**Party Policy Positions and the Varying Electoral Gender Gap**

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*Please note this is a (very!) shortened version of a book manuscript-in-progress*

**Abstract**

Political parties often make implicit or explicit policy appeals to women voters. However, the comparative literature on gender vote gaps largely ignores political factors and focuses on social-structural factors (e.g. women’s labour force participation, marital status, and religiosity) when explaining gender differences in political preferences. This paper brings politics back in to the study of gender vote gaps by linking individual-level data on voters in 71 elections 1996-2017 from 20 Western countries from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), with macro-level data on party positions in those elections from the Manifesto Project (MP). I test whether party positions on economic equality and social spending, moral and religious issues, the environment, and international intervention, are associated with attracting more (or fewer) female or male voters, and, as a result, whether the policies parties offer in an election matter for gender gaps in vote choice. This fills a gap in the literature on gender and voting by analysing the impact of political factors – in the form of party policy positions – on men’s and women’s differential voting behaviour at election time. The findings have implications for how we understand variation in gender vote gaps across elections, as well as for parties trying to attract ‘the women’s vote.’

1. **Introduction**

Gender vote gaps have been the subject of much comparative research in recent years, and there is a consensus that women have gradually moved to the left and/or men have gradually moved to the right. As a result, the existence of gender vote gaps where women are more likely to vote for parties of the left in most Western democracies is now well-established (Giger 2009; Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014). This has important implications for party competition, where parties of the left might be increasingly relying on female voters rather than their traditional, male, working class base. However, considerations of political parties’ actions at election time and how they produce gender vote gaps is largely absent from the existing comparative literature. Parties often make explicit appeals or adopt particular policies in order to capture the ‘women’s vote’ – but whether this actually has an impact on women’s (and men’s) voting preferences remains under-studied.

Explanations for gender vote gaps instead focus on socioeconomic differences between men and women, which lead them to differ in their preferences. In particular, women are thought to be economically worse-off than men due to their position in the labour force where they face lower pay and discrimination, increasing proportions of single households, and the disproportionate burden of care responsibilities that fall to women. However, political factors have largely been absent in scholarship on gender differences in vote choice. This paper thus aims to analyse the role of party positions in shaping electoral gender gaps. Party positions are often thought to be important by media commentators and academic researchers alike when it comes to explaining gender gaps at individual elections (e.g. Campbell & Childs, 2015), but their role has not been analysed systematically in comparative perspective.

Using individual-level data on voters from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) 1996-2017 in conjunction with party data from the Manifesto Project (MP), this paper tests whether certain policy positions are more (or less) likely to attract female or male voters when parties adopt and emphasise them at election time. I find that women are in general more likely to vote for a party if it emphasises welfare state expansion, education spending, social and economic equality, environmental protection, and peaceful international interventions. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to vote for a party if it emphasises lower taxation and fiscal conservatism, and become less likely to vote for parties if they emphasise welfare state expansion, environmental protection, or peaceful internationalism. These gender differences are especially pronounced when they are broken down by labour force participation, education level, and birth cohort. Surprisingly, policies such as support for abortion, divorce, non-traditional family forms, and protection for minority groups have a similar influence on men’s and women’s vote choices and are thus relatively unrelated to gender vote gaps.

These results show that the policies offered by political parties have an important role in shaping gender vote gaps, and that variation in gender vote gaps between elections could be related to differences in party positions in certain issues. This suggests that the comparative literature on gender and the vote should start to expand its focus to the political and electoral environment within which men and women make their vote choice, in order to better understand the formation of gender vote gaps.

1. **Previous Literature and Hypotheses**

Comparative research into electoral gender gaps has found that, whilst women used to be more likely to vote for right-wing parties than men, they have gradually become more left-wing relative to men over time (Giger 2009; Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Such a gender gap where women are more likely to vote Democrat has been noted in the US since the 1980s (Baxter and Lansing 1980; Klein 1984). Scholars then observed its presence in Scandinavian countries (Knutsen 2001; Norris 1988; Togeby 1994), and by the present day almost no Western European country has a gender gap where women are more likely to vote for right-wing parties than men (Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014; Shorrocks 2018). At the same time, a gender gap on the radical right has opened up, where men are more likely than women to support parties of the populist radical right in the same countries (Givens 2004; Gidengil et al. 2005).

