

Article

Women Leading the Opposition: Gender and Rhetoric in the European Parliament

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Submitted: 30 August 2022 | Accepted: 16 December 2022 | Published: 22 February 2023

Abstract

The European Parliament (EP) is an intriguing arena to study the nexus between gender, speech-making, and leadership performance, as it simultaneously challenges and confirms gender-based hierarchies in legislative contexts. While the EP has a higher level of women's representation than national parliaments, women's access to top-level positions nonetheless remains limited. Yet the EP is a special case of a legislature. Lacking a right of initiative, it often acts collectively as an inter-institutional opposition to the other EU core institutions. In this article, through a software-assisted analysis of EP debates following the president's State of the Union Address, we investigate party group leaders' evaluations of the Commission's proposals and their charismatic rhetoric from a gender angle. Focusing on the three most recent legislatures (2009–2021), our analysis shows that while collective inter-institutional opposition is present in the EP, women leaders generally show higher levels of rhetorical skillfulness and voice either approval or opposition toward the Commission more emphatically than their male counterparts.

Keywords

charismatic rhetoric; European Parliament; gender; inter-institutional opposition; party group leaders; political speeches; women's leadership performance

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Women Opposition Leaders: Pathways, Patterns, and Performance" edited by Sarah C. Dingler (University of Innsbruck), Ludger Helms (University of Innsbruck), and Henriette Müller (New York University Abu Dhabi).

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1. Introduction

Recent literature on women's representation in the European Parliament (Parliament, EP) underscores that while the Parliament is "a role model of gender parity with its explicit commitments to gender equality and higher levels of women's representation than the lower houses of its member states," these features do not translate into "a parallel pattern of vertical mobility," with women remaining underrepresented at the Parliament's top (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger, 2022, p. 74). Hence, although the EP is not embedded in the same forms of male hegemony as most national parliaments due to the overall stronger representation of

women, women's access to influential positions within the EP remains limited. With this paradox, the EP provides an intriguing arena in which to study the nexus between gender, speech-making, and leadership performance as it simultaneously challenges and confirms gender-based hierarchies in legislative contexts.

Yet the EP is a special case of a legislature. Rather than being internally divided between governing and opposition parties, it often acts collectively as an inter-institutional opposition to the other EU core institutions. Vis-à-vis the Council, the Parliament regularly acts as opposition in decisions on legislation; regarding the Commission, the EP opposes or aims to influence the Commission's agenda, thus compensating for its lack of a

right of initiative. Critical rebuttals delivered by the party group leaders (PGLs) following the Commission president's annual State of the Union Address (SOTEU) best illustrate the EP's inter-institutional power dynamics and its role of opposition.

However, the provision of inter-institutional opposition by the EP is highly contested (Helms, 2008; Mair, 2007). Mair (2007, p. 12) assessed the EP as essentially powerless, stating that "opposition [at the EU level], even when it exists, is almost by definition ineffective." In contrast, Tömmel (2014, p. 108) argued that the EP, being directly elected by Europe's citizenry, holds a "strong bargaining position with regard to the other institutions," especially the Commission. When its Members act in unity, the EP exerts "substantial influence on legal acts in a broad array of issue areas" (Tömmel, 2014, p. 106), counter-balancing the other EU institutions in decision-making and policy formulation. Shackleton (2017, p. 192) concluded that in "an environment of inter-institutional competition, the EP has proved remarkably successful in influencing the nature of individual policies as well as in co-shaping the agenda of system development."

This leadership role within the EU polity is embodied and most visible in the office of the party group chair. With wide-ranging powers, "group leaders represent the groups both within the Parliament and outside of it" (Kantola & Miller, 2022, p. 152; see also Dingler et al., 2023). Group chairs are thus of central importance to the EP's political work and its inter-institutional influence and success. From this perspective, they also come closest to the role of traditional opposition leaders (Dingler et al., 2023) in the highly complex system of EU governance, spearheading the Parliament's positioning vis-à-vis the Commission and Council. Since the introduction of the Commission president's SOTEU in 2010, six women have led or co-led political party groups (18.75% of the total of party group chairs): Rebecca Harms (2009–2016, Greens/EFA), Gabriele Zimmer (2012–2019, GUE/NGL), Marine Le Pen (2016–2017, ENF), Ska Keller (2017–present, Greens/EFA), Manon Aubry (2019–present, GUE/NGL), and Iratxe García Pérez (2019–present, S&D; for an overview of party group abbreviations see Supplementary File, Table A1).

This article studies how female party group chairs engage with the EP's inter-institutional oppositional role and whether and to what extent their performance differs from those of their male counterparts. More specifically, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do female and male political group chairs differ in their expression of opposition to the European Commission, and what kind of gender dynamics can be identified across political groups?
2. Taking the example of charismatic rhetoric, in what ways do patterns of speech-making differ between female and male parliamentary leaders, and what

kind of gender dynamics emerge across political groups?

Empirically, focusing on the three latest legislatures (2009–2021), we concentrate on the parliamentary debate and the speeches given by political group chairs following the annual SOTEU by the European Commission president ($N = 87$). Through a software-assisted analysis of political language, we first investigate to what degree EP collective opposition exists by analyzing political group chairs' positive or negative evaluations of the Commission president's proposal. Next, we examine whether and how women and men parliamentary leaders differ in their oppositional expression and what kind of dynamics can be identified across political groups. To further evaluate speech-making style, we employ an analysis of charismatic rhetoric, which is used as a proxy to study gender-based differences in political speech-making. In doing so, our article contributes to the growing literature on women's performance in legislatures with a specific focus on leadership and oppositional dynamics at the supranational level (Anzia & Berry, 2011; Bäck & Debus, 2019; Homola, 2021; Kantola & Miller, 2022).

