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Women Populist MPs, Patriarchal Bargains, and Anti-Gender Politics: Agnė Širinskienė and Marjorie Taylor Greene

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Abstract

Two women politicians living over 5,000 miles away—Agnė Širinskienė, a populist left member of the Lithuanian Parliament, and Marjorie Taylor Greene (known as MTG), a far-right MAGA Republican from Georgia in the US House of Representatives (2021–2026)—rose to prominence by winning several national elections and becoming among the most recognizable women populist leaders in their countries’ politics. Despite their different birthplaces, life experiences, ideological orientations, and political affiliations, they share several commonalities: both are anti-feminist, anti-gender, and/or espouse anti-immigrant views, and both came into national politics while showing no lifelong desire to become MPs. This transnational comparative analysis of the two women MPs, first, examines their motives for getting involved in national politics by reviewing significant biographical events that shaped Širinskienė’s and MTG’s professional careers; second, applies a “patriarchal bargain” analytical concept to the strategies they used to rise to political prominence within patriarchal environments; and, third, evaluates the anti-gender political agendas that both MPs pursued to influence national political landscapes. This article maps out the similarities and differences in the roles that Širinskienė and MTG have played in their respective political parties to ensure their political survival and notoriety. We find that the patriarchal bargains used by populist women MPs present them with a paradox: career opportunities and fame in politics on the one hand, and vulnerability and “effacement” on the other.

Keywords

Agnė Širinskienė; anti-gender politics; Lithuania; Marjorie Taylor Greene; MPs; patriarchal bargains; populism; women

1. Introduction

The recent rise of women populist politicians on the right—and, increasingly, on the left—is an intriguing phenomenon, even if the numerical representation of women in politics does not necessarily translate into substantive or symbolic representations. Present-day studies of women populist leaders tend to be Western-centric, examining European women party heads: Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, Alice Weidel, Pia Kjaersgaard, etc. (Akkerman, 2015; Blee, 2021; Celis & Childs, 2018; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Meret et al., 2016). However, existing scholarship has not yet fully engaged with women populist MPs as a distinct category outside the Western European regional context (except for Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Norocel, 2018) and is still testing theoretical explanations of women populist leaders' numerical growth and their effects on national politics.

This study focuses on women MPs who do not formally lead their parties but, nevertheless, have played key roles in advancing party agendas and in shaping public (often anti-gender) discourse in domestic politics. We chose two of the most recognizable populist women politicians: Agnė Širinskienė, a Lithuanian MP (2016–present), and MTG, a Republican congresswoman from Georgia (2021–2026). Since neither of them had a lifelong aspiration to be in politics, our analysis of these two populist women MPs centers on the following questions: Why and under what circumstances did Širinskienė and MTG get involved in politics? What common strategies did they use to achieve prominence and success? And, to what extent did Širinskienė's and MTG's presence in politics have impacted the respective national political landscapes?

After a brief overview of women populist leaders within the broader populism–gender nexus literature and the comparative case methodology used in this study, we examine each MP's personal background, pathways into politics, legislative (anti-gender) agendas, and effects on national politics. We highlight our core findings in the conclusion, asserting that women MPs' "stardom" in national political parties is contingent on "patriarchal bargains" that they voluntarily make with populist male party leaders, and the depth and strength of such bargains condition women populist MPs' political survival and, ultimately, their continuing prominence in national politics.

2. Populism, Gender, and Women's Leadership

Recently published handbooks and encyclopedias on populism always include chapters reviewing populism's relations with gender, noting that this relationship "remains a widely understudied topic" (Abi-Hassan, 2017, p. 426). Although the focus on women political leadership and female populist leaders has burgeoned over the past 15 years, many examinations of populism–gender relations in populism studies continue to center on right-wing populism (Dietze, 2022; Korolczuk, 2026). Why? One explanation is that advances in gender equality, especially in Western Europe, and the radical discourse of right-wing populist parties are in obvious tension, which has led scholars to ask how rising women populist leaders reconcile this tension (Akkerman, 2015); how gender struggles are being reframed, adapted, and challenged in populist politics; and, how the populist–gender relationship is framed and transformed in various sociopolitical contexts.

Another noticeable empirical trend is that women politicians are propelled into leadership positions during economic, political, or financial crises, which also present fertile grounds for populism to flourish. Since crises today are a norm rather than an exception, electorates worldwide seem to prefer outsiders—women, by default, fall into the category of outsiders because political circles are often dominated by men. This

particularly fuels the rise of women leaders on the far-right, with most of them espousing anti-gender, anti-immigration, and anti-LGBTQ+ policies and views (Bennhold, 2025; Givens & Brothers, 2026), because populist dynamics always center on anti-establishment politics and the continuous construction and reinvention of enemies. Yet studies on the gender-populism nexus continue to emphasize a need for more comparative, fine-grain, empirical, micro-dynamics analyses that explore changes and struggles over time in populist politics, non-Western European country cases, and in-depth case studies of women populist MPs who lead from behind and fight for male-led populist parties by adopting and propagating anti-gender ideas (Abi-Hassan, 2017; Korolczuk, 2026).

