

# Gendered Patterns of Committee Assignments—To What Extent Are Women in Parliamentary Party Groups Game Changers?

Corinna Kroeber\* 

Department of Political Science and Communication Studies, University of Greifswald, Ernst-Lohmeyer-Platz 3,  
17489 Greifswald, Germany

\*Correspondence: [Corinna.Kroeber@uni-greifswald.de](mailto:Corinna.Kroeber@uni-greifswald.de)

Committee assignments continue to be gendered with men having higher chances than women to be appointed to the most visible, resourceful and influential committees. I contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon by investigating to what extent women in parliamentary party groups push for gender parity in committee assignments. The empirical analyses build on original data from the 16 German states between 1990 and 2021. I find no indication that women as leaders of parliamentary party groups narrow sex gaps in appointment to the most prestigious committees, but higher shares of women representatives enhance women's access to these posts.

**Keywords:** Committees, Parliaments, Germany, Gender, Critical actors, Critical mass

## 1. Introduction

Committees constitute the centre of policy-making power in modern democracies. In committees, MPs (members of parliament) form opinions about policies and negotiate compromises with members of other legislative parties. While the organisational form, competencies and practical working of committees vary, their importance appears universal (Longley and Davidson, 1998; Strøm, 1998). Which MP enters which committee is therefore a question that attracts substantial scholarly attention (see most recently Martin and Mickler, 2019). One of the most consistent findings of this research is that men have better chances than women to

enter the most prestigious committees, which promise influence over financial and personal resources, media attention and career opportunities (Heath *et al.*, 2005; Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012; Barnes, 2014; Bolzendahl, 2014; Pansardi and Vercesi, 2016; Murray and Sénac, 2018; Chiru, 2019; Coffé *et al.*, 2019; Prihatini, 2021). The consequences of this pattern are manifold, such as the exclusion of women from negotiations about relevant proposals and a reduced influence over policy outcomes (Krook and Mackay, 2010), but also lower chances for women than men to advance their political careers (Baumann *et al.*, 2019). Despite considerable efforts to understand the presence and extent of gendered patterns of committee assignments, the role that women themselves play in shaping the dynamics within their parties leading to unequal chances to enter certain committees has not been studied systematically.<sup>1</sup> However, women in PPGs (parliamentary party groups)—as leaders or regular members—influence outputs as diverse as party positions, policy outcomes or nomination processes (Greene and O'Brien, 2016; Beauregard and Taflaga, 2023). The present article answers the following question to address this research gap: To what extent do women in PPGs change how assignments to the most prestigious committees are gendered?

Theoretically, I expect that women's presence in PPGs—women in leadership positions and their numerical strength—may open the door to the most prestigious committees for women representatives. Committee assignments take place as an intra-party negotiation process between MPs, who submit their wishes to the leadership of their PPG, and the leader, who decides who gets what if the aspirants outnumber the available seats (Gschwend and Zittel, 2018; Martin and Mickler, 2019). A woman leading a PPG might enhance women's access to prestigious committees, as she might be more inclined than a man to believe that women MPs are as loyal, hard-working and reliable as men MPs. Moreover, a larger share of women MPs may increase the share of women in the pool of candidates for influential offices, may make women more confident to show their aspiration for these posts and may make leaders more inclined to believe that women MPs are trustworthy and loyal party agents that should be rewarded by selecting them into these offices. The sets of literature showing that women as critical actors (Childs and Krook, 2009), that is, women as PPG leaders, as well as a critical mass of women (Dahlerup, 1988), that is, a large share of women in a PPG, shape political processes and outputs.

I test these expectations based on an original data set for committee assignment in all 16 German state parliaments between 1990 and 2021. The data combine information from electoral commissions, plenary yearbooks, parliamentary

<sup>1</sup>Throughout the article, I differentiate between biological sex and gender resulting from socialisation. When I speak about the empirical analysis, I use the term sex because I investigate differences between biological male and female MPs. To explain these differences, I use the term gender to clarify that socialisation not biological characteristics shape the perception and behaviour of individuals.

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websites and plenary minutes. By studying the German states, I ensure the comparability of the contextual factors shaping the assignment procedures while being able to reach statements generalisable to a broader set of established democracies, given the substantial variation within and between parties, parliaments and states. The results indicate that only the numerical strength of women in a PPG is decisive for women's access to the most prestigious committees, while women's leadership has no substantial effect. There is a short- and long-term effect of the share of women MPs: In the short run, increasing proportions of women from one legislature to the next enhance women's access to prestigious committees, probably because they become more numerous in the candidate pool for committee assignments. In the long run, women's presence in previous legislatures unfolds an additional positive effect, suggesting that a more permanent transformation in women's aspiration for committee positions and gatekeepers' perceptions of women aspirants takes place.

For our understanding of the intra-party dynamics behind gendered patterns of committee assignment, these findings imply that gender parity in PPGs is a powerful driver for women's access to the most influential, visible and resourceful committees. Accordingly, committee assignments constitute another party personnel selection process that is substantially reorganised as women increasingly enter politics, similar to ministerial appointments (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2005; Krook and O'Brien, 2012). The findings pose questions about the role that women in leading party positions play as advocates for women's influence in prestigious portfolios within their organisation. While candidacy for legislative offices (Cheng and Tavits, 2011) and ministerial posts (Goddard, 2021) appear to become more accessible to women under women's leadership, women in leading party positions appear to 'close the door' to the most prestigious ministerial posts for women (O'Brien *et al.*, 2015). The evidence presented here adds to this previous scholarly work by showing that women as PPG leaders have no apparent effect on women's access to the most prestigious committees. When it comes to the most prestigious portfolios, women as party and PPG leaders appear to deviate from established behavioural patterns of promoting the access of other women to party offices—leading to the follow-up question as to why this might be the case.