Our analysis shows that while collective, inter-institutional opposition by the EP is evident across all political groups, women generally voice either approval of or opposition toward the Commission more strongly than their male counterparts. Their performance in oppositional speech-making is confirmed by their exercise of rhetorical charisma—again stronger than their male counterparts. At the same time, we find that in party groups with greater levels of gender equality women's and men's rhetorical performances become more similar while their voicing of political opinion becomes more dissimilar. Corroborating previous research, this study shows that sociocultural challenges, gender stereotypes, and women's underrepresentation continue to impact the performance of female legislators even in more gender-equal institutions, such as the EP, highlighting women leaders' exceptional parliamentary performance at the EU level.

2. Women in Legislatures: Connecting Leadership, Charisma, and Rhetoric

The literature has offered serious reflections on the role of gender in the legislative behavior and floor participation of women and men. As Vincent (2001, p. 73) points out, gender is "a central differentiating variable in political behavior" in institutions such as legislatures, often negatively affecting women's representation, performance, and impact. Understanding political language and public speech-making as "essential means of enacting leadership," sociolinguist Judith Baxter found that women's public language and rhetoric are more affected by contradictory socially and culturally constructed expectations, stereotypes, institutional

constraints, and underrepresentation than that of their male counterparts (Baxter, 2010, pp. 7, 113).

Women are almost invariably caught in a double bind: “If they speak and sound overly ‘masculine,’ they are characterized by colleagues as aggressive, and if they speak and sound overly ‘feminine,’ they are characterized as tentative, hesitant, or weak” (Baxter, 2017, p. 116). Women leaders are thus driven to master a rhetorical approach that is “highly skilled, linguistically expert, diverse and nuanced...finely-tuned to colleagues and context” (Baxter, 2010, p. 169; see also Anzia & Berry, 2011). Although women’s rhetorical style is hardly the polar opposite of men’s, they must more frequently employ so-called impression management measures “to ensure they are neither dismissed as insufficiently authoritative nor derided as aggressive ‘battleaxes’” (Cameron & Shaw, 2016, pp. 11, 134). However effective these techniques are, the double bind still often yields prejudicial perceptions and evaluations of women’s speech-making that impede their exercise of leadership.

Despite these insights, and the centrality of speech-making for parliamentary procedures, research on the rhetorical performance of female political leaders remain scarce. Apart from a few studies of specific institutions and societal contexts (Baxter, 2010; Müller & Pansardi, 2022) or individual political leaders (Bligh et al., 2010; Jones, 2016), the literature has concentrated on women legislators’ speech-making, highlighting the constraints to which women are exposed or the content of their speeches. Studies suggest that female legislators take the floor less often than men (Bäck & Debus, 2019; Bäck et al., 2014) and that their speeches focus less often on issues of “hard” politics. Moreover, the literature indicates that female legislators are more likely to address gender-related issues (Bäck et al., 2014) and are more frequently interrupted than their male counterparts (Och, 2020; Pearson & Dancey, 2011a). Brescoll (2011) finds that powerful women speak less (long) than powerful men in the US Senate, suggesting that volubility negatively affects the perception and evaluation of women’s competence. Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) show that women not only speak less often but also align their speech-making more with men, even if their positions deviate from those of their male counterparts. Pearson and Dancey (2011b), meanwhile, find the opposite—female legislators in the US House of Representatives overcompensate for their descriptive underrepresentation by speaking at higher rates than congressmen in debates, thereby enhancing women’s substantive representation.

Still, other studies have argued against the existence of any meaningful differences in men’s and women’s legislative speech-making. Considering the specific case of the British parliament, Shaw (2000) indicates that women develop and embrace a competitive and self-assertive style of speaking as much as men do if this is the dominant style of performance in a given envi-

ronment. The case studies by Wang (2014) and Murray (2010) find that women and men speak equally long and often in the Ugandan and French parliaments, respectively. In an analysis of energy policy-making, Fraune (2016, p. 139) suggests that “party affiliation affects [a] legislator’s energy policy priorities more than [a] legislator’s gender,” with party ideology trumping gender as a correlative in speeches, voting, and deliberation.

These findings together suggest that there is variation across countries and contexts in the role gender plays in parliamentary debates and speech-making. However, few studies have focused specifically on the performance and rhetoric of women leaders in legislatures, although the context across different positions in a parliament can vary significantly. For example, PGLs might not need to compete in the same way as MPs for speaking time, especially in formal debates, where speaking time is allocated by political groups’ size and strictly adhered to. PGLs also need to be well-versed in a variety of policy areas to ascend to the position in the first place, moving across so-called “soft” and “hard” policy issues. Hence, this article draws attention to women leaders in the legislature and their public speech-making.

One way of studying the oratorical skillfulness of leaders in a systematic, comparative fashion is through the concept of charisma—more precisely, charismatic rhetoric (Bligh et al., 2004). In essence, charisma is inherently personal and refers to agency; it is not a characteristic of office or institutional structure. Core characteristics of what constitutes a charismatic leader incorporate both nominally masculine and feminine traits (Antonakis et al., 2016).

Charismatic leaders “increase the appeal of collective goals by clearly linking core aspects of the leader’s vision to core aspects of followers’ self-concepts” (Bligh et al., 2010, p. 829). In connecting collective goals to individual vision, the charismatic leader draws on qualities both “feminine”—empathetic, caring, other-oriented—and “masculine”—agentic, dominant, self-oriented (Bligh et al., 2010, p. 828). To forge that connection, a leader’s rhetorical approach is crucial (Bligh et al., 2004; Shamir et al., 1994). The ability to “deploy linguistic strategies that range along the feminine-masculine continuum according to topic, purpose, the degree of ‘publicness’ of the meeting, and the norms of the [ir] professional community” is a central leadership skill (Baxter, 2017, p. 121). Analysis of charismatic rhetoric can thus serve as a proxy to assess a leader’s “skilled performance” in the realm of speech-making (Antonakis et al., 2016, pp. 296, 304), particularly with reference to stereotypically gendered attributes.

