Undermining the Parliamentary Patriarchy: Women, Political Speech, and Power around the World

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Abstract

Research on gendered legislative behavior is advancing our understanding of the importance of women getting elected to powerful political positions. Women politicians speak differently than men, work on different issues, and employ different political strategies. Additionally, research has shown that women who progress to higher positions in a hierarchy typically dominated by men tend to adopt more stereotypical masculine traits and become less distinctive from men the longer they stay in office. While acquiring power in a legislature is key in changing the gendered workplace environment of a parliament, we know very little about the interplay of power and femininity in politics. We study this relationship based on two data sources: a collection of 3.5 million parliamentary speeches from twelve democracies of Europe (East and West), North America, and Oceania between 1987 and 2020, and an original dataset of individual committee assignments in these countries. We investigate the relationship between discourse genderedness and the legislative power that politicians acquire, measuring "power" based on prestigious assignments, such as committee memberships and chairwomanships, party leadership, and cabinet positions. This research helps us understand the individual incentives that shape how women politicians represent women in parliament and the institutional structures that influence this relationship.

1 Introduction

Studies of women in politics have long found that women do not achieve the same levels of success as men, positing a variety of explanations for this phenomenon. We contribute to the discussion on how men and women politicians act differently in their professional capacities and explore the implications that these differences have on their long-term political careers. Building on previous scholarship that finds that women and men speak with different styles and about different topics, we further explore the relationship between this gender-typical speech and power in parliaments. We do so by employing a novel dataset of parliamentary leadership positions in committees and ministries in twelve democracies over 30+ years. We investigate which comes first: the rise to power or the stylistic turn towards speaking masculinely, finding that masculine speech both precedes and follows from an increase in power. Women speak more masculinely, acquire more power, and then speak even more masculinely as their career advances. Disentangling the relationships between gender, tenure, and power has important implications for our understanding of gender representation and equality in countries' leading representative bodies.

2 Gender and power in the literature

Parliaments are gendered workplaces (O'Brien and Piscopo, 2019) in which women MPs structurally struggle to advance their careers in similar ways to women in other workplaces (Baker, 2021; Erikson and Josefsson, 2019). Thus, we begin with a review of literature that addresses women's career progression and the accumulation of power and leadership positions. Across fields, there is ample evidence that women's careers progress more slowly than men's do; the question is why. Ellemers et al. (2004) provides an overview of what holds women back in workplaces, ranging from simple implicit bias against women in male-dominated fields to the glass cliff and different experiences in balancing work and family life. There remain strong cultural assumptions and values that women will take on the majority of childcare responsibilities in

a family even in relatively liberal Western democracies (Mussida and Patimo, 2020; Crompton, Brockmann and Lyonette, 2005; van de Vijver, 2007). Budig and England (2001) documented how women are penalized professionally when they become parents, but men are rewarded with a "fatherhood bonus" (Hodges and Budig, 2010). Keloharju, Knüpfer and Tåg (2018) found in their review of CEOs in Sweden that the main difference between men and women's career progressions occurred around the birth of their children, when women CEOs took more time off work than men did. When comparing men and women CEOs, Fitzsimmons, Callan and Paulsen (2014) also studied CEOs, finding that women CEOs were less likely to have acquired the relevant experience to obtain promotions. In its inverse, this means that the women who did acquire experiences that qualified them to be promoted to CEO had career trajectories that were more similar to male CEOs' career trajectories than to non-CEO women's career trajectories. Offermann and Beil (1992) tested whether differences in career achievements of men and women could be attributed to ambition, and they did not find evidence for this idea; women leaders in their study were at least as ambitious as their male counterparts.

Specifically in politics, we can observe the limited success of women politicians' career progression by considering how few women actually make it to top positions in government. Only 27 countries in the world have a woman who serves as head of state or head of government as of June 2024. Of all national parliamentarians in the world, only 26.9% of the MPs are women. Women make up 50% or more of the MPs in only six countries, and they comprise less than 10% of MPs in 21 countries (UN Women, 2024). In response to statistics like this, some women respond by "pulling up the ladder" instead of enabling other women to succeed in their wake (O'Brien et al., 2015), suggesting a belief that there is only room for a few women at the top and that they must protect their own positions by keeping other women out (Staines, Tavris and Jayaratne, 1974; Derks, van Laar and Ellemers, 2016).

