

When Do Women Influence Policy? How Women's Issue Priorities Matter for Government Responsiveness

Lawrence Ezrow¹ Timothy Hellwig² Jonathan Homola³

¹University of Essex

²University at Buffalo

³University of California, Los Angeles

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Motivation: unequal responsiveness

Do parties and policies follow the median voter? Yes, but...

- ▶ Niche vs mainstream
- ▶ Median voter vs party supporter
- ▶ Extremity vs moderation
- ▶ Reacting to other parties
- ▶ In government vs opposition
- ▶ Recent electoral success
- ▶ Institutions: bicameralism, electoral system, ...
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Do parties and policies follow some (types of) voters more than others?

- ▶ Rich > poor (but see Elkjær and Klitgaard; Wlezien)
- ▶ Politically active/opinion leaders
- ▶ Highly educated
- ▶ Old > young (Seeberg et al.)
- ▶ **Men or women?**

Responsiveness to women and men

Existing work: mixed results

► **Biased toward men**

- Bernauer et al. 2015: preferred parties slightly more *congruent* with men
- Reher 2018: under disagreement, policy aligns more with men (20 issues)
- Homola 2019: party platforms more responsive to men's LR preferences
- Persson et al. 2024: under disagreement, policy aligns more with men (152 issues)

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▶ **Mixed**

- ▶ Betz et al. 2023: women's preferences better reflected in *some* trade policies
- ▶ Mathisen 2024: gender gap in policy responsiveness has disappeared in Norway over time, but not in US

Resolving mixed findings

The role of issue domains and importance

- ▶ Spoon and Klüver (2014: 636) “rational, goal-oriented parties will seek to emphasize the issues that voters prioritize as a means to win political office”
- ▶ Thermostatic model works better for important issues (Wlezien)
- ▶ EU policy more responsive on salient issues (Wratisl; De Bruycker)

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⇒ Responsiveness to women and men may vary across issues

- ▶ Spoon and Klüver (2014), now also for *positions* and *groups of voters*
- ▶ $\approx$ “rational, goal-oriented parties will seek policies that respond to groups of voters on the issues they prioritize”

Applying this logic to women's and men's preferences

Hypotheses

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Our test case: social spending

- ▶ Women tend to prioritize spending on social concerns over security, military, narrow economic policies
 - ▶ (Alesina and Giuliano 2009; Bolzendahl and Brooks 2007; Dallinger 2010; Eger and Breznau 2017; Kraft and Dolan 2023; Weeks 2022; ...)
- ▶ Analysis of 2020 ISSP + 1987–2010 Swedish SOM data
- ▶ But not perfect

Data & Model

Data

- ▶ **Annual data from 15 democracies (1981 to 2022)**
 - ▶ (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom)

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 - ▶ Includes old age, survivors, and incapacity-related benefits; health, family, labor market programs; unemployment, housing, other social policy areas
 - ▶ Also look at some of these separately

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- ▶ **Explanatory variables: women's + men's mean LR positions, shifts**
 - ▶ From Dassonneville 2021: CSES, EB, WVS, ESS, national election studies, ...
 - ▶ Updated by us to include more recent waves
 - ▶ Idea: shift to left → increased spending

Data & Model

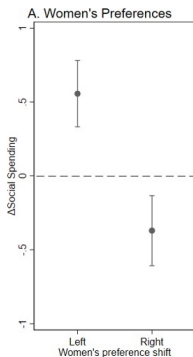
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Model

- ▶ **Dynamic model:** $\Delta Y_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Y_{it-1} + \beta_0 \Delta X_{it} + \beta_1 X_{it-1} + \epsilon_{it}$
- ▶ $\Delta \text{SocialSpending}_t \sim \text{Spending}_{t-1} + \Delta \text{LRposition}_t + \text{LRposition}_{t-1}$
- ▶ Identifies short-term and long-term effects of changes in X on Y
 - ▶ (Fortunato, Silva, and Williams 2025 - Cambridge Elements)
 - ▶ Includes country fixed effects
- ▶ Conditioning variable (for H2): Disproportionality/Electoral system

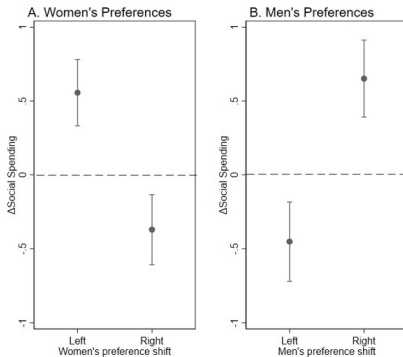
Results: simulation of preference shifts



When we move the mean women's/men's LR position 1 SD to the left/right...

