

Populist Parties, Female Populist Leaders, and the Gendered Vote in Germany

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Abstract

Studying the relationship between gender and populist voting is challenging because few electoral contexts allow for a direct comparison of relevant populist parties from different ideological camps under shared structural conditions. The 2025 German federal election provides a rare case: two ideologically distinct populist parties, both led by prominent female leaders, competed nationally. Alice Weidel headed the radical-right AfD, while Sahra Wagenknecht led the left-authoritarian BSW. Although both parties are headed by women and use populist appeals, their gendered electorates differ sharply: the AfD is supported disproportionately by men, whereas the BSW draws a larger share of female voters. Because the two parties operate in the same electoral and institutional environment, this case lets us isolate the roles of general issue preferences and gender-related attitudes in shaping gendered divides in populist voting, without the confounding influence of differing opportunity structures or leadership gender effects. Using data from the German Longitudinal Election Study, we analyze propensity-to-vote scores for both parties. The results show that the gender gap persists in baseline models but disappears once respondents' attitudes toward gender-related issues are introduced, indicating that such policy preferences systematically structure gendered voting. Mediation analysis confirms that the initial gender gap operates through these gender-related attitudes. Although leader evaluations are strong predictors of overall party support, they do not account for the gender gap. Together, these results underscore the central role of gendered policy orientations in structuring populist vote choice, highlighting how issue positions, leadership cues, and gender-related attitudes jointly shape gendered electoral behavior.

Keywords

female populist leaders; gender and populism; German politics; voting behavior

1. Introduction

Studying the relationship between gender and populist voting is difficult because most electoral contexts do not allow for meaningful comparisons across populist parties from different ideological camps. Existing research suggests that support for populist parties is shaped by the interaction of multiple factors, including the activation of individual-level populist attitudes, issue preference and ideological congruence, and features of the political supply side (Hawkins et al., 2020; Zhirnov et al., 2026). Furthermore, variation in the available choice set—whether voters face one or multiple populist options—is likely to shape vote choice itself. In electoral contexts with only one relevant populist party, this additionally complicates efforts to disentangle the effects of ideology from those of populism when it comes to gendered vote choice.

The 2025 German federal election provides a rare opportunity to address this problem. In this election, two ideologically distinct populist parties with credible prospects of entering parliament competed nationwide: the populist radical-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the left-authoritarian Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht—Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (BSW). Alice Weidel, who has co-led the AfD alongside Tino Chrupalla since 2022, was selected as its sole chancellor candidate for the 2025 election. She enjoys strong support among the party base and electorate. At the same time, her personal profile is at odds with the party's ideology: she is openly lesbian and in a long-term relationship with a woman of color, which contrasts with the party's emphasis on traditional gender roles and conservative family norms.

The newly founded left-authoritarian populist party BSW is led by its founder Sahra Wagenknecht, a former leading figure of the Left Party (Die Linke). Wagenknecht left the party in late 2023 due to escalating strategic and ideological conflicts over migration, “identity politics,” and the party's target electorate, arguing that it had become “too liberal,” and subsequently founded the BSW as a new political project. While positioned on the left on economic issues, the party adopts comparatively conservative positions on cultural questions, placing it much closer to the AfD than to Wagenknecht's former party on this dimension (Steiner & Hillen, 2025).

Despite being led by prominent female populist candidates, the parties' electorates diverged sharply along gender lines in the 2025 federal election. As in previous German elections, the “modern gender gap” was evident, with women tending to favor left-leaning parties and men more likely to support conservative or right-wing parties (Hudde, 2025). A gender gap is also visible between the AfD and BSW. Women are comparatively more likely to support the BSW, whereas men are disproportionately represented among voters of the AfD. However, so far, research has not addressed how this discrepancy could be explained. This stark contrast provides a particularly clear case for examining how populist vote choice intersects with gender.

Due to the regional and ideological sensitivity, exploring the connection between gender, populism, and voting requires a context in which two ideologically distinct populist parties compete under shared structural conditions. Against this backdrop, the 2025 German federal election provides a valuable opportunity to investigate whether gender plays a more significant role in shaping support for populist parties than is generally acknowledged. Moreover, this case is particularly well suited for comparative analysis, as both parties are led by women, ensuring a level of comparability that would be harder to achieve if leadership differed by gender. In addressing the underexplored nexus between gender and populism, this study investigates the following research question:

RQ: Why and how does gender structure support for the two female-led populist parties, AfD and BSW, in the 2025 German federal election?

Using survey data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) 2025, this study examines the sources of the gender gap in support for the AfD and the BSW. The next section reviews the literature on gender gaps in voting behavior and the gendered dimensions of populist support, integrating demand- and supply-side perspectives. We then develop a theoretical framework that conceptualizes gender-related attitudes as a key mechanism linking gender to vote choice. Using OLS regression models and mediation analysis, our findings show how gender differences in party support are attenuated once gender-related attitudes are taken into account. The final section discusses the implications of these findings for understanding the role of gendered policy orientations in structuring support for populist parties.

2. Gender Gaps in Voting Behavior

Gender gaps in electoral behavior have been studied extensively for decades, with research showing that these patterns are neither fixed nor uniform but vary across time and countries. In most Western democracies, women were more likely than men to support conservative and center-right parties until the 1970s, a pattern often attributed to women's higher levels of religiosity and their exclusion from the labor market (A. Campbell et al., 1980). Since then, however, this pattern has reversed. Women are now more likely than men to support left-leaning parties—a shift commonly referred to as the “modern gender gap”—which is also reflected in their ideological self-placement and policy preferences (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014; Inglehart & Norris, 2000).

