

Gender Equality as Foundational to Democracy: Theory and Evidence of Gendered Political Culture(s)

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Abstract

Mainstream research in political culture treats democracy in a gender-blind way. Building on the feminist argument that democracy and gender equality are co-constitutional, we introduce a concept of gendered political culture and explore its contemporary manifestations. To this aim, we develop a typology of integrated and fragmented political cultures based on four attitudinal combinations (support for/opposition to democracy/gender equality). Using Austria as a crucial case study and a mixed-methods research design, we also test it empirically. Our findings reveal both promise and concerns. Focus groups show Austrians support both democracy and gender equality. Yet democracy is mainly understood through a gender-blind lens that invisibilizes structural inequalities. At the same time, quantitative analysis reveals the co-existence of distinct gendered political cultures. We find that 32% of Austrians hold beliefs consistent with an integrated democratic political culture, strongly supporting both democracy and gender equality. However, 35% have beliefs in line with a fragmented democratic culture. They support democracy but are ambivalent toward gender equality. Among those with authoritarian-leaning attitudes, 21% support gender equality, while 12% do not, offering evidence of fragmented and integrated authoritarian political cultures. Men, FPÖ voters, younger individuals, and less educated respondents are significantly *less* likely to hold beliefs consistent with an integrated democratic political culture. The prevalence of a fragmented democratic culture reveals vulnerability to anti-gender equality campaigns that accompany democratic backsliding. Gender-blind frameworks in political culture research mask this risk. Measuring support for “androcracy” systematically overestimates democratic resilience. To understand why/how/with whom de-democratizing attacks on gender equality resonate, one needs to gender political culture research.

Keywords

Austria; democracy; gender equality; political culture; public opinion

1. Introduction

At the time of writing, we are witnessing democratic backsliding in Europe (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018; Lombardo et al., 2021; Petó, 2021) and in the US (Grumbach, 2023; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). This erosion of democratic institutions is connected to attacks on gender equality, which include policy dismantling, discursive delegitimization, and exclusion of women's organizations from the policy process (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018). In party competition, populist radical right parties actively target gender equality policies as part of broader strategies to undermine democratic institutions (Alonso & Espinosa-Fajardo, 2021; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Hajek & Dombrowski, 2022). Despite an established connection between backlash against gender equality and democratic backsliding on the institutional level, we know remarkably little about how citizens perceive the connection between gender equality and democracy. This is a gap with profound implications for democratic resilience.

Scholars of political culture have long studied system-level support for democracy (e.g., Norris, 2011). Recent studies have examined the strength of democratic support among citizens (Ferrín & Kriesi, 2025) and different generations (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Wuttke et al., 2020). They have also explored under what conditions people abandon democracy (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021). To date, however, despite feminist theories linking democracy and gender equality (Pateman, 1988; Young, 2002), no empirical study has examined whether and how European citizens link democratic attitudes to beliefs about gender equality. A gender-blind framework in political culture research creates measurement problems in assessing the strength of democratic support, as it measures support for “democracy with a male face” (androcracy). It thus likely underdiagnoses people's receptiveness to anti-gender equality messages linked to de-democratization and overestimates the strength of democratic support.

Building on feminist theories that view gender equality as a foundational requirement of the democratic polity itself, we theoretically reposition support for gender equality as fundamental to understanding system-level support for democracy. We build an argument of why the study of support for democracy centered in political culture research is incomplete without gendering the concepts of democracy and political culture. We present a typology of gendered political cultures and empirically explore if and how support for democracy and support for gender equality are connected in individual attitudes. Our contribution is twofold. First, our feminist theory-based typology of gendered political cultures offers a new conceptual-analytical framework to explore how citizens understand, evaluate, and link gender equality to a political system that can be used in longitudinal and comparative empirical research. By bridging feminist research on gendering democracy and political research on democratic support, we provide the first empirical evidence that gender equality is understood by a large group of citizens as constitutive of democracy (rather than a policy domain). This knowledge advances our understanding of how attitudes to gender equality can undermine or strengthen democratic norms and democratic resilience.

To test whether and how citizens associate democracy with gender equality, we conduct a plausibility probe using a mixed-methods research design that combines the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods. We select Austria as the plausibility test for our typology because its historical-political development on both democracy and gender equality dimensions has likely planted the seeds for different variants of gendered political cultures. This case combines an authoritarian past with a vibrant democratic present characterized by strong gender equality mainstreaming efforts and limited institutional backlash against

gender equality. The mixed-methods research design employed here enables both an in-depth exploration of how citizens understand the connection between democracy and gender equality (using focus groups), and a systematic test of whether and to what extent patterns observed in the focus groups hold at the population level (using a nationally representative survey). Qualitative analysis provides insights into how citizens understand democracy and gender equality, revealing the lack of an explicit link. Though only one type of gendered political culture emerges from the focus groups analysis, survey results paint a different picture: Austrians' attitudes to gender equality and democracy are aligned with four types of gendered political cultures. Taken together, these findings have major implications for our understanding of democratic resilience and vulnerability to anti-gender equality campaigns. Shedding new light on the citizens' support for democracy–gender equality link, our study offers a political culture perspective that moves debates about diffuse political system support, anti-gender equality backlash, and democratic backsliding beyond the institutional level and calls for gendering political culture research.

