

What Do Women in Politics Represent? The Moderating Role of Sexism in the Relationship Between Ideological Positioning and Normativity in Support of a Female Candidate

¿Qué representan las mujeres en la política? El papel moderador del sexismo en la relación entre el posicionamiento ideológico y la normatividad en el apoyo a una candidata

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Abstract

Increasing women's political representation is key to advancing gender equality worldwide. This article addresses challenges related to this issue and investigates the impact of ideological positioning and normativity on support for a candidate, analysing the moderating role of sexism in this relationship in Brazil and Spain. The study was conducted using an experimental design. In Brazil, the 185 participants had a mean age of 27.34 years ($SD = 9.06$), and 52.5% were female. In Spain, the 185 participants were also mostly female (49.7%) with a mean age of 21.22 years ($SD = 6.3$). The results indicate that ideological positioning is the main determinant of support, in Brazil, $F(1,181) = 25, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .12$, with more support to the left-wing candidate ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.122$) compared to the right-wing candidate ($M = 2.91, SD = 0.123$) and in Spain, $F(1,181) = 98.83, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .353$, with the left-wing candidate ($M = 3.80, SD = 0.093$) also receiving more support than the right-wing candidate ($M = 2.49, SD = 0.094$). Unlike in Spain, the Brazilian sample shows that participants' ideology is also related to normativity in determining support. Additionally, the results indicate a moderating role of sexism in this relationship, particularly in Brazil. This raises the question of what women in politics actually represent, given the impact of these variables, which, as factors underlying discrimination, may also be related to Brazil's slower progress towards gender equality in politics.

Keywords

women; politics; gender roles; ideology; sexism; female; gender equality.

Resumen

El aumento de la representación política de las mujeres es clave para el avance de la igualdad de género en todo el mundo. Este artículo aborda los desafíos relacionados con esta cuestión y tiene como objetivo investigar el impacto del posicionamiento ideológico y de la normatividad en el apoyo a una candidata, analizando el papel moderador del sexismo en esta relación, tanto en Brasil como en España. El estudio se realizó mediante un diseño experimental. En Brasil, los 185 participantes tenían una edad media de 27,34 años ($DE=9,06$) y el 52,5% eran mujeres. En España, los 185 participantes también eran mayoritariamente mujeres (49,7%) y tenían una edad media de 21,22 años ($DE=6,3$). Los resultados indican que el posicionamiento ideológico es el principal determinante del apoyo; en Brasil, $F(1,181) = 25$, $p < 0,001$, $\eta^2 = 0,12$, con mayor apoyo a la candidata de izquierda ($M = 3,78$, $DE = 0,122$) en comparación con la candidata de derecha ($M = 2,91$, $DE = 0,123$), y en España, $F(1,181) = 98,83$, $p < 0,001$, $\eta^2 = 0,353$, con la candidata de izquierda ($M = 3,80$, $DE = 0,093$) que también recibió más apoyo que la candidata de derecha ($M = 2,49$, $DE = 0,094$). A diferencia de España, en la muestra brasileña la ideología de los participantes también se relaciona con la normatividad en la determinación del apoyo. Además, los resultados indican un papel moderador del sexismo en esta relación, especialmente en Brasil. Esto plantea la cuestión de qué representan realmente las mujeres en la política, dado el impacto de estas variables que, como factores subyacentes de la discriminación, también podrían estar relacionadas con el menor avance de Brasil hacia la igualdad de género en la política.

Palabras clave

mujeres; política; roles de género; ideología; sexismo; femenino; igualdad de género.

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Introduction

Increasing female representation in politics is considered a key part of achieving gender equality, as it can create opportunities for women in different areas. Despite significant progress, women still account for less than a third of parliamentary speakers. Of the 148 economies covered in the 2025 Global Gender Gap Report, politics is one of the areas showing the greatest gender disparities. Based on current data, it will take another 162 years to achieve full gender parity in this area worldwide (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2025).

In recent years, female leaders representing countries as diverse as Finland, Singapore, and Tunisia left office, with burnout cited as a contributing factor by prominent leaders such as Jacinda Ardern. These and other factors (e.g., political violence against women) have been emblematic in the discussion about women's political participation. Women generally must overcome obstacles and endure biased assessments of their competence, often having to work harder than men to demonstrate the qualities considered necessary for leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly, 2018). Cases of female heads of state who have lost popular support, such as Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (2016) and Julia Gillard in Australia (2013), illustrate these difficulties. In this context, the success of some leaders has increased interest in the issue, raising questions about candidate support, expectations, and what they represent.

A literature review by Hessami and da Fonseca (2020) examined the relationship between female political representation and policy outcomes. The findings suggest that, in developing countries, higher female representation in politics is associated with improved provision of public goods, particularly in education and health. In developed countries, while overall policies did not change, increased female representation influenced deliberations and certain decisions (e.g., the expansion of public daycare centres). More broadly, the study found that increased female political representation tends to enhance institutional quality, reducing corruption and limiting rent-seeking by those in power.

Although attitudes towards women appear more positive, they are generally based on the attribution of community characteristics such as caring, empathetic, or “maternal,” which make them particularly suited to

the domestic role. Studies have long highlighted the resistance women encounter when entering traditionally male-dominated fields and the efforts required to attain prominent positions, as evidence of the persistence of gender discrimination (e.g., Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). The success of a female leader depends on a series of factors, and even successful trajectories are impacted by gender expectations. This study aimed to investigate the impact of ideological positioning and normativity on support for a candidate, and to analyse the moderating role of sexism in this relationship in Brazil and Spain.

Classic studies address the relationship between gender and leadership. In a systematic analysis of leadership styles, Eagly and Johnson (1990) found that people consider women more relationship-oriented, while men are more task-oriented. However, a meta-analysis by Eagly *et al.* (1995) found no difference between men and women in managerial and leadership effectiveness, but leaders tend to be especially effective in roles considered congruent with their gender. This perspective is developed in Eagly and Karau's (2002) Role Congruence Theory, a proposal according to which disproportionately occupied roles throughout history have produced a set of stereotypes or socially shared beliefs about the descriptive characteristics of men and women, leading to prescriptions that guide their behaviour.