In conclusion, previous research on women leaders suggests that while women and men are, in principle, equally capable of exercising charismatic leadership, the pressures of women’s underrepresentation in the political domain and societal gender biases contribute to women leaders’ emerging—more frequently than men—as highly skilled rhetors. However, few studies

have focused specifically on women leaders in the legislature and their public speech-making, especially beyond the national realm. To help fill this research lacuna, we thus investigate gender-based similarities and differences in public speech-making and charismatic rhetoric in the EP with a specific focus on European inter-institutional opposition.

3. Inter-Institutional Opposition and Women's Representation: The Special Case of the European Parliament

The EP—like any other European core institution—defies any easy definition and categorization as powers and responsibilities are overlapping and shared rather than exclusively ascribed. The EP's lack of a right to initiate legislation is a significant *de jure* difference from national parliaments in liberal democracies, even if, in practice, national governments rather than parliaments propose most of the legislation during a term (Tömmel, 2014). Along with the EP being the only directly elected EU institution, this lack is a primary determinant of the EP's inter-institutional role as a central corrective at the EU level—an ultimate “opposition institution,” if necessary.

More precisely, the Parliament provides opposition to the Commission by seeking to influence and scrutinize the Commission's agenda-setting and, thus, the Commission's exclusive right of initiative. It opposes the Council in decisions on legislative acts. When acting in a broad, unified coalition, MEPs can achieve significant influence via the legislative process, pressuring both the Commission and the Council (Tömmel, 2014). The Parliament's power of dismissal best illustrates the point of inter-institutional opposition. Never yet exercised, it is considered a “nuclear weapon” among the Parliament's procedural powers (Judge & Earnshaw, 2002, p. 347). Sensitive to its potential, the Commission, particularly, forges “a positive and constructive relationship” with the Parliament (Judge & Earnshaw, 2002, pp. 347–348).

Two inter-institutional dynamics at the EU level are central to understanding the power relationship between the EP, on the one hand, and the Commission and Council, on the other. First, there is a general need for collaboration, power-sharing, and consensus-seeking between the Parliament, the Commission, and the Council to ensure the functioning of the EU polity. The power dynamics here clearly differ from those of the national sphere. Second, throughout the history of European integration, the Parliament's self-defined political role has regularly exceeded the procedural rules. This, in turn, has led to an expansion of the EP's formal competencies in consecutive treaty revisions or amendments and, thus, its empowerment (Fromage, 2018; Meissner & Schoeller, 2019). Hence, while the EP neither holds a position equal to the Council nor can it “fully satisfy the normative and empirical expectations characterizing most established notions of parliamentary

opposition” in democracies (Helms, 2008, p. 229), the expression and influence of opposition by the EP are a salient, though peculiar matter in EU politics, and a vantage point—both intra- and inter-institutionally—for the study of leadership exercised by its party group chairs.

With reference to its composition, the EP is also a special case for the study of gender-based dynamics of speech-making and leadership. It has consistently had higher women's representation than national parliaments. Nonetheless, women's access to prestigious and influential positions within it remains limited (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger, 2022, p. 80; Kantola & Miller, 2022, p. 150; Sundström & Stockemer, 2022, p. 127).

To illustrate this paradox, the European elections of 2019 (9th legislature) yielded a 42% female Parliament—reflecting a continued increase since 1979. However, women continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership positions and are generally better represented in secondary leadership positions such as vice presidents (currently, eight out of 14 VPs, 57%, are women). Additionally, the allocations of committee memberships and committee leadership positions remain highly gendered, with female overrepresentation in so-called “feminine” committees, such as those that deal with women's rights, social welfare, and culture (Dingler & Fortin-Rittberger, 2022, pp. 83–84). At the same time, the number of MEPs opposing gender equality rose to over 30%, and patterns of gender-based discrimination, negative evaluations, sexism, and harassment continue to disadvantage women MEPs (Kantola, 2022, pp. 222, 224).

Zooming in on the political groups, in the 9th legislature (2019–2024), women (a) constitute a majority in the Greens/EFA, (b) have achieved near parity with at least 40% representation in the left and liberal S&D, GUE/NGL, and Renew Europe groups, as well as the radical-right populist ID, and (c) are underrepresented in the conservative EPP and the right-wing populist ECR, with just above 30% of the groups' MEPs (Kantola & Miller, 2022, pp. 151–152). Since 2019, only three women, Manon Aubry (GUE/NGL), Ska Keller (the Greens/EFA), and Iratxe García Pérez (S&D), have served in the highly prestigious political position of political group (co-)chair (27%, three out of 11 political group leaders). The EPP—the biggest party group—has never had a female chair. The picture is better one step down, with 23 out of 70 female vice-chairs being women (32%).

Female representation and gender equality are thus more pronounced in the center-left political groups (Sundström & Stockemer, 2022, p. 128). Kantola (2022, p. 222) found that only the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL “constructed gender equality as a fundamental principle of the groups, which was upheld with formal and informal practices.” In contrast, the groups S&D and ALDE/Renew “perceived gender equality as an important but flexible norm”; the EPP, ECR, and EFDD “perceived [it] as a highly contradictory and divisive issue”; and finally, the radical right populist ID group (formerly, the ENF)

“saw gender as a dangerous construct” and gender equality as “nonsense” (Kantola, 2022, p. 223).

