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# Quotas or parity? How the framing of positive action measures impacts public support and backlash

Hilde Coffé<sup>a</sup>, Sparsha Saha<sup>b</sup> and Ana Catalano Weeks<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies, University of Bath, Bath, UK;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

## ABSTRACT

While gender quota and parity laws are increasingly popular worldwide, their introduction often causes controversy. Thus far, we lack an understanding of how the framing of these measures affects public opinion. We conducted a survey experiment in the UK and France (combined  $N = 2677$ ) to identify the causal effect of framing on levels of support for the policy and potential backlash against women candidates. Comparing (1) gender quotas to increase women's underrepresentation and (2) gender parity laws to achieve gender balance, we find that overall levels of support are greater than opposition in both countries. Parity is more supported than quotas in France, but no such framing effects emerge in the UK. Respondents' gender also matters, with men less supportive of both measures than women. We find no evidence that either type of positive action measure increases backlash in the form of reduced support for hypothetical women candidates running under such measures.


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**KEYWORDS** Positive action measures; quotas; parity laws; gender; framing; public opinion

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, the number of countries adopting positive action measures (PAMs) to increase the political representation of women has increased significantly. More than 130 countries worldwide have introduced legal or party gender quotas or parity rules (Hughes *et al.*, 2019). Research confirms that such provisions increase the number of women in office, improve cultural norms about women in politics, and lead to policies that are more aligned with women's preferences (Beaman *et al.*, 2009; Clayton &

**CONTACT** Hilde Coffé  [h.r.coffe@bath.ac.uk](mailto:h.r.coffe@bath.ac.uk)  Department of Politics, Languages and International Studies, University of Bath, Building 1 West North 2.16, Bath BA2 7AY, United Kingdom

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Zetterberg, 2018; Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005; Weeks, 2022). Despite these positive attributes, the introduction of positive action measures (PAMs) – and gender quotas in particular – is almost always controversial. Initially most PAMs were described as ‘gender quotas’. It has, however, been suggested that the word ‘quota’ has negative connotations (e.g., Verge & Tormos, 2023; Ahrens *et al.*, 2020; Freidenvall & Krook, 2011), implying that candidates are selected not due to merit but because of an artificially imposed rule (Bereni & Lépinard, 2004), and that this could de-legitimise those women elected via a quota (Krook, 2014). As a result, advocates of PAMs began pushing for ‘parity’ instead of quotas, most notably in the case of the French parity law adopted in 2000 (Scott, 2005), but also in Portugal, Spain, and many Latin American countries (e.g., Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama). These frames differ in important ways, with a gender parity law intended to promote an equal gender balance in parliaments and a gender quota law intended to reduce the underrepresentation of women.<sup>1</sup> Thus far, no empirical study compares support for these different types of PAMs (see also Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). Therefore, the research question motivating our study is: how does the framing of PAMs influence public opinion?

We argue that the framing of PAMs (parity vs quota) matters for public opinion, and we investigate two aspects of this: support and backlash. First, we expect that citizens support a gender parity law intended to promote an equal gender balance in parliaments more than a gender quota law intended to reduce the underrepresentation of women. This is because of the negative connotations of ‘quota’, which can imply discrimination in favour of women and against men, and associated tokenization that some women find humiliating. Parity, however, is framed as a gender-neutral requirement for equal political participation and as a universal right of citizenship. Second, we also examine the potential for a *backlash* against women candidates running under PAMs; a topic that has so far received little attention. PAMs created to increase women’s representation could cause backlash against women candidates, especially among men. We expect that framing could mitigate such gender backlash, with respondents less likely to downgrade the qualifications of women candidates running under a ‘parity’ law compared with ‘quotas’.

Previous research suggests that gender is a crucial determinant of opinions towards PAMs, with women significantly more supportive than men (Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2020; Barnes & Córdova, 2016; Gidengil, 1996; Keenan & McElroy, 2017; Barnes & Córdova, 2016; Teney *et al.*, 2023). We investigate the extent to which gender has a different impact depending on the framing of the positive action measure and how it also affects a backlash against women candidates. Given that gender quotas focus on preferential treatment of women to increase their representation, whereas gender parity laws highlight gender equal representation, we expect the gender difference to be larger for support for quotas compared with parity laws. In

addition, we anticipate men respondents to show higher levels of backlash against women candidates when exposed to information about PAMs (compared with no exposure to such information) than women respondents, particularly in response to the quota framing.

We also move beyond the role of binary gender and make the case that masculinity moderates the link between binary gender and support/backlash. Building on the concept of political masculinity and ‘masculine men’ (Glick *et al.*, 2015; Starck & Sauer, 2014), we suggest that masculine men drive low levels of support for PAMs, especially for quotas, and gender backlash. In summary, the main contributions of our study are: (1) to provide a causal test of the impact of the framing of PAMs (quotas vs parity) on levels of support; (2) to deepen our understanding of public opinion by examining backlash in addition to support, and; (3) to consider the moderating role of masculinity among men.

