

# PARTY PRIORITIES AND POSITIONS ON GENDER-RELATED ISSUES

## AUTHOR

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scholars, pundits, and other commentators agree that gender issues have become a contentious topic in European politics, and that its polarisation has been mostly driven by right-wing populist parties (RWPPs). Systematic evidence about this phenomenon have been lacking, but this briefing partially fills this gap offering a first quantitative assessment of this phenomenon in the six European countries of the UNTWIST project, over two decades. What we find is that parties tend to attach relatively low emphasis to a range of gender-related topics, with important variations across the contexts analysed. During the last two decades, however, the salience of gender-related issues increased, in particular in the late 2010s and early 2020s. This does not seem related to RWPPs electoral growth. On the average, RWPPs do not tend to address more gender-related topics as compared to remaining parties. Yet they tend to focus on specific topics, and to address these issues more negatively. Moreover, we find that parties tend to address gender-related topics as general goals or issues to deal with rather than concrete solutions. We highlight the implications of these findings for policymakers.

### Key findings:

- Overall, political parties, in their electoral manifestos, are not particularly concerned with gender needs;
- Nonetheless, important differences appear between countries and between manifestos for European and national elections;
- The salience of these topics has increased over time, in particular starting from the late 2010s, with important variations across countries;
- Over time, parties have decreased their attention to labour market or welfare-related topics;
- At the same time, parties increased their attention to reproductive rights, sexual and gender-based violence, or broader concepts such as patriarchy or heteronormativity;
- On the average, RWPPs do not emphasise gender-related issues more than other parties. Nonetheless, when they do it more negatively than mainstream actors;
- The increasing salience of topics such as gender rights, discrimination, and violence seem to be mostly related to RWPPs' agendas;
- Parties tend to address these topics as general goals to achieve or issues to address, often without proposing concrete policies.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

This briefing is based on findings from UNTWIST (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101060836>, a Research and Innovation Project financed under the Horizon Europe scheme. UNTWIST aims at facilitating political actors, particularly parties, with "untwisted" ways of representing gender needs, demands and worries.

## HOW TO CITE OUR WORK

Carteny, G., & Braun, D. (2024). *Party Priorities and Positions on Gender-related Issues*. Zenodo. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14215292



### Party platforms put little emphasis on gender-related issues and mostly address it as general goals and issues – but with important variations across space and time

There's a general consensus among experts that right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) across Europe are actively mobilising anti-gender equality positions on a range of issues, including reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights and family policy. These parties threaten gender-equality achievements, and democratic values more in general. The objective of the UNTWIST project is to provide concrete recommendations for policymakers to develop effective, pro-equality policies, thus empowering non-right-wing populist parties (non-RWPPs) with robust evidence for countering nationalist and illiberal political agendas.

However, so far experts and policymakers relied on evidence usually related to specific parties, or national cases, and a short period of time. Until now, systematic knowledge about how gender-related needs have been addressed by European political parties has been mostly missing. When available, empirical evidence

have been proven to be still limited its scope and granularity, thus failing to provide robust evidence for the development of more precise, fine-grained, and targeted political strategies or policies.

**For this reason, we developed the most comprehensive tool for the quantitative investigation of party programmatic stances on gender-based needs, analysing hundreds**

**of party manifestos in the six countries of the UNTWIST project.** By doing so, we mapped how parties addressed a set of diverse issues over roughly two decades. **These data consist in new evidence that would allow policymakers to evaluate parties' past behaviour**, thus spotting areas of weak representation and counter anti-equality narratives and policies.

Our data offers **cross-national and cross-temporal evidence** not only on **the issues addressed by parties** and the connotation that parties attached to these topics, but also **whether gender needs have been addressed with concrete policy issues or have been treated as general goals and problems** without engaging with potential solutions. Additionally, our data allow policy makers and experts to analyse other features of party electoral programmes such as the presence of specific group appeals or the intersection of gender-based needs with other relevant dimensions of representation.

### What are gender-based needs?

Gender-based needs are those needs and demands that are created through and/or exacerbated by an individual's gendered position in society. These may be **practical needs** that are specific to certain gender groups without challenging gender roles, such as women's reproductive healthcare needs. Alternatively, they may be **strategic needs**, relating to the relationship between gender and power, access and status within society, such as the disproportionate amount of unpaid labour undertaken by women (EIGE, 2024).

## Analysing party manifestos

**Programmatic statements are central features of political parties.** They put political ideas and goals of parties on record. Although only few voters actually read party documents, mass media commonly spread their contents and usually represent the core of different party documents. As such they represent ideal texts for analysing whether and how parties address gender-related issues.

