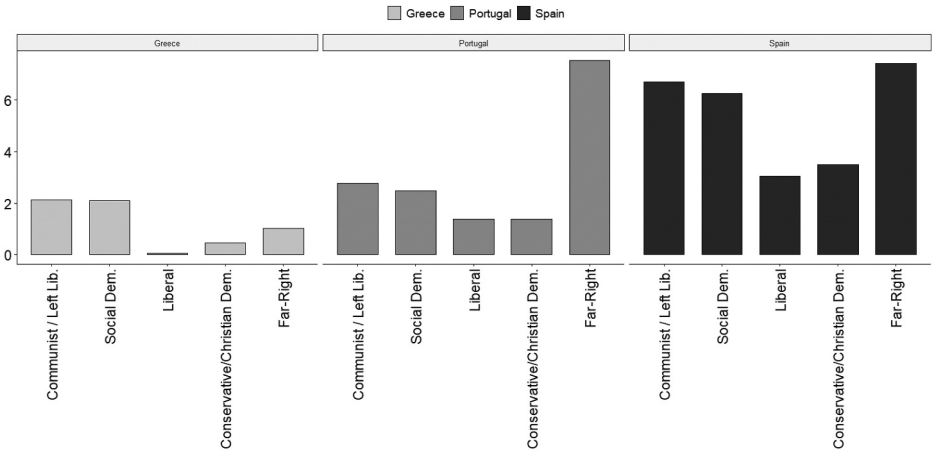


Figure 2. Mean party attention to gender-related interests by party family and country (1995–2022).

interests over time, except for the period of recession which is characterised by a decline.

Figure 2 shows the mean overall attention to gender-related interests by party family and country. While Figure 1 shows variance across time using all parties in the data, Figure 2 displays variance across countries and parties. It reveals important insights from our data: while Spain has the largest share of manifesto sentences given to gender-related interests, Greece has the least. As we had anticipated, Greece is an outlier with respect to attention to gender. Greek gender norms are more traditional and patriarchal than in other EU countries, as reflected by Greece's low score in the European Gender Equality Index. In general, equality between women and men is not yet a major social or political objective for Greek parties. Additionally, Figure 2 shows the same basic pattern of increasing attention to gender-related interests as party families move from right to left across countries, except for the far-right, which stands out for its significant focus on gender-related issues in Portugal and Spain.

What determines parties' attention to gender-related interests in their manifestos, and their position on these? Table 1 presents multivariate ordinary least-squares models of the share of party attention devoted to gender-related interests overall (Model 1) and to each of the five specific interests investigated (Models 2–6). Although we did not draw hypotheses on specific interests, we found it relevant to analyse them separately as there are theoretical grounds to expect that party families' attention varies across them. Additionally, Model 7 of Table 1 regresses the overall party position on these interests (the share of sentences coded egalitarian minus the share of sentences coded traditional, across all categories) on our main explanatory variables and controls. Table 1 reveals several interesting patterns. First, it confirms that party family matters. In line with Hypothesis 1a, party families on the left, communist/left libertarian and

Table 1. Determinants of gender attention and position in party manifestos.