To test our arguments, we field an original survey experiment which includes a conjoint experiment. We randomly manipulate the way that PAMs are described and justified, with – in addition to a control group that receives no information about PAMs – two different ‘treatment’ conditions: (1) a gender quota law that is intended to reduce the underrepresentation of women, and (2) a gender parity law that is intended to promote an equal gender balance in parliaments. We measure average treatment effects on levels of support, as well as backlash in the form of perceived qualifications of women candidates running under these hypothetical rules. To do so, we employ a conjoint experiment varying candidate traits, including gender, enabling us to identify the effects of framing marginalised over a broad range of candidate characteristics. Our study focuses on the cases of France and the UK, employing nationally representative samples collected in February of 2023 through YouGov (total N = 2677). Both countries are Western European democracies and use a Single Member District electoral system but offer interesting variation on the use of PAMs. France has had a gender parity law since 2000. The UK has no legislated measures, but some political parties have adopted voluntary gender quotas.

In line with our expectations, we find that support for a parity law is higher than support for a quota law in France, whereas in the UK the framing of PAMs has no impact on support. Importantly, in both countries levels of support overall are higher than levels of opposition. Gender mediates levels of support: men are less likely to support both types of measures in both countries, though the gender gap is smaller in France. We also find a moderation effect of masculinity in our French sample: more masculine men (the interactive effect of binary gender and masculinity) support quota laws less than parity laws (and support both measures less than less masculine men). We find no evidence of a backlash against hypothetical women candidates running under these positive action contexts in either

country. Indeed, in the UK, the perceived qualifications of women candidates even *increase* under both types of PAMs, especially quotas, compared with the control condition. Overall, our study suggests relatively high levels of support for PAMs, particularly in France where citizens now have over twenty years' experience of a gender parity law, and neither framing is associated with backlash in either country.

## **Support for positive action measures: gender quota laws vs gender parity laws**

### ***Support for gender quota and parity laws***

Democratic theorists agree that an equal gender representation in politics is important for the legitimacy of democracies (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995). Yet, few countries around the world have an equal number of elected women and men. As a remedy, various countries have introduced PAMs, mostly gender quotas. Over 60 countries have adopted national-level legislative gender quota or parity laws (Weeks, 2022). These introductions often cause controversy. One common argument is that quotas lead to less qualified candidates. The word 'quota' can imply that certain individuals get places not due to merit, but because of an artificially-imposed rule (Bereni & Lépinard, 2004). For example, in 2021 the Australian Liberal party considered adopting voluntary quotas within the party. Editorials in leading newspapers covering the debate included comments such as, 'a proposal to implement gender quotas in the Liberal Party will throw merit out the window',<sup>2</sup> and, 'does it enhance the quality of representation to demand that women fill the same number of spots?'<sup>3</sup> Overall, the word and concept of gender quotas has been found to carry a negative association. Verge and Tormos (2023), for example, show that the endorsement of gender balance in corporate boards increases when the word quota is not mentioned, and being called a 'quota woman' remains a stigma (Ahrens *et al.*, 2020). One of the interviewees in the study of Ahrens *et al.*, 2020 (42) even states: 'I can't use the word quota, it's a taboo-word'. They prefer to discuss the distribution of all party positions based on the concept of parity rather than quotas. Scholars worry that these negative associations of 'quota' make it easy for critics to dismiss the measure, and that it could also de-legitimise those women elected via a quota (Krook, 2014).

As a result, advocates began pushing for 'parity' measures instead, most notably in the case of the French parity law (Scott, 2005). Scholars studying the French case argue that the notion of 'quota' received little support in mainstream French politics; it was never accepted by right-wing elites, and many women politicians saw it as either 'humiliating' or not radical enough (Bereni, 2007, p. 195). The notion of 'parity', however, was more accepted

because it does not imply preferential treatment for women. Instead, it offers a 'rhetoric of universalism' (Scott, 2005), and subsequent support from mainstream French politicians and activists was attributed to this discursive framing. The parity frame is based on the premise that women are half of humankind everywhere, and therefore 'the participation of [men and] women on an equal basis becomes an end in itself', as an intrinsic, universal right that benefits the common good (Meier, 2008, p. 160). This framing implies a goal of equality, but in practice parity laws do not always require a threshold of 50 per cent for each sex or gender. For example, in 2006 Portugal adopted a parity law requiring a minimum representation of 33 per cent for each sex (increased to 40 per cent in 2019), and the decision to refer to 'parity' rather than 'quotas' was made to emphasise equality of opportunities and bolster public support (Verge, 2013, p. 446).

A review of previous research on public support for positive action measures reveals considerable variation in support across countries. This research mostly refers to support for quotas (rather than 'parity'), state legal requirements, or voluntary political party commitments. Overall, support tends to be high in countries where gender quota laws have been adopted. For example, the majority of citizens in most countries in Latin America (where most countries have such a law) support the idea that 'The state should require political parties to reserve some space on their lists of candidates for women, even if they have to exclude some men' (Barnes & Córdova, 2016), including for example 60 per cent of citizens in Brazil (Batista Pereira & Porto, 2020). Support can be much lower in countries where no national-level gender-based positive action law has been adopted. For example, in Germany 8 per cent of citizens say that they support gender quota laws (Coffé & Reiser, 2023), and in New Zealand the figure drops to 4 per cent (Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2020). However, research from Ireland in 2011, before the country adopted a quota law, suggests that support for legal quotas can be high in countries without existing measures. 48 per cent of Irish citizens agreed that 'Parties should be forced to nominate more women candidates' (Keenan & McElroy, 2017).