Scholars have reviewed the types of political leadership positions that women occupy globally and the circumstances under which women rise to the top, in an

effort to explain why some women in some countries find success while others do not (Jalalzai and Krook, 2010; Krook and O'Brien, 2012). Women in politics face threats of violence on a regular basis (Krook, 2017; Baker, 2021; Phillips, 2023) and encounter structural barriers against their success (Lovenduski, 2005; Collier and Raney, 2018; Lovenduski, 2015; Fetscher, Tröger and Manow, 2024). In general, women come into leadership positions under challenging circumstances where they are more likely to fail, a phenomenon known as the glass cliff (Ryan and Haslam, 2005; O'Brien, 2015). Women are far more likely to be selected as leader of their party when men do not wish to stand as candidates due to a crisis or loss (Beckwith, 2015). And yet, women continue to cooperate and try to work within these systems effectively, collaborating on initiatives together (Wäckerle, 2023; Barnes, 2016; Holman and Mahoney, 2018) and generally being less adversarial than men politicians (Childs, 2004; Grey et al., 2002; Sones, Moran and Lovenduski, 2005).

Collaborative approaches are not always rewarded, however: leadership studies tell us that there remains a strong bias towards masculine agentic leadership as the image of "good leadership" (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2002; Schein, 1973). Yet Eagly and Karau (2002)'s role congruity theory tells us that women are evaluated as poor leaders when they lead in a way that does not conform with gendered norms that portray women as collaborative and relationship-focused. Thus women leaders face a double bind: lead "masculinely" and be seen as good leaders but bad women, or lead "femininely" and be perceived as congruous with their expected gender role, which does not include the expectation of a leadership position (Duerst-Lahti, 2005; Rosenwasser and Dean, 1989). This bears out in recent studies, where women and men's leadership styles are described and evaluated in gendered ways during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sperling and Boatright, 2024; Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai and Och, 2023), and where politicians judge that their female colleagues are better-suited to work on gender equality initiatives than men (Höhmann, 2024).

Though progress may be slow, there is evidence to show than women are being appointed to leadership positions more often in democracies (Nyrup, Yamagishi and

Bramwell, 2024). Krook and O'Brien (2012, p.844) laid the groundwork for conceptualizing and measuring the prestige and power associated with a certain formal position of leadership, demonstrating that some ministries or committees that are technically of equal rank come with more power and influence, or to use their term, prestige. Historically, when women do progress to high-ranking positions like government ministers, they often are awarded jobs in low-prestige ministries and/or ministries that are perceived to be "feminine" (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Reynolds, 1999). Kroeber and Hüffelmann (2021) additionally find that women who are appointed to cabinet positions advance more slowly than men to more prestigious "masculine" ministries, men are seen as more suited to influential portfolios with large budgets (Kroeber and Dingler, 2023), and MPs belonging to right-wing parties particularly evaluate women ministers as less competent (Dingler and Kroeber, 2023). Heberer (2024) also finds that women party leaders appoint women to high-prestige ministries less often than male party leaders. Despite this, women are just as effective as ministers as their male counterparts (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2016). Jacob, Scherpereel and Adams (2014) also demonstrate that there is actually greater gender equality in cabinets than in legislatures, though this appears to be more the case for junior coalition partners than larger parties (Heberer, 2024).

This relates to one of our key research questions: does performing masculinity (in our case, through speech, though this could be measured in other ways as well) cause an increase in an MP's parliamentary power, or does the MP act more masculinely as a result of their increasing power? Therefore, we test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 *Women MPs who speak more masculinely will attain greater parliamentary power throughout their careers than women MPs whose speech is more feminine.*

Beyond the overarching relationship between gender and power, we also investigate the sequence of events. In other words, which comes first: masculine speech or promotion to a more powerful office? Baumann, Bäck and Davidsson (2019) find that when women politicians hold "masculine" committee assignments, they are less likely to be appointed to a cabinet positions. The authors invoke Eagly and Karau (2002)'s role

congruity theory, arguing that gender-incongruous committee assignments actually hold women back.