In conclusion, the EP is a special legislature, both concerning (a) the provision of inter-institutional opposition due to its lack of legislative initiative and (b) the persistence of a gendered hierarchy among leadership positions despite women’s overall high representation. Moreover, and similarly to many national legislatures, it attests a left-right divergence in the promotion and realization of gender equality. Connecting the insights on women leaders’ performance set out in Section 2 to the insights of this section, we expect, at the example of the EP’s inter-institutional opposition to the Commission, that female PGLs perform differently from men in that they are more skilled and prolific public rhetors due to the sociocultural and structural constraints, as well as gender stereotypes they encounter on their pathways to and exercise of leadership. Furthermore, we expect that gender differences in public speech-making vary across political groups, with more gender-equal groups showing less strong differences between women and men than their more unequal counterparts.

4. Method, Empirical Analysis, and Discussion

To address the questions outlined in the introduction, we analyze the language used by PGLs. The group chairs most notably embody the Parliament’s political leadership within and outside the EP. Furthermore, the EP’s specific role of providing inter-institutional opposition vis-à-vis the European Commission stands out as a vantage point from which to study the exercise of leadership by party group chairs in the EP. We conceptualize parliamentary speech-making as position-taking on “one or several policy issues in front of a broader audience” (Bäck et al., 2014, p. 505) and parliamentary debates as reflecting a “confrontational style of interpersonal deliberation” (Ilie, 2013, p. 501).

Apart from its visibility, the annual State of the Union debate is a crucial moment for the EP to (publicly) influence the Commission’s priorities and program (Pansardi & Battagazzorre, 2018) and “to press for the inclusion of new items or even the exclusion of items,” as the SOTEU is purposely scheduled ahead of the adoption and presentation of the Commission’s Work Programme (September and October, respectively; Corbett et al., 2016, p. 314). Hence, we analyze PGLs’ speeches in response to the SOTEU and the Inaugural Speeches by European Commission presidents between 2009 and 2021. The SOTEUs are not delivered in European election years, so for 2009, 2014, and 2019, the debate following the delivery of the Commission president’s Inaugural Speech was analyzed.

To investigate the characteristic traits of the different political groups and female and male PGLs’ speech-making, we collected all speeches delivered by PGLs between 2009 and 2021, a total of 87. Speeches not available in English were translated using the auto-

mated eTranslation software provided by the European Commission (European Commission, n.d.). Our corpus covers three different Commissions and three different Commission presidents—José Manuel Durão Barroso (2009–2014), Jean-Claude Juncker (2014–2019), and Ursula von der Leyen (2019–present)—with 16 speeches by female and 71 by male PGLs. Table 1 lists the political group chairs between 2009 and 2021 with reference to the number of speeches they delivered in SOTEU or Inaugural Speech debates. It needs to be noted that some PGLs did not deliver a speech during the abovementioned debates and were thus excluded from the analysis.

To analyze the language and tone of the speeches, we relied on the software Diction 7 (Hart, 2001; Hart & Carroll, 2015). Specifically created to analyze the tone of political discourse in written texts, Diction codes text according to 31 predefined variables using built-in dictionaries (word lists). For each variable, Diction automatically assigns each text raw scores that are subsequently standardized based on a built-in corpus of 50,000 texts to ensure the generalizability of the results. The scores are thus immediately ready for a comparative analysis that is not affected by the *N*-size. The built-in corpus was last updated in 2015, when the latest version, Diction 7, was released. Approximately 25% of the included texts—which range from political speeches to poetry—are authored by women. Whereas a more gender-balanced corpus would better ensure the gender neutrality of the software, Diction’s capacity to place the results for all analyzed texts on a single scale partly overcomes its drawbacks, allowing us to compare female and male PGLs’ speeches in light of a well-defined and systematized set of variables.

4.1. Inter-Institutional Opposition and Gender Dynamics in the European Parliament

To address our research questions, we investigate the positions that different PGLs express towards the Commission’s proposals in the corpus of speeches. We first examine whether collective opposition by the EP toward the Commission is evident, testified to by the presence of significantly more critical attitudes than confirmatory ones among the PGLs. Second, in light of the scholarship that suggests that female leaders approach public speech-making differently than their male counterparts due to sociocultural constraints and gender stereotypes, we analyze whether we can detect specific differences between male and female PGLs expressing favorable or critical attitudes towards the Commission.

To do so, we rely on the Diction 7 built-in dictionaries to generate two indicators: positive evaluation, indicating a favorable attitude towards the Commission, and negative evaluation, indicating a critical attitude. Each is created by summing three different Diction variables (Supplementary File, Table A2, presents the formulas). After analyzing the individual speeches with the software, we averaged the data by political group. Figure 1

Table 1. Political group chairs and the number of speeches delivered.