The way in which survey questions about support for quotas are phrased might also be part of the reason that large cross-national differences are observed (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). For example, in a 2016 survey Australians were asked 'Should there be more efforts to increase the number of women MPs? If so, what means would you prefer?' Respondents could choose one of five options, including, 'Yes, by legally requiring all political parties to select more women candidates by means of a quota'. 13 per cent of women and 9 per cent of men supported this option (Beauregard, 2018). In 2017, another survey in Australia asked about how to increase the number of women in politics, this time asking respondents how much they agree with each policy given. Support for legal quotas is much higher

using this survey question, with overall levels of support reaching 40 per cent (Beauregard & Sheppard, 2021). The studies from New Zealand and Germany cited above use similar forced-choice questions, which measure relative support given other hypothetical options rather than absolute levels of support, while the Irish study mentioned does not. These studies suggest that the framing of the policy and the question format might shape levels of support in important ways. Our experimental approach studies the effects of framing on absolute levels of support (without requiring respondents to choose between the policy and several other potential options).

While little research compares different types of legislative PAMs, the available literature suggests differences in support exist. For example, relying on the 2014 New Zealand Election Study, Bolzendahl and Coffé (2020) found significantly greater support for keeping or increasing the number of reserved seats for Māori (the indigenous New Zealand population) (62 per cent) compared with introducing gender quotas (4 per cent). While these results may be influenced by the fact that reserved seats for Māori are known for New Zealand citizens while the country does not have legislative gender quotas, it does suggest the support might differ depending on the type of positive action measure.

Overall, in line with theories suggesting that frames impact public opinion (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007) and given the negative connotation of 'quotas' that can be perceived as unfairly discriminating in favour of women (e.g., Verge & Tormos, 2023; Ahrens *et al.*, 2020; Freidenvall & Krook, 2011), we anticipate support for gender quotas is lower compared with support for gender parity laws. Our first hypothesis reads:

H1: Support for gender parity laws is higher than support for gender quota laws.

The extent to which the public supports parity versus gender quota laws may, however, differ between contexts. Political institutions affect attitudes and public opinion. They can alter the opportunity structures for citizens, influence the visibility of social phenomena, and signal behaviours that are considered appropriate (Sjöberg, 2004). Hence, implementing PAMs ought to positively affect citizens' support for such measures. Confirming this expectation, studies of support for PAMs in the workplace and politics find that public opinion is more positive in contexts where these measures have already been implemented (Barnes & Córdova, 2016; Möhring & Teney, 2020, 2024). The presence of legislative PAMs not only legitimises these measures but also enhances their visibility and acceptance within society. Citizens are more likely to view PAMs as appropriate and necessary tools for addressing inequalities when they are backed by legal frameworks. Furthermore, the implementation of PAMs can signal a commitment from political authorities to combat discrimination and promote fairness, which in turn fosters public support and endorsement for these measures – in particular among those facing discrimination and unequal treatment. Our second hypothesis thus reads:

H2: Support for gender parity laws and gender quotas is higher in countries with existing legislative PAMs.

### ***Gender and support for gender quota and parity laws***

Previous studies on public support for increasing women's representation and PAMs aimed at achieving this goal show that women (as the target group of the policy) are more likely to be supportive (Allen & Cutts, 2016; Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2020; Barnes & Córdova, 2016; Cowley, 2013; Espírito-Santo, 2016; Gidengil, 1996; Keenan & McElroy, 2017; Rosenthal, 1995; Sanbonmatsu, 2003; Teney *et al.*, 2023). This has often been explained by the symbolic value of group identity and (related) substantive concerns (Mansbridge, 1999; Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2020). The identity explanation highlights that people want MPs who look like them (Cutler, 2002). For example, a meta-analysis of survey experiments shows that women prefer women candidates more than men do, supporting the idea of a 'gender affinity' effect (Schwarz & Coppock, 2022).

Group identity is also related to substantive concerns, with identity groups having the tendency to share substantive concerns that are related to shared life experiences. For example, women prefer more social spending than men across advanced democracies, and are more concerned with inequalities in society (e.g., Manza & Brooks, 1998; Fox & Oxley, 2015); correspondingly, women legislators are seen as better equipped to address issues of inequality and supportive of strengthening the government (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; McDermott, 1998; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Looking at Northern Ireland, Allen and Cutts (2016) revealed that respondents – and in particular women respondents – believed that increasing women's descriptive representation improves the representation of women's interests.

In sum then, women are expected to be more supportive of PAMs to increase women's representation than men. Since – as discussed above – gender quotas tend to focus on preferential treatment of women to increase their representation whereas gender parity laws highlight the ideal of an equal representation of women and men, we expect the gender difference to be larger for support for gender quotas compared with gender parity laws. Our third hypothesis thus reads:

H3: Support for gender quotas and (to a lesser extent) gender parity laws will be lower among men compared with women.

### ***Masculine men and support for gender quota and parity laws***

Most empirical research studying gender and public opinion, including studies on support for PAMs, relies on a binary measure of gender, distinguishing men



and women. A small but rapidly growing strand of research moves beyond binary measures to also include gendered personality traits (for an overview, see Lindqvist *et al.*, 2021). Such measures include Bem's (1974) Sex Role Inventory which asks respondents to evaluate their personalities on masculine/agentive and feminine/communal traits (Hentschel *et al.*, 2019). As a gendered stereotype, the masculine/agentive traits include assertiveness, independence, and leadership, while feminine/communal traits are associated include sympathy, warmth, and compassion (see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Another measure of gendered personality traits relies on respondents' self-assessment on continuous scales of masculinity and femininity (e.g., Hatemi *et al.*, 2012; Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017; Wängnerud *et al.*, 2019).