The scholarly literature directed at explaining the electoral gender gap on the left has primarily focused on the social and economic position of women in society relative to men. Women are thought to be more ‘economically vulnerable’ compared to men, leading them to be more likely to support parties of the left for their redistributive agendas (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2004). Women’s labour force participation is emphasised in this perspective: women have entered the workforce in greater numbers over time, but they have done so in a context of inequality where they are exposed to discrimination, unequal and/or low pay, and disproportionate responsibility for caring for children and the elderly (Manza and Brooks 1999; Togeby 1994; Bergh 2007). Declining marriage rates and rising divorce rates are also emphasised here, as these factors are thought to make men richer but women poorer (Edlund and Pande 2002; Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2004). Single women are thus expected to be particularly left-wing in their vote choice. Furthermore, women’s greater caring responsibilities are argued to lead them to support parties that prioritise spending on the welfare state and health and educational services, since they are more likely to come into contact with them (Andersen 1999; Erie and Rein 1988).

Complementing these arguments is a smaller literature focused on men’s socioeconomic position, with some scholars in the US emphasising that men are less likely to prioritise social spending and are more optimistic about the economy than women, and so this has pulled them towards the Republican Party (Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999). Comparative research has also argued that since men don’t take on the same caring responsibilities as women and have higher incomes on average, they have preferences for lower taxation and lower state provision of redistribution and services (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006).

Another perspective on the gender gap on the left also emphasises the role of differences in attitudes and values between individual men and women in producing gender gaps. Early explanations for the gender gap in the US focused on women’s support for feminist values (Conover 1988), and women’s gender-egalitarian attitudes have been linked to the US gender gap more recently (Norrander and Wilcox 2008). Comparatively, the literature has emphasised the role of rising female education rates, declining religiosity, and changes to traditional gender roles in making women more gender-egalitarian as well as more liberal in their values relative to men, and thus more likely to vote for left-wing parties (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Bergh 2007).

The decline in religiosity is thought to be particularly electorally significant in the production of the gender gap on the left. Women’s past greater support for right-wing parties has been found to be particularly associated with their greater religiosity relative to men (De Vaus and McAllister 1989; Duverger 1955). However, in more recent years women are becoming much less religious and this is thought to be a particular driver of their new-found left-wing voting. There is debate about the mechanism here, however. Some have focused on cultural changes associated with women’s declining religiosity, arguing that this has made them more socially liberal in their values and thus more likely to support left-wing parties (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Others, however, argue that the decline in women’s religiosity has meant they are now more able to vote in line with their long-standing left-wing economic preferences because they are no longer tied to Christian Democrat parties (Emmenegger and Manow 2014; Shorrocks 2018).

The literature on the gender gap in support for the radical right has also picked up on the socioeconomic explanations derived from the left-wing gender gap literature. However, factors such as occupation, education, religiosity, and gender roles, have been found to have negligible effects on the gender gap in radical right voting (Gidengil et al. 2005; Givens 2004; Immerzeel, Coffé, and van der Lippe 2015). This literature has instead argued that men’s lower motivation to control prejudice and lower sensitivity to social cues compared to women is what leads men to be more likely to vote for parties of the radical right (Ivarsflaten and Harteveldt 2016; Harteveld et al. 2017). This perspective has shown larger gender gaps when parties are small and thus non-mainstream, and smaller gender gaps where radical right parties have a ‘reputational shield’ that might make them appear more acceptable to vote for.

The focus on these long-term trends can give the impression that gender gaps across Western countries are becoming more similar to each other. However, whilst it is the case that there is a broad pattern where women are more likely to vote for parties of the left, and men are more likely to vote for parties of the radical right, there is also considerable variation between countries and elections in the magnitude and sometimes direction of these gender gaps. For example, regional differences are noted in the gender gap on the left, with the largest gender gaps present in the US and Scandinavia, whilst smaller or non-existent gender gaps exist in Catholic countries such as Ireland, Italy, and Spain (Shorrocks 2018; Giger 2009). Such cross-national and over-time variation in the size of the gender gap has been linked to multiple factors, including a country’s divorce rates (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006), female labour force participation (Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014; Giger 2009) and Catholicism (Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014). These factors are consistent with the explanations given at the individual level for gender vote gaps. Gender gaps vary over time within countries too: even in the US, where the gender gap is considered to be broadly stable for 40 years, the gender gap in Presidential elections has varied in size since 1980 – from a low-point of 4 points in 1992 to a high of 11 points in 2016.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The existing approaches to studying gender vote gaps in comparative perspective largely assume that what is occurring at the level of political parties or electoral competition is largely irrelevant to the gender gap. However, I argue that there are many reasons to expect such factors to be important in shaping differences between men and women when it comes to vote choice. When discussing the reasons for gender vote gaps, scholars make implicit assumptions that party policy is indeed important in shaping how men and women vote. Women are expected to vote for parties of the left because they offer increased social spending, redistribution, and gender equality policies. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be drawn to parties of the right because of their policies of lower taxation and lower redistribution, whilst women are put off by the comparative lack of attention given by such parties to issues such as gender equality. However, as these lists of ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ policies show, parties in the same ideological space can offer packages of policies, and so far there has been little empirical consideration of *which* policies or party positions are really crucial for gender vote gaps. For instance, are women more likely to vote for left-wing parties because of their policies on social spending, or their policies on gender equality, or both?