Our comparative analysis of Širinskienė and MTG not only answers this call but also brings an innovation by testing the utility and explanatory powers of the patriarchal bargain concept, first proposed by Kandiyoti's (1988) pathbreaking work to expose differences between gender ideals and gendered practices in households living in developing, patriarchal-values-based world regions (e.g., the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia). She defined such a bargain as a form of the different strategies that women adopt "within a set of concrete constraints" under the imposed "rules of the game," exploring how women's adopted strategies result in "varying potential for active or passive resistance," and under what conditions such bargains breakdown, get transformed, and with what implications for women (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 274).

For feminist and gender scholars, patriarchy became a concept "too useful to lose" (Bryson, 1999) and, with time, patriarchal bargain evolved into a "patriarchal power" conceptual tool to better understand how various gendered structures and bodies evolve over time (Pierik, 2022). In gender studies, patriarchal bargain is most closely associated with the idea that women (and sometimes men) pursue strategies to maximize status and/or room for maneuver within patriarchal constraints, often by complying with certain norms in exchange for future benefits (e.g., protection, legitimacy, or seniority). Noteworthy, "bargains" with patriarchs vary by the status of the relationship and the context, and can change when conditions—be they social, economic, or political—shift. Additionally, Kandiyoti (1998, p. 145) noted that "gender orders also involve mutually binding constraints" but "the powerful are much better placed to change the rules of the game unilaterally, at which point attempts by subordinates to call their bluff may emerge as rather pitiful and ineffectual forms of rearguard action." Therefore, "bargains" are not equal in gendered power relationships where give-and-take transactions are made, transformed, contested, and/or (de)legitimized.

This has significant implications for women populist MPs who enter into patriarchal bargains, as they subordinate themselves to the powerful (male) leaders and, due to their lower, weaker status and position in the relationship, they tend to accept the shorter end of the bargain. Also, to prove their "worthiness" and determination to uphold the bargain, women often give more than they take/get. Over time, this give-more-than-take/get bargain, which reveals their "devotion" to the relationship, can help women MPs raise their status in the relationship. Once political conditions change and provided that women have achieved greater independence and notoriety during such "critical junctures," they may challenge the initial patriarchal bargain they had struck.

2.1. The Comparative Case Study Method

The value of the comparative case method, based on the most different systems design (Lijphart, 1971), guides and justifies the selection of two cases that are different in nearly all aspects but are similar on a particular outcome. In our selected comparative case study, differences abound, with the three core ones being:

1. Political systems: Lithuania is a semi-presidential system with a unicameral legislature and a truly multiparty political system (see Politpro.eu, n.d.). Elected MPs are often, albeit not always, nominated to serve in executive/ministerial posts. Party leaders rather than the president have a final say in which MP belonging to their party will serve in which legislative or executive post. The personalistic nature of politics relies on the strength and depth of personal bonds between an MP and a party leader rather than the president. In the US, the presidential system, with a bicameral legislature and a political system dominated by two parties, means elected legislators or party heads have little to no influence on the president's choices as to who will lead a department (ministry). The primacy of personalist politics in the US is highly dependent on the personal relationship one has with the president.
2. The length and extent of populism in politics: The first time a populist political party (the Labor Party) won the largest number of seats in Lithuania's parliament was in 2004. Since then, new left- and right-wing populist parties have gained and lost seats in the legislature, but no populist party has held a majority in the Lithuanian parliament. Meanwhile, in the US, the Tea Party Caucus (as part of the Republican Party), which espoused populist ideas, was founded in 2010, and only in 2016 did the populist MAGA firmly establish itself in all branches of governance.
3. Selected women populist MPs: Širinskienė and MTG were born in different places, under different political regimes, have different personal characteristics (e.g., physical appearances, speaking styles, work ethics, interests, marital status, etc.), and have experienced different events that have shaped their political views and, ultimately, party affiliation choices. Despite initially showing no interest in politics, they have both reached prominence in national politics through the patriarchal bargains they made with male party leaders and their anti-gender populist positioning—both of which constitute a similar outcome.

Different system design requires the identification and discussion of critical episodes—which, given the focus of this study, necessitates an examination of important biographical trajectories and career pathways to reveal how the two female populist MPs have managed to achieve visibility and political notoriety, how they have navigated patriarchal power structures, what they have achieved once in politics as both populist MPs articulated exclusionary (anti-gender, anti-immigration) narratives and agendas, and what their experiences and entanglement in patriarchal bargains means for patriarchal hierarchy in national politics and other women MPs in different national contexts (i.e., when women politicians eclipse the personalistic politics of a populist male leader).

3. Agnė Širinskienė: From Obscurity to the Most Recognizable Populist Name in Lithuania's Politics

3.1. Biographical Background

Agnė Širinskienė (née Kazėnaitė) was born in Vilnius, but after the divorce of her parents, she and her mother moved to Eastern Lithuania, where she lived for over a decade. She was raised by her grandparents and grew up in a deeply religious family under communism (1970s–80s). Agnė took her first communion in a Catholic church even though her maternal grandfather was a member of the Lithuanian Communist Party, and she herself had joined the school's little Octoberists and communist youth organizations. According to her teachers, she was well-mannered, very polite, and an exceptionally hard-working and smart student, finishing high school with top grades. Since childhood, she was driven by innate curiosity, a sense of duty, an

unstoppable eagerness to learn, and deeply loved school and her teachers. Although active in various clubs, she was nevertheless very shy, showed no leadership ambitions, nor sought to be the center of attention (Šilinskaitė-Puškorė, 2018a, 2018b).