Most of the explanations emphasize gradual, long-term societal transformations (Shorrocks, 2018). In their “developmental theory,” Inglehart and Norris (2000) argue that modernization processes like women's expanding education and labor-force participation have enhanced women's autonomy while exposing them to persistent gender-based inequalities, thereby fostering left-leaning political orientations. Complementary research highlights the role of secularization and women's overrepresentation in comparatively lower-paying sectors, all of which contribute to the formation of new gendered political preferences over time and across generations (Dassonneville, 2021; Emmenegger & Manow, 2014; van Ditmars & Shorrocks, 2025).

Another strand of attitudinal research suggests that the gender gap may partly reflect a “feminism gap” rather than a genuinely gender-based divide (Bergh, 2007). From this perspective, variation in “feminist consciousness” (i.e., gender-related attitudes such as perceptions of gender roles, support for women's rights movements, and endorsement of feminist policies) constitutes a key explanatory factor. Because left-wing parties are generally more progressive on gender equality, and women tend to hold more egalitarian attitudes, they are more likely to vote left (Grunow et al., 2018). Similarly, individuals of any sex who hold progressive positions on these issues are also more inclined to support left-wing parties (Gurin, 1985; Hayes, 1997). This perspective gains renewed relevance in light of recent research highlighting the increasing politicization of gender across policy fields and national contexts, which is strongly driven by the anti-gender mobilizations of a broad coalition of radical-right, conservative, and center-right actors (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Research on candidate gender and voting behavior further suggests that women are, on average, more likely to support female candidates; however, this effect is highly contingent on contextual factors like country,

party affiliation, and the candidates' perceived policy positions (R. Campbell & Heath, 2017; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Crucially, descriptive representation alone is insufficient: gender-based affinity effects are strongest when female candidates are perceived as substantively representing women's interests (Plutzer & Zipp, 1996). Consequently, the electoral relevance of female populist leadership might depend less on the gender per se than on the alignment between leader identity, party ideology, and gender-related policy positions. However, female leadership can increase support among women even in contexts where such alignment is weak. A prominent example is the French radical-right Rassemblement National, which attracted more women under Marine Le Pen than under her father (Mayer, 2013).

These insights are particularly relevant when shifting the focus from general gender gaps in voting to populist party competition. As populist parties have gained strength across Europe, research has increasingly converged on a common conceptualization of populism. Following Mudde's ideational approach, populism is commonly conceptualized as a thin-centred ideology that relies on a host ideology to articulate a broader political agenda (Mudde, 2004). Further studies suggest that populist parties engage with gender differently depending on their ideological and cultural contexts (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015).

Against this backdrop, most existing research on gender and populism has focused on the persistent (populist) radical-right gender gap, whereby men are consistently more likely than women to support populist radical-right parties (Immerzeel et al., 2015). Mediation-based explanations attribute this gap to gender differences in the thick ideological attitudes associated with radical-right support. While some evidence points to a broader gender gap in populist attitudes beyond the radical-right, findings remain inconclusive (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017).

Moderation-based accounts posit that comparable levels of nativist and authoritarian attitudes do not translate into radical-right vote choice to the same extent among women as they do among men (Harteveld et al., 2015). Other studies emphasize socio-psychological factors, noting that men are generally more likely than women to support ideologically extreme and socially stigmatized parties, as women are more sensitive to social harmony and social desirability (Harteveld et al., 2017).

3. Demand-Side Factors: Explaining the Populist Vote

At the individual level, populist attitudes are often associated with support for populist parties, irrespective of the parties' thick ideological orientations (Hawkins et al., 2020; Loew & Faas, 2019; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). Yet, research on how populist attitudes interact with ideological components in shaping vote choice remains limited. Studies of the populist radical-right suggest that support depends on both populist attitudes and alignment with party positions on key issues (Lewandowsky & Wagner, 2023; Zhirnov et al., 2026). Concerning sociodemographic factors, support for these parties is more common among individuals with lower educational attainments, working-class backgrounds, and those living in precarity (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018).

Nevertheless, by comparing support for populist parties from varying political camps, Rooduijn (2018) does not identify a common denominator uniting all populist voters. However, evidence from European democracies suggests that right- and left-wing populist voters share some core beliefs and attitudes. They exhibit low institutional trust, negative evaluations of political responsiveness, economic pessimism, and

high Euroscepticism (Krause et al., 2017). The key difference lies in issue positions and priorities: radical-right populist voters emphasize immigration and Euroscepticism, while left-wing populists focus on economic grievances and redistribution.

The gendered dimensions of populist attitudes remain understudied. While some studies find no significant differences in the distribution of populist attitudes between men and women (Hameleers et al., 2021; Piterová & Loziak, 2024), others show that men are more likely to hold populist attitudes at a higher level than women (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Pruyssers, 2021; Rico & Anduiza, 2019), which might translate to a higher likelihood of men voting for populist parties (Geurkink et al., 2020).

4. The Supply-Side: Populist Parties and Gender

As for the supply-side relationship, the focus is similarly limited to the populist radical-right (T. Akkerman, 2015; Dietze & Roth, 2020). Here, studies consistently find that these parties are structurally misogynistic and committed to the re-traditionalization of gender relations, promoting a binary and essentialist understanding of gender that reinforces the sexual division of labor and opposes feminist and egalitarian values.