That political context is important for gender vote gaps has sometimes been noted by scholars over the years. Pippa Norris, in an early comparative study, suggested that the impact of attitudinal differences between men and women would depend on the salience of the issue, the size of the attitudinal gender gap, and the positions of the parties on the issue (Norris 1988). However, the first and third suggestion have never been applied to studies of the gender gap comparatively in Europe, which largely ignore cross-national and cross-election differences in salience and party position. This ignores potential explanations for variation in gender gaps between countries and elections, as well as inadvertently giving the impression that politics does not influence gender gaps.

Whilst there is in general an absence of political factors in accounts of gender vote gaps, there are a few exceptions to this rule when it comes to studying gender gaps and the radical right. This literature has been more focused on party characteristics since explanations based on differences in socioeconomic position between men and women failed to account for gender differences in support of radical right parties. For example, women have been found to be more likely to vote for Radical Right parties if they have a ‘reputational shield’ and appear less prejudiced (Ivarsflaten and Harteveldt 2016) or if the party is already larger in terms of electoral support (Harteveld et al. 2017). Additionally, very recent research shows that parties of the right which adopt a more egalitarian gender ideology gain more support amongst women than those that don’t, showing that party characteristics are important for gender gaps in vote choice (Campbell & Erzeel, 2018). That party characteristics matter for the magnitude of gender vote gaps in support for the radical right suggests that they should also matter for gender vote gaps in support for other parties.

Single-election case studies, especially in the US and the UK, have also empirically demonstrated the importance that party characteristics and party policy play in the formation of gender vote gaps. Parties often make deliberate attempts to attract female voters through the adoption of certain policies or campaign methods (Campbell, 2016; Campbell & Childs, 2015). In the UK, Conservative Party policy was formulated in 2005 and 2010 in an explicit attempt to attract female voters (Annesley and Gains 2014), and in the US the Republican’s stance on welfare provision and particularly insurance coverage has been found to reduce their support amongst female voters (Deckman and McTague 2014). In the UK, women have been found to be more likely to be undecided during election campaigns, suggesting that party positioning and policy promises are especially important for attracting women’s votes (Campbell, 2012). The broader literature on vote choice, especially in the US but also comparatively, shows that policies offered by parties at election time are important for voter decisions in general (Iversen 1994; Jessee 2009; Lau and Redlawsk 1997). These two separate literatures suggest that party policy is likely to have a role in determining the size and direction of gender vote gaps cross-nationally.

Drawing on the insight from single-country case studies that party policy is important for gender vote gaps, this paper analyses the role of politics in producing gender gaps in vote choice by examining Norris’ third suggestion: that the positions of the parties on various issues at election time will matter for gender vote gaps. This brings the political context and especially political parties into the study of gender vote gaps. It also focuses new attention on the interaction of gender vote gaps and political outcomes: the parties men and women vote for are related to the policies those parties promise at election time and subsequently enact whilst in office. Such a focus will also provide an account of why gender gaps differ between countries and between elections within countries. At the same time, it helps us to understand which policies offered by the political parties are particularly important in attracting women to vote left, or men to vote right.

The arguments above suggest that we should expect party policy to be important for gender gaps in vote choice. Parties that offer greater redistribution and support for state provision of services can be expected to attract greater support from female voters, whilst parties that offer lower taxation and more conservative fiscal policies can be expected to attract greater support from male voters. Parties that are more socially liberal on issues such as gay rights or abortion, or more supportive of gender equality, should also be expected to attract higher numbers of female voters than male voters.

In addition, further literature on gender gaps highlights two other attitudinal differences between individual men and women that might be relevant to their party choice. Firstly, women have been found to be more supportive of environmentalism and environmentalist policies than men, especially in the US (Zelezny, Chua, and Aldrich 2000; Xiao and McCright 2012). This difference is also the case cross-nationally, although here the finding is less consistent and varies by country and/or types of question on environmental concern (Zelezny, Chua, and Aldrich 2000; Hayes 2001; Marquart-Pyatt 2012). Various explanations have been offered for the gender gap in environmentalism in the US: some have argued that women are argued to be more other-oriented, socially responsible, and altruistic than men (Zelezny, Chua, and Aldrich 2000; Dietz, Kalof, and Stern 2002), whilst others have found that women have greater concern for health problems related to environmental issues as well as perceive more risk coming from environmental problems (Xiao and McCright 2012). Most recent research concludes that gender differences in environmentalism are related to gendered socialisation, rather than specific roles that women hold in society (i.e. as mothers).