Commission	Political group	Year	Chair	Gender	Nationality	Speeches (N)
von der Leyen (9th parliamentary term)						
	EPP	2019–	Manfred Weber	M	DE	3
	S&D	2019–	Iratxe García Pérez	F	ES	3
	Renew	2019–2021	Dacian Cioloş	M	RO	3
		2021–	Stéphane Séjourné	M	FR	0
co-chairs	Greens/EFA	2019–	Ska Keller	F	DE	1
		2019–	Philippe Lamberts	M	BE	2
	ID	2019–	Marco Zanni	M	IT	0
co-chairs	ECR	2019–	Raffaele Fitto	M	IT	2
		2019–	Ryszard Legutko	M	PL	1
co-chairs	GUE/NGL		Manon Aubry	F	FR	1
	GUE/NGL		Martin Schirdewan	M	DE	
Juncker (8th parliamentary term)						
	EPP	2014–2019	Manfred Weber	M	DE	5
	S&D	2014–2019	Gianni Pittella	M	IT	4
		2018–2019	Udo Bullmann	M	DE	1
co-chairs since 2017	ECR	2014–2019	Syed Kamall	M	UK	4
		2017–2019 (co-chair)	Ryszard Legutko (co-chair)	M	PL	1
	ALDE		Guy Verhofstadt	M	BE	5
		GUE/NGL		Gabriele Zimmer	F	DE
	Greens/EFA	2014–2016	Rebecca Harms	F	DE	1
		2016–2019	Ska Keller	F	DE	1
	EFDD	2014–2019	Philippe Lamberts	M	BE	3
		2014–2019	Nigel Farage	M	UK	5
co-chairs	ENF	2015–2017	Marine Le Pen	F	FR	1
		2017–2019	Nicolas Bay	M	FR	1
		2015–2019	Marcel de Graaff	M	NL	0
Barroso (II) (7th parliamentary term)						
	EPP	2009–2014	Joseph Daul	M	FR	5
	S&D	2009–2012	Martin Schulz	M	DE	3
		2012–2014	Hannes Swoboda	M	AT	2
	ALDE	2009–2014	Guy Verhofstadt	M	BE	5
co-chairs	Greens/EFA	2009–2014	Daniel Cohn-Bendit	M	DE	2
		2009–2014	Rebecca Harms	F	DE	3
	ECR	2009–2011	Michał Tomasz Kamiński	M	PL	2
		2011	Jan Zahradil	M	CZ	1
	GUE/NGL	2011–2014	Martin Callanan	M	UK	2
		2009–2012	Lothar Bisky	M	DE	2
		2012–2014	Gabriele Zimmer	F	DE	1
co-chairs	EFD	2009–2014	Nigel Farage	M	UK	4
		2009–2014	Francesco Enrico Speroni	M	IT	1

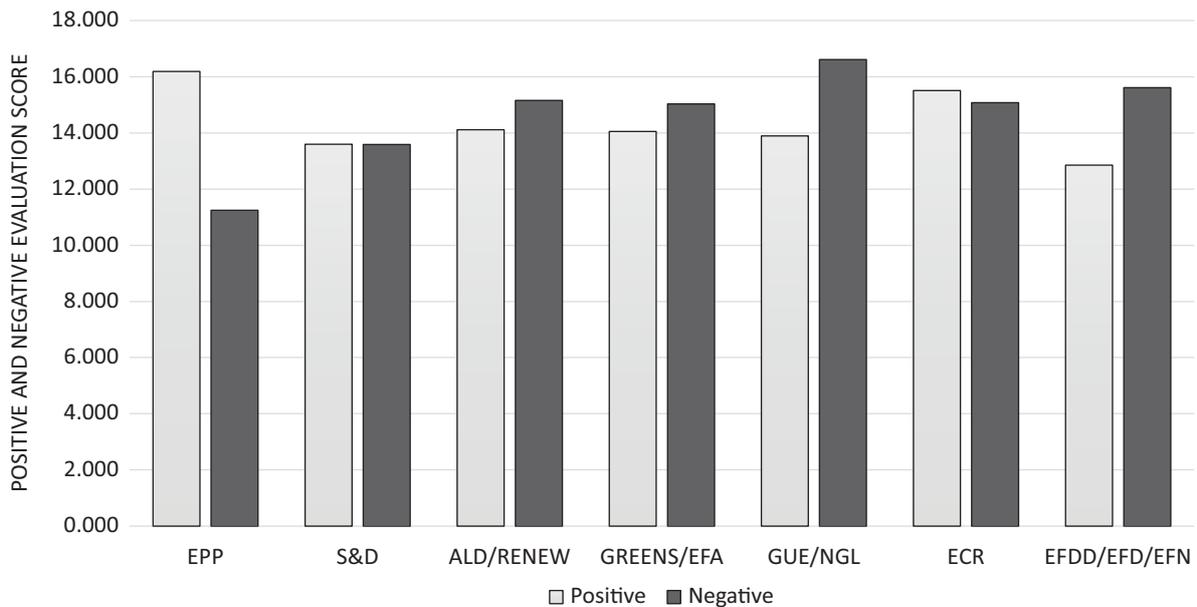


Figure 1. Political group chairs’ positive and negative evaluations by political group.

provides the mean values on the two indicators for the different political groups.

Looking at the groups together, Figure 1 shows that negative evaluations of the Commission and its proposals slightly outweigh positive ones (average score of positive 14.31, versus an average score of negative 14.62), with all political group leaders expressing a substantial amount of criticism.

Considering the groups individually, the EPP, with which all three Commission presidents in this study have been affiliated, shows the highest score on positive evaluation and the lowest on negative evaluation. PGLs belonging to the far-right groups EFDD, EFD, and EFN score the lowest on positive and the second highest on negative evaluation. The other political groups range between these two poles. Perhaps surprisingly, the pro-European leftist political group GUE/NGL outweighs the far-right on negative evaluation, with the highest score for this indicator.

To offer a parsimonious inspection of the results concerning positive and negative evaluations by group and gender, we created a new indicator, called Commission approval, by subtracting the negative from the positive evaluation scores for each political group and for male and female PGLs (for a detailed overview see Supplementary File, Table A3). Figure 2 provides an overview of the results. A value above zero indicates that the positive evaluation score is higher than that of the negative evaluation; a score below zero indicates that the negative evaluation score is higher.

First, for the groups that have had both female and male chairs (S&D, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL, EFDD/EFD/EFN), women outweigh men both in their positive (average female score 14.72 versus the average male score of 13.86) and negative (average female score 17.10 versus the average male score 15.31) eval-

uations of the Commission. Furthermore, we observe a stronger gender difference in oppositional than approbative expressions (gender difference for positive evaluation 0.86 and negative evaluation 1.79).