## 2. Literature review: explaining gendered patterns of committee assignment

A comprehensive set of literature studying countries around the world finds that committee assignments, just like ministerial appointments or speech time distributions, are gendered (Heath *et al.*, 2005; Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012; Barnes, 2014; Bolzendahl, 2014; Pansardi and Vercesi, 2016; Murray and Sénac, 2018; Chiru, 2019; Coffé *et al.*, 2019). Men and women MPs are segregated along a horizontal

and vertical dimension (Pansardi and Vercesi, 2016). Along the horizontal dimension, men and women MPs are more likely to join committees working on policy areas that match traditional ideas about the role distribution between sexes. Policy areas can be linked to tasks that individuals of each sex ought to fulfil according to gender stereotypes. Men are in charge of public life, so masculine policy areas include finance, interior, defence or economy. Women are in charge of the private sphere, so feminine policy areas include women, family, health, education or welfare. Along the vertical dimension, a disproportionately large number of men MPs belong to the most prestigious committees, while an above-average share of women can be found in the least prestigious committees (Pansardi and Vercesi, 2016). A committee's level of prestige follows from its influence over the distribution of financial and personal resources, but also the strength of media coverage and its function as a career stepping stone (Goddard, 2019).

Such gendered patterns of committee assignments follow from the demand of those in charge of making final decisions over committee appointments, that is, the discrimination of women MPs by PPG leaders, as well as the supply of candidates with the necessary interest and expertise, that is, the free choice of individuals (see Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012; Murray and Sénac, 2018). Demand-sided explanations emphasise the power of the PPG leadership to make final decisions about committee memberships (Heath *et al.*, 2005; Baekgaard and Kjaer, 2012; Pansardi and Vercesi, 2016). PPG leaders serve as gatekeepers for committee membership (Pansardi and Vercesi, 2016), even though MPs usually submit requests to join certain committees, and party leaders try to fulfil these requests (Curini and Zucchini, 2014). The literature emphasising the demand side argues that guided by stereotypical beliefs about the competencies of men and women, party gatekeepers tend to perceive women as more competent in some policy areas than others.

Other scholarly work emphasises MPs' independence in selecting committees and argues that the supply of candidates is gender biased (see, e.g., Carroll, 2008). According to this line of argumentation, the low number of women interested in working in masculine and prestigious portfolios is a consequence of women's lack of interest in these policy areas. Carroll (2008) shows, for instance, that the gaps in committee assignment preferences of MPs are more pronounced than the observed gaps in actual committee assignments and deduces that women MPs are frequently forced into working in prestigious and masculine portfolios despite having different interests. However, Murray and Sénac (2018) show that the policy interests of men and women MPs are not exogenous to socialisation processes in parliament and parties or during life more broadly. In their case study of France, they show that 'small gaps in knowledge translate into larger gaps in experience and even larger gaps in committee assignment' (Murray and Sénac, 2018, p. 328) (see also Coffé *et al.*, 2019).

While gendered committee assignment patterns appear almost universally, micro-, meso- and macro-level factors moderate their strength. At the micro

level, researchers observe that MPs' expertise, seniority or electoral context shape chances for committee assignment (Gschwend and Zittel, 2018; Chiru, 2019). In their recent study on Portugal, Espírito-Santo and Sanches (2020) find that most sex differences in committee assignment are the consequence of the systematic variation of men and women along these individual characteristics (see also Barnes, 2014 on regional-level committees in Argentina). When controlling for these omitted individual-level variables, men and women MPs in Portugal have equal chances for appointment to prestigious and masculine committees. Nevertheless, women remain more likely to enter committees engaging with feminine issues (more precisely, social affairs).

At the meso level, scholarly work emphasises the role of party characteristics as a determinant of gendered committee assignment patterns. To begin with, party ideology appears decisive. In parallel with the idea that left-wing parties serve as guardians of women's interests, Coffé *et al.* (2019) find in their research on Germany that women in left-wing parties tend to work in larger numbers on a more diverse set of committees. However, Pansardi and Vercesi (2016) cast doubts on the universality of the variation in the degree of vertical segregation between parties with different ideological stances by showing that Italian right-wing parties appoint more women to prestigious committees than left-wing parties. The salience of a committee for a party also appears to shape gendered patterns of assignments (e.g., environment for the Greens), with women's appointments appearing most frequently in less salient policy fields. Beyond party ideology, higher shares of women in the PPG also seem to positively affect women's ability to assess masculine and prestigious portfolios (Coffé *et al.*, 2019).

At the macro level, societal attitudes towards gender equality shape the degree to which committee assignments are gendered. More progressive values create an environment where women are more likely to be selected for committees where they are otherwise underrepresented (Pansardi and Vercesi, 2016). Moreover, the institutional rules guiding assignment procedures in parliament shape women's chances to enter prestigious and masculine committees. If PPG leaders have a strong say on committee assignments, women tend to be sidelined in the least influential, feminine policy areas (Heath *et al.*, 2005).