Thus, we test two additional hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2 *After gaining more power, MPs begin to speak in a more masculine way.*

Hypothesis 3 *After speaking in a more masculine way, MPs gain more power.*

Based on the literature, either or both of these hypotheses could credibly be true, so we do not present them as competing hypotheses. If we find evidence for both effects, it could be the case that masculine speech begets power, which begets more masculine speech in a cycle. It could also in principle be that something else causes an MP to initially gain power, and this leads to masculine speech, which leads to more power.

3 Data and Methods

We join a robust academic discussion that understands speech as a political act and thus employs text-as-data methods to understand political and gendered actions. Speech is universally present in political contexts: politicians need to convince their constituencies to support them and explain their actions. Many scholars have investigated the ways that women and men in politics use their speech strategically differently: women employ different grammatical structures (Yu, 2014), speak more positively and affectively (Childs, 2004; Boussalis et al., 2021; Hargrave and Blumenau, 2021), convey more emotion (Dietrich, Hayes and O'Brien, 2019; Renner and Masch, 2019; Masch and Gabriel, 2020) but are punished for expressing the wrong emotions (Boussalis et al., 2021; Masch, 2020). Women have less speaking time on the floor of parliaments (Osnabrügge, 2021), emphasize different topics than men do (Bäck, Debus and Müller, 2014), and are more likely to use gender-sensitive language (Bast et al., 2024) (especially in progressive parties). Parliamentary speeches that use feminine language also receive smaller reactions from colleagues (Ash, Krümmel and Slapin, 2024).

Our corpus of parliamentary speeches combines several datasets: Parlspeech v2 (Rauh and Schwalbach, 2020) for Austria, Czechia, Germany, New Zealand, Spain,

and Sweden; MAPLE (Kartalis and Costa Lobo, 2021) for Portugal; Lapponi et al. (2018) for Norway; Pančur et al. (2020) for Slovenia; Ogrodniczuk and Nitoń (2020) for Poland; and Darģis et al. (2018) for Latvia. The Estonian data was graciously shared by Martin Mölder. These speeches all originate in lower houses of parliament in plenary sessions. We clean the data by removing speeches shorter than 50 words, which we presume are interjections or questions rather than substantive additions. We also remove speeches given by the Chair (also known as speaker, president, etc., who serves an administrative role rather than participating in debate) and by anyone who is not an MP, such as a cabinet minister. These parliamentary records are, to the best of our knowledge, complete stenographic records of the discussion in these legislative bodies, containing all speeches from the time period. The combined data so far comprises a total of 7764 individual MPs from 107 parties in those 12 countries who gave speeches in those periods.

We investigate the issue of how parliamentary power is related to speech by combining two comprehensive datasets. First, we look at speech femininity using the speeches and measures from Castanho Silva, Pullan and Wäckerle (2024). They apply machine learning models to predict the level of femininity in speeches from 24 parliaments over around 30 years. The measure provides a continuous scale of how feminine or masculine the discourse of each member of parliament is. The measure is driven both by the topics MPs speak about, and by distinctive gendered markers of speaking style (Wäckerle and Castanho Silva, 2023).

We combine those measures with data we originally collected on committee membership across twelve countries, where we identify which MPs are members or chairs in which parliamentary committees in each year. This data comes directly from each country's parliament's website and includes potentially multiple overlapping positions for each MP. We apply the WhoGov dataset's (Nyrup and Bramwell, 2020) classification of cabinet portfolios into three levels of prestige (low, medium, high) based on the policy area, to classify committees' levels of prestige accordingly. Next, we assign values to each position in a committee, reflecting their importance: for instance, a chairperson

is a more prestigious position than a substitute member. The full coding is described in Table 1.