After Agnė completed the Dūkštas secondary school, she left the rural, conservative, Russian-speaking, and minority-dominated part of Lithuania. Her pursuits in higher education took her, first, to Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, where she earned BA degrees in Catholic Theology and English Language and Literature in 1998, then an MA in Pastoral Theology in 2000, followed by a PhD in Humanities in 2005. Subsequently, she earned a BA and an MA in Law at Mykolas Romeris University in Vilnius, completing her studies in 2009. With five degrees in hand, Širinskienė was perhaps the only academic who had exceptionally high and, arguably, unique educational credentials. Her expertise in theology and law is reflected in her scholarship and publications, during the 12 years that she lectured at the Romeris University, reaching the rank of associate professor, until 2016, a pivotal year in her professional career.

3.2. Political Career

As the 2016 parliamentary elections approached, Širinskienė was invited by the agricultural billionaire businessman Ramūnas Karbauskas to join his conservative center-left-leaning party, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS; Politpro.eu, n.d.). In a shocking and surprising result, the LVŽS claimed an unexpected landslide victory, winning the largest number of legislative seats in 20 years and becoming a major player in national politics. Širinskienė, having agreed to join the LVŽS, was unexpectedly propelled into national politics, to the amazement of her childhood friends, students, and academic colleagues. Never showing any political ambitions, Širinskienė remained, for a while, a political unknown and, arguably, would have stayed unknown if not for an unexpected turn of events in the top ranks of the LVŽS.

Given her background in theology and her deep academic and professional interest in public health law, she was nominated and elected by the LVŽS to chair parliament's Committee on Health Affairs. A "critical event" occurred in January 2017, when LVŽS chair Karbauskis lost Greta Kildišienė, his party's vice-chairwoman, alleged lover, and closest political ally, who was forced to resign as MP over an embezzlement scandal, with other three prominent LVŽS MPs also leaving the party. Soon after, Karbauskis chose Širinskienė as his political confidante. Portraying himself and his party as victims of "powerful forces" who relentlessly attacked him and the LVŽS, "Karbauskis became more cautious in publicly promoting his personal views and pet projects" (Gudžinskas, 2025, p. 96). Širinskienė quickly filled this void by performing masculine, tough legislative heavy lifting, while showing feminine, supportive care for the LVŽS and its leader. The media dubbed the two a "duo" who instructed the party's parliamentary caucus on how to vote on every matter and bill. Ostensibly, Širinskienė made a patriarchal bargain voluntarily, becoming not only the gray cardinal of the LVŽS but "Karbauskas's hitwoman," "right hand," and "the chief of the parliament, more powerful than the [Parliament's] Speaker" (Šilinskaitė-Puškorė, 2018b).

During her first legislative term (2016–2020), Širinskienė faithfully and stalwartly defended LVŽS patriarch Karbauskis, denying his alleged "dictatorial inclinations" and suggesting that Karbauskis was rather "too overly democratic," which is what forced the LVŽS leader to make ill-advised decisions (Salynė, 2019). Her influence within the party skyrocketed once she became part of Karbauskis's inner circle, thrusting her into the political spotlight. As the first prominent woman populist MP, she not only endorsed Karbauskis's traditional family

values and anti-gender ideology, but made it her mission to see that progressive and gender rights-affirming bills would be obstructed, discredited, and impossible to pass. In exchange for her commitment and loyalty to the LVŽS and Karbauskis, she was elected, in 2017, chair of one of the most important and influential parliamentary committees: Legislative Affairs.

3.3. Political and Legislative Work

For a newbie MP, her law-making track record (2016–2020) was truly breathtaking: 51 individually submitted draft bills, 113 draft legislative acts submitted in parliamentary members' groups, 83 individually submitted draft proposals for legislation, and 51 draft proposals for legislation submitted in parliamentary members' groups, as well as 39 official media announcements and statements (Širinskienė, 2020). Dedication, servitude, and workaholicism given her numerous legislative initiatives defined Širinskienė's political career and also her role in shaping policies.

Advocacy for the traditional family values espoused by Karbauskis particularly resonated with Širinskienė. The anti-gender legislative agenda became her political *raison d'être* for being, surviving, and thriving in national politics. The LVŽS strongly opposed gender quotas for political parties, with Širinskienė arguing that gender quotas only existed among African countries (it should be noted that Širinskienė was not alone in opposing gender quotas; the first woman president of Lithuania did, too). The LVŽS leadership not only defied but also launched a smear campaign against the Lithuanian Constitutional Court (LCC) and the Court's President, Dainius Žalimas, after the court ruled that a temporary parliamentary inquiry commission led by Širinskienė was unconstitutional, because it was granted investigative powers that were too broad. The LVŽS-led government also decided to stall the timely rotation of the LCC judges (Salynė, 2020). Eventually, Širinskienė turned into a particularly divisive populist politician who used her popularity to block and impede all legislation promoting women's and gender rights, in particular by hindering Lithuania's ratification of the Istanbul Convention and derailing the legislature's voting on same-sex civil union/partnership bills.