Despite their gender positions, populist radical-right parties include a notable number of active female members and prominent leaders (Ammassari, 2025), with Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni among the most visible. Research suggests that radical-right parties strategically exploit the contradiction between essentialist gender ideologies and the visibility of women within their own parties, defying traditional roles as a “dynamic paradox” (Dietze, 2018), which legitimizes rather than undermines their agenda. Female members and leaders can selectively highlight women’s issues, especially during electoral campaigns, without substantively altering the party’s core positions (Meguid et al., 2025). These strategies frequently take the form of femonationalist framings (Farris, 2017), invoking women’s rights to justify exclusionary, particularly anti-immigrant, policies, thereby attempting to appeal to more moderate voters. In this context, female leaders function as signals of moderation and credibility. However, such appeals remain purely symbolic, and they are found to achieve limited success in closing the gender gap in support for radical-right parties, outside of the aforementioned case of Le Pen in France (Meguid et al., 2025).

Among the few studies comparing the gendered appeals of different populist actors, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015) are particularly influential. Comparing European right-wing and Latin American left-wing populist parties, they find that gender positions primarily reflect host ideology and national context: Latin American left-wing populists adopt relatively progressive gender stances within conservative settings, while European right-wing populists defend more traditionalist positions in comparatively progressive contexts, often invoking femonationalist narratives. They conclude that populism itself has no intrinsic relationship with gender. However, because they compare ideologically distinct actors embedded in markedly different regional contexts, such an inference may be premature and warrants further systematic investigation.

The absence of a uniform gender pattern across ideological variants does not imply gender neutrality; rather, gender may function as a flexible symbolic resource through which populists construct collective identity and articulate inclusion and exclusion. The aforementioned supply-side research shows that populist parties deploy gender strategically, albeit in divergent ways across the ideological spectrum (Mostov, 2020). Right-wing populists emphasize binary and traditionalist gender norms while leveraging female leaders and

femonationalist rhetoric to broaden appeal, whereas left-wing populists foreground women's political and economic equality while often limiting recognition of broader gender diversity.

5. Two Populist Female Chancellor Candidates: BSW and AfD in the 2025 German Federal Election

The German political landscape in 2025 offers a rare opportunity to study how two ideologically distinct female-led populist actors—the BSW and the AfD—compete for votes under shared national and institutional conditions. The final results reveal intriguing divergent gender gaps between these populist competitors: representative election statistics show that the AfD received 20.8 percent of the vote overall, with support among men exceeding that of women by 8.4 percentage points, whereas the BSW captured 4.98 percent, with support among women being 1.3 percentage points higher (Die Bundeswahlleiterin, 2025, p. 14). Among all parties, the gender gap was largest for the AfD, despite its female chancellor candidate. In this section, we take a closer look at the 2025 electoral competition and the populist parties' positions, particularly regarding gender attitudes, to better understand the observed gap.

Although the BSW is relatively new and its programmatic base is still evolving, its programs for European, federal, and regional elections already provide sufficient material to classify it as a left-authoritarian populist actor in its combination of traditional left-wing economic positions with sociocultural conservatism (Thomeczek, 2024; Wagner et al., 2023). In the year preceding the 2025 federal election, the party joined governing coalitions in Brandenburg and Thuringia and received 6.2 percent of the vote in the 2024 European Parliament election. In the federal election itself, however, the party narrowly failed to enter parliament, missing the 5 percent threshold by only about 9,000 votes. Despite this outcome, the BSW has emerged as a significant new competitor in the German party landscape.

By contrast, the AfD has strongly consolidated its profile as a prototypical authoritarian, nativist, and populist radical-right party since its foundation in 2013 (Heitmeyer, 2024). Over time, the party has developed a stable core electorate and achieved growing electoral success across state and federal elections, most notably emerging as the strongest party in Thuringia in 2024 and the second strongest party in the 2025 federal election (Heinze, 2025).

Both parties compete for a populist electorate but occupy distinct positions within a two-dimensional party space. The AfD is located in the right-conservative quadrant, whereas the BSW occupies a left-conservative position, rendering the two parties relatively close on the sociocultural dimension but more distant on the socioeconomic dimension (Steiner & Hillen, 2025). While the AfD combines neoliberal elements with nationalist anti-capitalist rhetoric, the BSW advances an anti-neoliberal, nationalist agenda centered on the selective expansion of welfare state measures. Despite their general ideological differences, the parties share several core positions. Both AfD and the BSW support restrictive immigration policies, adopt protectionist economic positions while criticizing the EU and globalization, oppose military support for Ukraine in its defense against Russia, and reject cosmopolitanism and diversity (Thomeczek & Wagner, 2025).

Alongside immigration, debates about gender have become an increasingly salient component of the sociocultural dimension of party competition (Wallaschek et al., 2024). As is the case for populist attitudes (Hawkins et al., 2020), the impact of any issue on voting depends on whether those attitudes are activated in

a given context. The same logic likely applies to gender-related attitudes. In Germany, recent public debates have focused particularly on institutional gender equality measures, gender quotas, and gender-inclusive language (Jäckle, 2022). While these issues are increasingly polarized in public opinion, their salience in electoral campaigns varies over time. In the 2025 campaign, gender issues generally played a minor role, only surfacing briefly in debates on the potential decriminalization of abortion in early 2025.