Secondly, the higher likelihood of men to support the use of force and the higher likelihood of women to support efforts to promote international peace and disarmament have long been noted in the US and cross-nationally (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Norris 1988; Silverman and Kumka 1987; Wilcox, Hewitt, and Allsop 1996). This finding applies to many different types of the use of military force, and indicates that women are more sensitive to humanitarian concerns than men are (Eichenberg 2016). Women are also less supportive of spending on defence policy than men are cross-nationally (Eichenberg and Stoll 2017).

The consistent findings on gender gaps in environmentalism and support for military force have not been thus far been systematically linked to gender gaps in vote choice. This is likely a product of the focus on individual-level socioeconomic differences between men and women, and the fact that these issues can cut across the more economic left-right cleavage. However, they do suggest that women would have a higher preference for parties that offer more environmental policies than men, and that men would have a higher preference for parties that argue for the use of force in certain circumstances than women.

The arguments above suggest that parties with certain policies will have more success in attracting women’s votes, whilst other policies are more successful in attracting men. This leads to the following set of hypotheses; the first three are grouped together as they all refer to economic and social spending policies.

*H1a:* Women will be more likely than men to vote for parties that offer redistribution and support for disadvantaged groups than men.

*H1b:* Women will be more likely than men to vote for parties which offer higher spending on social services.

*H1c:* Men will be more likely than women to vote for parties that offer lower taxation and fiscal conservatism.

*H2:* Women will be more likely than men to vote for parties that offer socially liberal policies.

*H3:* Women will be more likely than men to vote for parties that offer policies to protect the environment.

*H4:* Women will be more likely than men to support parties that offer policies that support limited or pacifist action abroad.

1. **Data & Methods**

To examine whether the positions that parties adopt at election time matters for the vote choice of men and women, this paper uses data from 71 parliamentary elections in 20 established, Western democracies during the period 1996-2017.[[2]](#footnote-2) Coverage of this large number of elections generates variation in party positions between elections (both within and between countries). The countries in the sample come predominantly from Europe and the Anglo-American world. These countries have been selected for their similarities: they all now have gender vote gaps at the aggregate level where women are more supportive of left-wing parties than men (Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014) and similar explanations for these gender vote gaps have been found to apply across these countries (Giger 2009; Shorrocks 2018). They have been identified as experiencing many of the same societal developments that are relevant to how the aggregate-level gender gap has changed over time (Inglehart and Norris 2003).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Individual-level data on voters comes from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), waves 1-5. .[[4]](#footnote-4) The CSES comprises of (post-)election, face-to-face surveys from multiple countries, harmonised across election studies and thus countries. This dataset is under-used by scholars of gender and voting behaviour, but it has the advantage of asking respondents who they voted for in a specific election that usually occurred a few months before the survey was fielded. This means that an individual’s vote can be linked to the election context within which it was cast, which is crucial to analysing the role of party positioning in shaping men’s and women’s voting behaviour. The dependent variable of interest in this study is *vote choice*; i.e., whether an individual voted for a party or not. The key individual-level independent variable is *gender,* measured using a standard dichotomous measure for being a woman or not.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Party-level data comes from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) and Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) which will be known collectively as the Manifesto Project (MP) throughout this paper.[[6]](#footnote-6) These datasets form a continuous dataset with identical variables from 1996-present,[[7]](#footnote-7) categorising party manifestos and programmes at each election. 165 parties are included in the analysis in this paper, many of which competed in multiple elections within the same country; there are 435 party-election combinations. Party data from the MP is linked to individual-level data from the CSES, providing more information about the parties that respondents in the CSES cast a vote for. This creates a dataset of 97,623 respondents.

The MP codes party statements in party manifestos and programmes according to a policy category, counting the number of ‘quasi-sentences’ that mention the policy position. They then calculate a score for each policy which is the percentage of the total number of quasi-sentences in the manifesto in which this policy is mentioned. The score provided by the MP is thus strictly speaking one of salience, rather than policy position, as it records the amount of emphasis in a particular party programme on each policy area. The MP provides the best data for answering the research questions in this book. Although expert survey data such as that provided by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey provides data on party positions, it is not tied to a party’s programme in a particular election, which is what makes the MP (and CSES) particularly helpful for the purposes of this analysis. Moreover, election manifestos and programmes, whilst not read by most voters at election time, nevertheless provides information on what a political party thought was important to emphasise and stress at election time, and provides the basis for much media coverage during election campaigns. The contents of manifestos should therefore be at least somewhat linked to voter decisions at election time. For a detailed overview of the manifesto data from the MP, see Volkens et al. (2013).