Attention							Position
	Overall	Gender equality	Work-family	Gender violence	Repr. issues	Sexuality	Overall
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Comm./Left Lib.	2.65*	1.72***	−0.02	0.23	0.25***	0.47**	14.10
	(1.06)	(0.45)	(0.53)	(0.18)	(0.04)	(0.17)	(7.72)
Social Dem. Democrat	2.89**	1.55***	0.46	0.46*	0.21***	0.21	8.45
	(1.05)	(0.44)	(0.52)	(0.19)	(0.06)	(0.12)	(7.28)
Conservative/ Chr. Democrat	1.02	0.43	0.10	0.24	0.12*	0.12	−35.25**
	(1.13)	(0.53)	(0.53)	(0.17)	(0.06)	(0.14)	(13.61)
Far-Right	1.82	0.69	0.62	0.08	0.31***	0.13	−118.85***
	(1.12)	(0.63)	(0.77)	(0.20)	(0.08)	(0.13)	(17.83)
Recession	−1.45***	−0.55***	−0.68**	−0.20*	−0.04	0.01	−8.30
	(0.34)	(0.15)	(0.23)	(0.09)	(0.03)	(0.12)	(7.49)
Woman Leader	0.78	−0.11	0.78*	0.13	0.04	−0.07	−15.14
	(0.48)	(0.17)	(0.31)	(0.13)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(15.47)
Party in Govt $_{(t-1)}$	−0.25	−0.05	−0.17*	−0.03	−0.03	0.03	9.61
	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.02)	(0.08)	(6.56)
Time	0.07*	0.02	0.02***	0.02*	−0.001	0.005	0.75**
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.28)
Total no. sentences	−0.0004**	−0.0001	−0.0002***	−0.0000	−0.0000	0.0000	0.005**
	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.002)
Constant	−131.58*	−38.49	−41.91***	−41.83*	2.14	−10.24	−1442.14*
	(55.19)	(31.78)	(12.49)	(16.90)	(5.02)	(5.91)	(568.30)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	123	123	123	123	123	123	108
R-squared	0.52	0.53	0.25	0.54	0.28	0.29	0.64
Adj. R-squared	0.47	0.48	0.18	0.50	0.21	0.22	0.59

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.
Standard errors clustered by political party in parentheses.

social democratic parties, give significantly more attention overall and to all specific interests investigated except for work–family balance (note that the reference category for party family is liberal).

Partially confirming Hypothesis 2a, far-right parties pay significantly more attention to some gender-related interests compared to other right-wing families – in particular, reproductive issues. This result is confirmed by a Wald test; the difference between the Far-Right and Conservative/Christian Democrat party family coefficients in Model 5 is significant ($p = 0.02$). Indeed, the coefficient on the far-right party family for Model 5 indicating a 0.3 percentage-point increase is larger than that observed for any other party family. This is not surprising given that many far-right parties strongly condemn abortion, although recently some parties take a more ambivalent position (Akkerman 2015). However, the most notable finding related to the far-right party family is the strong link between this party family and gender-traditional positions, confirming Hypothesis 2b. Model 7 shows that far-right parties are associated with a large, statistically significant decrease in gender position (indicating a more traditional position). Far-right parties thus do not afford less attention

to gender-related interests compared to other parties (and for reproductive issues, they give *more* attention), but they have extremely traditional positions on these interests. This combination of the prioritisation of gender-related interests and gender-traditional positions makes far-right parties a credible threat to democratic backsliding understood as the erosion of women's rights.

Parties' attention to and positions on gender-related interests in their manifestos reflect the actual adoption of gender equality policies by party families in our sample. In Spain, the PSOE has been the main promoter of gender equality policies in the last decades (Valiente 2008), with an ambivalent position of the conservative PP (Alonso, Ciccia & Lombardo 2023; Alonso & Lombardo 2018). The far-right party Vox promoted backsliding in gender equality policies as an external supporter of PP and in regional governments (Alonso & Espinosa-Fajardo 2021). Podemos, included in the communist-left libertarian category of our sample, recently exercised a leading role in advancing gender equality policies from the Ministry of Equality in the coalition government with PSOE (2020–2023).

Similarly in Greece, the far-right Golden Dawn grew rapidly in 2012 and introduced a male supremacy discourse in Greek political life. The left libertarian party SYRIZA, which also grew after the financial crisis, boosted feminist discourse without translating it immediately into concrete gender equality policies. SYRIZA's relevant gender equality legislation passed only just before the end of its government term in 2018 and 2019.

Turning to Portugal, the PS has been adopting an increasingly progressive agenda over the years. Particularly noteworthy was the PS's first absolute majority (2005–2009), during which significant achievements were made, such as the parity law, the legalisation of abortion, and the divorce law. Additionally, the socialist minority government, supported by far-left parties (2015–2019), not only put forth an anti-austerity agenda but also made substantial advancements in gender-related policies. In contrast, the Portuguese far-right party Chega has demonstrated an emphasis on anti-feminist narratives. In particular, the party argues that 'feminism gone wrong' has been misguided by 'gender ideology' (Santos & Roque 2022).