A careful review of the parties' federal election programs reveals their positions on some gender-related issues. The AfD follows a typical radical-right pattern, promoting traditional gender roles, opposing abortion rights, and framing gender equality policies as expressions of a "totalitarian gender ideology" (Lang, 2017). Consistent with this rhetoric, the AfD's 2025 federal election program embeds gender in traditionalist, heteronormative, and biologically essentialist narratives, linking the protection of women, children, and families to nationalist and civilizational concerns (Alternative für Deutschland, 2025, pp. 145–155).

Although systematic research on BSW's gender positions remains absent, the party generally follows a second-wave feminist perspective, advocating expansive legal and social equality for women and supporting state measures to strengthen women's and family rights (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2025, pp. 33–34). At the same time, this framework remains firmly binary: the BSW portrays trans women and efforts to deconstruct gender categories as threats to these goals (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2025, p. 34). Although both parties employ femonationalist rhetoric, the AfD does so systematically and extensively throughout its program and campaign, whereas BSW references it only briefly (Alternative für Deutschland, 2025, pp. 102, 122; Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2025, p. 36).

To sum up, although both populist parties reject trans-inclusive conceptions of gender, they differ markedly in their support for measures promoting the equality of women and in their general understandings of gender roles. Here, the AfD advances a biological essentialism embedded in nativist, traditionalist, and heteronormative worldviews, whereas the BSW promotes a women's-rights agenda that, although expansive, primarily addresses the equality of cisgender women while marginalizing trans and non-binary individuals. These distinctions are crucial for developing specific expectations about how individual attitudes toward gender issues influence support for each party.

The presence of prominent female leaders in both the AfD and the BSW adds an important layer. The two parties represent contrasting configurations of female populist leadership. Alice Weidel exemplifies a central paradox of right-wing populism: the prominence of female leaders within parties that promote "traditionalist" and anti-feminist gender ideologies. Despite leading a party grounded in a biologically essentialist and heteronormative conception of gender, her personal profile as a woman in a same-sex, interethnic relationship is at odds with this ideology. This disjuncture does not necessarily undermine credibility; rather, it can mobilize strategically. By decoupling personal identity from party ideology, Weidel may contribute to a moderating effect in public perception while selectively foregrounding her gender when deploying femonationalist narratives that frame migration as a threat to women (Ulrich et al., 2022). In this sense, her gender functions less as a vehicle for substantive representation and more as a symbolic and strategic resource that broadens the party's appeal.

By contrast, Sahra Wagenknecht represents a more coherent alignment between her personal identity, her leadership, and the party's positions. As the highly personalized face of the BSW, she reinforces the party's

emphasis on social justice and state support for women, thereby lending credibility to its gender-related policy agenda. At the same time, this alignment is not without tension. Although critical of identity politics, Wagenknecht strategically mobilizes her gender and East German background to successfully appeal to specific constituencies.

These cases suggest that female populist leadership conditions, rather than determining, the effect of gender attitudes on vote choice. Where leader identity and party positions are congruent, as in the case of Sahra Wagenknecht, leadership may enhance the credibility of policy commitments and strengthen support among voters with egalitarian gender attitudes, particularly women. In contrast, where such congruence is absent, as in the case of Alice Weidel, female leadership is unlikely to generate comparable affinity effects. Instead, Weidel might partially mitigate the AfD's gender gap while failing to make the party genuinely attractive to women. However, the extent of this effect—and whether the gap would be larger without her—remains uncertain.

6. Hypothesis

Building on the concept of “feminist consciousness” discussed in Section 2, this study examines gender-related attitudes (i.e., individual positions on issues linked to gender and sexual equality) as a potential explanation for the contrasting gender gaps in support for the BSW and the AfD, alongside sociodemographic and broader issue-based determinants. These attitudes generally span a broad range, from specific policies promoting gender and sexual equality—such as abortion regulation, gender quotas, or marriage equality for same-sex couples—to more general, normative beliefs about gender, gender roles, and the conceptualization of gender itself, of which we can only analyze a small fraction.

We argue that gender-related attitudes constitute a central mechanism underlying the divergent gender gaps in support for the two populist contenders. The party positions outlined in Section 5 allow us to derive specific expectations regarding vote choice. Voters endorsing state-led measures promoting gender equality, such as gender quotas, are more congruent with the BSW, which is why we expect a positive effect on BSW support. In contrast, opposition to such policies aligns with the AfD's positions, which frame such measures as part of a broader “gender ideology.”

At the same time, both parties are critical of broader, pluralistic conceptions of gender, often reflected in their rejection of gender-inclusive language, making this issue unlikely to differentiate support between them. Consequently, the gender gap in vote choice is expected to be driven strongly by women's higher support for gender equality measures and concern about the underrepresentation of women. In other words, gender-related attitudes focused on the equality of women are hypothesized to substantially mediate the gender gap in populist voting behavior:

H: The gender gap in support for the BSW and the AfD is substantially mediated by attitudes towards gender issues.

Consistent with previous research, we expect that the gender gap is partly shaped by women's greater left-leaning orientations on broader socioeconomic and sociocultural issues, including redistribution, climate policy, and immigration. Drawing on the socio-psychological Michigan model of voting (A. Campbell et al.,

1980), we argue that long-term social characteristics like gender shape voting indirectly by influencing more proximate attitudes—a funnel of causality in which enduring traits structure party preferences through issue positions. Accordingly, our analysis considers both attitudinal and sociodemographic factors in explaining the gender gap. Finally, we incorporate leadership evaluations of Alice Weidel and Sahra Wagenknecht into our regression models. This accounts for the fact that both figures generate high levels of affect among their respective partisan bases. By controlling for these evaluations, we ensure that the observed gendered effects are not merely artifacts of strong party-based leader attachment, as sympathy for these leaders largely mirrors broader partisan sympathy.