The present study systematically assesses women's role in intra-party dynamics in women's appointments to the most prestigious committees. Thereby, it makes two main contributions to the field: First, this study is the first to investigate the role of women leaders of PPGs for committee assignments—a group of actors likely to be critical in this context, given its substantial influence over who gets what. Second, the present study revisits the role of women's numerical strength in parties in a cross-sectional comparison, which allows disentangling the effect of the share of women from a party's ideological position (see Coffé *et al.*, 2019).

### 3. Theory: how women in PPG shape assignments to the most prestigious committees

In the context of committee assignment, the leadership of a PPG plays a crucial role in selecting from the pool of MPs interested in joining a given committee and, hence, shaping the demand for men and women committee members. Since committees are supposed to be a microcosm of the party composition of the legislature, PPGs receive a share of committee seats roughly proportional to their overall seat share. To fill these seats, MPs, as a first step, submit their wishes for committee assignments to the leadership of the PPG. Since MPs show progressive ambition, that is, try to increase their career prospects (Schlesinger, 1966), they usually try to maximise the level of prestige of the committees they join. As a second step, the leadership assigns seats based on these wishes. In particular, if the aspirants outnumber the available seats, the leadership substantially influences who gets what (Gschwend and Zittel, 2018; Martin and Mickler, 2019).

When assigning committee seats, the party leadership considers the party's collective goals (Giannetti *et al.*, 2019). First, parties use committee assignments to reward senior MPs who proved loyal and hard-working over long periods, thereby incentivising other party members to act the same way (Strøm, 1998). Second, parties try to ensure that those who receive influential party seats are good agents of the party who will not exploit their substantial policy-making influence in the committee for their advantage or threaten party unity on important policy issues (Strøm, 1998; Giannetti *et al.*, 2019).

Those who lead legislative parties qualify as critical actors since they have the formal power to take action to promote women's role in the political decision-making process (Childs and Krook, 2009). In theory, men and women might act as critical actors in the interest of women (Childs and Krook, 2009). However, in practice, women are more likely to qualify for this definition (e.g., Beauregard and Taflaga, 2023).

First, a woman leading a PPG might be likelier to have women in her network than a man. Consequently, she might have more women she trusts with the delicate task of working on the most prestigious portfolios, which she can assign to these committees. Shared network membership influences the party leadership's perception of an MP as a reliable agent. Regular cooperation and the exchange of information and ideas create trust between actors. Coined with the term 'Homosocial capital' (Bjarnegård, 2013), scholarly work clarified that individuals tend to have higher levels of trust in members of their sex group. Notably, individuals tend to believe they have better chances to predict an individual's action of the same sex than the opposite sex because they tend to see themselves in them. Visible are such higher levels of in-group trust, for instance, in the appointment decisions that presidents, prime ministers and

party leaders make for ministerial positions, where men and women tend to select more men or respective women from their networks (Claveria, 2014; Goddard, 2021).<sup>2</sup>

Second, women leaders of PPGs might perceive women's contributions to collective party endeavours as more reward-deserving than men leaders. To begin with, specialising in feminine policy areas creates career disadvantages for women MPs, as their engagement in these policy areas reinforces stereotypes about women's responsibility for the private sphere and their lower ability to govern in other areas (Miguel, 2012). For example, the consequences of this pattern are visible in the literature on ministerial appointments, where scholarly work shows that ministers holding feminine portfolios have lower chances for career advancements than their colleagues in charge of masculine portfolios (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Kroeber and Hüffelmann, 2022). Moreover, gatekeepers expect higher levels of qualification from women before perceiving them as sufficiently qualified for a promotion to the most prestigious policy areas. Again, the literature on ministerial selection supports this idea by showing that women reaching ministerial positions, particularly the most prestigious ones, tend to be more experienced than their men colleagues (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Beer and Camp, 2020). These kinds of sex-based discrimination tend to occur more frequently by men than women leaders since their dominant position makes them more prone to apply and deny different forms of institutional discrimination (Childs and Krook, 2009; Blodorn *et al.*, 2012).

Following these considerations, I expect that:

**H<sub>1</sub>: If the leader of a PPG is a woman instead of a man, gender parity in the assignments to the most prestigious committees will be more pronounced.**

The numerical strength of women in PPGs may also shape women's chances to enter highly prestigious committees. To some extent, this relationship may result from a statistical link between increases in the share of women in the legislative party from one term to the next and women's access to committees. If there are more women to choose from, it becomes more likely that women will be selected. Similarly, scholarly work shows that more women are selected as ministers if more women are present in parliament (Davis, 1997; Krook and O'Brien, 2012).