These scale-based measures of gendered personality traits allow us to measure respondents' perceived alignment of themselves with social stereotypes (see also e.g., McDermott, 2016; Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017; Wängnerud *et al.*, 2019; Gidengil & Stolle, 2021a). Empirical studies on gendered personality traits, public opinion, and political behaviour confirm that gendered personality scales, and in particular masculinity, matter. For example, masculine traits are linked to support for populist radical right parties and organisations (Coffé, 2019; Coffé *et al.*, 2023; Gidengil & Stolle, 2021b; Ralph-Morrow, 2022), and agentive forms of activity, including engaging with political parties and politicians (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2021). Masculinity matters especially among men. The concept of 'hyper-masculine men' refers to men who are not just masculine and not just male (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988, p. 64). Hypermasculine men exhibit an exaggerated form of masculinity, engage in stereotypical masculine behaviour, and see themselves as possessing a high level of stereotypical masculine characteristics (Gidengil & Stolle, 2021b, p. 1819). They also typically fear the feminisation of society and are most likely to be susceptible to masculine threats.

Because masculinity has been found to be the crucial aspect of gendered personality traits when examining public opinion and political behaviour, particularly among men, we focus on how masculinity relates to support for PAMs in interaction with binary gender. We expect masculine traits such as independence, leadership and dominance to negatively affect support for PAMs especially among men. We thus hypothesise a reinforcing effect between gender and masculine identity: men with strong masculine traits will be least supportive of the idea of positive discrimination of women (and therefore, against men). The fourth hypothesis is:

H4: Men who identify as more masculine will be less likely to support PAMs (and gender quotas in particular) than men who identify as less masculine.

## Positive action measures and backlash against women candidates

### *Gender quota, parity laws and backlash against women candidates*

Besides explaining support for different positive action measures, we are also interested in potential backlash effects. As Krook and Sanín note, quotas can ‘trigger various forms of backlash and resistance to women’s political integration’ (Krook & Sanín, 2016, p. 126). Here, we explore the backlash effect that PAMs may have on the perceived qualifications of women candidates. We thus follow other scholars who study backlash in public opinion against women politicians, expanding this line of research which often focuses on counter-stereotypic candidate traits (see, e.g., Batista Pereira, 2021; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Saha & Weeks, 2022) to the role of electoral rules. As mentioned above, one of the most common arguments against PAMs is that they will lead to less qualified candidates for office. While empirical research consistently shows this is not the case (e.g., Weeks & Baldez, 2015; Besley *et al.*, 2017), it has seemingly done little to dispel common perceptions. Studies on affirmative action support the idea that candidates are perceived as less qualified in the context of PAMs. Minority candidates are evaluated as being less qualified than white candidates under the condition of an affirmative action measure (Garcia *et al.*, 1981). The specific framing of the positive action measure has, however, been found to matter. When the affirmative action measure is called ‘promoting diversity’, minorities are less stigmatised (Awad, 2013). We expect exposure to PAMs, and in particular gender quota laws which – as suggested above – tend to be more controversial than parity laws, to trigger a backlash against women candidates. Our hypothesis thus reads:

H5: PAMs, and gender quotas in particular, increase backlash against women candidates.

As with support, we expect gender quota and parity laws to have a different effect on gender backlash in different countries, depending on the prior existence of such measures. Political institutions affect public opinion, and support for affirmative action policies tends to be higher in countries with existing measures (Barnes & Córdova, 2016; Möhring & Teney, 2020, 2024). Thus, we expect that backlash against women candidates will be less common in countries with an existing gender quota or parity law. Our hypothesis reads:

H6: Gender quotas and to a lesser extent gender parity framing are associated with higher levels of backlash against women candidates in countries with no existing legislative PAMs (compared with countries with existing legislative action measures).

### **Gender, masculine personality traits and the backlash effect**

Like support for PAMs, we anticipate the effects of different PAMs on perceived candidate qualifications to be conditioned by respondent gender and gendered identities. According to ‘intrusiveness’ theory, when majority groups perceive a threat to their dominance, they will respond negatively (Krook, 2015; Blalock, 1967). Men exposed to information about positive action which threatens the traditional political dominance of men and which may elicit justice concerns about legitimacy might perceive the women candidates running for office under such rules to be less qualified.

We further expect masculinity and in particular men’s identification with their stereotypical gender identity, masculinity, to shape their perceived qualifications of women candidates. Not all men view their gendered identity in the same way (Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017), and this could have important implications for their propensity to feel threatened by the inclusion of women. Though the ‘jury is still out on whether masculine identification necessarily leads to chronic derogation of nontraditional male and female types’ (Glick *et al.*, 2015, p. 211), research suggests that hostility toward nontraditional women (such as women politicians) is more likely among men with strong masculine identification (Maass *et al.*, 2003). Our final two hypotheses are thus:

H7: Men respondents will show higher levels of a backlash against women candidates when exposed to information about PAMs and gender quotas in particular (compared with no exposure to such information) than women respondents.

H8: Men who identify as more masculine will show higher levels of a backlash against women when exposed to information about PAMs and gender quotas in particular (compared with no exposure to such information) than men who identify as less masculine.