Table 1 also reports consistent evidence that the context of the national recession dampens party attention to gender-related interests, in line with Hypothesis 3 and the pattern observed in Figure 1. Recession has a negative and statistically significant impact on overall attention to gender-related interests, and on attention given to gender equality, work–family balance, and gender violence. National recession is associated with a 1.45 percentage-point decrease in attention to gender-related interests. Given that the mean value of attention to gender-related interests in our data is 2.9 per cent, this is a sizeable decrease of 50 percentage points. Recession halves party attention to gender, representing significant gender backsliding.

This finding aligns well with previous studies of recession dynamics within our cases. For example, Spanish conservative political actors leveraged the crisis opportunity to strengthen the promotion of traditional gender roles and anti-abortion policies (Alonso & Paleo 2017). In Portugal, the hegemony of the neoliberal economic discourse in parliamentary debates sidelined the importance of gender inequality problems, and in the rare times they were discussed it was only in relation with the economy (Prata 2017). In Greece, tackling austerity measures was the absolute priority during SYRIZA's mandate, which undermined feminist pledges.

Considering our control variables, Table 1 finds that having a woman leader is positively associated with party attention to work–family balance. This finding reflects previous studies suggesting that work-family policies are not a left-right issue and that women tend to prioritise the issue more than men (e.g. Atchison 2015; Weeks 2022). We observe a significant effect of time, with attention to gender-related interests overall, and work-family balance and gender violence, increasing over time. We also report a trend towards more gender-egalitarian positions over time.

Figure 3 further investigates the relationship between party family and position on gender-related interests over time. The figure presents the mean party-level gender positions, with loess-smoothed lines. The lines are coloured dark to light as the ideology of party family shifts from left to right; communist/left-libertarian parties are shown in black while far-right parties in lightest grey. The figure shows that left-wing parties – social democratic and communist/left libertarian – maintain highly gender egalitarian positions throughout the time period of analysis (confirming Hypothesis 1b). Liberal parties take slightly less egalitarian positions but are still clearly on the positive (more egalitarian) top half of the figure. Conservative and Christian democratic parties are the least egalitarian of mainstream parties, but also show a trend towards more

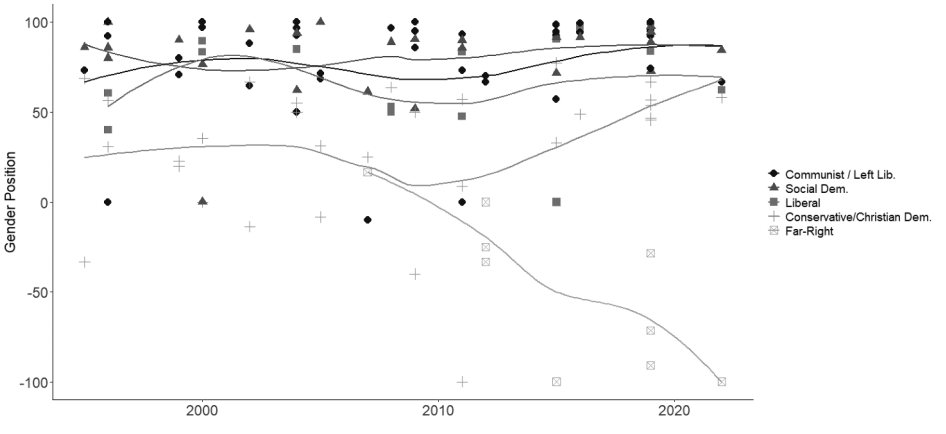


Figure 3. Mean party position on gender-related interests over time by party family, loess smoothing.