Moreover, I propose that the share of women in a PPG in one legislative term also shapes women's chances in future legislatures to gain the most prestigious committee posts. Women who recently entered parliament are also frequently

<sup>2</sup>However, research by O'Brien *et al.* (2015) also casts doubts on this finding by highlighting the constraints under which women in these positions operate and that they lead to equal levels of appointment of women by men and women leaders.



sidelined by men, who try to protect their privileged access to prestigious committees. Consequently, it might take more than increases in women's numbers to change how committee seats are assigned (Heath *et al.*, 2005; Barnes, 2014). A large share of women MPs increases the supply of women for prestigious posts. To begin with, women may perceive that other women are sufficiently covering feminine issues, which are often less prestigious and decide to pursue other topics (Childs and Krook, 2006). Moreover, with increasing numbers, women may form networks that promote women's interests and women's political careers (Krook and O'Brien, 2012) and feel more confident that they have the necessary expertise to apply for the most influential positions (Barnes, 2014). As long as only a few women are present in parliament, they lack the experience and networks to work efficiently, but as they become more numerous, women may feel sufficiently confident to declare their interest in joining prestigious committees. At the same time, the demand of party gatekeepers for women as members of prestigious committees may also change permanently with higher shares of women in their PPG. Increasing numbers of women make women's contributions to politics more visible, which makes it more likely that they are perceived as trustworthy party agents. Additionally, it becomes more difficult for party gatekeepers to sideline women as they are numerically stronger.

From these considerations, I deduce two hypotheses about the short- and long-term effects of the share of women on gendered patterns of committee assignments:

**H<sub>2a</sub>** : Increases in the share of women in a PPG from one legislative period to the next will have a positive effect on gender parity in assignments to the most prestigious committees.

**H<sub>2b</sub>** : A higher share of women in a PPG in the previous legislative period will have a positive effect on gender parity in assignments to the most prestigious committees.

#### 4. Research design

To investigate these propositions, I study committee assignments of parties in the German states. The analysis builds on a unique data set covering a complete list of all 14,846 MPs elected to the 16 German state legislatures between 1990 and 2021.<sup>3,4</sup> These data contain information on the personal characteristics of MPs (sex, age), their political attributes (party membership, electoral district, months of legislative experience) and the roles this person plays in parliament such as (vice-)presidency, the leadership of the PPG or committee memberships. The

<sup>3</sup>The data starts with the first term after 1990 and ends with the last completed term before March 2021.

<sup>4</sup>The individual-level data set is available online at <https://doi.org/10.7802/2549>.

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sources used to gather these data include electoral commissions, plenary year-books, parliamentary websites and plenary minutes.

In this article, I aggregate the data into 435 state-party-term observations.<sup>5</sup> This strategy allows me to capture the party-level game of committee appointments accurately, which fits the main research interest of this article. If women lobby for women's entrance into influential positions, their presence in legislative parties should shape women's numerical strength in prestigious committees—independent of individual-level variation in seniority or expertise between MPs of different sexes.

Studying the research question in the context of Germany balances concerns about comparability and generalisability. On the one hand, state legislatures in the German states display less diversity than, for instance, European democracies or industrial democracies. The German state parliaments' structure, functioning and committee systems are comparable with the Bundestag (Mielke and Reutter, 2012). All German states have working parliaments, where most substantial policy-making work occurs in committees. Each committee is responsible for a clearly defined policy area, in which members discuss proposals and policy drafts and prepare suggestions to revise or vote in plenum. Committees have fixed membership and last for the entire legislative turn, with few changes in between. The role and competencies of the leaders of the PPGs are also the same (Strøm, 1998). On the other hand, German states' political and societal contexts vary substantially. The states include more urban and more rural government units. Some states are relatively progressive, while others show more conservative societal structures. The level of economic well-being also differs substantially (for a systematic overview of the contextual variation, see [Supplementary Appendix A1](#)). It is hence possible to compare the functioning of committee assignments across German states, and the results are likely to travel to other industrial democracies.

#### 4.1 *Dependent variables: sex gaps in committee appointment*

Three variables identify the level of parity in the assignments to the most prestigious committees: The sex gaps in appointment to the committees of interior, economy and finance.

This study focuses on interior, economy and finance as prestigious committees for three reasons: First, scholarly work identifies these portfolios as some of the most prestigious ones for the working of governments. Being selected to lead the ministries in charge of these portfolios is said to provide substantial influence over personal and resources, media visibility and functions as a career stepping stone

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<sup>5</sup>Since parties who enter parliament for the first time or after a more extended break tend to have less standardised procedures, the analysis furthermore focuses on the six parties that are more or less regular parliamentary parties in the German states (CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, Left).

in most national governments as well as in the German state governments (Krook and O'Brien, 2012; Linhart and Windwehr, 2012). Second, nearly all states have interior, finance and economy committees in all legislative periods, which suggests that these portfolios are of universal importance.<sup>6</sup> Whether a committee responsible for a portfolio exists and which portfolios a committee combines varies extensively between the state parliaments over space and time. Nevertheless, finance, economy and interior exist in 85.9% of all legislatures or more (see [Supplementary Table A2.1](#) in [Supplementary Appendix](#)). Third, MPs who once entered the finance, economy or interior committees tend to enter the same committee rather frequently in subsequent terms. Consequentially, representatives with progressive ambition (Schlesinger, 1966) identify working in these committees as something worth continuing with no other committees better suited to serve their career endeavours (see [Supplementary Table A2.2](#) in [Supplementary Appendix](#)). While the main analysis focuses on interior, finance and economy for these reasons, the robustness test section discusses the result of an alternative selection of prestigious committees.