As women are traditionally associated with community roles and men are attributed highly action-oriented qualities that emphasise power and authority (Eagly & Wood, 2012), women are only well accepted as leaders in typically feminine or normative areas. In leadership, in the broad sense, they are rejected or targeted with negative attitudes. The role of a leader is expected to possess qualities such as confidence, self-sufficiency, and dominance, which are considered incongruous with femininity and closely associated with roles typically attributed to men (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Support for women in politics is related to expectations about leadership eligibility and gender-related attributes. More subtle characteristics, such as the group's prototypicality, also seem to interfere with these evaluations (Eagly, 2018), making it even more difficult to achieve and maintain leadership. Normativity, understood as the fulfilment of social norms—

consensual expectations about what members of a given group do (descriptive norms) or should do (injunctive norms)—seems to be one of them (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). A woman who exhibits typically masculine behaviour often faces consequences for deviating from traditional norms (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007). There is evidence of a negative reaction in the form of greater repulsion and harsher moral judgments directed at female leaders who are perceived as more agentic (Brescoll *et al.*, 2018), who act assertively and dominantly (Rudman *et al.*, 2012), or who engage in self-promotion (Rudman, 1998). This happens because they threaten the gender status hierarchy and confront the status quo (Brescoll *et al.*, 2018).

Even if they do correspond to the role of leader, women who do not conform to gender roles seem to be “losing out.” What happens to women in politics with characteristics or behaviours more congruent with gender expectations? According to Schneider and Bos (2014), female politicians constitute a specific, stereotyped category with qualities that may differ from those traditionally attributed to women in general. Female politicians seem to lose out on both typically masculine qualities and those attributed to women. However, the content and consequences of gender expectations for these women’s trajectories remain unclear.

Reactions to leaders who reproduce gender stereotypes, such as the belief that women are more emotional than men, for example, have received little attention from researchers (Brescoll *et al.*, 2018). Although motherhood occupies a central position in gender roles, since its origins are historically associated with activities related to pregnancy, breastfeeding, etc. (Eagly & Wood, 2012), we found no empirical studies on the specific impact of a candidate’s motherhood on support for women in politics.

In a survey of 49 countries, Suppes (2020) investigated the common belief that women need to have children in order to live a fulfilling life. The results showed the widespread persistence of this motherhood norm and its impact both at the individual level and in the organisation of society. This norm also seems to impact women in politics, both in how the population treats their leaders, such as the nickname “Mommy of Germany” attributed to Angela Merkel, and in the media representation of female candidates (Eagly, 2018).

García-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2012) analysed media coverage in four European countries of Spain’s appointment of a cabinet with a majority of women. They noted that, while some discussions celebrated the ministers, others judged their physical appearance or their performance as wives, mothers, or expectant mothers. In Brazil, Fontenelle *et al.* (2025) analysed the Instagram profiles of female candidates from different regions and across the political spectrum in the 2022 elections. They discussed how motherhood, historically seen as an impediment to female political participation, had been reinterpreted and had become an important element in the candidates’ campaigns. Thus, in this study, we examine the extent to which a normative position based on motherhood would affect support for a candidate.

When considering support for a candidate, it is important to take into account the ideological position. For example, in U.S. elections, although variables such as religion play a marginal role, the ideological battle is a determining factor due to the strong polarisation between Republicans and Democrats (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012). The same applies to other countries, including Spain and Brazil. In Spain, ideology, understood as self-positioning on the left-right axis, has shown a strong predictive capacity for voting (Bailon Garcia, 2011). In Brazil, the importance of party sentiment and ideological positioning in voter behaviour is growing. The connection between ideology and gender bias also influences electoral behaviour (Batista Pereira, 2023; Borges & Vidigal, 2018) and constitutes a relevant factor in the dynamics of women’s political participation.

Koch *et al.* (2025), for example, show that online gender-based violence, particularly on digital platforms, undermines such participation in Brazil. Their study indicates that young candidates and those affiliated with left-leaning parties are more likely to experience misogynistic attacks. Moreover, the intensity of these attacks is associated with reduced social media activity, potentially silencing their voices in public debate.

Pérez *et al.* (2023) examine the relationship between ideology and party positions on gender issues in Spain, analysing four dimensions: welfare and labour market, violence, representation, and values. Their findings reveal a left–right divide in the areas of violence, representation, and values; however, in the welfare and

labour market dimension, ideology does not account for significant differences, as support for gender equality policies is broadly shared across parties. In this area, gender equality seems to be a “valence issue” characterised by positive consensus regardless of ideological orientation.

Similarly, Santana and Aguilar (2019) examine the link between party ideology and women's representation in Spain, focusing on the Socialist PSOE and the Conservative PP. They contend that previous research has overlooked both the effect of electoral timing, since left-wing parties began recruiting women earlier, and the distinction between the two party roles: acting as “gate-openers,” by facilitating women's entry into parliament, and as “career-promoters,” by supporting the continuity of female incumbents. Drawing on an extensive dataset covering regional deputies across 138 elections, the authors find that, once temporal factors are controlled for, left-wing parties, particularly the PSOE, consistently recruit more women. However, while the PSOE stands out as a gate-opener, the PP proves more effective in fostering the parliamentary careers of women already in office.

Spain and Brazil are at different stages in terms of gender parity. According to the WEF (2025) index, Spain ranks 11th out of 148 countries for gender parity in politics, while Brazil ranks 70th. Thus, while male dominance remains a global reality, general trends towards equality vary by context. As a factor underlying gender discrimination, sexism plays an important role in these variations (Batista Pereira, 2023; Viana *et al.*, 2020).

According to Glick and Fiske (1996), sexism can be expressed in two dimensions: hostile and benevolent. These complementary systems limit women's political, economic, and personal power. When women attempt to control or exercise power over men, they are often met with hostility (hostile sexism). On the other hand, benevolent sexism is not always recognised as discriminatory, as women are idealised as beings who need to be cared for and whose love is essential for a man to feel complete. This “protective” dimension also implies that women are weak and inferior. Consequently, “normative” women who fulfil traditional gender roles (e.g., mothers and caregivers) are rewarded with benevolent solicitude, whereas “counter-normative” women are penalised with hostile sexism (Connor *et al.*, 2017).