We collected **412 party electoral manifestos** – i.e., election programs of political parties – for European and national elections from all relevant parties in the **six countries of the UNTWIST project** (Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK) **between 2003 and 2021**.

We analysed said manifestos exploiting a **new coding procedure** which involved a series of essential steps, divided in two main activities: the classification of manifestos' quasi-sentences, and the completion of a survey dedicated to more general concepts which can be gauged by evaluating the entire content of the documents. These documents were annotated and evaluated by 11 coders, specifically trained for these tasks. The results of the annotation and the surveys were then analysed relying on statistical methods, allowing the systematic analysis of patterns stemming out from our data.

This brief engages with the overall patterns that stem out from our data, while country-specific evidence is provided in separate briefs. Furthermore, to explore more, our **interactive database** (produced by the ViT foundation) allows users to explore the coverage of gender-related issues in surveys by country and year and to **search for specific parties, topics, and features of the documents**.

### 1) Annotating party manifestos' sentences

To develop our data, we first developed an original coding scheme (based on the Typology of Gender-based Needs, also developed within the UNTWIST project) for categorising manifesto along different dimensions. We thus employed and trained 11 country experts to split these documents in sentences, and then annotate these documents in their original language, following seven conditional steps. After splitting the original manifestos in sentences, our coders had to first (1) assess whether a sentence addressed at least one of the 25 gender-related issues identified by our coding scheme. If so, coders were asked to (2) define both the broader and more specific topic of the sentence. In the following step (3) coders were asked to determine whether the sentence referred to a specific recipient or group based on the recipient's gender and/or sexual orientation. Then, the coders had to (4) evaluate the intersection of the topic with other relevant dimensions such as citizenship, immigration background, religion, class, age and so forth. After this step, coders were asked to (5) assigning the sentiment or connotation of the sentence, (6) determining if it is related to a goal, issue, or policy, and (7) characterising the policy if applicable.

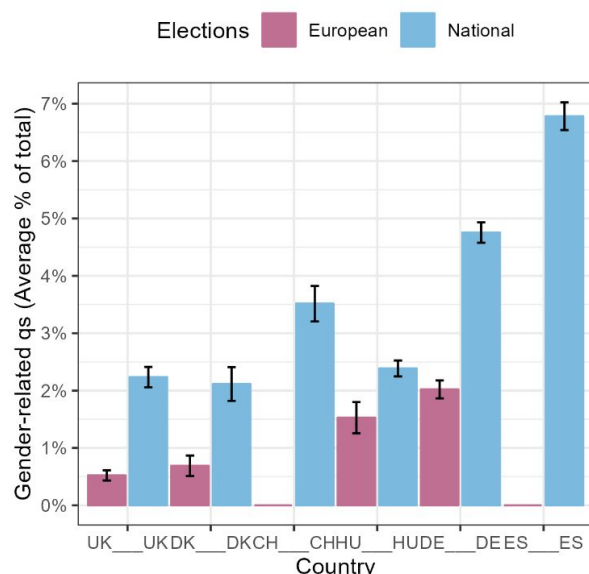
### 2) Evaluating party manifestos using expert surveys

After completing the classification of the sentences in a given manifesto, coders had to fill in a survey dedicated to the document. These surveys provide information that cannot be directly inferred from the sentences, focusing on the gender ontology of a manifesto, the degree to which a manifesto entails a binary conception of sexes, the extent to which a manifesto promotes a patriarchal conception of the society, and how much a manifesto promotes heterosexuality as the only normal and socially acceptable sexual orientation of individuals. In this brief we focus mostly on the results of party annotation. Specific results of the expert survey are available on the second deliverable produced by our team (Carteny et al., 2024b).

## Key findings: low salience of gender-based needs, increasing over time

By aggregating our data, the WP4 team has been able to develop a comprehensive analysis of feminist permeation in party politics in the 6 national contexts of interest, between 2003 and 2021. The analysis of manifestos by WP4 reveals that parties' engagement with gender-based needs is a complex picture. Notably, gender-related issues receive greater attention in national manifestos compared to European ones, indicating a discrepancy in prioritization across electoral arenas (Fig. 1). Variability across countries further complicates the analysis, with Spain emerging as the most vocal in discussing gender-related topics in national manifestos.