As the LVŽS's popularity declined due to constant internal feuds in the party's leadership, ongoing public scandals, and controversial investigations (Gudžinskas, 2025), the party's leadership began to look for scapegoats, turning against Širinskienė. In 2019, at Karbauskis's request, she left the LVŽS parliamentary group and joined another rising populist newcomer, the Law and Justice (TT) party, then chaired by Remigijus Žemaitaitis, so that the LVŽS in coalition with TT could gain more political weight in the legislature. Širinskienė did as asked by the LVŽS patriarch, but was eventually forced to leave the TT parliamentary group because such switches went against the LCC's decision on parliamentary affiliations (Salynė, 2019). One of the LVŽS's members described Širinskienė's willingness to fulfill Karbauskis' political whims and orders as "political self-pimping" (Jurčenkaitė, 2019).

Overt and covert humiliation continued for the next three years. In several interviews, Širinskienė revealed that she was "clenching her teeth," having suffered indignities from male MPs for a long time. For instance, she was instructed by the LVŽS's leadership not to use the main parliament building entrances and enter through the backdoors to avoid being seen and questioned by the media, not to look at certain colleagues presiding over parliament sessions because they could not stand her stern glance, to stop "successful media performances" and give "worse quality" interviews, to ignore curses directed at her in the legislative chamber,

etc. (Vireliūnaitė, 2021; Žičkus, 2021). Širinskienė later admitted that she frequently cried at night due to the unrelenting psychological pressure, bullying, and unyielding snubbing by MPs. Karbauskis claimed that some of her LVŽS colleagues felt eclipsed by Širinskienė because she appeared to speak on the party's behalf, giving the impression that she actually represented both the party's parliamentary faction and the LVŽS ("A. Širinskienė palieka LVŽS," 2021).

Once Širinskienė outshone Karbauskis, the patriarchal bargain unraveled, and in December 2021 she announced that she was leaving the LVŽS. Her public announcement sent shockwaves through national politics. While the public and a few MPs were caught by surprise by this declaration and supported her decision to quit the party, others blamed her for being the creator and the most ardent supporter of the LVŽS's "patriarchal cult" system. According to Vireliūnaitė (2021), a former LVŽS MP wrote on Facebook: "She herself did everything to make competence, tolerance, democracy and a free mandate [for MPs] despised in the LVŽS faction. She herself created a cult of Bolshevik obedience to the party and the leader," the former LVŽS MP continued by adding: "I tried to resist it and always told [Širinskienė] that sooner or later she would experience the guillotine of the system she was creating."

The most powerful political duo reportedly parted on good terms: Širinskienė thanked LVŽS Chairman Karbauskis and expressed her gratitude to him "for his loyalty to values, dedication and unconditional sacrifice to build Lithuania" and blamed her "difficult character" for frictions in the party, while Karbauskis expressed deep regret that Širinskienė was leaving but reckoned that there was "probably no other way out" ("A. Širinskienė palieka LVŽS," 2021). Starting in early 2022, Širinskienė began political party switching. Starting in early 2022, Širinskienė began to search for a new political home. She wanted to join the center-left Party of the Regions (Politpro.eu, n.d.) but was unsuccessful. Širinskienė eventually became a member of the mixed MPs legislative group, losing some of the public prominence she had previously enjoyed, but retaining political prominence via her ardent public opposition to legislation promoting gender rights, while serving as deputy chair on the Legislative Affairs Committee.

3.4. *Three Patriarchal Bargains*

With the 2024 parliamentary elections approaching, many political parties tried to convince Širinskienė to join them since her membership was expected to significantly boost their party's chances for victory. Ultimately, she made another patriarchal bargain with the newly created populist national-conservative right-wing political party Nemunas Dawn (NA) led by Žemaitaitis (Politpro.eu, n.d.) and was credited for being "one of the most important architects of the [NA's electoral] victory" (Narbutas, 2025). Širinskienė claimed that the NA's values regarding the family, the state, justice issues, and the individual strongly aligned with hers ("Paaiškėjo A. Širinskienės sprendimas," 2024). Others argued that this was a calculated strategic move by Širinskienė since she was listed at the top of the NA electoral list, guaranteeing her election to the national parliament, while Karbauskis asserted that Širinskienė's "butterflying" between ideologically opposite parties signaled that she had abandoned her espoused values and principle-based decision-making in her pursuit of higher political positions (Pikelytė, 2024).

The NA and Žemaitaitis briefly rode on Širinskienė's coattails, given that she was one of the most visible MPs in the legislature and that the NA needed her political stewardship and legal expertise, particularly in lawmaking. Similarly to Karbauskis's patriarchal bargain, Širinskienė also loyally stood by and defended

Žemaitaitis against accusations that he had broken not only the MP's oath but also violated the Constitution by making anti-Semitic statements. Having won 20 seats in the October 2024 parliamentary elections, the NA was invited to join the ruling coalition.

After the NA's unexpected victory, Žemaitaitis and Širinskienė enjoyed a brief moment in the spotlight. Few believed, however, that the new political duo, given their very different personalities, would be able to work together for a long time. Indeed, the diarchy in the NA and Širinskienė's second patriarchal bargain quickly unraveled: less than three months later, Širinskienė announced her resignation from the NA.