2. Gendering Political Culture

While feminist scholars writing about democracy have long argued that gender equality is co-constitutive of democracy and that women's inclusion in political participation and representation must be taken seriously in democracy studies (i.e., Lovenduski, 2019; Paxton, 2008; Phillips, 1994; Young, 2002), research on citizens' support for democracy has relied on gender-blind conceptualizations. In what follows, we argue that if gender equality is co-constitutive of democracy, we also need to gender the political culture concept and research; particularly, the study of system-level support for democracy.

2.1. Gendering Democracy

Democracy rests on the fundamental principle of political equality among citizens to participate in a democratic polity (Dahl, 1989). This means that all members of the political community (demos) should have equal opportunities to participate in collective decision-making, have equal access to political power, and have equal standing in the democratic process through the process of representation. Political equality is constitutive of what makes a system democratic (Dahl, 1989). It follows that systems failing to ensure equal participation and representation of all citizens cannot be considered genuinely democratic.

Yet democracy's historical development reveals a fundamental paradox: Systems that claimed to embody political equality systematically excluded vast populations from political participation. Women, who make one-half of the global population, were denied the basic rights of citizenship and thus were not political equals to men. Women's suffrage took time to be institutionalized across the world. For example, "by 1945, [only] 46% of the world's countries allowed women to vote" (Paxton et al., 2014, p. 18).

This formal inclusion in political participation, however, did not translate into automatic institutional restructuring, equal access to political power, or equality in representation (Paxton et al., 2014). Although women have gained political ground, they remain underrepresented across all branches of government. Based on the available global data, at the time of writing, only 27% of seats are held by women in national parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). If women's equal participation in democratic politics (or lack thereof) is seriously considered, it becomes obvious that democratic institutions have been "organized around men's lives and interests" and were not built with women in mind (Lovenduski, 2019, p. 21). This

exclusion is often sustained by traditional attitudes that give preference for men in positions of authority (Inglehart & Norris, 2003, p. 130; Paxton et al., 2014).

Women's exclusion, thus, was not simply an oversight; it was foundational to how democratic theory and practice were conceived (Lovenduski, 2019; Pateman, 1988; Paxton, 2008). Pateman (1988) argued that the social contract establishing liberal democracies was fundamentally a sexual contract that secured men's political rights through the subordination of women in the private sphere. Women were excluded not despite liberal democracy's principles but because those principles rested on a gendered division between public political life (male) and private domestic life (female) and implied a male citizen. Interestingly, many modern conceptualizations and measures of democracy, although multidimensional, still fail to explicitly include gender equality as a core democratic principle (e.g., Claassen et al., 2025; Coppedge et al., 2016).

Here, we side with the view that democracy and gender equality must be understood as mutually constitutive, with neither capable of full realization without the other: If women are part of the demos, then gender equality becomes constitutive of political equality, and consequently, of democracy itself. Political equality among citizens is impossible without gender equality; and democracy is not possible under conditions of political inequality; it follows that democracy cannot exist under conditions of gender inequality. Given that in representative democracies democratic "participation and fair representation...mutually require one another" (Young, 2002, p. 121), our concept of political equality as a foundation of democracy includes both gender-equal political participation and representation (e.g., parity in parliaments and cabinets). We call it gender-equal democracy. Yet the concept of gender-equal democracy and feminist theorizing have not found their way into the political culture research on system-level support for democracy. We now turn to the discussion of why political culture research needs to be gendered.

2.2. Why Gender Political Culture?

The concept of political culture has gained popularity through the seminal work by Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture* (1963). They famously argue that political culture is the missing link between individuals and political systems, referring to attitudes, beliefs, and feelings towards it and one's role in it. Civic culture is a particular type of political culture that helps sustain democratic political systems (Almond & Verba, 1963). This framework has provided the foundation for decades of political culture research, using comparative survey data, with scholars investigating the drivers of diffuse (system-level) support for democracy (Chu et al., 2020; Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Ferrín & Kriesi, 2025; Norris, 2011), autocracy (Mauk, 2020), and democratic backsliding (Wunsch, 2025). Some studies have also explored what democracy means for citizens (Baviskar & Malone, 2004; Ulbricht, 2018).

Current debates in political culture scholarship on diffuse support for democracy center around two questions. The first question concerns differences in democratic support across countries and generations. The second asks under what conditions people abandon their support for democracy. This body of research has questioned the existence of universal normative commitments to democracy by showing that citizens relinquish democratic principles to advance the policies they want, political ideology they adhere to, or simply out of partisan loyalty (e.g., Graham & Svobik, 2020). This is often driven by polarization combined with strong party attachment (Kingzette et al., 2021) and different understandings of democracy (Wunsch, 2025). Research on generational differences in democratic support has produced mixed evidence. Some find

younger cohorts less supportive (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023; Foa & Mounk, 2016), while others either see no decline (Voeten, 2018; Wuttke et al., 2020) or greater support (Welzel, 2021).