Sexism is present in women's daily lives and also influences politics. Cassese and Holman (2019) examined its role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, during which Donald Trump accused Hillary Clinton of playing the “woman card” to gain support. Their study revealed that those who displayed hostile sexism were more likely to support Trump, whereas those who displayed benevolent sexism were more inclined to support Clinton, driven by a perceived need to “protect” women. In Brazil, Batista Pereira (2023) investigated the relationship between electoral rules and voter prejudice, demonstrating that sexism is an underlying factor influencing the behaviour of voters who consider themselves egalitarian, yet still avoid voting for women when ideologically similar male candidates are available.

The relationship between sexism, women's non-conformity to traditional gender norms, and other ideology-related variables, such as political illiberalism (i.e., an individual preference for nondemocratic forms of governance), has been extensively examined in a robust body of research, which demonstrates well-established associations among these variables. Individuals with stronger adherence to sexist attitudes are more likely to tolerate and even support discrimination. This is evident in the increasing trend of violent reactions against women in politics, manifested as threats, semiotic violence, and physical attacks. Regarding ideological positioning, the literature concludes, for example, that sexist individuals are more tolerant of political violence because they are also motivated to maintain traditional social hierarchies and suppress demands for equality from historically marginalised social groups (Piazza & O'Rourke, 2025). Thus, sexism reflects attitudes aligned with traditional and hierarchical gender norms and is closely linked to phenomena such as support for political violence.

Results like these highlight the impact of sexism on women's representation in politics, particularly when women deviate from socially sanctioned roles. A central dimension of this normativity concerns motherhood. Szekeres *et al.* (2023) investigate the normativity of motherhood as the primary social expectation for women, demonstrating that motherhood occupies a hierarchically superior position relative to other gender norms. Their study is grounded in the observation that contemporary conservative political rhetoric often endorses women's professional participation, provided

that it does not interfere with childbearing. Across five experiments with 738 participants, the authors show that women who voluntarily remain childless elicit more negative reactions than mothers, and even more negative reactions than women who violate gender norms in domains such as occupation, power, or sexual orientation.

However, the literature has not yet examined the relationship between normativity, specifically the motherhood norm, ideological positioning, and sexism in shaping support for a political candidate. We identify this as an important gap in the field, which constitutes the primary original contribution of the present study. Accordingly, we address the following research question: How do normativity and ideology affect support for a female candidate? Is sexism a variable that can affect the direction and/or strength of this relation?

Aim and Overview of the Study

This study aims to investigate the impact of ideological positioning and normativity on support for a candidate by analysing the moderating role of sexism in this relationship in Brazil and Spain. Specifically, we examined the relationship between a candidate's suitability for the motherhood norm, their position on the political spectrum (left or right), and support for their candidacy, while controlling for participants' political positions. We then analysed whether sexism acts as a moderating variable in this relationship and whether these relationships differ between Brazil and Spain.

We examined the general proposition that ideology and gender normativity are associated with support for female candidacy and that these associations are context dependent. **H1)** We expect ideological alignment between participants and the candidate to be positively associated with candidate support in both countries. That is, support for a candidate will mainly depend on

their left-right positioning and that of the participants (Bailon Garcia, 2011; Batista Pereira, 2023; Borges & Vidigal, 2018). **H2)** Beyond ideological alignment, we anticipate a main effect of normativity, such that candidates portrayed as conforming to the motherhood norm may receive higher levels of support than those depicted as counter-normative, because deviating from social norms or normative expectations for women's behaviour generates more disapproval (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007; Szekeres *et al.*, 2023). However, we expect this effect to be contingent on the national context. Specifically, the magnitude of the normativity effect is expected to be greater in Brazil, where structural gender inequalities remain comparatively more pronounced.

As a factor underlying gender inequality, sexism is conceptualised as a moderator of these effects. **H3)** We expect sexism to moderate the relationships between candidate characteristics (ideology and normativity) and support. A moderating variable affects the direction and/or strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986), explaining when the phenomenon occurs.

More specifically, **H3a)** At higher levels of sexism, overall support for female candidates is expected to decrease, potentially attenuating ideological differentiation in candidate evaluations. **H3b)** At lower levels of sexism, ideological alignment is expected to be more strongly associated with candidate support. **H3c)** The positive association between normativity and support is expected to be stronger among individuals with higher levels of sexism; that is, we expect that high adherence to sexism will lead to greater support for the "normative" candidate and rejection of the "counter-normative" one. Finally, **H3d)** Among individuals with lower levels of sexism, differences in support between normative and counter-normative candidates are expected to be reduced or statistically non-significant.

Method

Participants and Study Design

The study was conducted in two parts (I: Brazil; II: Spain) to achieve its objectives and enable cross-

national comparison. The sample size was determined a priori using G*Power 3.1.9, estimating a sample of

179 participants in each country as adequate for a design with 80% power to detect a moderate effect size between the variables ($f = .25$; $p = .05$). The study employed an experimental design based on two non-probabilistic convenience samples, which provide analytical representativeness for testing theoretical relationships, but do not allow for statistical representativeness of the general populations of Brazil and Spain. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as generalizable to individuals with characteristics similar to those of the participants rather than to the national populations as a whole.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (candidate's ideological position: left or right) $\times$ 2 (women's normativity: "normative" or "counter-normative"), between-subjects factorial design. The inclusion criteria in both countries were: a) being over 18 years old and b) agreeing to participate in the research.

The Brazilian sample included 185 participants, mostly female (52.5%) and from the northeastern region (84.2%). Ages ranged from 18 to 63 ($M = 27.34$; $SD = 9.06$). Regarding the participants' positions on the political spectrum, 55.7% identified as left, 25.2% as centre, and 19.1% as right. Due to the small proportion of right-wing participants, retaining three separate groups would have led to unbalanced cell sizes and reduced statistical power. Therefore, for analyses, we combined centrist and right-wing participants into a single "centre/right" category (44.3%), while left-wing participants remained a separate group (55.7%). This grouping is consistent with both statistical considerations and theoretical reasoning, as centre and right-wing orientations are typically more similar in terms of adherence to traditional gender norms and resistance to progressive gender equality policies than left-wing orientations. In Spain, the sample included 185 participants, mostly female (49.7%), 81.4 % of whom declared Spanish nationality. Ages ranged from 17 to 62 ($M = 21.22$, $SD = 6.3$). 69.7% declared themselves to be on the left, 19.5% in the centre, and 10.8% on the right. We also divided the sample into left (69.7%) and centre/right (30.3%).