For this analysis, I use a subset of policy categories that I expect to be relevant for gendered voting behaviour. These policies fall into four broad groups: (1) economic and redistributive policy; (2) social liberalism; (3) environmentalism; and (4) internationalism. The MP unfortunately does not include a specific policy related to gender equality or women’s rights, although neither does any other similar dataset. However, assistance to women is included within one of the policy categories described below.

Hypotheses 1a-1c are tested using the following measures from the MP, which focus on economic policy, the welfare state, social spending, and social and economic equality:

*Free Market Economy:* favourable mentions of the free market and free market capitalism as an economic model. May include favourable references to: Laissez-fair economy; superiority of individual enterprise over state and control systems; private property rights; personal enterprise initiative; need for unhampered individual enterprise.

*Economic Orthodoxy:* need for economically healthy government policy making. May include calls for: Reduction of budget deficits; retrenchment in crisis; thrift and savings in the face of economic hardship; support for traditional economic institutions such as stock market and banking system; support for strong currency

*Welfare Expansion:* favourable mentions of need to introduce, maintain, or expand any public social service or social security scheme. This includes, for example, government funding of health care; child care; elder care and pensions; social housing.

*Welfare Limitation:* Limiting state expenditures on social services or social security. Favourable mentions of the social subsidiary principle (i.e. private care before state care).

*Education Expansion:* Need to expand and/or improve educational provision at all levels.

*Education Limitation:* Limiting state expenditure on education. May include: the introduction or expansion of study fees at all educational levels; increasing the number of private schools.

*Equality:* Concept of social justice and the need for fair treatment of all people. This may include: Special protection for underprivileged social groups; removal of class barriers; need for fair distribution of resources; the end of discrimination (e.g. racial or sexual discrimination).

*Demographic Groups:* general favourable mentions of demographically defined special interest groups of all kinds. They may include: Women, University Students, Old, young, or middle aged people. Might include references to assistance to these groups, but only if these do not fall under other categories (e.g. 503 (*equality*) or 504 (*welfare expansion*))

Hypothesis 2 (social liberalism) is tested using the following measures:

*Traditional Morality: Positive:* favourable mentions of traditional and/or religious moral values. May include: prohibition, censorship and suppression of immorality and unseemly behaviour; maintenance and stability of the traditional family as a value; support for the role of religious institutions in state and society.

*Traditional Morality: Negative:* opposition to traditional and/or religious moral values. May include: support for divorce, abortion, etc.; general support for modern family composition; calls for the separation of church and state.

*Minority Groups:* very general favourable references to underprivileged minorities who are defined neither in economic nor in demographic terms (e.g. the handicapped, homosexuals, immigrants, indigenous). Only include favourable statements that cannot be classified in other categories.

Hypothesis 3 (environmentalism) is tested using the following measure:

*Environment:* general policies in favour of protecting the environment, fighting climate change, and other ‘green’ policies. For instance: general preservation of national resources; preservation of countryside, forests, etc.; protection of national parks; animal rights.

Hypothesis 4 (military intervention and internationalism) is tested using the following measures:

*Military: Positive:* the importance of external security and defence. May include statements concerning: the need to maintain or increase military expenditure; the need to secure adequate manpower in the military; the need to modernise armed forces and improve military strength; the need for rearmament and self-defence; the need to keep military treaty obligations.

*Military: Negative:* Negative references to the military or use of military power to solve conflicts. References to the ‘evils of war’. May include references to: decreasing military expenditure; disarmament; reduced or abolish conscription.

*Peace:* Any declaration of belief in peace and peaceful means of solving crises – absent reference to the military. May include: peace as a general goal; desirability of countries joining in negotiations with hostile countries; ending wars in order to establish peace.

*Internationalism: Positive:* need for international co-operation, including co-operation with specific countries other than those coded in 101 (*foreign special relationships: positive*). May also include references to the: need for aid to developing countries; need for world planning of resources; support for global governance; need for international courts; support for UN or other international organisations.

Following other researchers using Manifesto Project Data, I rescale the raw percentage measures into a logarithmic scale (Lowe et al. 2011; Prosser 2014), which accounts for the diminishing importance of each new mention of a policy category.