None of these studies, however, has questioned the gender-blind conceptualization and operationalization of democracy or explored how citizens' (lack of) support for gender equality may strengthen or weaken democratic commitment, despite emerging research that shows that different gendered experiences of women and men with democracy color their assessment of it differently (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021; Jansesberger & Rhein, 2024). We argue that, in the study of political culture focused on diffuse support for a political system, this blindness risks painting an incomplete picture of generalized support for this political system, similarly to how omitting women's suffrage from the study of democratization produced an incomplete analysis of democratization waves in Huntington's study (Paxton, 2008). What is more, retaining a gender-blind conceptualization of democracy in the study of political culture creates fundamental problems in assessing genuine democratic support, as we might be measuring support for democracy with a "male face" (androcracy). Even worse, a gender-blind framework that assumes that democratic institutions are complete without explicitly addressing gender inclusion as part of the concept fails to account for changes in political culture, as gender equality becomes a part of democratic governance and women begin paying attention to how well democracy represents their needs and interests when they express their support for this system (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021; Setzler & Yanus, 2021). Finally, without gendering political culture we won't be able to understand why the erosion of democratic institutions connected to the attacks on gender equality is tolerated by (which) citizens and why anti-gender equality actors and narratives have been so successful in recent years.

2.3. Gendering Political Culture

Feminist critique of democratic theory necessitated the reconceptualization of the concept of political equality—as the foundation of democracy—from being exclusive to being inclusive of gender equality. We propose to reconceptualize political culture along two co-constitutive dimensions—support for democracy as a system of political equality and support for gender equality as a necessary condition for political equality to be fully realized. In practice, gender equality, and consequently, political equality as the foundation of democracy, have not been fully realized. Using two analytical dimensions, the dimension of support for political equality/hierarchy (horizontal axis) and the dimension of support for high/low gender equality (vertical axis), visualized in Figure 1, we theorize variation in gendered political cultures. Combinations along the axes of political equality/hierarchy and support for high/low gender equality produce four hypothetical variants of gendered political culture.

On the far left of the spectrum lies political equality, which is foundational to democracy; while the extreme right pole stands for political hierarchy, which is foundational to autocracy. Depending upon whether the concept of democracy includes gender equality or not, we can, in theory, distinguish two types of political cultures: an integrated one and a fragmented one. If democracy and gender equality co-constitute each other not only in the minds of feminist theorists but also in the minds of citizens, then those citizens who show attitudinal support for democratic principles should also be systematically supportive of gender equality in the public and private spheres. This would suggest that citizens recognize that true democracy cannot exist without active inclusion of women and that women's political participation requires supporting them in their "private" lives (e.g., Zwiener-Collins & Lefkofridi, 2023). This is what we call *integrated*

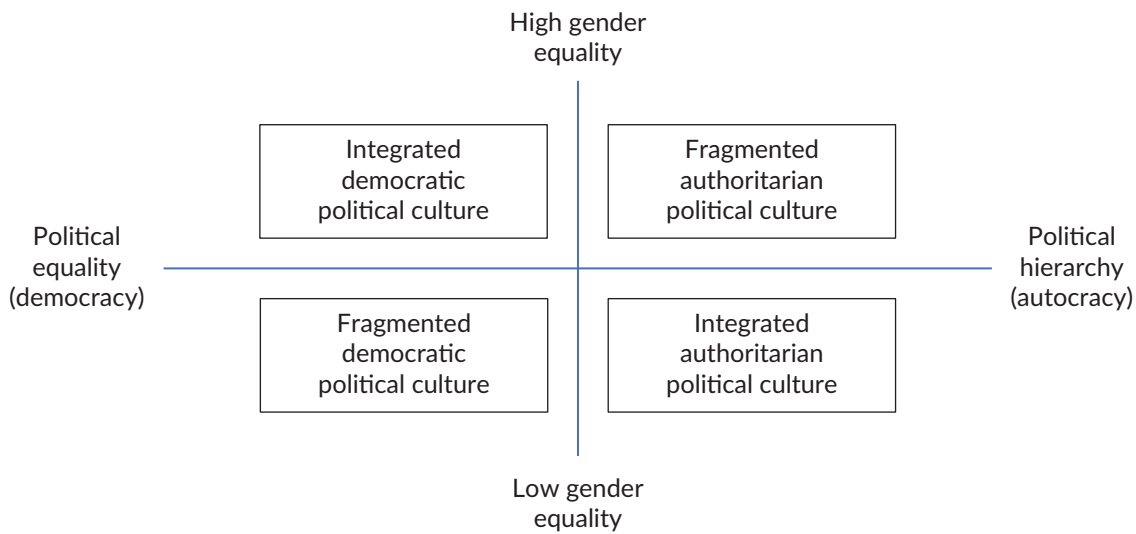


Figure 1. Gendered political cultures.

democratic political culture: the combination of support for democratic institutions of equal participation, representation, and pluralism with explicit support for gender equality in public and private spheres. While no existing democracy mandates 50/50 parity between men and women in representation, and few fully support women in reconciling their roles as mothers, workers, and citizens, many European countries have mainstreamed gender equality. This has created conditions for attitudinal integration between democracy and gender equality in people’s minds, thus laying the foundation for the development of an integrated democratic political culture.

Still, we also expect the persistence of a gender-blind understanding of democracy due to the historically gender-blind development of democratic theory and practice. This *fragmented democratic political culture* reflects gender-blind conceptualizations of democracy that proclaim political equality for all but at the same time mask structural inequalities in power and resources between men and women in public and private spheres. Such political culture excludes women from democracy and makes it a political system by men and for men (de-facto androcracy). Supporters of democratic principles, who deny that the views and needs of the historically marginalized half of the population (women) remain sidelined, are unlikely to endorse (measures that enhance) gender equality. From a feminist democratic theory perspective, these are incomplete democrats, and their understanding of democracy is susceptible to anti-gender equality campaigns, as they don’t see the connection between the two.