### **Experimental design**

To investigate the causal effect of the framing of PAMs on legitimacy, we rely on original data obtained from a survey experiment conducted in the UK and France in February 2023. The survey was fielded by YouGov to a representative sample of UK (N = 1,708) and French (N = 969) voters.<sup>4</sup> Both countries are Western European democracies and use a Single Member District electoral system in their parliamentary elections – a relatively difficult institutional context in which to enact PAMs (Davidson-Schmich, 2016). Both countries also have a similar proportion of women in parliament, 37.3 per cent in France compared with 34.8 per cent in the UK (May 2024). Differences in support for PAMs can thus not be due to women’s descriptive representation, electoral system or democratic context. Both countries do, however, offer interesting variation on the use of PAMs. France has had a gender parity law

since 2000, mandating an affirmative action policy to enhance women's representation in several elected assemblies. The UK does not have legislated quotas or parity laws, but some parties have adopted voluntary gender quotas.

Our study was pre-registered and approved by our university's relevant ethics boards.<sup>5</sup> In the experiments, we randomly manipulate the way that PAMs are described and justified, with three conditions: (1) a gender quota law that is intended to reduce the underrepresentation of women, (2) a gender parity law that is intended to promote an equal gender balance in parliaments, and (3) no positive action law mentioned (control).

The treated versions (conditions 1 and 2) of our survey instrument present respondents with information about the actual share of men and women in their country's national parliament, and then explain that gender quota laws [gender parity laws] are one way to address unequal representation. We explain that there are different arguments for and against such laws, and present all respondents in the quota and parity conditions with two arguments for and two arguments against such laws, which are randomly varied. Advocates of PAMs can make many different types of political arguments for and against quota and parity laws, for example relying on comparisons with other countries, appeals to fairness, or the link between descriptive and substantive representation. Some of these arguments might be more effective at shaping public opinion than others. We want to avoid the potential for results to be driven by a particular political argument, or that particular arguments confound our latent frames of interest (quota versus parity). Thus, we follow the recommendations of Blumenau and Lauderdale (2024) and Fong and Grimmer (2023) and randomly present respondents with arguments for and against quotas [parity]. We draw from a pool of eighteen arguments in total (nine for and nine against), which were developed by building on those identified from previous debates about PAMs in Dahlerup and Freidenvall (2010) (See Section 1 of the Appendix for the full list). In this way, we can make general conclusions about support for the two different frames (quotas versus parity), averaged over the different political arguments typically used in debates for and against them. Through this approach, we can be more confident that the effects we estimate are attributable to the treatments (quotas versus parity) rather than specific political arguments for PAMs. We also refrain from incorporating a specific threshold (e.g., that 50 per cent of candidates must be women) when introducing PAMs, because our interest is in assessing the impact of framing and not response to a particular threshold. This choice also reflects the reality of existing PAMs, whereby some countries have adopted parity laws requiring less than 50 per cent women and other countries have quota laws requiring 50 per cent of women. Following the treatment (either quota or parity framing), respondents are asked, 'To what extent do you **support or oppose** gender quota/gender parity laws in your country?' This is our first dependent variable.

Respondents indicate their attitudes using a 5-point Likert scale (options range from *Strongly support* to *Strongly oppose*). Question responses were recoded such that higher values indicate higher levels of support. Questions about support for PAMs were not asked in the control version of the survey, which is included to measure potential backlash by collecting baseline levels of perceived qualifications of men and women candidates.

To measure perceived qualifications of candidates, we field a forced-choice candidate conjoint experiment, randomly varying gender and other relevant attributes (such as age and political experience).<sup>6</sup> Each respondent saw one pair of candidates. The benefit of using a conjoint experiment is that we can be sure that any gender differences observed in levels of support or perceived qualifications between the treatment and control conditions are not reliant on any one candidate attribute. We ask those in the treated conditions to imagine that their country had passed a gender quota [parity] law and the following two candidates are running for office under the new rules. Respondents in the control condition are asked to evaluate the candidates without receiving any information about PAMs. After respondents select which candidate they would support, they are asked to rate the **qualifications** of each candidate on a 1–11 scale ('how qualified do you think this candidate is to be your MP?') to test how framing of PAMs might influence public attitudes at the micro, candidate-level. This is our second dependent variable and our measure of a possible *backlash* against women candidates elected through PAMs.

Upon completion of this task, treated respondents answer a factual manipulation check (FMC) question (Kane & Barabas, 2019) and a battery of follow-up questions, including a question asking respondents to what extent they hold masculine characteristics, with responses ranging from 0 to 10, and a list experiment varying the inclusion of a PAM, as an alternative measure of backlash. List experiments provide a way to measure attitudes that are difficult to pick up due to social desirability bias. Respondents see a list of statements and choose how many of the statements they see make them angry or upset, rather than indicating which ones. The survey item randomly varies which respondents see the statement, 'A gender quota [parity] law in politics', where the framing of the measure described matches the framing treatment condition.<sup>7</sup> We collect demographic information, including binary gender, in the final stage of the survey.<sup>8</sup> Further details about the survey, including wording, can be found in the Appendix (Section 1; Section 5 for summary statistics).