Procedures

The research procedures provided access to Brazilian and Spanish university students, with approval for data collection at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB), Brazil, and the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM), Spain. We used an online survey strategy, with a questionnaire hosted on SurveyMonkey. We ask for support from institutions, as well as the general participation of the community through wide dissemination (e.g., Facebook). Data collection in both countries was completed in July 2021.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Paraíba (CAAE: 36369820.4.0000.5188) and was classified as a minimal-risk investigation, in accordance with Brazilian National Health Council Resolutions 466/2012 and 510/2016 (Conselho Nacional de Saúde, 2012, 2016) which are consistent with international ethical standards for research involving human participants (e.g., the Declaration of Helsinki). Prior to participation, all participants provided free and informed consent electronically. The consent form explained the study's objectives, its voluntary nature, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality and data protection. No physical or psychological harm was expected beyond possible mild discomfort related to answering the questionnaire.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire presented the profiles of two hypothetical female candidates, Maria Alves da Costa in Brazil and María García Rodríguez in Spain, who were running in the upcoming elections in their respective countries. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the story versions, which differed in terms of normativity and ideological position. Figure 1 shows a translated summary of the text that participants read.

Figure 1. Scenarios

Candidate Maria Alves da Costa / María García Rodríguez began her political career as "Vereadora (BR)" / "Concejala (ES)" and was later also elected as "Deputada Estadual (BR)" / "Diputada al Parlamento Autonomico de su Comunidad (ES)". In the election for this position, she was among the most voted candidates in her state. Maria is a mother and, despite having an intense political career, has always prioritized her family life and caring for her children (vs. Maria chose not to have children, has an intense political career, and has always prioritized her professional life). In the upcoming elections, she intends to run for "Deputada Federal (BR)" / "Diputada Nacional (ES)" for a right-wing (vs. left-wing) party to which she is affiliated.

Ten judges, all researchers specialising in this field, evaluated the scenarios before their use. The testing was conducted with experts in both Brazil and Spain to ensure that the scenarios were congruent with the characterisation of women's participation in elective positions in the two countries. This procedure enabled a valid comparison of the cases and contributed to understanding differences in gender parity in politics across countries with distinct political and social contexts, such as Brazil and Spain.

The candidate's ideological positioning was manipulated by their affiliation with a right- or left-wing political party. In terms of normativity, we examined the effect of prioritising family life, with motherhood being a salient characteristic. We refer to this as the effect of the motherhood norm, given that the literature highlights the central role of motherhood in shaping gender expectations, social roles, and norms that influence women's experiences (e.g., Costa *et al.*, 2022; Suppes, 2020; Szekeres *et al.*, 2023). Each participant responded to only one experimental condition, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Experimental Condition

Brazil			
Normativity of the candidate			
Ideological position of the candidate	Normative	Counter-normative	Total
Right	42	50	92
Left	48	45	93
Total	90	95	185
Spain			
Normativity of the candidate			
Ideological position of the candidate	Normative	Counter-normative	Total
Right	45	46	91
Left	43	51	94
Total	88	97	185

Dependent Variable

The questionnaire asked participants to indicate how much they agreed with the following statements: a) I would vote for the candidate; b) I believe that the candidate's proposals would benefit me; c) I would ask friends to vote for her; d) I would get involved in the campaign by distributing leaflets in the streets; e) I would make financial donations; f) I believe that a candidate with this profile would keep her promises; and g) I have no criticism of this candidate. These questions were answered using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The average score for these items pro-

vided a measure of "support," the dependent variable. To assess the reliability of this composite variable, internal consistency was calculated, yielding satisfactory indices (Cronbach's alpha = .88 for the Brazilian sample; .86 for the Spanish sample).

Sexism Measure

We used the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) developed by Glick and Fiske (1996), adapted in Spain (Expósito *et al.*, 1998) and in Brazil (Formiga *et al.*, 2002). The measure consists of 22 items, of which 11

are hostile sexism (HS), and 11 are benevolent sexism (BS). The items assess gender stereotypes in relation to dimensions of sexism (e.g., hostile: “women seek power by controlling men” and benevolent: “women should be cared for and protected by men”) and were answered by participants on a 6-point Likert scale.

In the Brazilian adaptation (Formiga *et al.*, 2002), the internal consistency indices for BS ($\alpha = .77$) and HS ($\alpha = .66$) factors were satisfactory. In this study, the Brazilian sample demonstrated superior indicators: HS ($\alpha = .93$) and BS ($\alpha = .87$). In the Spanish adaptation (Expósito *et al.*, 1998), the HS subscale had an alpha coefficient of .89 and the BS had an alpha coefficient of .86. In our Spanish sample, the scale also had satisfactory indicators: HS ($\alpha = .86$) and BS ($\alpha = .73$).

Data Analysis

SPSS software was used for the analyses, including ANOVAs, ANCOVAs, moderation analyses, and descriptive statistics. In the Brazilian sample, the assumption

tests indicated that the variable “support” showed no significant deviation from normality and met the assumption of homogeneity of variance (Kolmogorov–Smirnov = .051, $p \geq .200$; Levene (3, 181) = 1.69, $p = .171$). A similar pattern was observed in the Spanish sample (Kolmogorov–Smirnov = .052, $p \geq .200$; Levene (3, 181) = 0.60, $p = .616$). For the ANCOVAs, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was assessed by testing the interaction effects between ambivalent sexism (AS) and the factors. In Brazil, the interaction was not significant, $F(1,175) = 0.05$, $p = .825$, $\eta p^2 < .001$. Similarly, in Spain, the interaction was not significant, $F(1,177) = 2.59$, $p = .110$, $\eta p^2 = .014$, indicating that the assumption was met in both samples.

For descriptive interpretation, the AS variable was mean-centred by subtracting the sample mean from each score. This procedure preserved the variable’s continuity. Values above the sample mean were interpreted as reflecting higher adherence to AS, whereas values below the mean reflected relatively lower adherence. However, the variable was not formally dichotomised and was treated as continuous in the moderation analyses.