From the start, Širinskienė's second patriarchal bargain was tenuous because it was clear that her political ambitions were much stronger than those she had had when she belonged to the LVŽS. Also, because she had by then achieved notoriety and a higher status—she was not a subordinate but almost an equal to the NA's party leader, Žemaitaitis needed Širinskienė just as much as she needed him, and the bargain was built on the equal proportionality of give-take/get deal. The unravelling of the second patriarchal bargain began after her appointment as the sixth deputy speaker of parliament. Širinskienė criticized the agreement between the parties in the ruling coalition signed by Žemaitaitis and hinted that this agreement may need to be reviewed (Černiauskaitė, 2024). Žemaitaitis did not immediately dismiss her criticism but, when he threatened to pull the NA out of the ruling coalition without consulting the NA parliamentary faction if he were not appointed as the seventh deputy speaker of parliament, Širinskienė harshly criticized him, labeling his actions as political ultimatums. Žemaitaitis fired back, announcing that he was forbidding Širinskienė from commenting publicly about matters related to the ruling coalition, and that she was not allowed to speak on the NA's behalf. Širinskienė was not willing to go through another humiliating ordeal of bullying and denigration and quit the NA, claiming that she did not want to be associated with the party's MPs, who had criminal records (Račkauskaitė, 2025).

Širinskienė soon joined Skvernelis's center-left Democratic Union "For Lithuania" (DSVL; see Politpro.eu, n.d.), striking her third patriarchal bargain—a move that produced another political earthquake with potentially larger implications in national politics (Narbutas, 2025). Arguably, Širinskienė's third patriarchal bargain with the male-led DSVL was the least favorable of the three bargains that she had yet made, because the DSVL had many former members of the LVŽS who had joined the party earlier than Širinskienė. Former party leader Skvernelis and his male successor enjoy and maintain the primary patriarchal leadership position—diarchy in the DSVL is not tolerated—and have no intention of sharing the political spotlight with anybody, including Širinskienė, regardless of her political notoriety. Although Širinskienė significantly strengthened the DSVL's position when this party was part of the ruling coalition, but when it collapsed in the Summer of 2025, she practically vanished from both the political spotlight and the media.

Overall, Širinskienė's career trajectory, her rise to prominence in national politics, and place in the political hierarchy were possible thanks to patriarchal bargains that she voluntarily made with, thus far, three parties situated on both sides of the ideological spectrum. She built political capital due to her work ethic, impressive legislative track record, loyalty to male leaders, and dedication to, and support for, gendered hierarchies. However, at critical points when she either eclipsed or threatened to outshine male party leaders, her patriarchal bargains unraveled, leading her to compromise on values and make U-turns (Vireliūnaitė, 2021).

The defining features of Širinskienė's political opportunism are her frequent switching of political party affiliation, her willingness to make and then break patriarchal bargains, and her flip-flopping between espoused political and personal values. These features could potentially undermine her political notoriety and even past legislative successes. The predictions of some analysts that Širinskienė may sink in the DSVL are becoming a reality (Narbutas, 2025). Ultimately, she may need to revive her gendered populist repertoire, which would involve challenging the DSVL party manifesto and even the personalistic politics of male DSVL leaders, to return to the political spotlight and notoriety she had enjoyed for nearly a decade and perhaps strike a fourth patriarchal bargain in the future.

4. Marjorie Taylor Greene: From MAGA Loyalist to a Populist Fighter for the People?

4.1. Biographical Background

MTG was raised in the very affluent Northeastern, white-dominated suburbs of Atlanta (Kruse, 2021). At South Forsyth High School, she was seen as an ordinary, well-liked student by her peers. She didn't display any early drive toward political leadership or especially lofty ambitions. Her teachers do not have any recollections of her. It appears that she was a good, although not great, student (Plott Calabro, 2023, p. 48). During high school, she also helped out with her father's local construction business. Being the first one from her family to finish college, Marjorie pursued a degree in business administration at the University of Georgia. There she met her future husband, Perry Greene. They married in 1995, and she added his last name to her maiden name. After completing her bachelor's in 1996, the two helped run the Taylor family business, but, apparently, MTG was not particularly interested in the construction business, preferring to spend her days at a gym instead. It may be that her failure to establish herself in the construction business contributed to her desire to try out something else, for instance, a career in politics (Plott Calabro, 2023, p. 50). Accusing MTG of infidelity, Marjorie's husband filed for divorce as early as 2012, and their marriage finally ended in 2022.

4.2. Political Career

Up until 2016, Greene showed little interest in politics. However, when Trump began campaigning for the 2016 election, she viewed him as unusually relatable and straightforward. As she put it: "He was someone I could relate to....And I thought, 'finally, maybe this is someone who will do something about the things that deeply bother me.'" She confessed that she saw in him a man resembling her father. "He reminded me of most men I know.....Men like my dad" (Plott Calabro, 2023, p. 53). Although she did not vote that year, she made a one-time contribution to Trump's campaign in 2016.