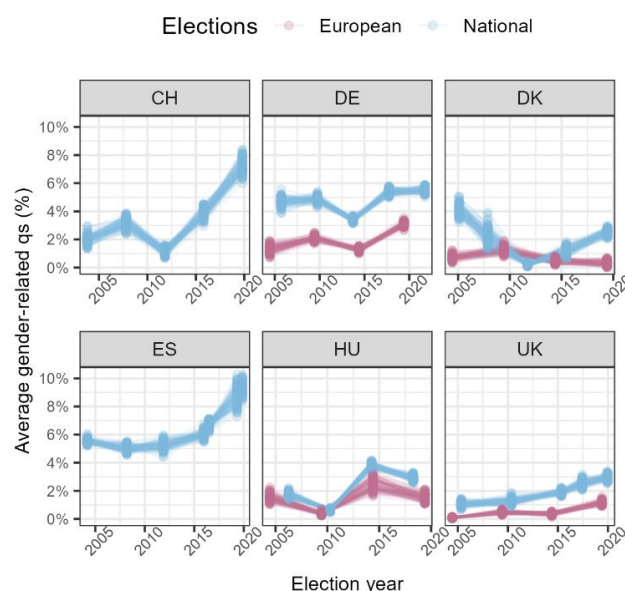
Figure 1: Emphasis on gender-related issues is higher in national election manifestos as compared to those for European elections



Despite the overall limited representation of gender-related content, a predominantly positive connotation characterizes both national and European manifestos. However, European manifestos tend to exhibit a higher proportion of negatively connotated gender-related content, suggesting a more critical portrayal of gender issues.

Examining the evolution of gender-related issues over time reveals an increasing salience in party manifestos, albeit with divergent trajectories across countries. While overall salience rises, in particular in the last years analysed, trends vary within specific national contexts (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Emphasis on gender-based needs has grown, but with important variations across countries and electoral arenas



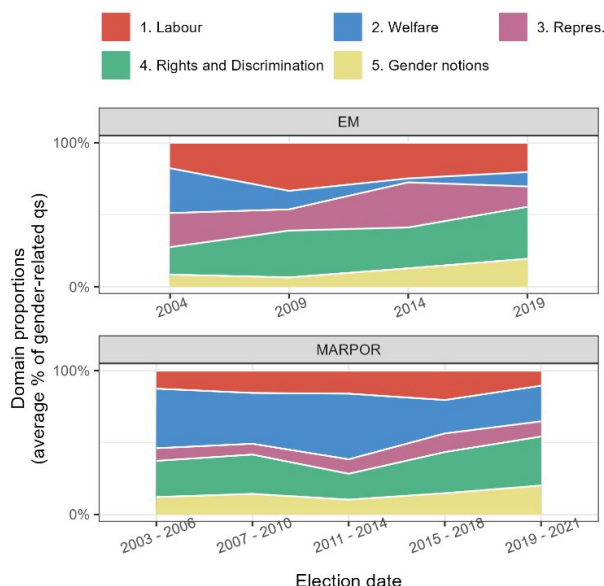
## Key findings: From labour and welfare to rights, discrimination, and broader notions

The analysis of manifestos by WP4 reveals a diverse array of topics, offering a nuanced understanding of gender-related issues. Despite the complexity, certain patterns emerge, especially concerning the salience and connotation of various domains. European and national manifestos generally assign similar importance to rights, discrimination, and violence, as well as broader gender-related notions.

However, discrepancies arise in other domains, with European manifestos placing greater emphasis on participation and representation and labour market issues, while national manifestos prioritize welfare and family concerns.

When examining domain-specific trends over time, rights, violence, and discrimination issues progressively gain relevance, particularly in the most recent manifestos. Conversely, the salience of labour market and welfare and family issues fluctuates, indicating dynamic shifts in political priorities. Interestingly, these trends largely hold true when analysing individual countries, with minor variations reflecting specific contexts.

Figure 3: The emphasis on gender rights and discrimination, and broader gender-related notions increased over time



## Key findings: RWPPs focus on rights and discrimination, and are more negative than other parties

RWPPs tend to show distinct patterns as compared to other parties. These parties generally assign less salience to gender-related issues compared to other parties, with few exceptions such as Vox in Spain and *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany.

When considering specific the salience attached to specific gender-based needs, RWPPs assign less importance to gender-related labour market issues and welfare concerns compared to other parties, though exceptions exist. However, they consistently emphasize rights, discrimination, and violence domains. Nonetheless, RWPPs tend to attach different emphasis to these topics. While some parties focus on reproductive rights and discrimination others highlight family rights or sexual and gender-based violence.