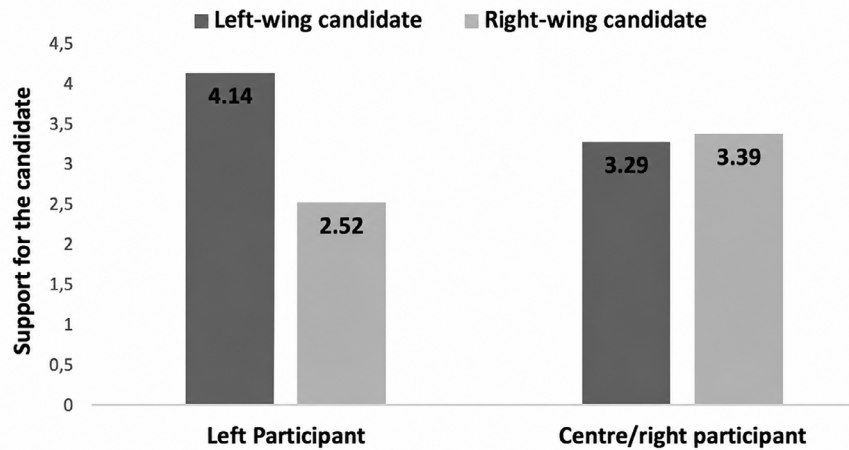
Results

Brazil

To test the effects of ideological positioning (left versus right) and normativity (normative vs counter-normative) on support for the candidate, we conducted a 2×2 factorial ANOVA (post hoc analyses of the main and interaction effects were conducted using the Bonferroni test). The results revealed a significant main effect of ideological positioning, $F(1,181) = 25$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .12$, indicating that participants attributed more support to the left-wing candidate ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.122$) compared to the right-wing candidate ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.123$). On the other hand, there was no significant main effect of normativity on support for the candidate, $F(1,181) = 0.063$, $p = .803$,

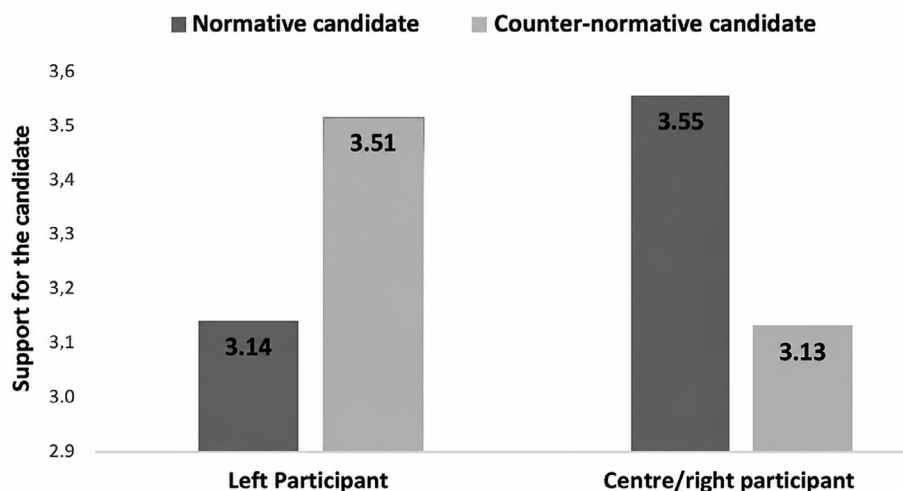
$\eta p^2 < .001$, and no significant interaction effect between normativity and ideology, $F(1,181) = 0.001$, $p = .981$, $\eta p^2 < .001$.

As expected, the left-wing candidate received more support, with most participants positioning themselves on the left of the political spectrum (55.7%). To better analyse the role of participants’ ideological belonging, a 2×2×2 factorial ANOVA was also conducted, considering participants’ ideology (left and centre/right), the candidate’s ideology, and normativity as independent variables. As predicted in H1, the results showed a significant interaction effect between the participant’s ideology and the candidate’s ideology, $F(1,175) = 27.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .13$. Figure 2 illustrates these interactions.

Figure 2. Support According to the Ideological Position

Participants who identified as being on the left-wing candidates were more supportive of left-wing candidates and more opposed to right-wing candidates. Among participants who identified as centrist or right-wing, there were no differences in support according to the candidate's ideology. These results confirm H1, which predicted that the variation in support would occur mainly as a function of ideological positioning. This shows the intergroup bias in support for a candidate based on ideology.

Regarding normativity, the results refute H2, which predicted greater rejection of the counter-normative candidate, as we did not find a significant main effect of normativity on support. However, when we consider the participant's ideology in this relationship, the results show a statistically significant interaction effect between the participant's ideology and the candidate's normativity, $F(1,175) = 5.85$, $p = .017$, $\eta p^2 = .03$. Support according to ideological positioning is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Support According to the Participant's Ideological Position and the Normativity of the Candidate

H2 predicted lower support for the counter-normative candidate, but the results showed that this relationship depends on the participant's ideological

position. Contrary to expectations, left-wing participants showed lower levels of support for the normative candidate. On the other hand, among participants

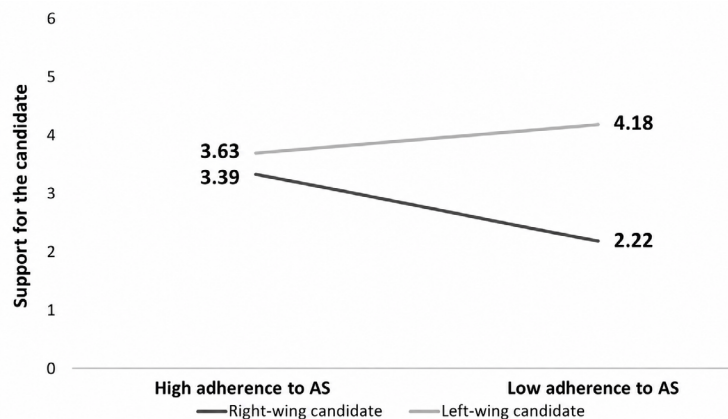
who identified as right- or centre-leaning, support for the normative candidate was higher, corroborating H2. Therefore, support for a normative or counter-normative candidate appears to depend on the participant's ideological position.