- Women: leftward shift $\uparrow$ social spending, rightward $\downarrow$

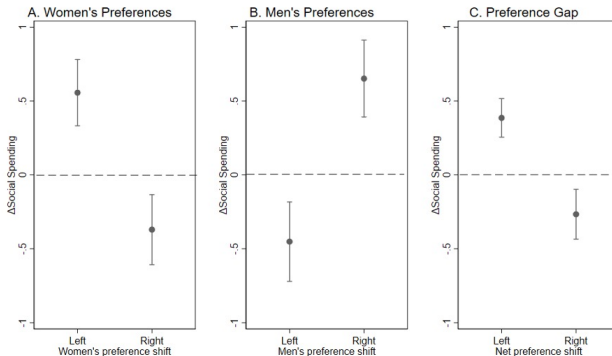
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- ▶ Preference gap: when preferences diverge, policy follows women

Main result and robustness

Main finding

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- ▶ Effects are in opposite direction for men
- ▶ → women's preferences have a stronger influence on social spending

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Robustness

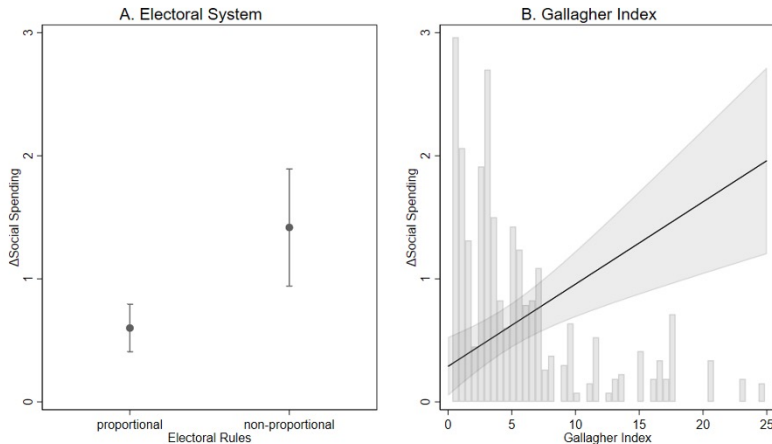
- ▶ Separate expenditures on health, old age, families, and childcare ✓
- ▶ Excluding one country at a time ✓
- ▶ Omitting country FEs ✓
- ▶ Include economic controls ✓
 - ▶ (GDP growth, unemployment, debt, EMU membership)
- ▶ In-kind vs total spending ✓
- ▶ Parallelism: excluding high correlation countries ✓

What explains these patterns: vote-seeking incentives

Our (Spoon and Klüver-y) argument

- ▶ Vote-seeking incentives → parties respond to voters on the issues they prioritize
- ▶ → pattern should be especially pronounced where vote-seeking strategies are incentivized
- ▶ ⇒ focus on disproportional electoral systems
 1. 0 PR; 1 non-PR/plurality systems
 2. Gallagher's measure of disproportionality (1991)

What explains these patterns: vote-seeking incentives



When we move the mean women's LR position 1 SD to the left...

- ▶ spending $\uparrow$ more under non-proportional/disproportional systems
- ▶ $\uparrow$ Disprop. (vote-seeking incentives) $\rightarrow$ influence of women's prefs $\uparrow$

What explains these patterns: supply-side arguments

Alternative explanations: supply-side driven

1. Descriptive → substantive link

- ▶ ↑ Responsiveness to women where women occupy positions of power
- ▶ Three measures of descriptive representation:
 - ▶ % of women in parliament
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 - ▶ female head of government (0/1)
- ▶ × No significant effects

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2. Government ideology

- ▶ (Center-)left parties “own” the social spending issue
- ▶ More responsive... or more stable positions?
- ▶ × No differences in right vs left-wing gov't responsiveness to women

⇒ No support for (these two) supply-side explanations

Conclusion

Summary

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 - ▶ Preliminary analysis of immigration policies
 - ▶ Results flipped: more responsive to men's preferences ✓
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- ▶ "Better" preference measure than LR
- ▶ Leverage variation in (relative) importance of social spending for women across time and space
- ▶ Consider other subconstituencies (e.g., class)

Thank you!

Differences in preference(s) shifts

Table 1. Mean Women's and Men's Left-Right Preferences, Comparisons

	Mean women's preference & Mean men's preference, r	Δ Mean women's preference & Δ Mean men's preference, r	Shifts in opposite direction, %	N. Obs, years
Austria	0.82	0.81	12	26
Belgium	0.83	0.67	24	41
Denmark	0.78	0.74	22	41
Finland	0.21	0.57	19	26
France	0.69	0.80	24	42
Germany	0.96	0.81	22	41
Greece	0.79	0.85	15	41
Ireland	0.97	0.89	15	41
Italy	0.91	0.60	34	41
Luxembourg	0.86	0.40	41	41
Netherlands	0.55	0.80	22	41
Portugal	0.83	0.61	28	36
Spain	0.74	0.80	19	36
Sweden	0.63	0.73	15	27
United Kingdom	0.92	0.73	36	42
Total	0.83	0.73	24	563

- Variation across women and men
- Significant variation across countries
- Results strengthen when we remove countries with high correlations