In terms of connotation, RWPPs tend to exhibit a higher percentage of negatively connotated gender-related content, especially evident in the German, Swiss, and Spanish contexts. However, the degree of negativity varies according to both topics and national contexts.

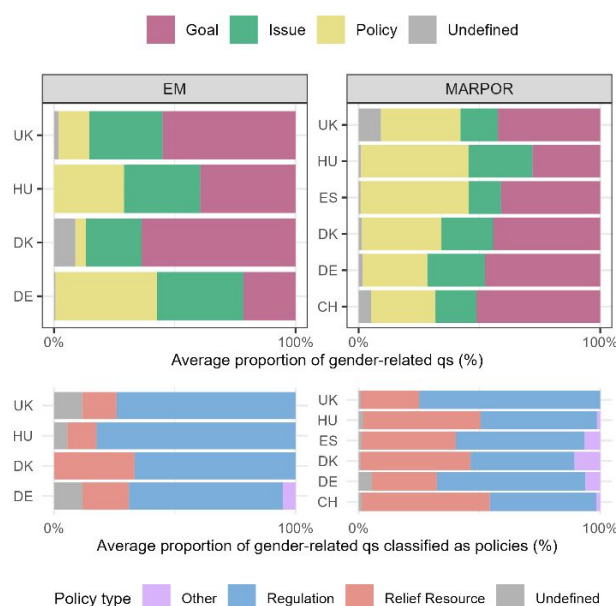
These differences underscore ideological disparities and approaches between RWPPs, reflecting the broader societal discourse on gender and politics, and how these actors strategically navigated their political contexts.

## Key findings: RWPPs focus on rights and discrimination, and are more negative than other parties

Moreover, our analysis reveals that parties predominantly frame gender-related issues as aspirational goals or issues to be addressed rather than proposing specific policies for addressing them, especially in European manifestos. However, this trend diverges in national manifestos, where parties demonstrate a more policy-oriented approach (Fig. 4)

In terms of policy content, parties across electoral arenas and countries predominantly advocate for regulatory measures to address gender-based inequalities. However, our results suggest also a greater focus on relief and resource-based approaches in national manifestos compared to European ones.

Figure 4: Parties address gender needs as general goals or issues, rarely proposing specific solutions





## Policy implications

Our analyses highlight important feature of how parties addressed gender-related issues over the years. Our conclusion is that parties should engage more with concrete policy issues, including topics on which RWPPs are building alternative narratives, or challenging non-RWPPs.

In particular, policymakers using public opinion data should consider the following:

- **Labour and welfare issues** are becoming areas of weak representation – Without questioning the relevance of other gender-related topics, the decreasing relevance gender equality in the labour market, welfare system, and related topics should be a source of concern. This appears particularly relevant in more than a decade long period of economic distress caused by the multiple global and regional crises which affected the EU and European countries – from the Eurocrisis of the early 2010s, passing through the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic distress caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.
- **More concrete policy proposal** – Proposing goals to achieve and denouncing issues to be addressed are fundamental aspects of political communication. Nonetheless, parties, in particular in European elections, have seldom engaged with concrete solutions. Although further research is needed, it is likely that the supply of more precise policy proposals would help mainstream parties to counter the increasingly challenging rhetoric and, in some cases, the solutions provided by RPPWs.

## Looking ahead: Expanding the Scope of Gender Analysis

The data collected during our research are insightful, but offer evidence for just the countries covered by the UNTWIST project. More data from more countries are needed in order to develop robust generalisations, that might help to unravel the patterns and dynamics of gender politics in European party competition. The UNTWIST project is now engaging with computational methods which would allow researchers and experts to expand our classification beyond the national contexts considered so far, thus providing solid basis for addressing areas of weak representation of gender-based needs.

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## ABOUT US

The research in this briefing was led by Dr Giuseppe Carteny and Prof. Dr. Daniela Braun at Saarland University.

Saarland University was founded in 1948 as a bilingual university under the auspices of the French government. The university has earned an international reputation for its research in computer science and informatics and for work in the life sciences and nanosciences. The university is distinguished by its close ties to France and its strong European focus.

Saarland University stands out as one of the most internationally oriented medium-sized German universities, thanks to its strong global connections and collaborations with European and worldwide institutions. A key strength of the university lies in its extensive cross-border academic programmes, which offer double-degree qualifications and even triple-degree options when a third international partner is included.

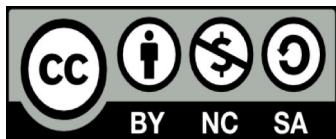
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