In H3, we tested the moderating role of sexism in the relation between the candidate's ideological position, normativity, and support. First, we ran a 2×2 factorial ANCOVA with AS as a covariate ($M = 2.41$; $SD = 1.09$), representing the average of the HS and BS subcomponents. This approach is justified: HS and BS, while conceptually distinct, function as complementary ideologies that jointly uphold gender inequalities. Using a single AS index allows for a general, comprehensive analysis of how these intertwined dimensions shape the effects. In other words,

both HS and BS contribute meaningfully to the observed patterns of support, underscoring the importance of addressing them together in analyses of gendered political attitudes. In this sample, HS ($M = 2.25$; $SD = 1.24$) and BS ($M = 2.57$; $SD = 1.12$) showed a strong and significant relationship ($r = .71$, $p < .01$), which can then be used as a single variable ($\alpha = .94$).

The results revealed a significant interaction effect between candidate ideology and AS, $F(1,179) = 52.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .26$. This interaction indicates that, for participants with high AS adherence, the candidate's ideological position was not significantly relevant ($p = .279$). However, as illustrated in Figure 4, significant differences were observed between conditions for low adherence ($p < .001$).

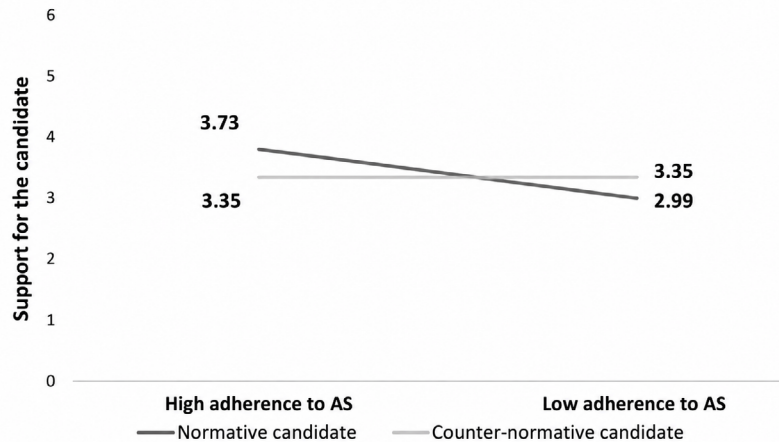
Figure 4. Moderating Effect of AS on the Relation Between the Candidate's Ideology and Support



As predicted by H3a, in high adherence to AS, support did not vary by the candidate's ideology, being practically the same in both conditions: right ($M = 3.39$; $SD = 0.153$) and left ($M = 3.63$; $SD = 0.150$). Participants' support for the candidate was consistent across all conditions, with no statistically significant differences by the candidate's ideological position. When AS adherence was low, participants were more supportive of the left-wing candidate ($M = 4.18$; $SD = 0.153$) and seemed to reject the right-wing candidate more ($M = 2.22$; $SD = 0.151$). As expected in H3b, the relationship between ideology and support strengthens in this situation, without the influence of sexism. Thus, ideology explains the greater support for the

in-group (left) and the greater rejection of the out-group (right).

Regarding normativity (Figure 5), we carried out another 2×2 factorial ANCOVA and found a significant effect for the interaction between normativity and AS, $F(1,179) = 4.08$, $p = .045$, $\eta p^2 = .03$. Although the differences were not as pronounced, among participants with high adherence to AS, mean support scores were higher for the normative candidate ($M = 3.73$; $SD = 0.188$) than the counter-normative ($M = 3.35$; $SD = 0.177$). Among participants with low levels of AS, the counter-normative candidate had a higher mean support ($M = 3.35$; $SD = 0.180$) than the normative one ($M = 2.99$; $SD = 0.185$).

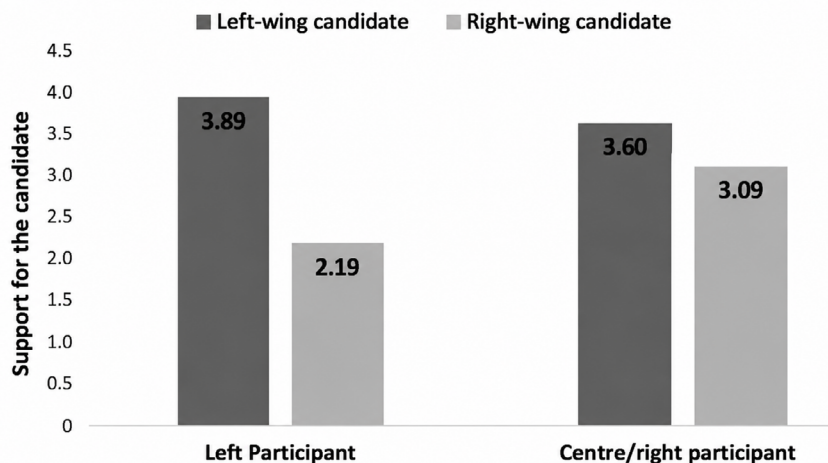
Figure 5. Moderating Effect of AS on the Relation Between Normativity and Support

Spain

A 2×2 factorial ANOVA was conducted to test the effect of ideological positioning and normativity on support in the Spanish sample. The results showed that the main effect of the candidate's ideological position was significant, $F(1,181) = 98.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .353$, with the left-wing candidate ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.093$) receiving more support than the right-wing candidate ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.094$). Regarding normativity, the main effect was not significant: $F(1,181) = 2.28$, $p = .132$, $\eta p^2 = .012$. There was also no significant interaction effect between normativity and ideology, $F(1,181) = 0.982$, $p = .323$, $\eta p^2 = .005$, in line with the the-

oretical expectations discussed in the Spanish literature (Pérez *et al.*, 2023).