Second, comparing the positions expressed towards the Commission, women and men show significantly different scores on the indicator of Commission approval. For three of the four political groups which have had female chairs, the difference between male and female PGLs’ approval of the Commission involves a swing from a positive to negative overall value or vice versa. For S&D and the Greens/EFA, female leaders show a markedly more positive attitude towards the Commission than do their male counterparts. For GUE/NGL, female leaders have a Commission approval value well below zero, while their male counterparts’ positive evaluation score is higher than the negative. The Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL group chairs show the most substantial gendered divergence of positive versus negative evaluations. Lastly, for EFDD, EFD, and EFN, both the male leaders and the only female leader (Marine Le Pen) score below zero on Commission approval, with Le Pen far surpassing her male counterparts.

To test for the presence of a significant difference between female and male PGLs, we ran a univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA)—conventionally used to study between-group differences in small samples, among others (Rutherford, 2011)—on the scores for Commission approval, using speech length (measured by the total number of words in each speech) as a covariate and focusing only on the parties with both male and female party group chairs. As Table 2 shows, no significant difference between male and female PGLs can be attested.

While no linear effect of gender in the expression of positive or negative attitudes towards the Commission

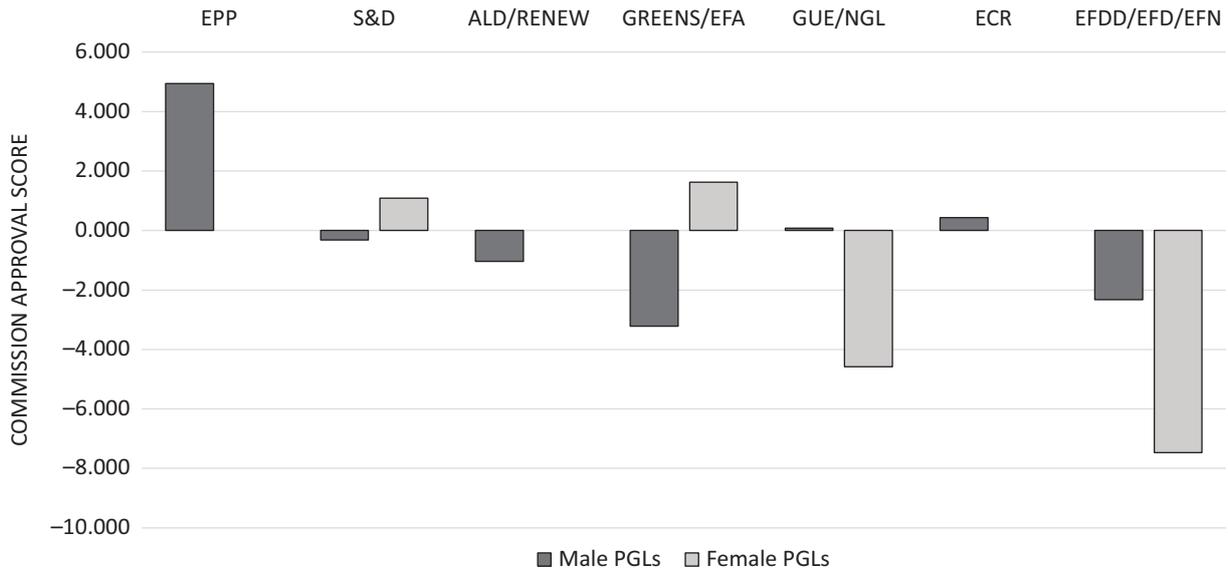


Figure 2. Commission approval score by PGLs’ political group and gender.

can be detected, the results highlight a relevant difference between male and female leaders and across political groups in expressing opposition to the Commission. Women’s public speech-making and voicing of opposition are generally more emphatic, whether positive or negative, than their male counterparts. The next section will further investigate in what ways female and male rhetoric differ from each other.

4.2. The Charismatic Rhetoric of Female and Male Party Group Leaders

To analyze the PGLs’ charismatic rhetoric, we followed previous studies (Bligh et al., 2004; Müller & Pansardi, 2022; Olsson & Hammargård, 2016; Pansardi & Tortola, 2022; Tortola & Pansardi, 2018) and combined Diction variables into seven composite constructs. According to the literature, charismatic rhetoric comprises seven essential factors associated with different points along the masculine-feminine continuum of public speech-making: Three of these factors (collective focus, followers’ worth, and similarity to followers) involve community and collectivity (“feminine”); two (action and adversity) involve task orientation and authoritative-ness (“masculine”); and the final two (temporal orientation, tangibility, and intangibility) are considered gender-neutral (for an in-depth analysis of each factor see Müller & Pansardi, 2022, pp. 134–135).

Table A4 in the Supplementary File summarizes the seven constructs and corresponding Diction formulas, along with sample words for each variable and its gender connotation. The charismatic constructs presented in Table A4 are also aggregated in a single indicator of charismatic rhetoric—which we label charisma—by subtracting the value of tangibility from the sum of the six remaining constructs (Bligh et al., 2004). Turning to the analysis of gender and rhetoric in the context of the EP’s party group leadership, Figure 3 provides an overview of party groups and our dependent variable labeled charisma.

Figure 3 (for full results see Supplementary File, Table A5) indicates that female PGLs overall demonstrate higher scores of charismatic rhetoric than their male counterparts. In particular, focusing only on the parties with female PGLs, Table 3 attests to a statistically significant difference between male and female chairs in terms of charismatic rhetoric, confirming the findings already proposed for other institutions (Müller & Pansardi, 2022)—that female leaders deliver a more skillful leadership performance concerning rhetoric (Antonakis et al., 2016). Comparing the four political groups with female PGLs, the charismatic rhetoric of the female and male leaders of the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL are internally closest in distribution (Supplementary File, Table A5).

Concerning the individual constructs of charisma (Supplementary File, Table A6), we observe that the

Table 2. Political groups chairs’ Commission approval by gender—ANCOVA results.

	Mean	SD	Univariate <i>F</i> (2, 45)
Commission approval			
Male	-1.596	6.912	0.013ns
Female	-1.369	6.201	

Notes: Male PGLs’ speeches *N* = 32; female PGLs’ speeches *N* = 16; *ns* = nonsignificant.