7. Data and Operationalization

We use data from the 2025 post-election cross-section of the GLES to test this hypothesis. The dependent variables are party preferences for the AfD and the BSW. These were both measured using the propensity-to-vote (PTV) item included in the survey, which asks respondents “to indicate how likely it is that you would ever vote for that party.” Answers range from 1 (“I would certainly not vote for this party”) to 11 (“I would certainly vote for this party”). Thus, the PTV measure captures graded electoral preferences for each party.

To capture the gender gap, we use a binary gender variable distinguishing male and female respondents. Individuals identifying as non-binary/diverse or declining to report their gender are excluded due to small sample sizes and privacy concerns. While gender is a central variable in political science, it is rarely critically reflected on in quantitative research (de Vries et al., 2024). Standard survey categories (male, female, and diverse) reflect administrative conventions and often assume cisnormativity, failing to capture distinctions such as gender identity, expression, or conformity. As a result, the variable provides only a limited proxy for the multidimensional concept it represents (Solevid et al., 2021). Accordingly, we acknowledge that our analysis is constrained by these measurement limitations, as more nuanced indicators would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of gendered effects.

Gender attitudes are the central explanatory variables hypothesized to account for gender voting gaps for both the AfD and BSW, which we measured with three items. First, we measure evaluations of women’s descriptive representation in parliament. Respondents were informed that, after the 2021 election, the share of women in the Bundestag was 31.4%, and then asked whether this percentage was *too high*, *too low*, or *about right*. This variable was recoded into a binary indicator, with 1 representing the view that the percentage is *too low* and 0 representing *about right* or *too high*. Second, we measured attitudes toward gender-sensitive language using agreement with the statement: “Writing and speaking in gender-sensitive language, for example ‘Bürger*innen,’ are useful measures to ensure greater equality.” Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Third, we included an item capturing opinions on state-led gender equality policies: “Governmental measures for gender equality in society already go too far,” which was also measured on a five-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. All items capturing gender attitudes are coded in a way that higher values indicate more critical or restrictive positions toward gender equality policies and discourses.

Candidate preference is measured using standard like–dislike scales for the two chancellor candidates, Alice Weidel for the AfD and Sahra Wagenknecht for the BSW. Respondents were asked: “Please rate your opinion

of different political leaders. What do you think of...?" Answers range from -5 ("I think very poorly of this person") to $+5$ ("I think very highly of this person"). These items capture generalized evaluations of leaders and allow us to assess the extent to which personalized support influences gendered party preferences.

Populist attitudes are measured using an index composed of six survey items corresponding to the populist attitudes scale proposed by A. Akkerman et al. (2014). Responses were aggregated into an additive index by calculating the mean across items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$), with higher values indicating stronger populist attitudes (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). To capture potential non-linearities and ease interpretation, quintiles were constructed from the resulting scale.

Issue positions are measured along three core policy dimensions that are central to party competition in Germany (Stövsand et al., 2022): redistribution, immigration, and climate change. Preferences on redistribution are captured by the following item: "Some people prefer lower taxes, although this results in fewer social services. Others prefer more social services, although this results in raising taxes. What position do you take on taxes and social services?" Responses range from 1 (*Lower taxes and fewer social services*) to 11 (*More social services and higher taxes*). Attitudes toward immigration are measured by asking whether immigration for foreigners should be facilitated or restricted, again on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (*Facilitate immigration for foreigners*) to 11 (*Restrict immigration of foreigners*). Preferences regarding climate policy are operationalized using a trade-off question between environmental protection and economic growth. Respondents indicate whether fighting climate change should take precedence, even if it impairs economic growth (1), or if economic growth should take precedence, even if it impairs climate protection (11). All issue scales are coded such that higher values represent more restrictive or market-oriented positions.

We proceed with our analysis in three steps. First, we estimate baseline OLS models including populist attitudes, issue positions, leader evaluations, and sociodemographic characteristics predicting the populist competitors' PTVs. Second, we extend these models by adding gender-related attitudes to assess their explanatory power for the observed gender gap. Third, we employ structural equation models to examine whether support for these attitudes mediates the effect of gender on party support. All models include a standard set of control variables: region (East vs. West Germany), age (in years), and educational attainment. To ensure representativeness, all analyses were conducted using the provided sociodemographic and regional survey weights.

8. Results

Figure 1 presents the results from OLS regression models explaining PTV scores for both parties. Model A constitutes the baseline specification, while Model B adds the gender-related attitude variables central to our theoretical argument (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File for full regression tables).

