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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Thania Isabelle Paffenholz,
Inclusive Peace, Switzerland

*CORRESPONDENCE
Hilde Coffe
✉ hc965@bath.ac.uk

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Editorial: Mind the backlash: gender discrimination and sexism in contemporary societies

Hilde Coffe^{1*}, Marta Fraile², Amy Alexander³,
Jessica Fortin-Rittberger⁴ and Susan Banducci⁵

¹Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies, University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom, ²Instituto de Políticas y Bienes Públicos (CSIC), Institute of Public Goods and Policies, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), Madrid, Spain, ³Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden, ⁴Department of Political Science, University of Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria, ⁵Department of Social and Political Sciences, Philosophy, and Anthropology, University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Mind the backlash: gender discrimination and sexism in contemporary societies

Decades of policy efforts have brought significant progress in women's economic and political status and advanced gender equality on the global policy agenda. The goal of gender equality, however, still remains largely out of reach, as illustrated by the recent wave of women's protests against sexual harassment and gender violence (e.g., #MeToo movement). Some European countries (e.g., Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania) have even seen their performance on gender equality backslide in recent years. In parallel with calls for increased gender equality and rights, a wave of mobilization against what has been called "gender ideology" has appeared in the public discourse. This backlash against women's empowerment carries considerable implications for anti-discrimination laws, policies protecting women against domestic violence, reproductive health, and the establishment of gender quotas, even fuelling an increase in hostility toward prominent female political figures (see for instance [Brescoll et al., 2018](#); [Krizsan and Roggeband, 2018](#)).

Given the "backlash" against gender observed in various countries around the globe, we are at a critical crossroad not only to expand, but also to revisit our knowledge about gender discrimination, gender equality, gender rights, and sexism. Our Research Topic "*Mind the Backlash: Gender Discrimination and Sexism in Contemporary Society*" adopts a gender perspective to illustrate and understand the recent illiberal turn in politics in a variety of contexts. Our collected papers add to the renewed interest in sexism and its impact in the political sphere with the stalled progress of women's representation and the resentment surrounding Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign in 2016.

Our Research Topic presents 10 different original research papers focusing on sexism, gender(ed) attitudes, and attitudes toward gender equality, the link between these attitudes, and their potential electoral consequences. They explore the theme of sexism in politics drawing on a vast palette of methodological approaches, ranging from case studies to experimental methods. Through broad geographical coverage, our Research Topic uncovers trends that span different political and societal contexts.

The contributions can be grouped into two broad categories, with one set of papers focusing on sexism and a second set looking at attitudes toward gender equality.

Sexism

Off et al. demonstrate that young men are most likely to perceive advances in women's rights as a threat to men's opportunities across Europe. Gothreau et al. uncover an intricate relationship between different conceptualizations of sexism and gendered attitudes, underscoring the need to consider how different forms of sexism shape broader social and political views. Beauregard et al. highlight that those holding sexist attitudes (net of other attitudes and demographic characteristics) are in favor of reducing funding for pro-women policies like social services, education, and health, while they approve of increased budgets for "male" policies such as law enforcement and defense. In another paper looking at the political consequences of sexism by Coffe et al., sexism becomes a crucial factor when studying the link between masculinity and support for the populist radical right party VOX. Sexism operates in two different ways, namely through mediating and moderating effects. Further substantiating this insight, Longdon and Banducci's conjoint experiment shows that sexist attitudes, rather than gender identity as a woman or femininity, moderate how individuals respond to politicians accused of sexual misconducts: people showing hostile sexism were less likely to punish politicians for multiple offenses and less likely to reward acknowledgment of misconduct by politicians. Last on sexism, focusing on Dilma Rousseff's presidency, Jalalzai et al. demonstrate that gender stereotypes and sexism fueled criticisms about Rousseff's political leadership, indicating a gendered double bind and a backlash against women in politics.

Attitudes toward gender equality

A second set of four papers focuses on attitudes toward gender equality in various contexts. First, Lopatina et al. observe a link between higher national pride and stricter condemnation of pro-choice attitudes in post-Soviet Armenia, but the condemnation of pro-choice attitudes does not reflect their practice of sexual and reproductive choices. Examining public perceptions of women's empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa, Thomas and Kasselstrand show attitudinal differences across countries, but also significant gender gaps across a series of explanatory factors such as diverse urban living, keeping religion a private matter, and connecting with the world via social media. Glas and Spierings investigate the impact of anti-Muslim hostilities on how Muslims connect their religiosity to support for gender equality in Western Europe and conclude that Islamic religiosities shape Muslims' support for public-sphere gender equality in far more complex ways than captured by any right-wing populist claim of one essential patriarchal Islam. A final paper by van der Pas et al. presents a large-scale vignette experiment to examine a gender bias in political candidate evaluation among voters. They find that there is a (slight) preference for women representatives among Green party voters and a clear preference for men candidates among voters of populist radical right parties.

Taken together, the contributions comprising this Research Topic substantiate that gendered attitudes and sexism play a

non-negligible role in contemporary representative democracies. They suggest that sexism exerts powerful effects on the political realm, shaping attitudes about parties, policies, and politicians. Our Research Topic also highlights crucial differences between social groups in sexist attitudes and their attitudes toward gender equality, including differences between gender, age groups, religious groups, or attachment to masculinity. The broad range of countries included in our Research Topic suggests that the impact of sexism on political behavior and attitudes is observable in several different countries, namely Australia, UK, Spain, and Brazil, among others, which suggests broadly generalizable trends that potentially transcend institutional configurations.

The mere strength of the effect of sexism in all the studies presented in our Research Topic suggests the pressing need to develop comparable measures of these attitudes across contexts. In fact, the editorial team of the current Research Topic has developed European Social Survey (ESS) Round 11 Gender Attitudes Module (<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/about/news/essnews0094.html>), that is being fielded in 2023/24 and includes questions about gender identity, salience, gender equality values, and policy preferences in over 30 European countries. Once released these high-quality data will provide an important future resource for comparative scholars seeking to address the themes and further questions raised in this Research Topic in a systematic way.

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