The methodological approach of this book uses the linked dataset of the CSES and MP as described above. The primary analytical goal is to measure the effect of parties’ adopting and emphasising particular policy positions on men’s and women’s voting behaviour. This presents a challenge: respondents across the CSES are not faced with the same choice of parties – instead, they are faced with a choice particular to a specific election. Conventional ways of specifying a vote choice model, such as multinomial logit, are therefore less appropriate. I thus transform the data into a stacked (long) dataset, where there are as many observations per respondent as there are parties standing in the election for which the respondent is observed. For each voter-party pair, the dataset contains the variable *vote,* which takes on the value 0 if the voter did not vote for that party, and 1 if they did. Each voter only votes for one party in each election; for the other parties in that election they are assigned a zero for this variable. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for a single dependent variable – *vote* – that applies to all respondents across all elections. The unit of analysis then becomes not the individual voter, but each voter-party pair. There are 537,839 voter-party pairs in the full sample, and 395,729 in the reduced sample.

The models used are logistic regression models with *vote* as the dichotomous dependent variable. Since the dataset now contains multiple observations per respondent, the models include robust standard errors clustered at the respondent level. All models include *gender,* all party policy positions, a time trend measured by year of election, and fixed effects for party. The year time-trend is measured continuously and is important because gender vote gaps have been trending over time. Fixed effects for party control for other, unobserved party characteristics that might influence whether a voter votes for a party apart from the policy positions they adopt. For example, parties with lower vote shares tend to attract fewer votes from women (Harteveld et al. 2017) and both men and women are more likely to vote for parties with more women candidates under certain conditions (Golder et al. 2017). The presence of party fixed effects in the models means that effects can be interpreted as *within-party* effects, i.e. the effect on the likelihood of voting for a particular party if it adopts a different position on that policy category. I run a series of logistic regression models, each including an interaction between *gender* and one of the party policy categories. I do not include all the interactions at once, as this would mean including 16 interaction terms all involving *gender,* which presents problems of multicollinearity.

In some of the supplementary analysis discussed below, I also include variables at the individual level for *employment status* (in paid work or not); *education level* (secondary or less versus post-secondary); *marital status* (married/cohabiting or not); *birth cohort* (year of birth); and *religion* (Christian, other religion, no religion). For space reasons I do not here go into the theoretical expectations with respect to these variables, which are drawn from theories of gender and voting and are specified in ways that are comparable across countries. For the models where these variables are discussed, all of these individual-level variables are also included as controls.

1. **Results**

**4.1 Economic and Redistributive Policy**

Figures 1 and 2 show the predicted probability of male and female voters voting for a party, depending on the level of emphasis the party places on the eight measures of economic and redistributive policies. The predicted probabilities are calculated from the logit regression models as described above. Figure 1 shows the results for the left-wing policy positions (*welfare expansion, welfare limitation, equality,* and *demographic groups*); figure 2 shows the results for the right-wing policy positions (*free market economy, economic orthodoxy, welfare limitation,* and *education limitation*). In interpreting these results, as well as in subsequent sections, I focus more on the substantive differences rather than statistical significance, since even small differences are statistically significant with the large sample size used in this analysis.

As expected by H1a and H1b, women are more likely to vote for parties when they have high scores on policies related to redistribution and social spending (*welfare expansion, education expansion,* and *equality*). The difference in women’s likelihood to vote for a party between the minimum and maximum score in each policy area is between 2 and 4 percentage points. Men are equally likely to vote for a party at all levels of *education expansion* and *equality,* but are more likely to vote for parties that score lower on *welfare expansion.* As a consequence, the gender gap in support for parties that score the lowest on *welfare expansion* is around 5 percentage points, with men more supportive of these parties. Both men and women are more likely to vote for parties at higher levels of *demographic groups,* and whilst the gender interaction in the model for this policy is statistically significant, the difference between men and women is substantively very small.

Turning to figure 2, and again in line with H1c, men are more likely to vote for parties that score higher on *free market economy, economic orthodoxy, welfare limitation,* and *education limitation.* The difference in the predicted probability of a man voting for a party with the minimum score on these policies versus the maximum score is usually about 2 percentage points, although this rises to 4 in the case of *education limitation.* Interestingly, women are equally likely to vote for parties at all levels of *welfare limitation* and *education limitation,* but are less likely to vote for parties the higher they score on *free market economy* and *economic orthodoxy,* suggesting that not only are men attracted to parties that offer these policies, but women are also put off by them.



**Fig.1.** predicted probability of men and women voting for a party across levels of *welfare expansion, education expansion, equality,* and *demographic groups*



**Fig.2.** predicted probability of men and women voting for a party across levels of *free market economy, economic orthodoxy, welfare limitation,* and *education limitation.*

Supplementary analysis showed that these relationships are stronger when examining voters in paid work. Women in employment are especially unlikely to vote for parties at high levels of *free market economy* and *economic orthodoxy,* and especially likely to vote for parties that offer high levels of *equality.* Women not in paid work were more similar to men in their vote choice. The relationships were also stronger for younger cohorts; although younger cohorts of both men and women tended to be more likely to vote for parties offering left-wing economic policies, younger cohorts of women were especially likely to vote for parties offering high levels of *welfare expansion* and *equality.* Women with post-secondary education were also more likely to vote for parties at high levels of *equality,* and unlikely to vote for parties at high levels of *free market economy* and *economic orthodoxy,* but levels of *welfare expansion* and *education expansion* did not matter to their predicted probability of voting for a party. Single people were more likely to vote for parties offering the left-wing policies than married people, but this did not differ by gender. This is interesting given the emphasis in the gender vote gap literature on the role of single women in voting for left-wing parties (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2004; Edlund and Pande 2002; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006).