Model A reveals a small but statistically significant gender effect even after controlling for leader evaluations, populist attitudes, issue positions, age, education, and region: women are more likely to support the BSW, whereas men are more likely to support the AfD. The control variables behave largely as expected. Evaluations of party leaders are strongly associated with support for the respective parties, indicating substantial leader effects, while populist attitudes are positively correlated with support for both parties. Negative attitudes

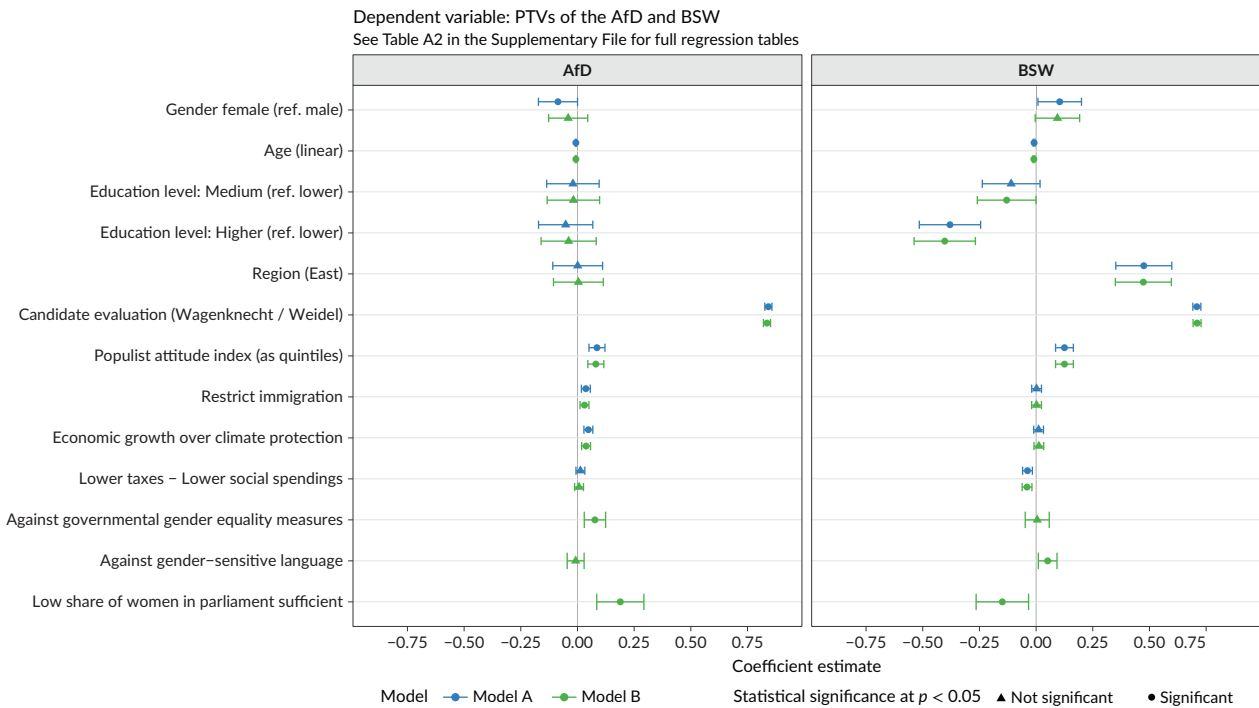


Figure 1. Coefficient plot of OLS regression models.

toward immigration and climate policy are significantly associated with higher AfD support, whereas support for redistribution is positively associated with BSW support.

Once Model B introduces attitudes toward gender-related policies, the independent effect of respondent gender disappears, indicating that these attitudes mediate the observed gender gap. However, the additional explanatory gain is comparatively limited, with adjusted R^2 increasing only modestly from Model A to Model B (AfD: 0.76 to 0.77; BSW: 0.59 to 0.60). At the same time, supplementary models including only the three gender-related attitude measures (results not shown) yield markedly different explanatory power across parties: while these variables account for a substantial share of variance in AfD support (Adj. $R^2 = 0.15$), their explanatory contribution for BSW support remains very limited (Adj. $R^2 = 0.02$). This pattern likely reflects the AfD's much clearer anti-feminist positioning, which renders gender-related attitudes more politically salient for AfD support than for support of the BSW.

For the AfD, the results show a consistently conservative electorate on gender issues. Agreement with the statement that government measures promoting gender equality *go too far* is positively associated with AfD support. Furthermore, respondents who do not perceive the share of women in parliament as too low are significantly more likely to support the AfD. Surprisingly, rejection of gender-sensitive language does not have a statistically significant effect in the full AfD model.

Post-estimation diagnostics indicate no violations of key OLS assumptions. All variance inflation factors (VIF) are well below the conventional multicollinearity threshold of 5 (the largest VIF is 1.97; the mean VIF ranges from 1.44 to 1.50). Additional tests for heteroskedasticity fail to reject the null hypothesis of constant error variance.

Figure 2 illustrates the substantive effect of perceptions that the proportion of women in parliament is too low on party support, holding all other things equal (results based on Model B). For the BSW, evaluating the share of women as too low increases the predicted PTV from approximately 3.0 to 3.2. For the AfD, the effect is reversed: the same attitude decreases the predicted PTV from about 3.2 to 3.0.