For each of the three committees, I calculate the sex gaps in appointment by subtracting the number of men a PPG appoints from the number of women.<sup>7,8</sup> Negative values indicate that a legislative party appoints more men than women to a committee. In contrast, positive numbers indicate that more women than men of a legislative party enter the committee. A value of zero indicates gender parity in appointments. At a conceptual level, this approach understands gender equality as the equal numerical strength of men and women in each prestigious committee— independent of women's numerical strength in the PPG. Consequentially, legislative parties with few women will have to send proportionally more of them to the most prestigious committees to show a narrowing sex gap. Such a pattern indicates

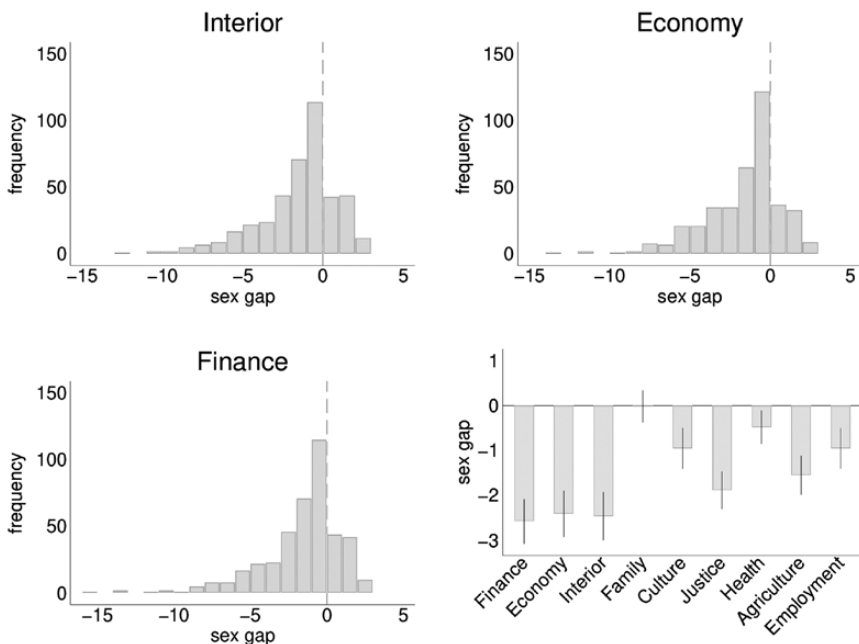
<sup>6</sup>The only exceptions are as follows: The 12th legislature of Bavaria had no committee for internal affairs in Bavaria (12<sup>th</sup> term), and the 15<sup>th</sup> legislature of Baden Wuerttemberg had neither a committee for economic nor financial affairs.

<sup>7</sup>I study overall appointments instead of new appointments, as the turnover rates from one legislative period to the next are relatively high (65.05% for interior, 67.03% for economy and 68.02% for finance).

<sup>8</sup>While changes in the composition of committees are infrequent, to the extent that they occur, they pose a substantial challenge to the data collection process. Changes in committee assignment usually occur if an MP who leaves parliament is replaced or if an MP who receives a party or public office has to leave the committee (e.g., a ministerial position). In such cases, either a successor directly takes over committee positions or cascade-like changes involving reshuffles over several committee seats might occur. Documentation of such changes in committee assignments is often incomplete or non-existing. I, therefore, identify committee membership on a single date for each electoral term only. Again, data availability limits the ability to provide perfectly comparable data. In most cases, I was able to gather information on the original assignments at the beginning of the electoral period. However, in some cases, only information on later dates was available.

an effort to ensure women's equal inclusion at a substantial level. Moreover, this measure has the advantage of being less sensitive to the number of seats a PPG receives in a committee than the overall number of women appointees or the share of women appointees. However, the measure is still intuitive; the resulting numbers are substantially meaningful.

Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of the three variables. The distributions of the sex gaps in appointment to the three prestigious portfolios are strongly skewed to the left. On average, a PPG sends two women less to a prestigious committee than men. In extreme cases, not a single woman was appointed to the economic affairs committee by the CDU in Saxony in the first electoral period or the CSU in Bavaria in the 12th electoral period, even though the parties occupied more than ten seats. Only in 10–13% of all cases do women outnumber men in these committees; if this is the case, women only exceed men by three or fewer. The last graph in Figure 1 shows a bar graph with the average sex gaps in appointment

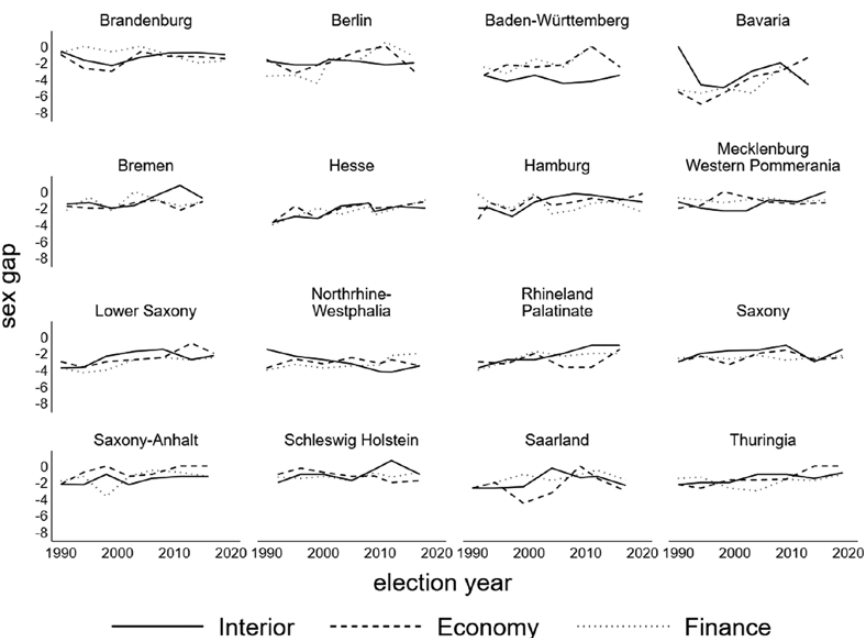


**Figure 1** Frequency distribution of the sex gaps in appointment to the committee of interior, economy and finance, and bar graph of average sex gaps for committees with different levels of prestige.