### **Analytic strategy**

We first present our results related to public support for different PAMs, before turning to the question of whether different PAMs lead to backlash. In both cases, we consider men and women respondents together before examining heterogeneous treatment effects by binary gender, and gender

and masculinity. We use ordinary least squares regression analysis to estimate average treatment effects. Specifically, we specify the following regressions for both (1) support for the PAM and (2) perceived qualifications of women candidates (backlash):

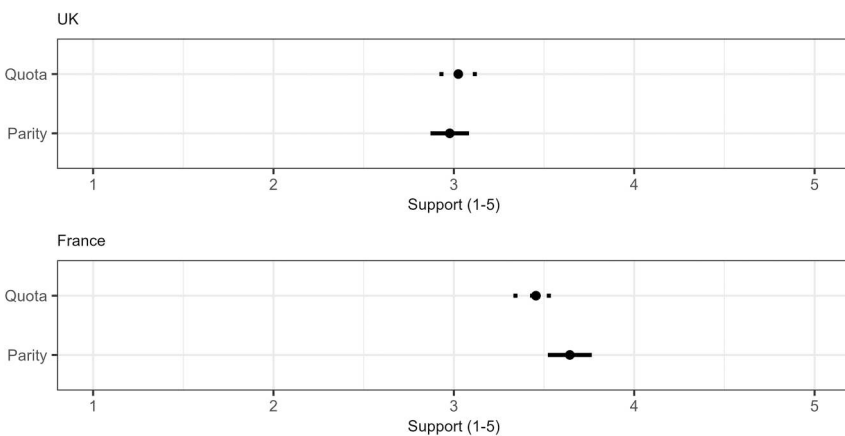
1.  $Y = \beta_1 \text{Treatment}$
2.  $Y = \beta_1 \text{Treatment} + \beta_2 \text{Gender} + \beta_3 \text{Treatment} * \text{Gender}$
3.  $Y = \beta_1 \text{Treatment} + \beta_2 \text{Gender} + \beta_3 \text{Treatment} * \text{Gender} + \beta_4 \text{Masculinity} + \beta_5 \text{Treatment} * \text{Masculinity} + \beta_6 \text{Gender} * \text{Masculinity} + \beta_7 \text{Treatment} * \text{Gender} * \text{Masculinity}$

These effects should be interpreted as average differences between the two treatment conditions in support, and between the two treatment conditions and control for backlash. Throughout the analysis, we present figures of the relevant treatment effects; Section 2 of the Appendix includes all regression tables used to create the figures.

## Experimental results

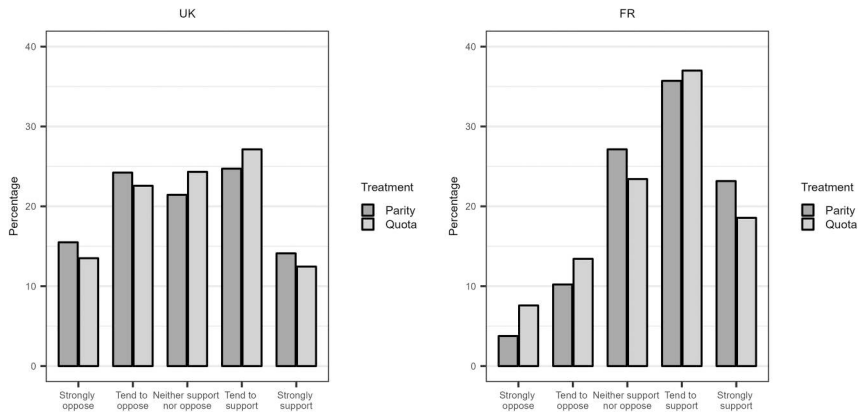
### Support for gender quotas and parity laws

Do respondents support parity more than quotas? [Figure 1](#) shows mean levels for support for both types of PAMs in France and the UK. Differences in means between the gender quota and the gender parity law treatment can be interpreted as the average treatment effect of positive action framing (quota vs. parity) on public support. For the UK sample, the mean



**Figure 1.** Support for positive action measures.

Notes: The figure shows mean levels of support by treatment for the UK (top) and France (bottom). Error bars (dotted for Quota, solid for Parity) show 95% confidence intervals.



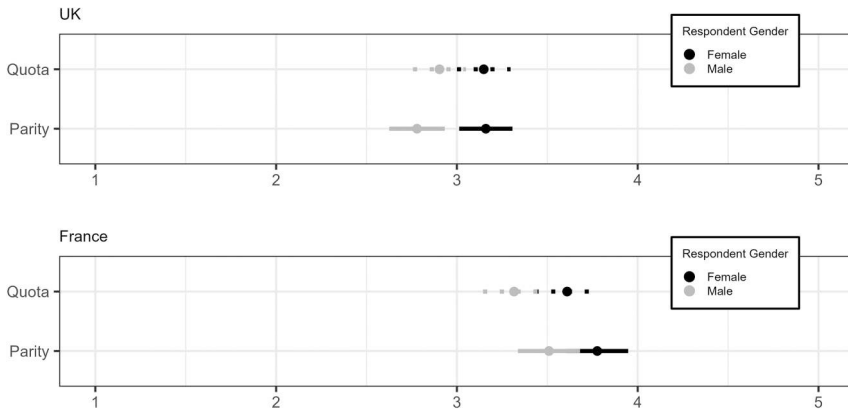
**Figure 2.** Distribution of support for quotas and parity.

level of support is very similar across treatments (3.02 for quota compared with 2.98 for parity; difference not statistically significant), while for the French sample respondents support parity more than a quota (3.46 for quota compared with 3.64 for parity, difference significant at  $p < 0.05$ ; see Table S1 in the Appendix). We thus find support for H1 in France, where respondents support a gender parity law more than a gender quota law, but not in the UK.