Table 1: Coding of Rank of Parliamentary and Executive Positions

Role	Typical Positions	Branch	Prestige
Minister	Members of cabinet	Executive	Very High (15)
Deputy Minister	Stand in for members of cabinet	Executive	Very High (12)
Committee Chair	Chairing committees	Legislative	High (8)
Parliamentary Secretary	Supporting cabinet members	Executive	Medium (6)
Party Spokesperson	Lead party group in committee OR shadow minister	Legislative	Medium (5)
Deputy Committee Chair	Stand in for committee chair	Legislative	Medium (4)
Deputy Party Spokesperson	Stand in for party spokesperson	Legislative	Low (3)
Committee Member	Member of committees	Legislative	Low (2)
Deputy Committee Member	Stand in for committee member	Legislative	Low (1)

Power is calculated by multiplying the prestige of the position by the prestige of the committee or portfolio. A minister for a high prestige portfolio receives a score of 45 ($15 * 3$), while a deputy committee member for a low prestige committee has a power of 1 for that assignment. Prime Ministers are assigned a power of 60, indicating they are more powerful than all others. In several countries, MPs sit in multiple committees with various positions, so that their total power is the sum of all their appointments. To keep PMs as the most powerful, in those cases we assign to them the highest value in that country and legislative session.

Furthermore, not only are there countries where the larger number of committees means that MPs sit in multiple ones, but party size also matters. MPs from smaller parties may have to sit in more committees, simply due to having to fulfill parliamentary distribution rules, while very large parties with more personnel may have more MPs in fewer or even no committees. For this reason, we always center and scale MPs' power in relation to the rest of their party, by subtracting the mean of an MPs' party power from the individual MP's power and dividing it by the standard deviation of the power in that MPs' party.

We refer to this data as the Member of Parliament Power Index (MPPI). In the future, we intend to release both the specific power calculation used in this paper and the underlying dataset for other scholars' use.