**4.2 Social Liberalism**

Fig 3 shows the predicted probability of voting for a party depending on party scores on *traditional morality: negative, traditional morality: positive,* and *minority groups,* to test H2. Unlike H1a-H1c, there is no support for H2, that women will be more likely than men to vote for parties that offer more socially liberal policies. Both men and women are more likely to vote for parties that have higher scores on *traditional morality: positive,* and less likely to vote for parties that have higher scores on *traditional morality: negative* and *minority groups.* Overall, women are no more likely than men to vote for parties that support abortion and divorce, and no less likely to vote for parties that emphasise traditional values.

**Fig.3.** predicted probability of men and women voting for a party across levels of *traditional morality (negative), traditional morality (positive)* and *minority groups.*

Supplementary analysis further broke down the relationship between vote and policy position by subgroups. Analysis shown in fig. 4 looks at the effect of *traditional morality (negative)* by employment status (in paid work versus out of paid work) and education level (secondary or less versus post-secondary), using a three-way interaction between *traditional morality (negative), gender,* and *employment status/education level.* These three-way interactions were statistically significant. Men and women in paid work and with post-secondary education are more likely to vote for parties at higher levels of *traditional morality (negative)* than those out of paid work or with education at secondary level or below, but this difference is much stronger for women. Women in paid employment and with secondary education are about 5 percentage points more likely to vote for parties at the highest levels of *traditional morality (negative)* than those out of paid employment or with education at secondary level or below. Women in paid work and at higher levels of education are still less likely to vote for parties at higher levels of *traditional morality (negative)* than they are for parties at lower, but this effect is much less strong than it is for women out of the workforce or at lower levels of education, or for men. This indicates that although women in general might not be any more likely than men to vote for parties that emphasise policies such as support for abortion and divorce, certain groups of women are. Employed and educated women might be more likely to support such parties than men because they have a more ‘non-traditional’ life experience (Inglehart and Norris 2003), making them more favourable to parties that have non-traditional stances on moral and social issues.

**Fig.4.** predicted probability of men and women voting for a party across levels of *traditional morality (negative),* by employment status (left) and education level (right).

**4.3 Environment**

Fig. 5 shows the predicted probability of men and women voting for a party at different levels of environmental protection. As expected by H3, women are more likely to vote for parties at higher levels of *environment,* whilst men are less likely to. The magnitude of the effect, whilst statistically significant, is small, with the differences between the highest and lowest levels of *environment* standing at about 2 percentage points for both men and women. Fig. 5, however, shows that the effect of *environment* on voting for a party is much stronger for some subgroups of women – those in the youngest cohorts, those with post-secondary education, and those in paid employment. For example, cohorts of women born in 1985 are about 12 percentage points more likely to vote for parties at the highest level of *environment* than at the lowest level, whereas for cohorts of men born in 1985 this difference is only about 6 percentage points. Women with post-secondary education are around 10 percentage points more likely to vote for parties at the highest level of *environment* than the lowest levels, whereas for men with post-secondary education this is only about 2 percentage points.

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**Fig.5.** predicted probability of men and women   
voting for a party across levels of *environment.*

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**Fig.6.** predicted probability of men and women voting for a party across levels of *environment,* by cohort (top left), education level (top right), and employment status (bottom left).

**4.4 International Intervention**

Figure 7 shows the results in terms of predicted probabilities for *military (positive), military (negative), peace,* and *internationalism. Military (positive)* appears to be irrelevant to both men’s and women’s vote choices. Both men and women are more likely to vote for parties at higher levels of *military (negative)* and *internationalism,* although the effects are marginally stronger for women, in line with the expectations of H4. Men are less likely to vote for parties at higher levels of *peace,* and women are equally likely to vote for a party at all levels of *peace,* creating a gender gap at the highest levels of *peace* of about 2 percentage points.

Supplementary analysis again showed that it was younger women, women with post-secondary education, and women in employment who were most likely to vote for parties with more less militaristic and more international outlooks, although these relationships varied depending on the specific policy category. Women with post-secondary education and in paid employment were more likely than other women to vote for parties at higher levels of *military (negative),* but education and employment status did not matter for the other categories. Younger cohorts of women were more likely to vote for parties at higher levels of *peace* and *internationalism,* but whilst younger cohorts were also more likely to vote for parties at higher levels of *military (negative),* this was the case for both young men and young women.