MTG's path to national politics started in June 2019 in the relatively affluent and somewhat liberal Georgia's 6th District, where she unsuccessfully ran against Lucy McBath, a Democrat. This region of Georgia had been leaning towards Democrats, and MTG realized that she could be much more successful in a more conservative area. During the same year, she successfully ran in a very conservative, relatively poor North Georgia region (the 14th District), in which her pro-gun, anti-abortion, anti-immigrant, anti-gender agenda, and disdain for the federal government received a lot of support from the local population.

It probably helped MTG that in this region she was known for championing conspiracy theories, including QAnon, according to which a high-ranking official in the Trump administration (“Q”) would release cryptic cues about a secret battle between Trump and child-sacrificing devil worshippers serving the US government. Several factors in the region—specifically, the opioid crisis, the influx of Hispanics, and the lack of health insurance—made people susceptible to conspiracy theories, and MTG seemed like a perfect choice for this electorate (Williams, 2021).

Support for QAnon conspiracy theories made MTG known nationally too, as she successfully linked these pseudo-theories to an argument that there is a global elite with enormous powers and enormous capacity for control and abuse (Davies, 2026). MTG’s use of QAnon can be read as a particularly effective form of populist performativity: it did not simply communicate a set of beliefs but staged a political identity and a moral drama. By invoking QAnon’s narrative of a hidden war between ordinary people and a corrupt, predatory elite, MTG repeatedly enacted a sharp boundary between “us” (virtuous, silenced, common-sense white Americans) and “them” (powerful, global, unaccountable politicians), which helped her to enter national politics and gain nationwide recognition. This boundary work is central to populism, but QAnon intensifies it by adding a conspiratorial register that turns political disagreement into existential conflict. In that framing, opponents are not merely wrong—they are dangerous, illegitimate, and often portrayed as complicit in moral crimes and should be removed through violence, if necessary.

4.3. Political and Legislative Work

Building on her populist gendered performativity, MTG entered Congress as one of Trump’s most loyal supporters, even after January 6, 2021, when he was shunned by many Republicans. Just like Širinskienė with Karbauskis (and, later, Žemaitaitis), MTG supported Trump’s agenda and was eager to enter into a patriarchal bargain, being both seen and acting as his helper and loyal supporter. She enthusiastically endorsed Trump’s false claim that the 2020 election had been stolen, helping Trump to reframe the January 6 narrative. In addition, she rallied behind Trump’s “Make America Great Again” agenda and aligned herself so closely with Trump that she got the nickname “Trump in heels” (Kruse, 2021). One of her greatest political ambitions was to be Trump’s VP or at least Secretary of Homeland Security—however, this did not materialize, and Trump’s failure to live up to his end of the patriarchal bargain may have pushed MTG into opposition in 2025 (Davies, 2026).

Embracing anti-gender ideology has definitely helped MTG to become loved and respected among her conservative supporters, not only in North Georgia, but also outside of that deeply conservative region. MTG’s public discourse about the so-called traditional family values and protecting the children, coupled with legislative attempts (when she was in Congress from 2021–2026) to fight gender affirming care for minors, became some of her most visible strategies and activities while in Congress. In 2023, MTG introduced the Protect the Children’s Innocence Act (HR 1399), which was meant to prevent minors from getting puberty blockers, hormone therapies, or surgeries to change gender (U.S. Congress HR 1399: Protect Children’s Innocence Act, 2024). She described gender dysphoria as “an ideology” which was rapidly spreading across social media, and which had to be stopped (Flynn, 2024).

HR 1399 never made it beyond the committee stage in 2023. However, in 2025, MTG introduced this bill again as HR 3492, and this time, it passed the House with 216 in favor and 211 against, on December 17,

mostly along partisan lines, with three Democrats supporting the measure and four Republicans opposing it. Although this legislation probably will not pass the Senate (in 2026, the Republicans do not have the 60-vote majority needed to end a filibuster), the House bill has strengthened Republican resolve to fight against trans people's rights. The bill attempts to make gender affirming care a felony, and doctors who provide such care could be imprisoned for up to 10 years. Civil rights organizations, including the Civil Liberties Union, described this MTG-championed legislation as "the most extreme anti-trans legislation ever considered by Congress" (Kim, 2025).

The supporters of MTG's position, which became mainstream among US Republicans, argue that they are protecting the rights of minors who supposedly are endangered by gender affirming care and cannot make their own decisions. This position is closely linked to the desire of Republicans to protect family values and parental rights. The championing of this position made MTG into a star among Republicans, especially during the Republican Convention in August 2024, where she was a keynote speaker. During the convention, she articulated a position that later became part of an executive order issued by President Trump—that supposedly there are only two genders. She also vilified the left and those associated with the left (with a focus on Democrats) for their support of trans rights, arguing that they "gave us trans visibility day instead of Easter Sunday" (Sommers, 2024).

Overall, Greene's legislative record suggests that she was very active introducing many controversial, polarizing bills, most of which never became law. She was constantly engaged in legislative actions, sponsoring populist bills. For instance, HR 1883 Protect America First proposed:

To enact a moratorium on immigration, build the wall, prioritize securing the Southern border, repeal certain Executive orders which endanger the security of the United States, re-assert a zero-tolerance immigration policy, ensure the safe return of unaccompanied alien children, reduce human trafficking, deport criminal aliens, and end chain migration. (U.S. Congress HR 1883: Protect America First Act, 2021)

Meanwhile, HR1682 English Language Unity Act stated that its goal was "to declare English as the official language of the United States" (U.S. Congress HR 1862: English Language Unity Act of 2025, 2025).