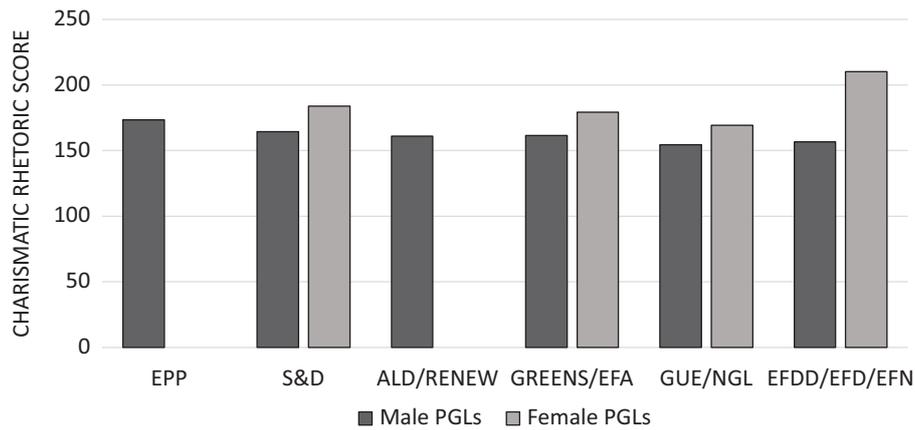


Figure 3. Charismatic rhetoric of PGLs by political group and gender.

female speakers make more frequent references to collective focus, temporal orientation, similarity to followers, and adversity, while male political group leaders invoke followers’ worth, tangibility, and most notably action more frequently than their female counterparts. This highlights (a) that women and men both employ feminine and masculine identified factors in their speech-making, as well as ones considered gender-neutral, and (b) that women’s speech-making involves a greater variance in the use of the seven factors.

Moving to the individual level of analysis, we find differences between single female PGLs (Figure 4; for full results see Supplementary File, Table A7).

According to our results, Marine Le Pen (EFN) employs charismatic rhetoric most strongly overall. However, this evaluation relies on just a single speech and must therefore be treated with caution. Ska Keller (Greens/EFA) displays the second-highest level of charismatic rhetoric, while Manon Aubry (GUE/NGL) fares lowest on charismatic rhetoric among the female PGLs. No specific pattern in the use of language pertaining to the seven charismatic constructs is detectable; the female PGLs’ charismatic language relies on different constructs. For example, Marine Le Pen fares strongest on similarity to followers and adversity, and lowest on tangibility, while Ska Keller fares strongest among all the female chairs on collective focus and followers’ worth.

4.3. Discussion of the Empirical Results

Our empirical analysis of the female and male PGLs’ rhetoric provides core results that are central not only

to the study of inter-institutional opposition exercised by the EP, but to the relationship between gender, leadership, and public speech-making in legislatures. There are four significant points to consider.

First, our analysis confirms that the EP performs collective, inter-institutional opposition toward the Commission. While negative evaluations only barely outweigh positive, in the context of inter-institutional opposition, a “visible collective institutional identity” vis-à-vis the Commission (and Council) nonetheless exists (Hamrik & Kaniok, 2022, p. 689). The strong bargaining position and substantial influence that Tömmel (2014) ascribes to the Parliament, especially when it acts together, is confirmed in the form of collective opposition as all groups express disagreement with the Commission, on average outweighing their approval. In other words, the EP maintains a coherent scrutinizing position in regard to the Commission. Furthermore, positive evaluations of the Commission are more randomly distributed across the political party groups than are negative evaluations. This indicates that while the political groups criticize and scrutinize the Commission’s proposals—which is their political and institutional role—they also express praise and approval. This, in turn, highlights that the Parliament indeed fulfills its role as a constructive, functional opponent towards the Commission, balancing consent and criticism across its political spectrum.

Second, our analysis highlights specific differences between male and female PGLs in their expression of favorable and critical attitudes about the Commission. While no linear effect of gender in the expression of pos-

Table 3. Political group chairs’ linguistic charisma by gender—ANCOVA results.

	Mean	SD	Univariate $F(2, 45)$
Charisma			
Male	159.925	28.094	5.286*
Female	178.372	21.037	

Notes: Male PGLs’ speeches ($n = 32$); female PGLs’ speeches ($n = 16$); * $p < 0.05$.

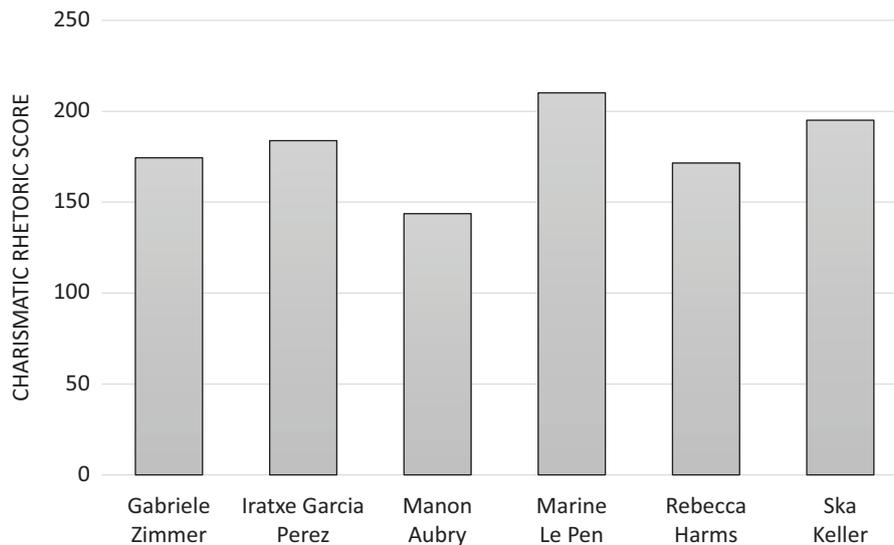


Figure 4. Charismatic rhetoric of female PGLs.

itive or negative evaluations could be detected, corroborating earlier research (Lundell, 2021, p. 35), women slightly outweigh men in their negative assessment and opposition to the Commission. Notably, women express approval of or disagreement with the Commission more strongly than their male counterparts. In this regard, the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL show the strongest divergence between women and men in approval versus disapproval.