On the opposite end of the continuum of political equality lies political hierarchy embodied in authoritarian political systems and authoritarian political cultures (i.e., attitudes that sustain hierarchy and order, black and white thinking, resistance to pluralism, and preference for a strong leader/party unconstrained by the institutional system of checks-and-balances). Like democratic political cultures, we anticipate authoritarian political cultures to be integrated or fragmented. What we call *integrated authoritarian political culture* is characterized by attitudinal support for hierarchical (autocratic) political systems and support for low gender equality (essentially valuing and promoting inequality), whether within the family or society more broadly. Integrated authoritarian political cultures historically helped sustain fascist and national-socialist political

systems. Another variant that we theorize is the *fragmented authoritarian political culture*, which combines attitudinal support for hierarchical (authoritarian) political systems with attitudinal support for gender equality. A historical example of polities that were conducive to the development of this type of political culture are former communist states. Given that many modern European democracies experienced fascism, national-socialism, and/or communism (e.g., Croatia, eastern German regions under the GDR), whether all these political cultures co-exist in a modern European democracy is an empirical question, to which we now turn.

3. Research Design and Methodology

To test our argument about the co-constitutive relation between democracy and gender equality in citizens' beliefs and to probe our typology empirically we employ a mixed-methods research design in a plausibility test case. This means that if we don't observe the theorized types of gendered political cultures in a case with relatively favorable conditions for developing most of them, we are unlikely to see them somewhere else. Our mixed-methods research design uses qualitative (focus groups, Section 3.2.1) and quantitative (survey, Section 3.2.2) methods of data collection. The goal of the focus groups is exploratory. It allows us to get a first glimpse at how citizens talk about democracy and gender equality and explore if and how they perceive the connection between the two. The survey is used to test if the patterns observed in the exploratory analysis hold at the population level. Thus, we conduct a two-step analysis. First, we analyze the qualitative data to explore the connections between democracy and gender equality (Section 3.4.1); based on these findings and our typology, we decide which variables to include in the second step, namely latent class analysis (LCA), which allows for the exploration of co-constitutive relations in the data and tests whether and how people's attitudes are reflective of the political cultures we theorized and observed in the focus groups (Section 3.4.2 and Supplementary File).

3.1. Case Selection

We chose Austria as a plausibility test for our typology because its historical-political development on both democracy and gender equality dimensions has likely planted the seeds for different variants of gendered political culture. On the one hand, the Second Austrian Republic is a relatively young democracy, dating back to 1945, when democratic institutions were restored after the autocratic episode of national socialism (World War II). It was built as a consensus-oriented system with coalition government, which deepened after Austria regained its sovereignty in 1955 (Pelinka, 2019). Civic education programs have been mainstreamed in education. In Austria, this subject is compulsory both in general education schools and in vocational schools. It is one of the "so-called general education subjects, alongside mother tongue and foreign languages and basic economic knowledge" (secondary level II; Šalaj, 2024, p. 15).

On the other hand, despite successful gender mainstreaming policies undertaken in recent years (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024b), Austria has a relatively conservative gender regime organized around the expectation for women to assume primary caregiving responsibilities. This results in many women working part-time when they become mothers (51.1% of employed women in Austria worked part-time in 2024; Statistik Austria, 2024). Additionally, women don't yet have parity in representation. In 2024, women held 41% of the seats in the lower chamber of the Austrian parliament and 36% in the regional assemblies (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024a).

Despite the absence of full parity for women in the governing bodies and the labor market, Austria has made significant progress since 2010 and ranks above the EU average on the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024a). While there is a discursive anti-gender equality backlash (e.g., against inclusive language), Austria has not experienced a backlash against women's rights to the same extent as Central and Eastern European democracies and some Western countries (e.g., Italy), maintaining its de-jure commitments to gender equality.

3.2. Data

3.2.1. Focus Groups

Focus group data were collected in December 2024, about three months after the last national elections in Austria. Each focus group consisted of five to seven people between 18 and 65 years ($n = 23$) and lasted about 1.5 hours. The groups were mixed on gender and political preferences, measured by party affiliation. The groups were stratified by age categories (18–40 and 41–65 years old) and by educational level (ISCED 1–4 and ISCED 5–6; see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). To ensure a diverse range of views on the topics of feminism, gender equality, and democracy, the recruitment followed a purposive sampling approach. Participants were compensated for their time with a small monetary incentive.

3.2.2. Survey

Survey data come from the newly designed online survey that included modules on attitudinal support for gender equality and democracy fielded in Austria between 20 May 2025 and 4 June 2025 by YouGov. The sample is a representative quota sample recruited from the YouGov opt-in panel, using an active sampling approach. While quota sampling during fieldwork had already aimed to create a representative sample, this process was refined through weighting adjustments after data collection. The weights align the final sample with population benchmarks on key demographics, including age, gender, region, education, and past vote choice. The sample size is 1,059 respondents.