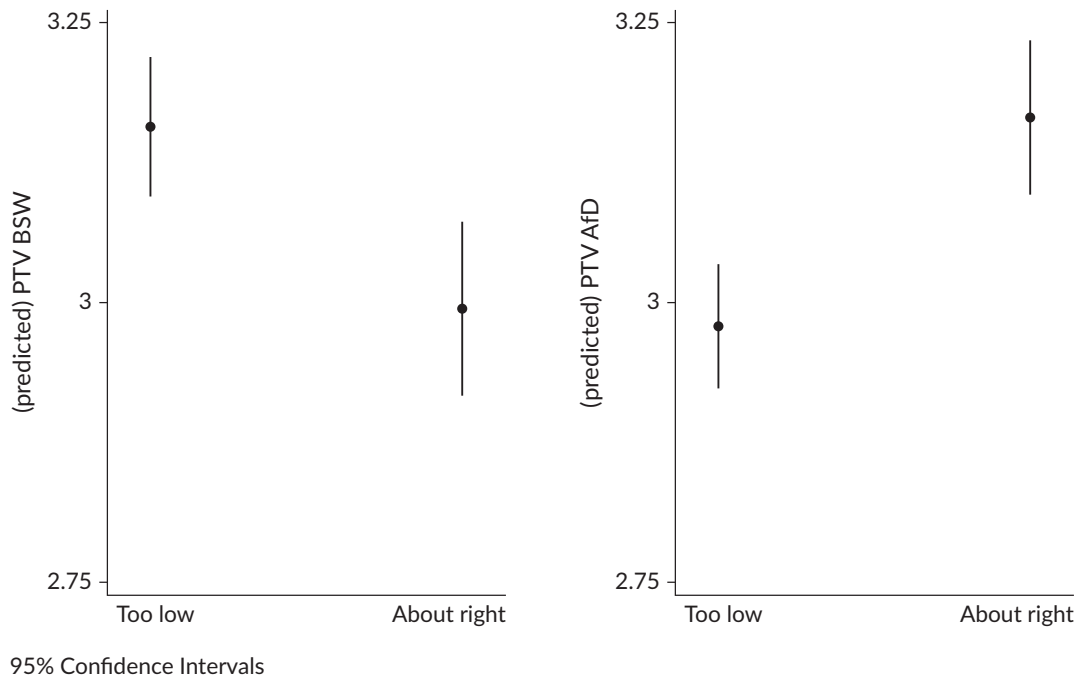


Figure 2. Effect of attitudes on the share of women in parliament on PTVs for AfD and BSW.

Substantively, the results indicate that while both parties challenge liberal feminist positions, they do so in distinct ways. Support for the AfD is consistently associated with opposition to institutional gender equality measures. In contrast, support for the BSW combines endorsement of descriptive representation (i.e., increasing the number of women in parliament) with skepticism toward symbolic or cultural aspects, such as gender-inclusive language.

To more rigorously test the mediation mechanism, we estimate survey-adjusted structural equation models. The specification follows a standard mediation framework: respondent gender predicts gender-related attitudes, which in turn predict party support. The aforementioned control variables are included as exogenous predictors of party support.

The results, presented in Figure 3, show that gender has a statistically significant effect on all three gender-related attitudes (see Table A4 in the Supplementary File for full regression tables). Female respondents hold more progressive views systematically: they are less likely to agree that gender equality policies *go too far*, less critical of gender-sensitive language, and more likely to perceive the share of women in parliament as insufficient. Crucially, once these attitudes are included, the direct effect of gender on BSW and AfD support becomes statistically insignificant. This pattern is consistent with the mediation hypothesis: gender differences in party support are at least partly transmitted through differences in attitudes toward gender equality policies. Overall, the findings indicate that gendered normative orientations toward equality policies constitute a key mechanism structuring support for both parties, albeit in ideologically distinct ways.

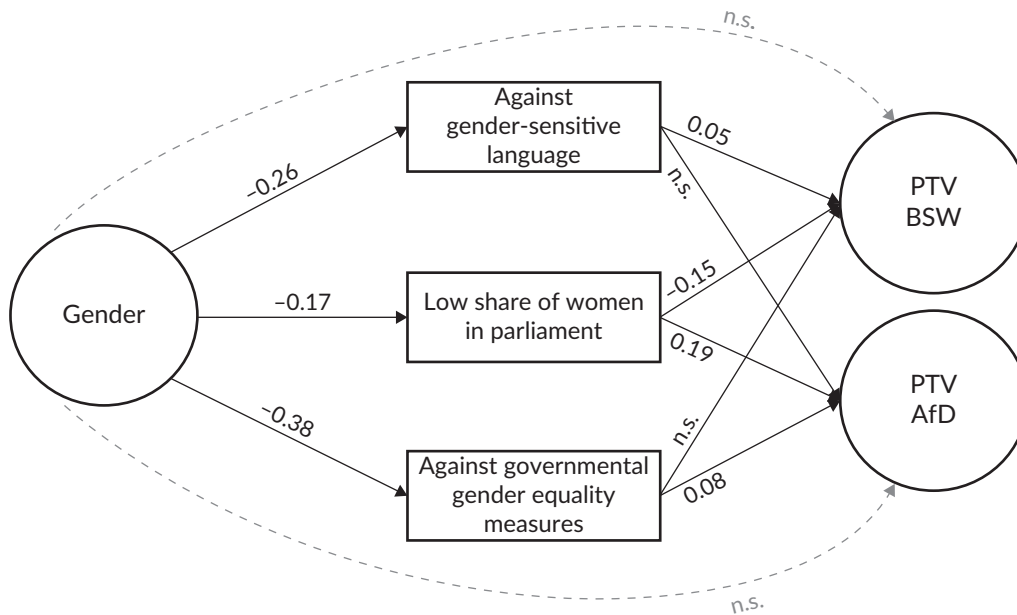


Figure 3. Result of the mediation analysis. Notes: n.s. = not significant; $p < 0.05$.