*Note:* The last figure shows a bar graph with 95% confidence intervals. Family and culture qualify as least prestigious and feminine committees, justice and health as medium prestigious and neutral committees, and agriculture and employment as medium prestigious and masculine committees (Krook and O'Brien, 2012).

to the three prestigious committees compared to a list of less prestigious portfolios. The figure reveals that women's underrepresentation in committees is not limited to prestigious committees but concerns even portfolios with low prestige, such as culture (Krook and O'Brien, 2012). However, the size of the sex gaps in committee appointments is most pronounced in the most prestigious committees.

Figure 2 shows variation in the dependent variables by displaying the average sex gaps in legislative parties' appointments to the 16 states' interior, finance and economy committees over time. Apart from a few exceptions, the average number of women a party sends to a committee is substantially lower than that of men in all three committees (i.e., indicated by negative sex gaps). This pattern holds over time, even for the most recent legislative periods. In some cases, the sex gaps in assignment to the most prestigious committees decrease nearly continuously over time (e.g., Rhineland-Palatinate and Thuringia), while in other cases, no changes in the sex gaps in committee appointment occur (e.g., Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia). Some legislatures even experience increases in the sex gaps from one term to the next (e.g., Bavaria and Saarland). Overall, these descriptive statistics confirm for the German states what has been observed in other cases already: There are persisting gender gaps in committee assignment; in particular, women's



**Figure 2** Sex gaps in appointment to the committees of interior, finance and economy in the 16 states over time.

Note: In this figure, the sex gaps show the average of PPGs in a state in a given legislature.

chances to enter the most prestigious committees are substantially smaller than men's; and these patterns continue to persist even nowadays.

#### 4.2 Independent variables: women in the PPG<sup>9</sup>

The first independent variable is a binary measure indicating whether a party has a woman leader of the PPG.<sup>10</sup> The variable takes the value '1' if one or more women lead the legislative party and '0' if no woman leads the legislative party. In 22.99% of all cases, women lead the PPGs.

The second independent variable identifies the change in the share of women in a PPG from one legislative term to the next ( $t_{-1} - t_0$ ). Women's presence decreased by up to 33.3% points (Greens in Saarland 2009, 2012) and increased by up to 40% points (FDP in Schleswig-Holstein 2009) in the parties entering German state legislatures in the period under study. The average party experienced a slight increase in women's presence of 1.39% points, with a standard deviation of 8.89.

The third independent variable is a continuous measure for the lagged share of women in a PPG. In the present data, the variable takes values between 0% (FDP in Baden-Württemberg 1992, 2011, Bremen 2007, Rhineland-Palatinate 1991, Schleswig-Holstein, 2005, Saarland 2004, 2009; Greens in Saarland 2012) and 66.67% (Greens in Saarland 1994, 2004). On average, a PPG has 34.78% women members, with a standard deviation of 15.13.

#### 4.3 Confounding variables

The main models focus on a list of key confounders, while additional robustness tests engage with a more extensive list of control variables.

Party seats in parliament: Increases in the seats available in a committee may directly shape women's chances to enter them. Since parties receive committee seats in proportion to their strength in parliament, each legislative party's seat share is a key confounder. I, therefore, use the share of party seats in parliament ( $t_0$ ) as a first confounder.

Lagged sex gap in committee appointment: Parties' committee appointment choices in two consecutive terms are, to some degree, dependent. Individuals may

<sup>9</sup>The independent variables' distribution is presented in [Supplementary Appendix](#) in [Supplementary Figure A1.1–A1.3](#).

<sup>10</sup>If replacements occurred, the information refers to the first person who held this position in a given legislative period since this individual has the most direct or indirect influence over who receives seats in the concurrent legislative period.

be reappointed to the same committee, and parties follow path dependencies in their selection criteria. To capture these dynamics, all models include the lagged sex gaps in committee appointments, i.e., the lagged dependent variables.

Committee(s) include broader/narrower set of portfolios than in previous term: Bolzendahl (2014) points out that a typical reaction to women's increasing presence in parliaments, in particular in the German Bundestag, was to adapt the committee system and create female-dominated committees whose 'titles and language reinforce stereotypically feminine constructions' (Bolzendahl, 2014, 860). To ensure that unobserved changes in the committee system do not drive observed relationships between key variables, I introduce two variables that identify modifications of the committee system based on the original names of the committees. First, I coded a dummy variable that takes the value '1' if a committee received additional portfolios and '0' if not. Second, I coded a dummy variable that takes the value '1' if a committee lost portfolios and '0' if not.