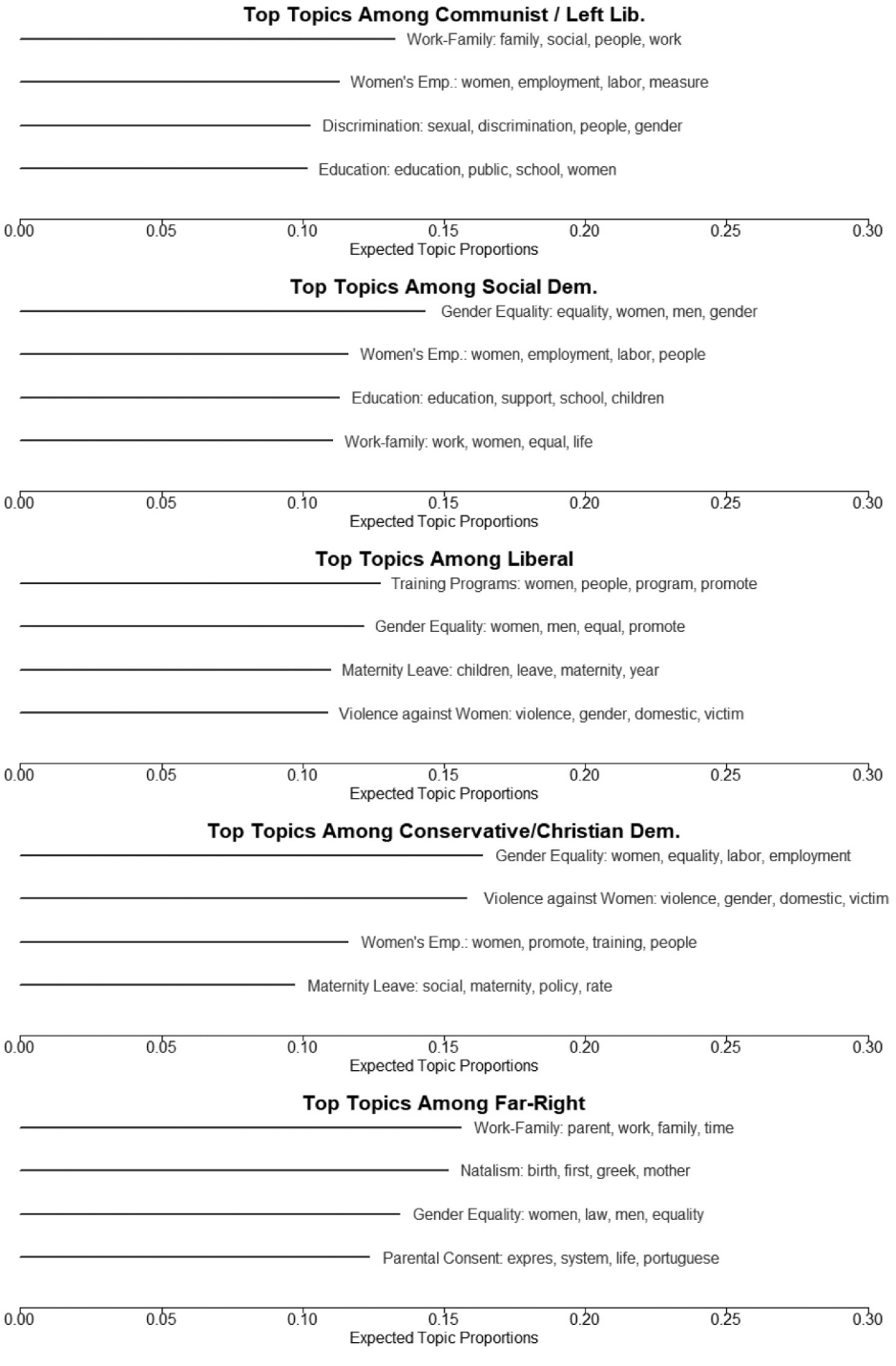


Figure 4. Top topics in party manifestos by party family.

egalitarian positions over time. Finally, far-right parties are the least egalitarian and the most traditional, by far.