3.3. Measures

To explore whether different gendered political cultures exist in Austria, we need to operationalize two dimensions that are at the center of our typology—support for political equality/hierarchy, thought about as democracy and autocracy, and support for high/low gender equality. We operationalize the first dimension through the items that measure support/opposition to liberal democratic institutions (Claassen et al., 2025). Claassen et al.'s scale is based on the V-Dem (gender-blind) conceptualization of liberal democracy. The questions ask how much a respondent agrees or disagrees with the statements on a 5-point response scale (*strongly disagree* = 1 to *strongly agree* = 5), with higher agreement indicating less support for democratic institutions. For example, if a respondent strongly agrees with the statement that “the country would be better off if there were only one political party,” they support democracy less than autocracy. Political equality in public expression of opinion (pluralism) is another essential principle of liberal democracy. We measure it through the item “people who hate my way of life should still have a chance to talk in a public forum” (Kingzette et al., 2021, p. 668). Given that Austria is a consensus democracy with coalition governments and a social partnership, compromise is a key feature of the system. To measure how people perceive compromise specifically in a consensus-oriented democracy, we also include an item from the short

populism scale by Van Hauwaert et al. (2020) that measures one's (dis)agreement with the statement that compromise in politics means selling one's values.

Given theory and evidence about barriers to political equality (resources, participation, recognition, representation), the operationalization of the political culture concept must include citizens' attitudes to policy measures that strive to correct systemic deficits, since "in societies with structural injustices that politically marginalize some groups, fairness and inclusion generally require taking special measures to encourage the representation of members of marginalized groups in decision-making bodies" (Young, 2002, p. 121). Hence, we operationalize support for gender equality through items that measure people's assessment of gender equality policies that seek to eliminate gender inequality in public and private spaces. The item battery comes from Reinl et al. (2025). For example, it asks respondents to choose whether measures that ensure equal pay, target gender-based violence, give women reproductive freedom, and engage men in the private sphere have gone too far or not far enough. We operationalize support for gender equality through support for gender equality policies rather than attitudes toward gender roles because these measures capture citizens' willingness to institutionalize equal rights, level the playing field for women, and accept the political trade-offs required for gender-equal democracy.

Additionally, we also include a behavioral measure of respondents' willingness to act in support of gender equality in practice by asking them whether they would sign a petition for 50% gender quotas on party lists. Finally, during focus group discussions, people spontaneously linked feminism with the achievement of women's suffrage, so we also include two items related to feminism. The first item measures identification with feminism, which is expected to strengthen people's support for gender equality, and the second item taps into people's anti-feminist attitudes ("feminists are a menace to this nation and the world"). The first measure is an adaptation of group-level self-investment that comes from Leach et al. (2008), and the second comes from Schnabel et al. (2022). We created an additive (mean-based) feminist identification scale, which factor analysis confirmed measures a single underlying dimension, with high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.94$). Table A2a in the Supplementary File lists all measures of our concepts of interest and the variables we created in preparation for LCA. Overall, higher values on each variable represent greater support for democratic institutions, pluralism, identification with feminism, and thinking that gender equality policies have not gone far enough. Table A2b in the Supplementary File presents descriptive statistics.

3.4. Analytical Strategy

3.4.1. Focus Group Data Analysis

After focus group transcript verification, we coded the data in MAXQDA 2024, using deductive (democracy, gender equality, and feminism) and inductive categories that emerged from the data. We then did thematic analysis to examine how people think about democracy, gender equality, and feminism, what connections they make, and what types of political culture emerge.

3.4.2. Survey Data Analysis

We employed LCA to identify distinct patterns in how Austrians think of democracy and gender equality. LCA is a person-centered approach that groups respondents into latent classes based on their response patterns

across multiple observed variables, making it well-suited for empirical testing of typologies of political culture (Collins & Lanza, 2009). We ran the analysis in LatentGOLD (Vermunt & Magidson, 2025) to account for weights. We followed a standard three-step approach: (a) we identified the optimal latent class model based on fit indices and theoretical interpretability; (b) we assigned respondents to their most likely class based on posterior probabilities; and (c) we examined associations between class membership and demographic covariates using binomial and multinomial logistic regression.

The model selection favored a four-class solution, balancing statistical fit with conceptual interpretability and avoiding small or unstable classes. For ease of presentation, full technical details of the LCA procedure, including variable diagnostic checks, model comparison statistics, estimation settings, robustness checks, including unweighted analysis, and a model with alternative indicators for support of gender equality, can be found in the Supplementary File (Sections I and II). Full results and summary of binomial and multinomial regression analyses are in Sections III and IV of the Supplementary File.

4. Empirical Results

4.1. *Citizens Talk About Democracy and Gender Equality: Signs of Fragmented Democratic Political Culture*

Focus group data reflect only one type of gendered political culture—a fragmented democratic political culture. Although participants express high support for both democracy and gender equality, the analysis of focus group discussions provides little evidence of an understanding of the two as co-constitutive. Though persistent gender inequality in Austria is acknowledged by the participants when they discuss gender equality in the economic sphere, this is not explicitly linked to political equality as the foundation of democracy. While women’s suffrage (secured by early feminist movements) is widely regarded as having established political equality, we find no signs of conscious endorsement of substantive gender equality measures (e.g., quotas that eliminate barriers to representation) as pre-requisites for the realization of democracy. Below we present the key themes emerging regarding democracy and gender equality, and their (missing) link. We connect these results with the survey data analysis results in the discussion section.