## 5. Empirical analyses: the effects of women in PPGs on the sex gaps in appointments to prestigious committees

I estimate three regression models, one for each set of prestigious committees. All models are linear regression models for panel data with robust standard errors and state-fixed effects.<sup>11</sup> The results are displayed in Table 1.

The main effects of the sex of the PPG leader visible in Table 1 indicate that women in these positions are not systematically linked to the sex gaps in membership in the committee of interior, economy and finance. If a woman leads a PPG, the gaps between the number of women and men a party selects decrease by -0.15 for interior, -0.32 for economy and -0.23 for finance. Given that the observed values for the sex gaps in the number of men and women in the three committees range between at least -13 to 3 (for interior, up to -16 to 3 for finance), with standard deviations of roughly 2.5, the predicted effects of a woman PPG leader on these variables are comparably weak. Moreover, the effects do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Exemplary for this effect are, for instance, the Greens in the state of Bremen: A woman led the PPG between the 13th and 16th legislative period, but for the committee of interior, the sex gap in appointment stagnated at -1 women; for economy, the sex gap decreased from -1 to -2 women; and only for finance, the sex gap increased from -2 to 1 women compared with men. Overall, there is hence no robust evidence supporting Hypothesis 1.

<sup>11</sup>In Saarland, in the 13th electoral period, the committee of interior is simultaneously the committee of women's affairs. In Berlin, in the 16th electoral period, economic and women's affairs are treated in the same committee. These unusual combinations of portfolios persisted only for a single legislative period. I exclude these cases, as gendered patterns of committee assignment might be fundamentally different in these cases.

**Table 1** Linear regression of women critical actors and critical mass on the sex gaps in appointment to the committee of interior, economy and finance

	Interior	Economy	Finance
	<i>b</i> /(SE)	<i>b</i> /(SE)	<i>b</i> /(SE)
Woman PPG leader	-0.153 (0.242)	-0.320 (0.266)	-0.234 (0.236)
Change in % women in PPG ( $t_{-1} - t_0$ )	0.046*** (0.013)	0.038*** (0.011)	0.072*** (0.013)
% women in PPG ( $t_{-1}$ )	0.037*** (0.007)	0.043*** (0.009)	0.036*** (0.009)
Confounders			
Party seat percentage ( $t_0$ )	-0.052*** (0.007)	-0.051*** (0.008)	-0.050*** (0.007)
Sex gap in committee assignment ( $t_{-1}$ )	0.394*** (0.048)	0.324*** (0.066)	0.420*** (0.061)
Committee(s) include broader set of portfolios than in previous term	0.171 (0.303)	-0.292 (0.246)	1.642+ (0.879)
Committee(s) include narrower set of portfolios than in previous term	-0.158 (0.465)	-0.048 (0.288)	-0.026 (1.662)
Year	-0.011 (0.012)	-0.009 (0.013)	-0.007 (0.012)
Constant	22.060 (24.418)	16.553 (27.016)	13.262 (23.563)
Observations	320	284	309
$R^2$			
Within	0.088	0.065	0.119
Between	0.902	0.901	0.891
Overall	0.648	0.664	0.681

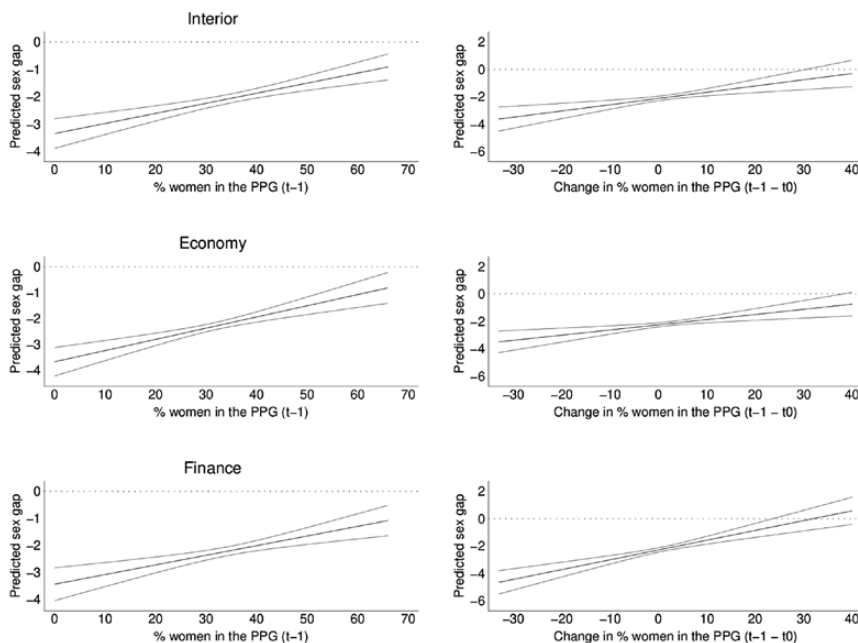
Note: All models are linear regression models for panel data with robust standard errors and state-fixed effects. With \* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Figure 3 displays the effects of change in the share of women in the legislative party ( $t_{-1} - t_0$ ) and the lagged share of women in the legislative party ( $t_{-1}$ ) on the sex gaps in appointment to the three prestigious committees. If the share of women in a PPG increases from one election to the next, the sex gaps in assignment to the most prestigious committees narrow. If the share of women increases by only 1% point, the difference between the number of women and men committee appointees decreases by 0.05 for interior, 0.04 for economy and 0.07 for finance. These effects can accumulate to changes in the sex gaps of 0.71–1.25, if women’s presence increases by 17.8% points from one election to the next (which equals two standard deviations). All effects are statistically significantly different from zero at the 0.1% level. To provide an example from the data, the share of women in the CDU in Lower Saxony increased from 13 to 21% from the 12th to the 13th legislative



period, and the sex gaps in appointment to the committee of interior, economy and finance narrowed consistently by one or two women in the three prestigious committees. This evidence hence lends support for Hypothesis 2a.