In addition to regression models, we also employ structural topic models as both a validation check on our hand coding and to further explore the specific topics party families discuss. Structural topic models use patterns in the texts to uncover latent topics with their most commonly used words in our corpus (all sentences related to gender are included). Figure 4 presents the most prevalent topics among each party family. The length of the horizontal line (x-axis) shows the conditional probability of each topic's prevalence across manifestos. The features next to each line are the words with the highest conditional probability for each topic. For example, work-family (~15 per cent) and gender equality (~15 per cent) are the most prevalent topics across far-right and social democratic manifestos, respectively.

We observe some interesting differences between party families. While nearly all party families discuss gender equality as a key topic, left-wing parties are more likely to focus on education and women's employment, while right-wing parties focus more on violence against women. While work-family issues are one of the most salient gender topics, they are addressed differently depending on the party family. Left-wing parties talk about reconciliation between work and family for parents (not only mothers), whereas parties on the right are more likely to focus on maternity leave and parties on the far-right more squarely on natalism (in line with Ennser-Jedenastik 2022). For example, in its 2007 manifesto, the Greek far-right party LAOS advocates for the, 'substantial support of motherhood . . . to protect the institution of the family and so it is ensured that there are Greeks over time'.

In addition, a common theme in far-right manifestos not seen in other party families advocates for parental consent for educational content including sexual 'values' or orientation, as noted previously, for example, by Kovats et al. 2015. For example, the word stem 'expres' is frequently used among far-right parties in this context. Vox's April 2019 manifesto proposes to 'Establish the parental PIN and express authorization in order to need the express consent of the parents for any activity with content of ethical, social, moral or sexual civic values'. Chega's 2019 manifesto makes the same promise, in addition to the 'prohibition of LGBTI agenda propaganda in the education system'. This reinforcement of gender traditional roles and attacks on sexual education and LGBTI rights erodes gender equality commitments and, as a consequence, egalitarian values of democratisation in the three countries. The topic model analysis confirms our findings about the more gender-traditional positions far-right parties take compared to other party families, suggesting that pro-natalism and parental consent are key dimensions on which these parties espouse gender-traditional views.

Given that far-right parties espouse more gender-traditional views, how does their electoral success impact other parties? In Table 2, we present the results of

Table 2. Impact of far-right on gender attention and position in party manifestos.

Attention							Position
	Overall	Gender equality	Work-family	Gender violence	Repr. issues	Sexuality	Overall
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Far-right $vote_{(t-1)}$	−0.02	0.02	−0.01	−0.01	−0.004	−0.01	−0.63
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.005)	(0.02)	(1.07)
Con./Chr. Dem./Lib.	−1.87***	−1.37***	0.17	−0.05	−0.19***	−0.42*	−43.11**
	(0.39)	(0.27)	(0.25)	(0.09)	(0.05)	(0.16)	(14.83)
Social Dem.	−0.08	−0.36*	0.49**	0.20	−0.11*	−0.30*	−6.12
	(0.24)	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.11)	(0.05)	(0.14)	(12.28)
Recession	−1.47***	−0.61***	−0.63**	−0.21*	−0.05	0.03	−10.05
	(0.39)	(0.18)	(0.23)	(0.10)	(0.03)	(0.13)	(7.98)
Woman Leader	0.64	−0.23	0.88*	0.08	−0.01	−0.09	−5.62
	(0.71)	(0.29)	(0.39)	(0.17)	(0.06)	(0.11)	(16.92)
Party in $Govt_{(t-1)}$	−0.07	0.02	−0.18	0.03	−0.0003	0.06	2.09
	(0.27)	(0.21)	(0.12)	(0.09)	(0.03)	(0.10)	(8.42)
Time	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.02	−0.005	0.01	0.68
	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.44)
Total no. sentences	−0.0004*	−0.0001	−0.0002*	−0.0001	0.0000	0.0000	0.005
	(0.0002)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.0000)	(0.003)
Far-right $vote_{(t-1)}$ * Con./Chr. Dem./Lib.	0.07	−0.003	0.02	0.02	0.01***	0.02	1.56
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.004)	(0.01)	(2.53)
Far-right $vote_{(t-1)}$ * Social Dem.	0.26*	0.16	−0.005	0.04	0.05*	0.02	0.81
	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(2.42)
Constant	−73.57	−10.30	−26.75	−31.92	9.43	−13.66	−1300.79
	(72.97)	(42.27)	(18.24)	(16.94)	(6.72)	(9.13)	(882.54)
N	102	102	102	102	102	102	88
R-squared	0.51	0.55	0.22	0.57	0.37	0.28	0.40
Adj. R-squared	0.44	0.49	0.12	0.51	0.29	0.18	0.31