HR 1883 and HR 1682 demonstrate that to get support among her constituents, MTG used relatively common populist strategies of division into "us" and "them," demonizing immigrants and supporting white nationalism in her legislative behavior. These strategies were pursued under the banner of America First, America Only, which happens to be her Twitter/X banner as of 15 January 2026.

Although MTG had high national visibility and gained power by sponsoring controversial legislation, her legislative record of making sure that the proposed bills became laws is poor. According to the Congress website, she sponsored 111 pieces of legislation and co-sponsored 432 pieces of legislation (of which in 277 cases she was the original co-sponsor). This suggests that she was very active in introducing legislation. However, only 14 bills that she either sponsored or co-sponsored actually became law. She exercised a quieter influence by proposing amendments. During her legislative career, she proposed 43 House amendments, 11 of which were adopted. Taking this data into account, the Center for Effective Lawmaking (n.d.) assesses her legislative effectiveness as "below average," putting her near the bottom of the entire

House, at 207 out of 228 for the 118th Congress and 117th Congress. Although she was removed from important congressional committees in 2021 for supporting political violence against Democrats (she was criticized for supporting conspiracy theories, racism, and anti-Semitism), this removal did not affect her ability to propose legislation.

4.4. *One Patriarchal Bargain*

Despite a relatively poor legislative record, Greene's supporters see her as a fighter who does not back down and is committed to championing cultural issues important to the right. This warrior image did not disappear even when Greene became Trump's critic and left Congress in 2026: she continued to be seen as fully supporting the America First cause by her supporters (Barrow & Megnien, 2026). Her voice and visibility are appreciated more than her legislative record. In the eyes of a certain segment of MAGA, she has become an icon associated with a true commitment to America First.

MTG's continued popularity among her supporters is consistent with key arguments in the populism literature about how populist representation works. In many populist projects, what matters most is not technocratic policy production or measurable legislative output, but the successful performance of embodied representation: the leader is valued as someone who voices the people's anger, refuses elite norms, is successfully confrontational, and wages conflict on behalf of an imagined moral national community. In this sense, MTG's warrior image and performativity are not incidental—they are constitutive of her political value. Mudde (2004, pp. 543–544) emphasizes that populism is a “thin-centered” ideology organized around a moral opposition between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” and Greene's public persona continuously stages that opposition through confrontational rhetoric, boundary drawing, and symbolic defiance. Seen through this lens, MTG's appeal also fits the account of populism as a style or political performance rather than primarily a governing program. Scholars who approach populism in performative terms argue that populists cultivate an image of crisis, transgression, and authenticity by violating institutional expectations and media conventions. MTG's visibility and notoriety—generated through provocation, viral confrontation, and culture-war messaging—therefore becomes a form of political productivity. Even when her bills fail, the public fights she initiates can be interpreted by her audience as evidence that she is “doing the right thing”: exposing enemies, breaking taboos, and demonstrating loyalty to the people against the corrupt establishment. MTG continued to battle the system even after exiting Congress. In January 2026, she voiced her support for an isolationist American foreign policy by denouncing Trump's Venezuela operation and describing it as a “regime change/foreign intervention,” thus remaining faithful to the America First agenda (Oppenheim & Cunningham, 2026). She articulated her disillusionment with Trump for betraying her and highlighted her disagreements with him over the Hamas-Israel war and Trump's long-standing resistance to releasing the Epstein files. MTG went as far as to suggest that the entire MAGA movement, led by Trump, was a lie, arguing that MAGA was “really serving...their big donors.” She also criticized Trump's involvement with “big corporations” and “foreign countries,” who were, in her eyes, “running the show” in Trump's America (Fields, 2026).

MTG's decision to insist on the release of the Epstein files was the main reason for the end of her patriarchal bargain with Trump. MTG adamantly condemned Trump's unwillingness to order the Justice Department to release the files, finally fracturing this relationship. The end of what appeared to be an unbreakable patriarchal bargain demonstrated the instability of personalist politics (rooted in the MTG–Trump alliance), when devotion

to the leader (demonstrated by MTG) becomes incompatible with the politician's own brand (MTG as a sincere populist). The unravelling of the patriarchal bargain between MTG and Trump revealed both the power and fragility of politics built around personal loyalty.

MTG's exit from Congress should not be read as political death so much as a shift in venue—from institutional lawmaking to the broader populist arena, where influence is measured by attention, agenda-setting, and symbolic representation. Populist leaders often remain politically consequential even when they lose office, resign, or are pushed to the margins of formal institutions because their authority is rooted less in bureaucratic capacity and more in an ongoing claim to embody the people against the entrenched power of the elites. In that sense, MTG can continue to function as a populist right-wing leader-entrepreneur—she can mobilize supporters, discipline Republicans from the outside, and sustain the moral narrative that propelled her into prominence in the first place.