Figure 1 shows moderate levels of support for both quota and parity laws in the UK, with support rising noticeably in France, which has had a national parity law for over twenty years. In line with H2, these country-level mean differences in overall support are statistically significant (Welch Two Sample t-test of support by country significant at  $p < 0.001$ ; see also Appendix Section 6). Looking at the full distribution of response options, Figure 2 further reveals that citizens exposed to a treatment explaining the purpose of legislative gender quotas / parity and arguments for and against them tend to support the use of such a provision in their own country more than they oppose it, again especially in France. Overall, a plurality of 39 per cent of respondents support PAMs in the UK (with no difference between quota and parity treatments), while 37 per cent oppose such measures (36 per cent for quotas and 39 per cent for parity). In France, support is higher at 57 per cent overall (56 per cent for quotas and 59 per cent for parity), with small numbers opposing such measures (21 per cent for quotas and 14 per cent for parity).

### **Gender and support for gender quotas and parity laws**

In line with previous studies, our findings indicate that support for PAMs is strongly conditioned by binary gender. Figure 3 shows that men are less supportive of both types of positive action laws compared with women in both the UK



**Figure 3.** Support for positive action measures by respondent gender.

Notes: The figure shows mean levels of support by treatment and respondent gender for the UK (top) and France (bottom). Error bars (dotted for Quota, solid for Parity) show 95% confidence intervals.

and France, and this gender difference in overall support for PAMs is significant at conventional levels in both countries. In the UK, the mean level of support for quotas is 2.90 for men compared with 3.15 for women, and for parity the mean levels of support are 2.78 for men and 3.16 for women. This equates to 35 per cent of men tending to support or strongly supporting quotas and 33 per cent parity in the UK, compared with 44 per cent of UK women supporting both quotas and parity (e.g., a gender gap in support of 9–11 percentage points). In France, the mean level of support for quotas is 3.32 for men and 3.61 for women, and for parity the figures are 3.51 for men and 3.78 for women. Overall, a majority of respondents in France tend to support or strongly support both quotas (53 per cent) and parity (56 per cent), and an even larger majority of French women support both measures (58 per cent support quotas, 62 per cent parity). The gender gap in support is thus smaller within France (ranging from 5 percentage points for quotas to 6 percentage points for parity laws) compared with the UK. However, as [Figure 3](#) shows, the interaction between binary gender and framing is not significant for either country, indicating no significant difference in how men or women view different types of PAMs (see Appendix Table S1 for regression results). Our findings thus show partial support for H3: men are less supportive of both quotas and parity laws compared with women in both country contexts, but men are not significantly less supportive of gender quotas than parity laws.

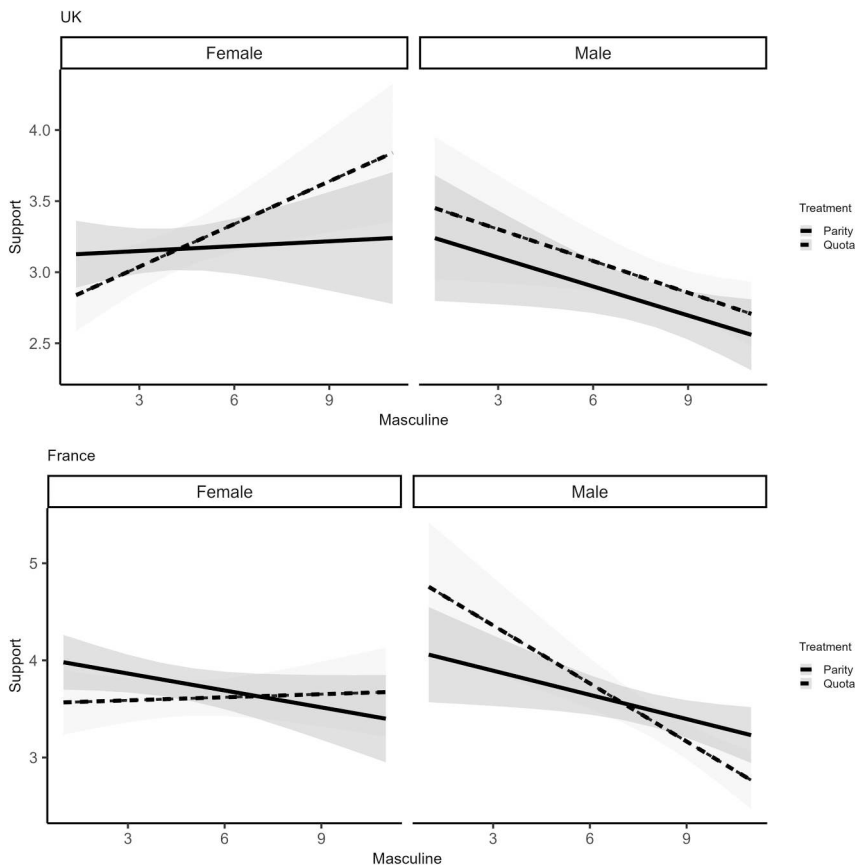
### ***Gender, masculinity and support for gender quotas and parity laws***