Additionally, [Figure 3](#) shows that the higher the share of women in a PPG in the previous term, the smaller the sex gaps in appointment to the most prestigious committees. More precisely, the sex gaps for the interior, economy and finance committees further narrow by 0.04 for every per cent the lagged share of women was larger in a PPG than in any other group. If women's presence in a party was, for example, 30.3% points larger in one legislative party compared with another (which equals two standard deviations), the effects would accumulate to a 1.2 women smaller sex gap in prestigious committees. Again, the effects are statistically significantly different from zero at the 0.1% level. This evidence supports H2b, meaning that, in sum, there appears to be both a direct effect of the increase of the pool of women candidates (H2a) and an indirect effect of women's momentum (H2b).



**Figure 3** Linear prediction and marginal effects plot of percent women in the PPG ( $t_1$ ) and change in the percent women in the PPG ( $t_1 - t_0$ ) on the sex gaps in assignment to the committee of interior, economy and finance (with 95% confidence intervals).

Note: Based on models in [Table 1](#).

These results are robust to various robustness tests such as excluding small parties, adding other party-, parliament-, and state-level confounders or looking at different prestigious committees. In this last test, for instance, I investigate whether the results hold when studying other committees that can be considered prestigious within the German state parliaments, such as environment, education and social affairs. The results suggest comparable effects of the lagged share of women in a PPG and the increase in the share of women in the PPG from  $t_{-1}$  to  $t_0$ . As in the main models, the effects of having a woman PPG leader are negative but now reach the 10% level of statistical significance for the sex gap in appointment to the committee of environment and the 5% level for the sex gap in appointment to the committee of education. Overall, the evidence still lends support for rejecting H1 and accepting H2a and H2b, meaning that the selection of committees in the main models does not drive the results of this study. [Supplementary Appendix 3](#) describes all tests in detail.

Moreover, I investigated whether the observed effects of women's presence in PPGs on the sex gaps in appointments to the most prestigious committees are heterogeneous across different party and state contexts (see [Supplementary Appendix 4](#) for a discussion of all models). These models reaffirm the positive effects of women's numerical strength in a PPG and the negative but statistically insignificant effects of women as PPG leaders in varying contexts. Among other things, the models show that women's presence has the same effects as in the main models in states with higher and lower shares of women in the workforce, in states that did and did not yet have a women head of state government (*Ministerpräsident\*in*) and in parties with more left-wing and right-wing positions on socio-cultural questions.

## 6. Conclusion

This study shed light on women's role in the intra-party dynamics that lead to gendered assignments to the most prestigious committees. For that purpose, I used an extensive data set providing information on committee membership and women in PPGs in German states for 30 years. The analyses showed that parties' assignments to interior, economy and finance committees become more gender equal as women's numerical strength in legislative parties increases. This effect can be divided into a short-term effect of recent increases in women's presence and a long-term effect of women's presence in the previous term. Contrary to the anticipation deduced from the literature, this study finds no evidence that women MPs increasingly enter prestigious committees if their party group is led by a woman.

The empirical results of this project thus reject the proposition that women leaders of PPGs serve as critical actors promoting the involvement of women MPs in

the most prestigious committees. Through their direct and indirect ability to shape opportunities and barriers for women in politics, previous scholarly work identifies women in leading party positions as possible critical actors (Childs and Krook, 2009) who may drive women's access to party offices (Cheng and Tavits, 2011; Goddard, 2021). However, the evidence presented in the present study suggests that women as PPG leaders do not open the door to prestigious committees for other women. The coefficients are negative—even though substantially relatively weak. Women PPG leaders might even be shutting the door to the most prestigious committees—similar to how women party leaders 'shut the door' to influential ministerial posts for women (O'Brien *et al.*, 2015). Further exploring the nature of this pattern is a promising avenue for future research, and qualitative interviews are likely to provide the most insightful results.

Moreover, the evidence presented here stresses the importance of gender parity in PPGs as a driver for women's access to the most prestigious posts. This effect is not merely the consequence of a short-term effect in which a larger pool of women candidates leads to more appointments of women. Instead, a long-term effect occurs, with more women in the previous legislative period translating into more appointments of women to the most prestigious committees in the subsequent parliament—even if the share of women in a party group decreases in between. I laid out multiple plausible consequences of women's increased presence for the supply of (Krook and O'Brien, 2012; Barnes, 2014) and demand for women in prestigious committee posts. Whether increasing shares of women change women themselves, their environment or both constitute another question that future research might want to address.

Overall, the results of this study pinpoint the importance of reaching equal shares of men and women in all PPGs. In many democracies, shares of women in parliament have been stagnating well below gender parity, meaning that the equal shares of men and women in PPGs that are such a powerful driver of women's access to the most prestigious committees are unlikely to be reached soon.

### Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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