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**Fig. 7.** predicted probability of men and women voting for a party across levels of *military (positive), military (negative), peace,* and *internationalism.*

1. **Conclusions**

Party policy positions and emphasis matters for gender vote gaps. Certain policy positions are more attractive to men, whilst other positions are more attractive to women, when it comes to choosing which party to vote for. This is the case even with party fixed effects in the model, meaning that if the same party offers different policies at different elections, this will affect the level of support they get from men and women at election time. In many ways, the policies that attract male and female voters are consistent with existing theories of gender and vote choice.. Women are, broadly, more likely than men to vote for a party if it offers more social spending and emphasises equality, whilst men are more likely than women to vote for a party that offers lower taxation and fiscal conservatism. Women are also more likely than men to vote for parties supporting environmental protection. There are some surprising findings, however. In particular, women are no more likely in general than men to vote for a party that support abortion, divorce, or protecting minority groups than men are, and gender differences in voting for parties that are for/against military action and support peaceful internationalism are small.

Analysing the results by subgroups provides more nuance to these findings. Women in paid employment are especially likely to vote for parties that emphasise social spending, social and economic equality, and environmental protection, which is line with literature that argues that women’s labour force participation has led them to vote more for left-wing parties. Women with post-secondary education, meanwhile, are not more likely to vote for parties that emphasise social spending, but are more likely to vote for parties emphasising social and economic equality and environmental protection. Women in the workforce and with post-secondary education are also less put off parties that support divorce and abortion compared to women without post-secondary education and men. Younger cohorts of women are also more likely to vote for parties offering policies on social spending, social and economic equality, environmental protection, and peaceful internationalism. Perhaps surprisingly, younger cohorts of women are no more likely to vote for parties that emphasise socially liberal policies such as divorce and abortion than younger cohorts of men – although younger cohorts overall are more likely to vote for parties when they have these policies than older cohorts. Finally, single women – despite being emphasised in the literature as being particularly left-wing – were no more likely to vote for parties that offered economically left-wing policies or support for policies such as divorce and abortion than either single men or married men and women.

These results highlight the importance of party policy positions for understanding variation in gender gaps across elections. Research into single election cases – especially in the US and the UK – has often suggested that the particular policies on offer from the various parties at that time are important for the emergence (or non-emergence) of gender gaps. This analysis uses a cross-national, multi-election dataset to those that party policy at election time is indeed important to the individual electoral decisions of men and women voters, and this produces gender vote gaps where men and women support parties at different rates, depending on their policy positions. Importantly, this analysis shows which party policy positions are important when men and women are casting their votes, which might not always be related to gender differences in preferences or attitudes.

The findings suggest two important points. Firstly, policy positions beyond those relating to economic policy, welfare provision, and social spending are important for gender vote gaps. Policies such as environmental protection and internationalism are also relevant for differential vote choice decisions between men and women. Such issues are rarely linked to gender vote gaps, where the literature tends to focus on economic and social issues that affect equality between men and women. However, this paper indicates that a broader set of issues matter for gender vote gaps. Secondly, when examining all men and all women, the differences between men and women in the effect of the policy positions parties adopt are quite small in magnitude, although in expected directions. But, when looking at subgroups of women – especially women in the labour force, with higher education, and in younger cohorts – we see much larger differences between men and women, as well as within women. This supports insights from previous research that suggests that looking at all men and women underestimates the extent to which gender matters for vote choice (e.g. Gerson 1987; Shorrocks 2018).

This paper also opens up a new research agenda focused on how the political context can influence the magnitude and direction of gender vote gaps. This paper relies on party manifestos, which form the basis of party’s campaigns but are not widely read by most voters, whose knowledge of party positions is mediated through statements from the media and politicians. Furthermore, this paper does not take into account the nature of party competition: parties are not offering policies in a vacuum, but in comparison to other parties in the election. This aspect of the election context should be taken into account in further research. Policy salience during an election may also matter for the extent to which particular policy positions matter for gender vote gaps. Finally, other party characteristics as well as their policy offer might be important for gender vote gaps – such as leadership and historical reputation.

This paper shows that party policy positions are important for shaping differences in men’s and women’s vote choice decisions. This suggests we need to look beyond socioeconomic differences between men and women when researching gender vote gaps, and assess the role of the wider political environment in producing gender differences in vote choice.

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2. All elections are parliamentary, lower house elections, except France in 2002 and all elections in the US, for data availability reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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