4.1.1. Perceptions of Democracy

Democracy was consistently valued as “the best system we have,” even if participants acknowledged that it also has limitations. Participants across all focus groups expressed positive attitudes toward democracy, emphasizing electoral procedures, freedom of speech and press, separation of powers, and institutional checks and balances. For example:

For me, freedom of expression is the be-all and end-all of democracy and freedom of choice. It means I can freely choose between different political orientations, different ideas, and discussions. I can discuss anything; I can talk about anything. And then I can make a decision that ultimately involves everyone. (FG 4 – 51)

About half of the participants mentioned human rights and equal rights for all. For instance:

Equal rights for all, everyone is treated equally. So, the law in Austria applies to everyone. There are no separate laws for rich and poor....We also have a very large judicial system in Austria. There are more parameters in the statutes than in any other country, which I find very positive. (FG 2 – 33)

Women's rights and gender equality were not mentioned spontaneously but only emerged when the discussion moved to feminism. While holding overall negative perceptions of feminism, participants acknowledged its importance in securing voting rights for women. Gender bias and/or socio-structural barriers to women's political participation and representation were not discussed, which suggests a gender-blind understanding of democracy.

4.1.2. Perceptions of Gender Equality

Participants assessed Austria as having already achieved much regarding women's rights and choices. Gender inequality was strongly connected to material and social aspects: the gender pay gap, which most participants believed should have been closed by now, childcare infrastructure, workplace discrimination, and military service obligations. Reproductive rights were also discussed but were not explicitly linked to gender equality. Overall, participants perceived gender equality as an important goal not yet fully realized. However, a few also mentioned examples where gender "should not matter": equal wages should apply only for "the same work/performance," with references to construction work and assumptions about women's physical capabilities (FG2 – 171–173; FG2 – 135; FG1 – 220–222). Participants also argued that qualifications, not gender, should determine the selection of job candidates. Regarding equal representation, one participant noted that "gender quotas are per se the wrong instrument, because the focus should be on a person's competence, regardless of gender" (FG 1 – 479). They also did not express concerns about fewer women in political positions. For example:

P4: I don't know if there are that many women who are interested in politics.

P2: They have to be competent.

P1: If there are enough people who are committed to it and who are female, [a quota] is not a problem.

P4: If they have the right qualifications. (FG 4 – 636–640)

4.1.3. Connection Between Democracy and Gender Equality

Beyond connecting feminism with voting rights, participants did not spontaneously link democracy and gender equality. Neither did they see barriers that hinder women's equal political participation and representation in practice. When prompted, discussions remained brief and vague, with participants treating these as mostly separate political phenomena. Equal rights were perceived as essential to democracy by some, but women's rights were only implied: i.e., "without equal rights, there can be no equality, but equal rights are actually the basis for democracy" (FG 1 – 278). This suggests viewing gender equality only as equality before the law, offering the first evidence for a fragmented democratic culture with gender-blind understandings of democracy.

Overall, participants perceived Austria as progressive regarding both democracy and (narrowly understood) gender equality but failed to recognize foundational connections between these concepts. Focus group discussions revealed neither integrated democratic nor fragmented/integrated authoritarian political cultures, which might reflect a social desirability bias. Whether these patterns hold at the national level is the empirical question to which we now turn.

4.2. National Patterns: Four Types of Gendered Political Culture

Contrary to the findings of the focus groups on the existence of only one gendered political culture, a fragmented democratic one, our LCA of the population survey data reveals four distinct classes. They offer insight into how Austrians combine attitudes toward democracy and gender equality (Table 1; Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File). The percentages reported below refer to model-estimated conditional response probabilities. Namely, this is the probability of selecting a given response category conditional on latent class membership. These probabilities should not be interpreted as the exact share of individuals within a class holding a given view. Detailed conditional probabilities for all items are in Supplementary

Table 1. Summary table of latent class profiles.

	Attitudinal Profile	Demographic Profile
Class 1 <i>Fragmented democratic political culture (35%)</i>	Strong support for procedural and pluralist principles of democracy, combined with low acceptance of compromise, neutral positions on gender equality, and opposition to quotas in politics. Members of this class are less likely to identify as feminists, but they do not perceive feminism as a threat.	Predominantly male (64%), middle-aged (50% between 45–64 years old), with mainly upper secondary or vocational education (62%); 34% voted for FPÖ in the last election.
Class 2 <i>Integrated democratic political culture (32%)</i>	Consistently strong support for democratic principles, pluralism, and compromise, combined with strong support for gender equality across domains. This class is also more likely to identify as feminists.	Slightly more female (53%), older on average (28% between 65–85 years old), and more highly educated (36% have university education); only 11% voted for FPÖ in the last election.
Class 3 <i>Fragmented authoritarian political culture (21%)</i>	Authoritarian views combined with selective support for gender equality policies (equal pay and anti-violence policies).	Younger on average (44% between 18–44 years old), more often female (59%), with lower to medium education (55% report medium levels of education and 29% low levels of education); 26% voted for FPÖ in the last election.
Class 4 <i>Integrated authoritarian(-leaning) political culture (12%)</i>	Authoritarian-leaning attitudes combined with broad opposition to gender equality. General rejection of extreme authoritarian institutions such as one-party system—this is why we call it “authoritarian-leaning”—but openness to general government overreach and questioning of universal voting rights.	Youngest class on average (37% between 18–32 years old), slightly male-dominated (52%), 41% have university education; 30% are FPÖ voters.

Note: In the Supplementary File, we illustrate attitudinal profiles in Figure A1 and Figure A2 and demographic profiles in Figure A3.

File Tables A4 and A6. Descriptive demographic profiles are derived after class estimation (Supplementary File Table A5).