As most participants were also on the left of the political spectrum (69.7%), the left-wing candidate (in-group) received more support. A 2×2×2 factorial ANOVA was conducted, with the participants' ideology, the candidate's ideology, and normativity as independent variables. As expected in H1, the results in Spain also showed a significant interaction effect between the participant's ideology and the candidate's ideology, $F(1,177) = 16.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .087$, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Support According to the Ideological Positioning of the Participant and the Candidate

The results from the Spanish sample contradict H2, as no significant main effect of normativity was found. Unlike in Brazil, even when including the participant's

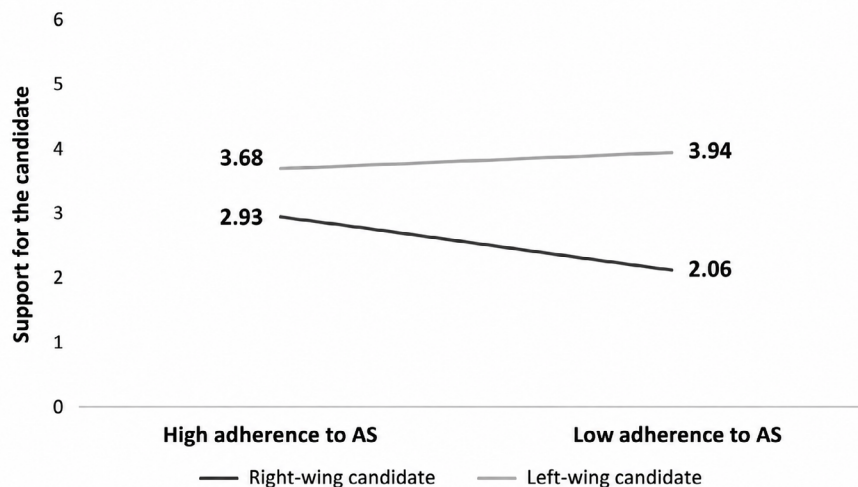
ideology in this relation, we also did not find a statistically significant interaction effect, $F(1,177) = 0.005$, $p = .945$, $\eta p^2 < .001$. Therefore, it seems that women's

normativity (regarding the norm of motherhood) does not affect levels of support. The subcomponents HS ($M=1.56$; $SD=0.66$) and BS ($M=2.0$; $SD=0.61$) showed a moderate and significant relation ($r = .51$, $p < .01$).

We also used the variable AS ($M = 1.78$; $SD = 0.55$; $\alpha = .86$) to test the moderating effect of sexism on the relation between the candidate's ideological positioning, normativity, and support for the candidacy. The results indicated a significant interaction effect between ideology and AS ($F(1,181) = 20.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .103$).

This interaction indicates significant differences in the mean scores of participants with high AS adherence depending on whether the candidate was right- or left-wing ($p < .001$). However, these differences were even more pronounced in the low adherence to AS ($p < .001$). In the high adherence, we have the right ($M = 2.93$; $SD = 0.127$) and left ($M = 3.68$; $SD = 0.122$). In the low-adherence condition, participants were more supportive of the left candidate ($M = 3.94$; $SD = 0.125$) and, by the same logic, seemed to reject the right candidate more ($M = 2.06$; $SD = 0.125$), as shown in Figure 7.

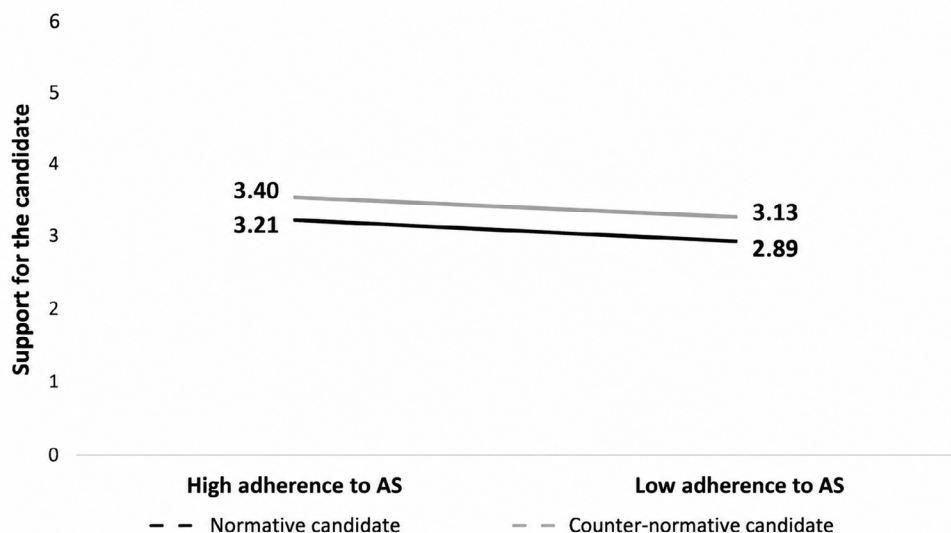
Figure 7. Moderating Effect of AS on the Relationship Between Target Ideology and Support



Regarding normativity, we found no significant interaction effect between normativity and AS among these participants, $F(1,181) = 0.019$, $p = .889$, $\eta p^2 < .001$, unlike

in Brazil. Figure 8 shows that although there were small differences in the means, they were not statistically significant for normative or counter-normative candidates.

Figure 8. Moderating Effect of AS on the Relation Between Normativity and Support



Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the impact of ideological positioning and normativity on candidate support, and to analyse the moderating role of sexism in this relationship. As predicted by H1, the participant's position on the left-right axis was the main determinant of support. Participants were more supportive of the candidate whose ideological position aligned with the majority in the Brazilian and Spanish samples (left). We also expected normativity to affect support, but this hypothesis (H2) was partially refuted as we found no statistically significant relationship between these variables.

The situation changed when we took the participants' ideology into account. In Brazil, a statistically significant interaction effect was observed between normativity, participants' ideology and support. Participants on the left were more supportive of the counter-normative candidate, while those on the centre/right were more supportive of the normative candidate. Batista Pereira (2023) discusses the relationship between ideology and gender-based voting choices. This study indicates that gender bias has an impact even among "egalitarian" voters since ideology is the main determinant of voting, but voters tend to choose ideologically similar male candidates in highly competitive scenarios.

Thus, this interaction suggests that gender role expectations are locally constructed within these groups (right and left), given that normativity was manipulated by deviating from or fulfilling the motherhood norm. Among the Brazilian sample, those on the left were less likely to support a candidate simply because she was a mother. Those from the centre/right were more likely to reject a candidate for choosing not to have children. In the Spanish sample, a woman's deviation from gender norms did not seem to affect her candidacy evaluation, even when the participant's ideology was taken into account.

Bellido-Pérez and Gordillo-Rodríguez (2022) analysed how the five main candidates for the Spanish presidency presented themselves on Instagram in the lead-up to the 28 April 2019 general election. Although none of the analysed candidates was women, their findings are relevant to our results. They showed that, particularly in the days leading up to the vote, credibility

and professionalism were prioritised over more humanised content or references to the candidates' personal lives. This strategy closely aligns with our findings from the Spanish sample, indicating that normativity (the candidate's personal life) had little impact on support for her candidacy, whereas the professional dimension (her ideology) prevailed.