Figure 1: Evolution of MPs' power in relation to their co-partisans over time

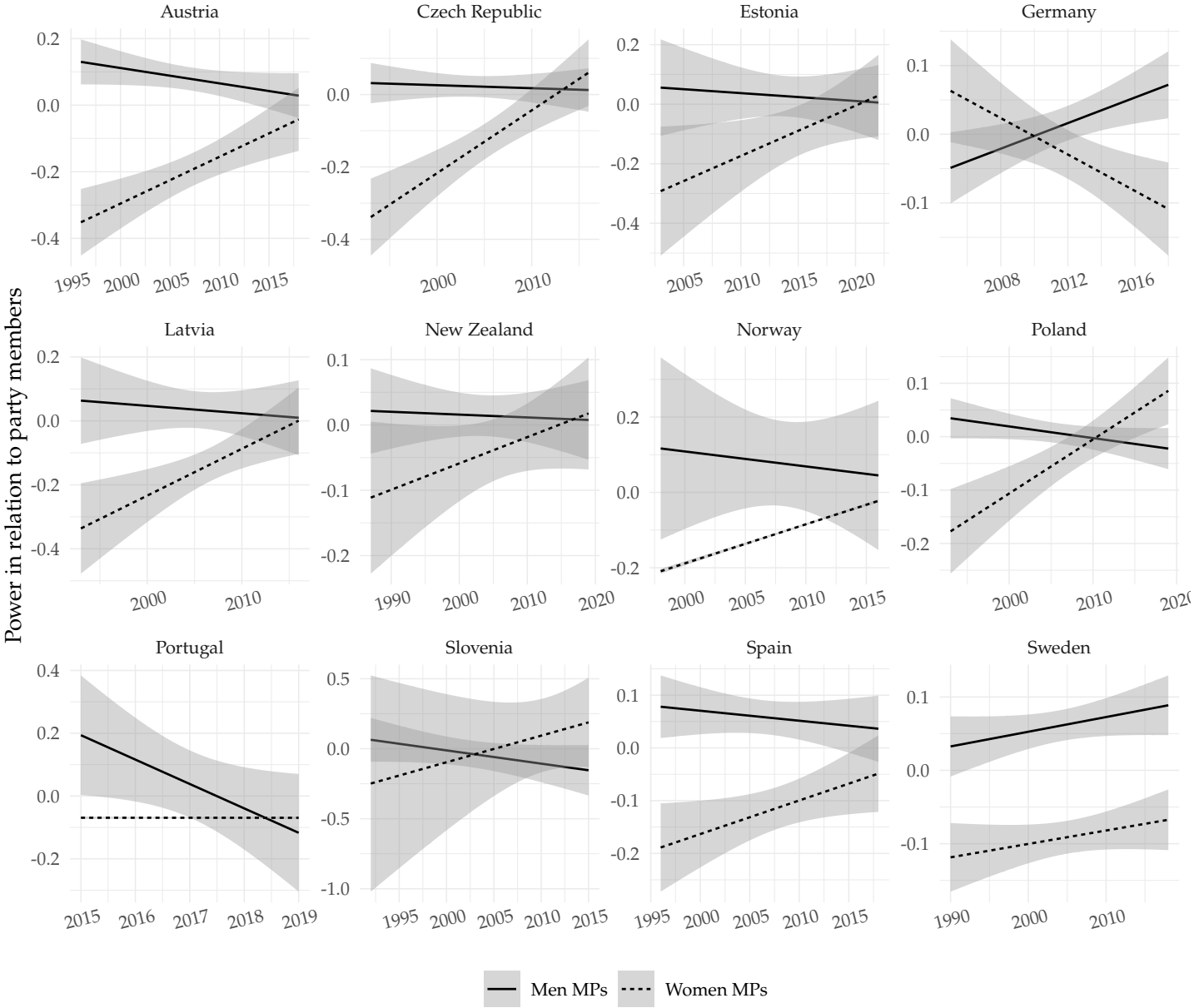


Figure 1 shows the evolution of power in relation to one's party, for men and women, across countries over time. As a positive note, even though the share of women in parliament is still below parity in all of these countries, we see that in most countries there is a convergence in power levels within parties between men and women in recent years. Women tended to have much less power than their male copartisans in the 1990s and 2000s, a gap that closed in the late 2010s. The clear exception is Germany, where women MPS on average appear to have lost prestige over the years while men got more, especially considering the country during this entire time period was under the leadership of Angela Merkel.

We merge also data on parties' characteristics from the V-Party dataset (Lührmann et al., 2020): parties' position on women's participation in the labour force, as a measure for their progressiveness on women's rights, the economic left-right, level of gender equality in the party leadership, its seat-share. We also calculate the proportion of women in each party and in each legislative session. Finally, we add as well the number of years an MP has been in parliament thus far.

4 Analysis and Results

We model the relationship between speech femininity and MPs' power index with longitudinal multilevel models. The lowest level of observation is an MP-year, with random intercepts for MP and party, and country fixed effects. The model allows the slope of year to vary across MPs and parties, and to account for temporal autocorrelation we include an autoregressive covariance structure for the residuals (AR1, Pinheiro and Bates, 2006). This covariance structure corrects the fact that in longitudinal data structures, residuals of an observation are correlated to the residuals of the same unit in the neighboring periods of time: the residual power of an MP in 2008 is more similar to the residual power of that MP in 2007 than in 2015. The error covariance structure models that.

Finally, in these models we also add fixed effects for each MPs' main policy area.

The main policy area is that of the committee or portfolio they sit in and, in cases of multiple memberships, it is taken as the policy area of the committee or portfolio from which they acquire the largest amount of power. This is considered as the MPs' main area of expertise, and the final list of 29 areas is entered as dummies in the models.[1] The models predicting speech femininity also control for the F1 scores of the XGBoost and Ridge algorithms in the country-year they were fit, to control for variance that is driven by the statistical performance of the models, following (Castanho Silva, Pullan and Wäckerle, 2024).

To investigate these relations we have two sets of models: one where the dependent variable is discourse femininity, and the other where the dependent variable is the member of parliament power index (MPPI) in relation to their party. We do this in order to investigate possible lagged effects of each variable on the other: namely, do women who become more powerful at time t start speaking differently in, say, time $t-3$? Or is the femininity of their speeches entirely determined by how powerful they are in that moment?

Results are in Table 2, for models fit only on a sample of women MPs. The first part, with speech femininity as the outcome, confirms the main finding of Castanho Silva, Pullan and Wäckerle (2024): women's discourse gets less feminine the longer they stay in parliament, while none of the party or parliament-level variables show signs of significance. When it comes to power, model 1 shows that MPs' power is negatively related to the femininity of their speeches – controlling for the area of their specialty. It appears clear that, for women, the more powerful they are the more masculine is their speech. Looking at lagged effects, we see that the relation seems driven by power on the year before: there seems to be evidence that women are indeed adjusting their speech to new more powerful roles after taking them.