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.
Standard errors clustered by political party in parentheses.

specifications regressing party attention and position on gender-related interests on far-right vote share in the previous election.[5] The specifications include interactions between party family and far-right vote share, because we expect far-right parties to have different impacts on parties according to their ideological position. Note that far-right parties are not included in these models, and the reference category is communist/left libertarian. We combine all centre-right party families (liberal, conservative, and Christian democrat) in this analysis, because the data does not include variation in far-right party vote share among observations where there exists a strong liberal party.

Table 2 shows that far-right electoral strength increases attention to gender concerns for social democratic parties (Model 1). In addition, both social democratic parties and centre-right parties respond to far-right strength by *increasing* attention to the issue of reproductive issues (Model 5), an interest that far-right

[5]Our operationalisation of far-right strength measures the overall success of far-right parties, rather than electoral gains (level rather than change).

parties are highly focused on (see Table 1). In additional specifications leaving out the centre-right parties instead of communist/left libertarian parties, we find that left-wing (communist or left libertarian) parties react to the strength of the far-right by decreasing their level of attention to reproductive issues.[6] Thus, contrary to Hypothesis 4, we find no evidence that the most left-wing parties take the most adversarial stance on gender issues in response to far-right success. Instead, the parties furthest to the left accommodate by affording less attention to reproductive rights, while mainstream left parties increase attention in an adversarial stance. We also report a small but statistically significant positive interaction between far-right vote share and centre-right parties, suggesting increased competition among parties on the right over the issue. Although hypothesis 4 does not make any predictions about parties' gender positions, we included it in Table 2 (Model 7). However, there is little evidence that far-right electoral strength impacts other party families' positions on gender-related interests.

This finding differs from previous research which reports social democratic party accommodation on 'identity politics' issues, including attention to women, across European countries (Weeks & Allen 2022). Further tests (see 'Sensitivity checks' below) reveal that it is driven by the case of Spain. On dropping Spain, we do not observe the same significant link between far-right success and attention to gender-related interests overall or reproductive issues specifically among social democratic parties. During the 2019 electoral campaigns, the PSOE mobilised its legacy as the main promoter of gender equality policies, presenting itself as the main stronghold against the far-right advance. This positioning was also driven by a competition with the left libertarian party, Podemos, which provided a salient counterpoint to the far-right that might have changed the incentives of the PSOE on gender-related concerns. The two parties have struggled over the leadership of feminist institutional positions in Spain, a conflict that was aggravated during their coalition government after the 2019 elections.

Sensitivity checks

We conduct a series of sensitivity checks. First, to ensure that the statistically significant findings reported in our main tables are not dependent on the particular covariates included (Lenz & Sahn 2021), we reestimate the main models excluding all control variables (see online Supplemental Material Tables A4 – A6). Reassuringly, these specifications continue to show the strong influence of party family and recession context, respectively, in the directions we theorise (left-leaning party families associated with more attention and more gender-egalitarian positions, and national recession context associated with less attention). In models with no controls, we note that the far-right is associated

[6]To save space, models are not shown but available from the authors.

with more attention to gender-related interests than observed in Table 1 with controls – including but not limited to reproductive rights. This could be related to the exclusion of a time trend, given far-right parties have emerged relatively recently in our set of countries, and attention to gender also grows over time (see Table 1) – but it also reflects our expectations that far-right parties engage with topics related to gender more than the mainstream right.