We conducted several robustness checks to assess the stability of our findings. First, we re-estimated the fully specified OLS models including party identification. We exclude party identification from the main specification because the BSW is a newly established party, and party identification is typically conceptualized as a long-term psychological attachment. Including it could therefore introduce asymmetry between the models. Nevertheless, incorporating party identification does not substantively alter the results: the effects of gender-related attitudes and the attenuation of the direct gender effect remain stable (Table A3 in the Supplementary File includes PID). Second, we examined whether foreign policy attitudes—specifically, positions on the Russian war against Ukraine—affect our conclusions. Both parties have taken distinctive stances on European–Russian relations, making this a potentially relevant dimension. The only suitable survey item captures agreement with the statement: “Germany should stop supplying weapons to Ukraine,” which is measured on a five-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Although this item addresses only one aspect of the broader issue, including it in the fully specified models leaves the substantive results unchanged (Table A3 in the Supplementary File, including Ukraine). Third, we test for nonlinear age effects by replacing the linear age variable with categorical age groups. This specification change does not alter the central findings (Table A3 in the Supplementary File, including age categories). Across all alternative specifications, the results consistently support the conclusion that gender-related attitudes substantially account for the observed gender gaps in support for both parties.

9. Conclusion

The motivation of this article was an apparent paradox: in the unusual context of the 2025 German federal election, two prominent female populist leaders, Alice Weidel (AfD) and Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), competed for votes nationwide. Yet, their electorates were clearly divided along gender lines. Women were disproportionately drawn to the BSW, whereas men were overrepresented among the supporters of the AfD. This juxtaposition of two populist parties led by women with opposing ideological profiles provided an instructive setting in which to examine how gender structures populist voting.

Using the 2025 GLES post-election cross-section, we analyzed voters' propensity to vote for both parties. Across model specifications, gender-related attitudes played an important mediating role in explaining the observed gender gap, even though their additional explanatory contribution in the full models remained comparatively modest. Our key finding is that the apparent direct effect of gender on support for the AfD versus the BSW disappears once attitudes toward gender equality policies are considered. Women hold more progressive views on descriptive representation and gender equality measures, which explains their greater propensity to support the BSW. Conversely, more conservative positions on gender equality are strongly associated with support for the AfD. While leader evaluations are the strongest predictor of party support, they do not supersede or attenuate the impact of substantive gender policy orientations. Structural equation models further corroborate a mediation pattern: Gender shapes gender-related attitudes, which then structure party preferences. The modest substantive impact of these attitudes likely reflects the low salience of gender issues in the 2025 campaign, which limited their activation. Nevertheless, they remain statistically significant, which might imply a latent, untapped potential for gender-based mobilization if gender issues become more salient in future campaigns.

These findings have several implications for research on gender, populism, and electoral competition. First, gender differences in populist voting cannot be attributed solely to a differing "populist" disposition, as even within a populist choice set, policy-related attitudes toward gender equality remain consequential. Second, populist parties differ not only along economic or cultural dimensions but also in their gender-policy profiles, and these differences have concrete electoral consequences. Female leadership alone does not eliminate the gender gap: substantial differences persist even when both parties are led by prominent female figures. Instead, substantive representation in the form of credible policy positions on gender equality appears crucial for attracting female voters. Accordingly, competition between populist parties is as much a contest over gender related policy as over economic or cultural issues. The emergence of left authoritarian or broadly left populist parties could therefore offer a new electoral home for women who are currently deterred by the anti-feminist positioning of the radical-right, a possibility that future research should examine more systematically in comparative settings with a broader supply of populist parties.

At the same time, several limitations qualify our conclusions and suggest directions for future research. First, available survey measures treat gender as a binary variable and do not capture whether respondents are transgender, nor do they reflect variation in gender expression, conformity, or attitudes toward traditional gender roles. As a result, the gender variable used in empirical analyses remains a limited proxy for a multidimensional construct. Future research would benefit from more nuanced measures of both gender identity and gender-related attitudes. Second, our analysis focused on two ideologically distinct populist parties within a single national context. Comparative studies that include a broader range of left- and right-populist parties would help determine whether the identified mechanisms can be generalized. Third, the cross-sectional design limits strong causal inference. While the mediation analysis is consistent with the proposed mechanism, panel data or experimental designs would allow for more rigorous identification of causal pathways.

Finally, disentangling leadership effects remains challenging, as leader evaluations and party support are closely intertwined and may reflect broader affective alignments. An additional problem arises in parties with multiple prominent leaders, such as the AfD, where Weidel served as the sole chancellor candidate but prominently co-led the party with Tino Chrupalla. Unfortunately, our data did not permit separate

assessment of their influence, as Chrupalla was not included in the survey. Future research should seek designs that compare male and female leaders within and across populist parties, and allow for better distinguishing personalistic appeal from policy congruence and partisan attachment.

Overall, the findings are consistent with the enduring relevance of the Michigan model of voting behavior. In line with the funnel-of-causality logic, socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, influence party support primarily indirectly, via more proximate attitudinal factors. In this case, gender shapes attitudes toward gender equality policies, which in turn structure support for competing populist parties. Contemporary patterns of populist competition do not render established theoretical frameworks obsolete; rather, they underscore the frameworks' continued utility in explaining how underlying social characteristics are translated into political behavior.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data available at <https://www.gesis.org/en/gles/2025-federal-election>

LLMs Disclosure

We used OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.3) for language refinement, grammar, and style improvements in the manuscript. No substantive content, data analysis, or interpretation of results was generated or altered by the model.

Supplementary Material

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

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