However, the results confirmed H3, which predicted AS's moderating role in this relationship. This was particularly evident in Brazil, where sexist ideologies were more prevalent. Participants with high levels of AS supported the left-wing and right-wing candidates equally. By contrast, those with low AS were more supportive of the left-wing candidate and more opposed to the right-wing candidate. The literature shows that ideological identification is a key factor in political decision-making (Bailon Garcia, 2011; Borges & Vidigal, 2018). For instance, individuals on the left are more likely to value members of their in-group (left-wing candidates) and reject members of their out-group (right-wing candidates). However, as sexist ideologies can distort or bias social judgements and practices (Connor *et al.*, 2017), high adherence to sexism results in low levels of support, regardless of ideological position.

In Spain, support for both high and low levels of AS varied by ideology. The fewer people adhered to AS, the more ideology determined their support for a candidate. In other words, low levels of AS strengthen the relationship between support and ideology. It should be emphasised that, in this study, we used mean AS scores as a composite measure rather than disaggregating them into HS and BS. We took this approach because, although they predict attitudes of opposite valence, they act as complementary ideologies in perpetuating gender inequalities (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

The results show that ideology and normativity influence support for women in politics, with AS moderating this relationship. This interaction can be understood through social norms: individuals high in sexism are more likely to penalise women who deviate from traditional gender roles, particularly motherhood, which occupies a central hierarchical position among gender norms (Szekeres *et al.*, 2023). Ideology shapes how these norms are enforced, with centre/right-leaning participants (who tend to uphold traditional

hierarchies) showing stronger negative reactions, while left-leaning participants are more supportive. Context also matters: differences between Brazilian and Spanish samples reflect the countries' levels of gender parity in politics (Spain 11th, Brazil 70th; WEF, 2025) and their historical and cultural norms, indicating that societal context interacts with sexism and ideology in shaping support for women in politics.

The results confirmed the prediction that normativity would affect support for a female candidate and highlighted the important role of motherhood in this context, as discussed in previous studies (e.g., Fontenelle *et al.*, 2025; Suppes, 2020). Furthermore, when considered together, these results show that ideology is the most important factor influencing support. At first glance, this may seem to be simply a matter of favouritism towards the final group (a predominantly left-wing sample tends to favour the left and reject the right). However, we also identified other aspects of this relationship, such as the impact of sexism. This has been supported by other studies (Batista Pereira, 2023; Cassese & Holman, 2019).

This study's key innovation is its demonstration of how ideological positioning interacts with AS to shape support for female political candidates, rather than merely confirming that conservative individuals endorse traditional values. While previous research has shown that conservative or right-wing individuals tend to adhere to traditional gender norms, our findings highlight that sexism moderates this relationship. Specifically, high levels of AS reduce the influence of ideological alignment on candidate support, causing participants to penalise women regardless of their ideological congruence. Conversely, participants with lower levels of sexism demonstrate stronger alignment effects, supporting candidates whose ideological preferences match their own. This interaction sheds new light on the mechanisms through which gendered social norms operate, demonstrating that ideology alone cannot fully explain evaluative judgements and that sexist attitudes can distort or override ideological preferences, affecting women's political representation.

By integrating normativity (the motherhood norm) and cross-cultural comparisons, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of the combined influence of ideology and sexism on political support than prior research has achieved. One limitation of our

conclusions is that the samples were predominantly left-wing because recruiting right-wing participants was difficult. Although we divided the samples into left-wing and centre/right-wing groups for the purposes of the analysis, it is important to consider the possibility of bias in assigning ideologies to the groups. While support for the left is clearly marked on the left, we cannot draw the same conclusion for the right, as we considered this bloc predominantly centrist in the analysis. Furthermore, the smaller size of the centre/right subgroup, particularly in the Spanish sample, may have reduced the statistical power to detect effects within this group. Consequently, the absence of significant differences among centre/right participants should be interpreted with caution, as it may reflect insufficient statistical power rather than the true absence of ideological or attitudinal effects. Future studies should seek to recruit larger, more balanced ideological samples to test these relationships more robustly. Care should also be taken when generalising these results, given the online data collection method, the experimental design, and other methodological and analytical choices described here, such as the ideological asymmetry of the samples and the decision to combine centre- and right-leaning participants, which could yield different outcomes under other conditions.

Additionally, a limitation of this study is its factorial design, which may limit generalizability, as the results depend on the specific conditions chosen. Furthermore, the model's sensitivity and group size may be limited. In studies of this nature, the groups formed can result in small sample sizes, which reduces statistical power and the ability to detect subtle effects. However, these factors did not prevent us from analysing and comparing the results in both countries. Our results enhance understanding of support for women in politics by considering the relationship between normativity, ideology, and sexism—a relationship that previous studies had overlooked.

Moreover, we emphasise the importance of addressing the issue of women in politics in all its complexity (Hessami & da Fonseca, 2020). As this agenda is considered crucial for gender equality, many studies perpetuate myths about increasing women's representation in politics by considering only the direct benefits. Angela Merkel's case also illustrates this, as although her long-term leadership could have been a vector for change, Germany did not make much progress towards gender equality during her time in office (Eagly, 2018).

In this study, we examined the impact of the relationship between ideology, normativity and sexism on support for a female candidate. However, it is also important to consider how these factors may affect women's performance or representation in politics. Simply including more women in politics does not necessarily lead to public policies or actions that benefit women in general. For instance, the ideological position of a female leader could result in conservative and discriminatory practices towards women who deviate from traditional gender norms or roles. In this sense, Eagly (2018) argues that careful, detailed, and systematic research is necessary to dispel diversity myths and provide empirical evidence.

Further research could also examine the impact of other social norms, such as the belief that women are more emotional than men (Brescoll *et al.*, 2018). We argue that increasing women's representation in politics is crucial to promoting gender equality. However, when searching for representations that will actually advance equality and include all women, it is important to consider how various factors can influence support for a female candidate. Given the importance of sexism as a moderating variable, we recommend that future studies examine the impact of sexist ideologies and stereotypes associated with motherhood on gender inequalities in politics and other areas.

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