From these models, we also plot the main policy fixed effects that are statistically

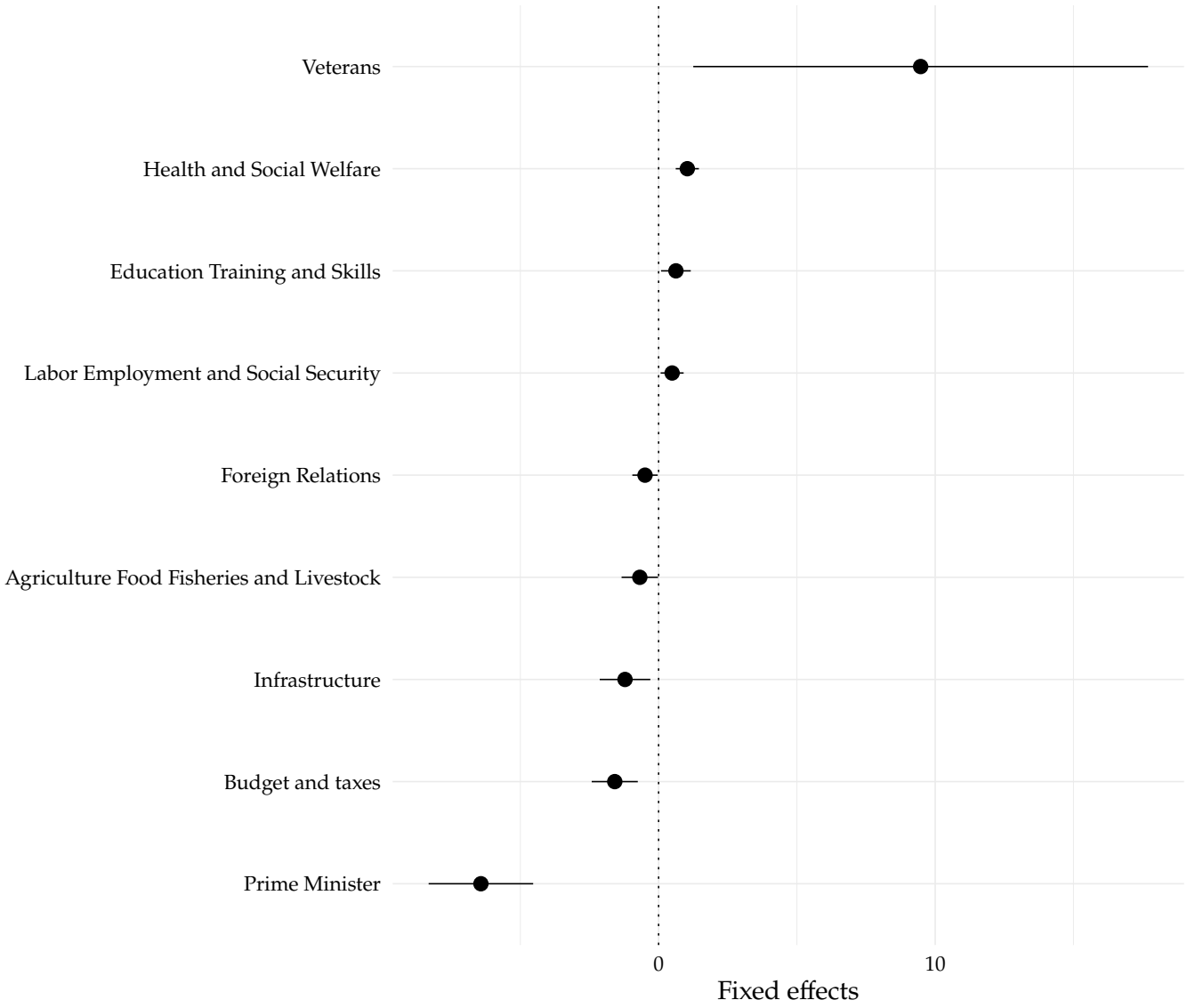
[1]The areas are coded into: Budget and taxes, Environment, Foreign Relations, Economy, Labor Employment Social Security, Government Interior Home Affairs, Health Social Welfare, Defense Military National Security, Justice, Education Training Skills, Sports and Tourism, Parliamentary affairs, Agriculture Food Fisheries Livestock, Infrastructure, Minorities, Family, Science Technology Research, Prime Minister, Political Reform, Foreign Economic Relations, Communications Information, Without Portfolio, Regional, Energy, Civil Service, Religion, Women, Immigration Emigration, Veterans.