4.2.1. Class 1 (35%): Fragmented Democratic Political Culture

The largest class is characterized by strong support for liberal democracy (both its procedural and pluralist principles), combined with neutrality in support for gender equality, opposition to quotas, and lack of feminist identification. Members have a probability of above 70% of opposing authoritarian measures and 76% of supporting pluralism. At the same time, this class displays skepticism toward compromise (56% probability of agreeing that compromise would mean selling out on one's values). They are neutral on gender equality measures (50–60% probability of neither thinking these measures have gone too far nor thinking they have not gone far enough). There is a probability of 66% of not supporting gender quotas in politics. Class 1 does not identify with feminists (70% probability). The conditional probability of not perceiving feminism as a threat in this class is 46%. Demographically, Class 1 members tend to be male (64%), have upper secondary or vocational education (62%), be older (50% between 45–64 years old), and 34% voted for FPÖ in 2024.

4.2.2. Class 2 (32%): Integrated Democratic Political Culture

This class offers evidence of an integrated democratic political culture in Austria, with the most gender egalitarian and feminist attitudinal profile combined with strong support for liberal democracy. Respondents in this class have a high probability of rejecting authoritarian measures ($\geq 79\%$), endorsing pluralism (82%), and rejecting the view that compromise amounts to selling out one's values (53%). Class 2 respondents also have an above 70% probability of thinking that all gender equality policies are not going far enough. They are more likely to identify with feminists (probability of 45%) and do not see feminism as a threat (probability of 89%). Thus, Class 2 is distinguished not only by strong support across individual indicators, but by the consistency with which democratic and gender-egalitarian attitudes align across domains (Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File). Demographically, members are more likely to be female (53%), older (28% between 65–85 years old), highly educated (36% have university education), and only 11% voted for FPÖ in 2024.

4.2.3. Class 3 (21%): Fragmented Authoritarian Political Culture

Class 3 combines authoritarian attitudes, which reject both pluralistic and procedural principles of liberal democracy, with selective gender equality support. Conditional on class membership, the probability of rejecting universal voting rights when voters are uninformed is 66%, the probability of agreeing that the government may ignore court rulings is 52%, and the probability of supporting law-bending is 62%. There is only a 40% probability that a respondent in this class will support pluralism. At the same time, the probability of thinking that equal pay, anti-harassment, and anti-violence measures are not going far enough ranges between 50% and 62%. They are split on gender quotas (35% probability of opposing them and 39% probability of supporting them). They don't identify as feminists (only a 36% probability of feminist identification). Demographically, this class is younger (44% between 18–44 years old), less educated (55% report medium levels of education and 29% low levels of education), 59% are women, and 26% voted for FPÖ in 2024.

4.2.4. Class 4 (12%): Integrated Authoritarian(-Leaning) Political Culture

The smallest class shows authoritarian-leaning attitudes and consistently low support for gender equality. While members tend to reject most extreme authoritarian measures like one-party rule (58% probability) and ignoring parliament/courts (50–58%), they show openness to government overreach, including restrictions on media freedom and legal safeguards, and show weaker support for universal voting rights. Of note, probabilities of supporting these measures do not reach 50%. What most clearly distinguishes this class is its systematic opposition to gender equality policies, showing high probabilities (> 60%) of thinking that individual gender equality measures have gone too far. Demographically, Class 4 is the youngest (37% between 18–32 years old), has the highest levels of university education (41%), includes 52% of men, and 30% of individuals who voted for FPÖ in 2024.

Regression analysis results reported in the Supplementary File Sections III and IV substantiate the descriptive patterns reported for demographic class profiles. Overall, younger, less educated, male respondents, and FPÖ voters are less likely to hold attitudes consistent with the integrated democratic political culture of Class 2.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Mainstream research in political culture has treated democracy as a gender-blind concept. Building on feminist theories of democracy, we contend that democracy and gender equality are co-constitutional. This means that to truly assess citizens' support for democracy, one also needs to gender the concept of political culture—namely, to analyze it through the lens of gender. Aiming at making visible what was previously treated as irrelevant or neutral in the research on political culture, we offer a new, feminist theory-guided typology of gendered political cultures. Combining support for a political system of governance (democracy/autocracy) with support for high/low gender equality, we propose a conceptual-analytical typology of integrated and fragmented political cultures. Using the crucial test case of Austria and a mixed-methods research design, we conduct a rigorous test of this typology and offer the first evidence of variants of gendered political culture.

Overall, our systematic inquiry into how citizens connect democracy and gender equality empirically demonstrates why gendering the study of democratic (and authoritarian) political cultures is essential for complete assessments of (non-)democratic attitudes. Our key finding is that Austrians' predominant understanding of the democracy–gender equality relationship is fragmented, but an integrated democratic political culture also exists.

The integrated democratic political culture was not visible in our focus groups, likely due to the method's limitations in capturing the full range of attitudes present in Austria. While formal political equality (voting rights, legal equality) is recognized as essential to democracy, substantive gender equality (addressing structural barriers, equal representation, redistribution of care work) is understood primarily as an economic—not political—concern. Focus group participants believe political equality has been achieved through voting rights and legal guarantees. When prompted, about half mentioned that “equal rights are the basis for democracy” (FG 1 – 278) and credited feminism with achieving women's suffrage—revealing an implicit connection at the level of formal equality. However, even when discussing barriers to equal economic participation in the labor market, reproductive rights, or family responsibilities, participants do not explicitly link these to political participation and representation. Yet alleviation of the socioeconomic

conditions—such as pay gaps, childcare infrastructure, and workplace discrimination—is required to bridge the divide between the public and private spheres, identified by Pateman (1988) as necessary for women’s political equality. Moreover, participants emphasize wanting “the most skilled” representatives irrespective of gender, without problematizing how stereotypes shape perceptions of competence (Lefkofridi et al., 2019) or how structural barriers limit women’s access to the opportunities and networks that build political skills. What focus group discussions capture is reflected in Class 1, which embodies what we call *fragmented democratic political culture* and represents 35% of the surveyed population. This pattern reveals the persistence of the public/private divide that Pateman (1988) critiqued: Formal political inclusion is accepted, but the economic and social conditions necessary for equal political participation are understood as separate from democracy itself. This disconnect at the citizen level mirrors conceptual blind spots of the mainstream (male-dominated) political science, which, for decades, denied that “the personal is political.”