Second, we estimate models that exclude one country at a time to ensure the results are not driven by a single country (to save space, results available upon request). In large part, our findings are robust to the exclusion of any country. However, the role of party family in models of attention to gender-related interests is sensitive to the inclusion of Spain. On dropping Spain (the country with the highest mean attention to gender-related interests; see Figure 2), specifications continue to suggest that parties in leftist party families pay more attention to gender-related interests than others, but these results are no longer statistically significant at conventional levels. As mentioned, our main findings from Table 2 are also sensitive to the exclusion of Spain. Of course, such sensitivity might be due to the loss in statistical power on dropping approximately one-third of observations; we encourage future studies to increase data collection in order to further explore this relationship. At the same time, our results highlight 1) party competition over gender-related interests across the ideological spectrum within our sample and 2) that Spain is an exceptional case with regard to the country's high level of attention to and party competition over gender-related interests.

Conclusions

Our comparative analysis of parties' attention to and positioning on gendered interests in Greece, Portugal, and Spain offers a new framework to examine dynamics of (de-)democratisation that centres gender at the core of these processes. We argue that progress in gender equality is a fundamental component of democratisation, and backsliding on gender equality is an indicator of democratic decay. To operationalise a conceptualisation of democratisation through the lens of gender equality, we study the extent and type of attention that political parties give to gender-related interests in their manifestos.

Situating gender equality as a key aspect of (de-)democratisation allows us to identify two critical events that determine democratic setbacks in the last three decades. First, the Great Recession disrupted the otherwise increasing attention towards gender equality issues. The economic crisis and subsequent austerity politics hindered democratisation through the relegation of gender equality as a non-urgent matter. Second, the rise of far-right parties in European countries has also threatened progress on gender equality.

In line with previous case-study-based literature, we find that party family matters in attention, and especially, positioning regarding gender-related interests. Social democratic, communist, and left libertarian parties give more attention to gender-related interests favouring gender-egalitarian positions and a focus on women's employment. Far-right actors also pay significant attention to gender issues while favouring gender-traditional views on reproductive rights and promoting natalism.

Additionally, we report an important upward trend in attention to gendered interests, with work-family issues one of the most salient topics. An important signal of gender and democratisation progress is that gender-egalitarian positions also rise over time, even for the least egalitarian mainstream parties, conservative and Christian democratic parties. These tendencies reflect the relevance of gender equality in democratisation processes of the three countries. However, the setbacks during the years of the recession and austerity politics – which halved party attention to gender-related interests – and the current wave of anti-gender and far-right actors – increasing gender-conservative positions – demonstrate the non-linear dimension of democratisation and gender equality progress. Future studies could consider other potential 'critical junctures', such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic crisis, as more manifesto data become available.

While we expected that the strength of far-right parties would impact other parties, party attention and positions on gender-related issues are not determined by far-right electoral success. Yet, our sample shows the outlier case of Spain, where we observe social democratic adversarial responses to far-right parties on reproductive rights by increasing attention to these issues. This is due to the Spanish mainstream left presenting itself as the main stronghold against the far-right, symbolically representing democratisation against backsliding, as well as to competition with far-left actors disputing feminist institutional positions.

With this study, we propose the importance of using gender as a category of analysis in the broader democratisation literature to offer more encompassing understandings of the phenomenon. We applied novel theoretical insights that link gender equality and (de)-democratisation (Krizsan & Roggeband 2018) to the study of party manifestos. At the same time, our focus on manifestos presents certain limitations for capturing progress and backsliding. Future research could study if policy agendas set out in manifestos become adopted policies, the extent to which these indicate progress or backsliding and address post-adoption phases (Engeli & Mazur 2018). To better understand the scope of our findings, further studies could analyse the gendered dynamics of (de-) democratisation in other countries. Within Europe, studies could compare processes of democratisation in Southern and Eastern European countries through the articulation of parties' attention and positions towards gender

equality, as well as the impact of economic crises. Finally, our study highlights two critical junctures that can halt the march of democratisation, but we also find that some parties respond to these pressures by doubling down on their commitment to gender equality. Another natural extension of our work is to consider the conditions under which gender backlash spurs parties, and women within parties especially, to engage more politically and claim back rights (e.g. Clayton, O'Brien & Piscopo 2023).

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