Table 2: Relationship between Discourse and Parliamentary Power – Women MPs

	DV: Feminine Speech		DV: MP power index	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Year	0.020	0.022	0.008***	0.009**
	(0.022)	(0.026)	(0.002)	(0.003)
F1 Ridge	−0.747	11.107		
	(4.310)	(5.959)		
F1 Boost	41.423***	41.159***		
	(0.903)	(1.276)		
Years in parliament	−0.087***	−0.071***	0.007**	0.001
	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Proportion of women in parl.	−3.898	−6.732*	−0.274	−0.513
	(2.773)	(3.413)	(0.321)	(0.444)
Proportion of women in party	1.071	0.515	0.008	−0.074
	(1.221)	(1.487)	(0.157)	(0.218)
Gender equality in party leadership	−0.159	−0.127	0.053**	0.029
	(0.175)	(0.211)	(0.019)	(0.028)
Party position women rights	0.132	0.217	0.007	0.022
	(0.158)	(0.171)	(0.018)	(0.025)
Party left-right	−0.169	−0.039	0.023	0.026
	(0.136)	(0.137)	(0.014)	(0.019)
Party seat share	−0.011	−0.015	0.003***	0.003**
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.001)	(0.001)
MP power	−0.141*	0.123		
	(0.064)	(0.104)		
MP power t-1		−0.419***		
		(0.127)		
MP power t-2		0.140		
		(0.128)		
MP power t-3		−0.045		
		(0.108)		
Speech femininity			0.001*	0.001
			(0.001)	(0.001)
Speech femininity t-1				−0.003*
				(0.001)
Speech femininity t-2				−0.004**
				(0.001)
Speech femininity t-3				−0.004***
				(0.001)
AIC	82123.988	43851.474	18084.495	12865.562
BIC	82568.564	44273.911	18303.078	13080.366
Log Likelihood	−41002.994	−21864.737	−9013.248	−6401.781
Num. obs.	13889	7572	13889	7572
Num. groups: name_ascii	2454	1665	2454	1665
Num. groups: party	94	77	94	77

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Figure 2: Significant Fixed Effects of Main Position Area on Speech Femininity, Model 1 in Table 2.



significant in predicting femininity in speeches. The results in Figure 2 also provide validation to the measure. Speeches by MPs whose focus is areas traditionally considered "women's issues", such as healthcare, welfare, and education. tend to be more feminine. Those from MPs who focus on foreign affairs, budget, or infrastructure are more masculine and, notoriously, speeches by Prime Ministers are also significantly more masculine.

Turning to Models 3 and 4, the dependent variable is women MPs' power. The results show that women seem to adapt to a more masculine speaking style before getting more powerful positions: the lagged effects for 1, 2, and 3 years prior are significant and negative: the more masculine the speech of a women that amount of time before, the more powerful they are at a given point. Furthermore, we see that year has a significant effect, confirming the descriptive observation we had made for almost every country in Figure 1. Model 3 also shows that women who spend more years in parliament also accrue more power and, naturally women in parties that have higher equality in leadership positions have more power.

5 Conclusion

Beyond looking at the numerical representation of women in parliament, it is important to understand in what way women change politics once elected. Previous work has explored the way women speak in parliament and shown that they talk less than men, about different issues, and using different style. Women MPs also change their speaking style as they stay longer in parliament. In this paper, we add to this discussion by cracking open the process through which women gain power in parliaments across the world.

Using a new dataset on parliamentary appointments, we operationalize power that MPs accrue throughout their tenure and connect it to measures of gender performance via speech distinctiveness. We show that women adapt their speech after increases in power, indicating that gaining power explains some amount of the change in speaking

style that occurs throughout their tenure. Additionally, speech femininity is also a significant predictor of gaining power in the future: Women who speak more masculinely gain more power in subsequent years.

This points to power as an important mechanism in how women get socialized into parliaments. When they adapt their speaking style, women can achieve more power, and once they are more powerful, they adapt their speaking style even more. These findings have important implications for the analysis of substantive representation as well as parliamentary behavior. In an institution historically dominated by men, pathways to power for women appear to be defined by masculinity.

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