5. Conclusion

By examining the formative life experiences and pathways to power of Širinskienė and MTG, our comparative case study demonstrates that their life stories are strikingly dissimilar and yet produce comparable political outcomes: a successful rise to power. Širinskienė's rural upbringing, religiosity, and academic credentials provided her with expertise, discipline, and a moral compass, which later translated into institutional effectiveness and power in legislative committees. In contrast, MTG's background, which includes a business education, an affluent suburban background, and a complicated personal story (including a divorce), did not generate expertise and discipline. Instead, she was able to present herself as an authentic politician, close to the people, which helped her rise to power and get elected to Congress. Neither of these two politicians appears to have been "destined" for success in power politics, but they were able to get there through conversion (in Širinskienė's case, from academia to party politics, and in MTG's case, from political neutrality to a strong Trump supporter), in addition to the successful use of the patriarchal bargain strategy.

Our comparative analysis of Širinskienė and MTG reveals that both women rose to political stardom as a result of patriarchal bargains that they voluntarily made with male party leaders. As part of the initial patriarchal bargain, both women not only adopted the values and ideas of male party leaders, but they also embodied and publicly performed their newly assumed roles. To reach political notoriety, Širinskienė and MTG built patriarchal solidarity with male party leaders and further entrenched patriarchal hierarchy while articulating an exclusionary populist repertoire filled with anti-gender, anti-establishment, anti-immigration public pronouncements, and legislative initiatives.

Their success in making patriarchal bargains is reflected through the comparison of their careers, which illustrate that Širinskienė's and MTG's political success had to do with their ability to become strategically useful to prominent male leaders. Širinskienė's political career shows her ability to understand the institution well and apply her expertise successfully. After entering the LVŽS and cooperating with Karbauskis, she rose rapidly by performing the party's "hard work" of governance and confrontation: committee leadership, the drafting of legislation, and investigatory commissions. She became an internal authority and a hitwoman, a figure whose value lay in her capacity to defend the male leader and his agenda. MTG's career shows a parallel path: she became nationally prominent not by dominating committee structures, but by excelling at playing populist politics to get people's attention (i.e., by successfully engaging conspiracy theories, waging

cultural wars)—and, while doing it all, showing loyalty to Trump and being his adamant supporter. Like Širinskienė, MTG's political success had to do with being recognized, valued, and keeping the attention of a male populist leader (especially at MAGA-related events); unlike Širinskienė, her influence derived more from her ability to control external factors, such as her successful use of conspiracy theories and obtaining support from the MAGA movement.

Although both women politicians practiced highly confrontational styles, especially towards political opponents and the opposition in the legislature, Širinskienė mostly limited her hostility to harsh political rhetoric in parliament and the media and launched legislative investigations to prove corrupt practices by opposition party leaders and their family members. MTG's hostility and clashes, however, were much more diverse and on a wider scale. In contrast to Širinskienė, MTG showed a strong affinity for, and promoted, various conspiracy theories, regularly voiced Islamophobic and antisemitic views, openly endorsed political violence against high-ranking members of the Democratic Party, and advanced a white supremacist agenda.

Our comparison of their legislative activities demonstrates that populist women leaders can matter legislatively in sharply different ways. Širinskienė's legislative record is immense: she was very productive in drafting and submitting bills and shaping committees' agendas. She translated her anti-gender priorities into legislative action. Her populist project was advanced institutionally, not just through rhetoric. In contrast, MTG's thin legislative record suggests a different logic. Although she was unable to push through many bills, her focus on controversial bills (including bills about immigration, language, and gender affirming care) was meant to maintain her visibility and ideological currency, even though the proposed legislative measures were not successful. MTG succeeded in normalizing extreme positions within the Republican Party and getting these positions national attention. In both cases, the two women populist politicians were successful at pushing a populist agenda but had different strategies.

Both Širinskienė and MTG engaged in patriarchal bargaining, which helped them achieve political power but at the same time revealed the fragility of their positions when they reached power. Once these women populist politicians undermined existing bargains by criticizing their party's members, agendas/priorities, or leaders themselves, these bargains broke down, and they were pressured to leave the party (or parties, in Širinskienė's case). Širinskienė's serial bargains also reveal how women can gain power through loyalty and competence yet become vulnerable when they outshine male leaders or threaten internal hierarchies. MTG's bargain reveals a different vulnerability: dependence on a male-led movement and its rewards, at least initially. Furthermore, because Lithuania is a multiparty political system, Širinskienė actually had the option of joining other political parties and, as a result, did strike multiple patriarchal bargains, whereas MTG had no party-switching alternatives given that the US political system is exclusively dominated by two parties.

Overall, Širinskienė and MTG cases demonstrate how women's visibility within populism actually strengthens, not weakens, patriarchal politics, especially when women politicians become associated with anti-gender and other traditionalist agendas. What remains to be seen is the extent and depth of the impact that these two women populist leaders will have on women in national politics. On the one hand, their anti-feminist stands could stall the progress of women's empowerment in a highly media-saturated and influenced politics; on the other hand, anti-feminist populist women leaders could produce a pushback as more women seek greater representation in national politics and are armed with a determination to reshape political landscapes and uproot male-imposed norms and values.

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Conflict of Interests

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