The relevance of the material foundations of gender equality to democratic functioning emerges from the survey data. It is reflected in Class 2, which embodies what we call *integrated democratic political culture*. Thirty-two percent of Austrians connect support for democracy with support for gender equality, showing consistently strong support for both democratic principles and gender equality policies across all domains. Future qualitative research should investigate what experiences, socialization processes, or political contexts foster integrated democratic political culture—an important question for understanding how to strengthen democratic resilience.

Beyond the democratic cultures, our study shows that authoritarian-leaning political cultures also exist in contemporary Austria (about 33% of the population; Classes 3 and 4 combined). Class 3 (21%) combines authoritarian attitudes with selective support for gender equality. The smallest class (Class 4, 12%) aligns with an *integrated authoritarian-leaning political culture*. While consistently opposing gender equality, rejecting universal voting rights, and supporting government overreach, respondents in this class also reject classical authoritarian institutions (e.g., one-party rule). The fact that authoritarian attitudes are not fully crystallized suggests Austria’s civic education programs have been effective in promoting critical reflection on its national-socialist history and re-democratization efforts.

Our research is not without limitations. For example, focus group composition may lead to biases arising from group and social dynamics (respondents might give responses that they consider most socially appropriate). We addressed these challenges through established procedures, such as anonymity assurance and creating a setting where all opinions were welcome. Moreover, the mixed-methods design allowed us to test whether patterns observed in focus groups held at the national level, thus mitigating the non-generalizability limitation of small-N designs. Even if our main analytical technique (LCA) was appropriate for this plausibility probe study, interpretation depends on researchers’ judgments and indicator selection, and class solution criteria can influence results. We addressed these concerns by letting theory guide our indicator selection, conducting robustness checks, including with alternative measures of support for gender equality, and estimating models in both R and LatentGOLD.

Despite these limitations, our study is the first to gender the study of political culture and offer empirical evidence on how citizens’ attitudes reflect different types of gendered political cultures, revealing the fragmented nature of democratic support when gender equality is brought into focus and explaining why de-democratizing anti-gender equality campaigns might resonate with some citizens. Gender-blind

frameworks in political culture research create measurement problems, likely underdiagnosing citizens' receptiveness to anti-gender equality messages and overestimating the strength of system-level support for democracy, which is generally reported as rather high in European democracies (Ferrín & Kriesi, 2025). The Austrian case illuminates which population segments de-democratizing actors opposing gender equality could mobilize and with whom their messages are likely to resonate. In this regard, regression analysis further revealed systematic demographic patterns: The probability of membership in Classes 3 and 4 versus Class 2 decreases with age for both men and women, suggesting younger cohorts—often assumed to be more progressive (Inglehart & Norris, 2003)—may be particularly receptive to anti-gender equality messages that undermine democratic norms. In Austria, younger people, men, FPÖ voters, and less educated people are significantly *less* likely to hold attitudes consistent with an integrated democratic political culture.

Our study opens several paths for future research. Firstly, we invite comparative studies to test the robustness of our typology by examining whether similar political culture types exist in other European societies and how their prevalence varies across contexts (e.g., varied levels of gender equality; varieties of welfare states). We would expect an integrated democratic political culture to be more prevalent in countries with longer histories of gender mainstreaming (e.g., Nordic countries) and stronger institutionalization of gender equality (e.g., gender quotas in politics). Conversely, a fragmented democratic culture may be more common where formal democratic institutions coexist with traditional gender regimes. Secondly, longitudinal research should examine temporal dynamics and generational change in gendered political cultures, e.g., whether younger cohorts maintain their lower support for integrated democratic culture as they age, or whether life-course and period effects shape different trajectories. Our cross-sectional data cannot distinguish between generational replacement and aging effects, making this a critical question for future research. Given the documented connection between democratic backsliding and anti-gender equality backlash (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018; Petó, 2021), polarization between integrated democratic and integrated authoritarian(-leaning) political cultures might increase, with fragmented types either consolidating into integrated forms or becoming battlegrounds for political mobilization. Research should also explore how our typology connects to other timely and important political phenomena, such as populism and nativism. Finally, comparative and longitudinal analysis would benefit from cross-national surveys that include both democracy and gender equality measures. While the World Values Survey and European Values Study include relevant items, making cross-national analysis feasible, future waves should incorporate measures that explicitly link democratic principles to gender equality, rather than treating them as separate domains. Our typology and operationalization strategy can serve as a template for such efforts.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that this article is based on will be publicly available as of 31 December 2026 and 15 December 2027, respectively, at: <https://doi.org/10.7802/2949> and <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17939980>

LLMs Disclosure

We used a free version of Grammarly to check for grammar and spelling mistakes.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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