While gender inequalities persist across the political spectrum, the green and left political groups in the EP most explicitly and proactively advance gender equality both within their ranks and regarding the body’s policy advocacy (Kantola, 2022). The substantial divergence between women’s and men’s approval and disapproval could signify this socialization process. As indicated above, Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) found that women tend to speak less and strongly align their positions with those of men in gender-unequal contexts. In contrast, women leaders, and especially those of the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL, voice their differing perspectives independently from their male counterparts. This aspect is negatively confirmed by Marine Le Pen’s lavish disapproval of the Commission, outpacing her male counterparts—and all other party group chairs. Women in far-right movements and parties rely on the display of strength and charisma in their leadership performance to a great degree as they encounter highly gender-unequal party-political contexts and a political ideology that is openly misogynistic (Geva, 2020).

Turning to the third result and connecting it to our analysis of gender and opposition, our study of charismatic rhetoric corroborates that female political group leaders are highly skilled speakers who provide a combination of both authoritativeness and relatability (Anzia & Berry, 2011; Baxter, 2010; Cameron & Shaw, 2016). This might explain why women leaders express both approval and disapproval of the Commission more strongly than

male PGLs. While we reject the idea that this gap could be based on biological differences, we understand it as corroboration that women leaders in legislatures are indeed more affected by contradictory socially and culturally constructed expectations and institutional constraints—even in the overall more gender-equal EP—which demand that they engage in and employ higher levels of rhetorical skillfulness and more explicit oppositional behavior (Anzia & Berry, 2011; Bäck & Debus, 2019; Baxter, 2010; Cameron & Shaw, 2016; Homola, 2021; Pearson & Dancy, 2011b).

Furthermore, scholarship has argued that the phenomenon of charisma transcends gender binaries, and our study of the individual constructs of charismatic rhetoric used by male and female PGLs confirms this assumption. Whereas female leaders show overall higher levels of charismatic rhetoric, both male and female PGLs make use of nominally feminine, masculine, and gender-neutral features of rhetorical charisma with varying preferences across groups. Zooming in on the female PGLs, we cannot observe any clear pattern in how female leaders make use of the individual features of charismatic rhetoric. Each woman has her preferred approach. This supports the idea that charisma is inherently personal, making it a highly distinguishable capacity from one politician to the next, thereby also confirming that gender is not an all-determining feature of individual speech-making (Baxter, 2017).

Fourth and finally, the comparison of the party group, gender, and charismatic rhetoric has also brought to the fore that, while not statistically significant, we can observe the closest proximity between male and female charismatic rhetoric in the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL. In addition, Marine Le Pen employs charismatic rhetoric most strongly in the sample overall (although this evaluation relies on a single speech). While future studies are necessary to substantiate these results, it is nonetheless illuminating that women and men of the

Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL, with the groups' history of proactive support for gender equality, seem to level each other out more strongly in terms of leadership performance than do women and men in the other political groups. At the same time, their female and male leaders diverge more strongly in terms of expressing approval and opposition vis-à-vis the European Commission. This aspect is again negatively confirmed by Marine Le Pen's charismatic rhetoric. The high levels of both Marine Le Pen's opposition to the Commission and charismatic rhetoric corroborate the dialectic proposed by Baxter between gender-(un-)equal contexts and women's leadership performance.

Connecting our analysis of gender, charismatic rhetoric, and opposition, our study highlights that female political group leaders are highly skilled legislative performers and linguistic experts who express approval and disapproval more strongly than their male counterparts. We understand it as corroboration that women speakers, and in our case, female PGLs, are indeed more affected by contradictory socially and culturally constructed expectations and institutional constraints, which lead them to develop higher levels of rhetorical skillfulness that are then also expressed in more emphatic approvals or disapprovals of the European Commission (Anzia & Berry, 2011; Bäck & Debus, 2019; Baxter, 2010; Homola, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This research has contributed to the growing literature on women's behavior in legislatures, with a specific focus on PGLs' leadership performance, at the example of public speech-making, and inter-institutional opposition in the EP. The gender-based differences in performance, as illuminated in this study, and the continued lack of women in top-parliamentary positions suggest that a linear link between high female representation in legislatures and women's presence in leadership does not exist. Even in environments considered to be "women-friendly"—such as the EP—gender stereotypes and sociocultural constraints are pervasive. However, there is also hope, as attested by the closer proximity between women's and men's charismatic rhetoric in the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL. If organizations, as in this case, party groups, actively promote and exercise gender equality, gender-based differences in public speech-making seem to become smaller, while gender differences in political opinions tend to grow, allowing for legislatures to become more gender-inclusive environments.

However, for the time being, women's underrepresentation in the political domain, sociocultural challenges, and gender stereotypes continue to contribute to demands that women leaders—more so than men—engage in highly skilled forms of leadership. Demonstrating consistently higher levels of charismatic rhetoric than their male counterparts, which also translates into more emphatic evaluations of the Commission,

whether positive or negative, female PGLs are clearly leading the inter-institutional opposition of the EP.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Sarah C. Dingler, Josefina Erikson, Anna Gwiazda, Ludger Helms, Ingeborg Tömmel, and Kristen Williams, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their valuable comments, feedback, and constructive suggestions on earlier versions of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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

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