Next, we consider the extent to which the interaction of gender and masculinity affects support for different PAMs. As discussed, we anticipate a stronger negative link between masculine personality traits and support for PAMs (and



gender quotas in particular) among men versus women. Masculine men are thus expected to show the *lowest* levels of support for PAMs, and for gender quotas in particular. Figure 4 shows the marginal effects from a regression on level of support including the interaction of treatment (quota vs parity), binary gender, and masculinity (including all constituent terms and lower-order interactions, see Table S1 in the Appendix). The figure shows that masculinity matters differently and more strongly for men than for women. Partially confirming Hypothesis 4, masculine men are less likely to support both quota and parity laws than less-masculine men in both country cases. Among women, conversely, masculinity is not a significant determinant of support for either measure in France, while it positively predicts support for quotas in the UK.<sup>9</sup>

In France, the triple interaction of gender, masculinity, and treatment is significant at conventional levels, suggesting support for the theory that respondent



**Figure 4.** Gender, masculinity, and support for positive action measures.

Notes: The figures show support for a gender quota law (dotted line) versus gender parity law (solid line) on the y-axis across a range of masculine values along the x-axis among men (left) and women (right), with 95% confidence intervals.

gender and masculinity *together* determine support for parity vs quota. Specifically, as expected in H4, masculine men support quota laws less than parity laws. ‘Parity’ thus seems to be a more palatable framing than ‘quotas’ for masculine men who tend to be most opposed to PAMs. However, in the UK the triple interaction is not significant, indicating that while masculinity determines overall support for men especially, masculine men do not prefer one type of positive action measure over another (a finding which should not be surprising given the lack of an overall quotas vs parity framing effect in the UK).<sup>10</sup>

### ***Gender backlash: perceptions of the quality of women and men candidates***

Beyond support for PAMs, we are interested in the extent to which the framing of PAMs might lead to a backlash against gender equality, measured by perceptions of the qualifications of hypothetical women candidates running under these electoral rules. To measure respondents’ perceptions of the quality of hypothetical men and women candidates, we ask respondents to evaluate men and women candidates elected under a system that: (1) uses a gender quota law; (2) uses a gender parity law; (3) no information about PAMs. Importantly, we use a conjoint experiment to present candidate resumes. We randomly vary not only candidate gender but also age, political experience, policy interests, marital status, career experience, and talent (all traits are fully randomised with no restrictions). Age, political experience, occupation, and marital status are commonly included in studies of gender and candidate choice (see Schwarz & Coppock, 2022 for a review), talent captures agentic versus communal personality traits (Saha & Weeks, 2022), and policy interests includes a range of stereotypically ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ policies (Krook & O’Brien, 2012). This setup ensures that any differences observed in perceived qualifications of women candidates between the treatment and control conditions are not reliant on any particular (gender-typical or counter stereotypical) candidate attribute. Respondents in the treatment conditions (quota and parity) are primed to consider how they would rate the candidates under a system that uses positive action with the following text:

Now we are going to ask you to imagine that the UK/France adopted a **gender quota [parity] law**, and the following hypothetical candidates from your political party are running to be your member of parliament under the new rules. Please read the following two candidate resumes carefully:

Respondents in the control version, which includes no information about gender quota or parity laws, are asked to evaluate the candidates without any mention of positive action rules. All respondents then are asked twice (once for each of the two candidates running to be a member of parliament; respondents see one ‘election’ only) to what extent they believe that the candidate is qualified, with response options ranging from 1 (not at all well) to 11 (extremely well).

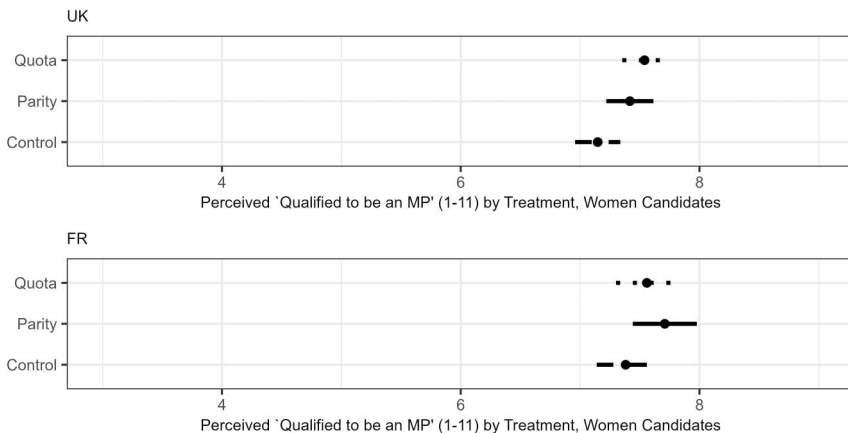
### *Gender quotas, parity laws, and perceived qualifications of women candidates*

Contrary to our expectation (H5), we find no evidence that PAMs negatively impact the perceived qualifications of women candidates, nor do we find a significant difference based on the framing of quota or parity.

Figure 5 shows that the differences in perceptions about the women candidates' qualifications are not statistically significant at conventional 0.05 levels in France. Respondents in the UK exposed to the quota treatment rate the women candidates as *more* qualified than those in the control condition, and this is significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Contrary to our initial expectation, UK citizens respond to the positive action treatments – especially the gender quota treatment – by *positively* adjusting the perceived qualifications of women candidates (see Appendix Table S2 for regression results). Given these positive effects in the UK, we find no evidence to support H6, that PAMs are associated with a backlash against women (here measured as lower perceived qualifications for women candidates) in countries with no existing legislative PAMs (compared with countries with existing legislative action measures). Note that ratings of men candidates do not change from control to treatment conditions in either the UK or France (see Appendix Section 8).

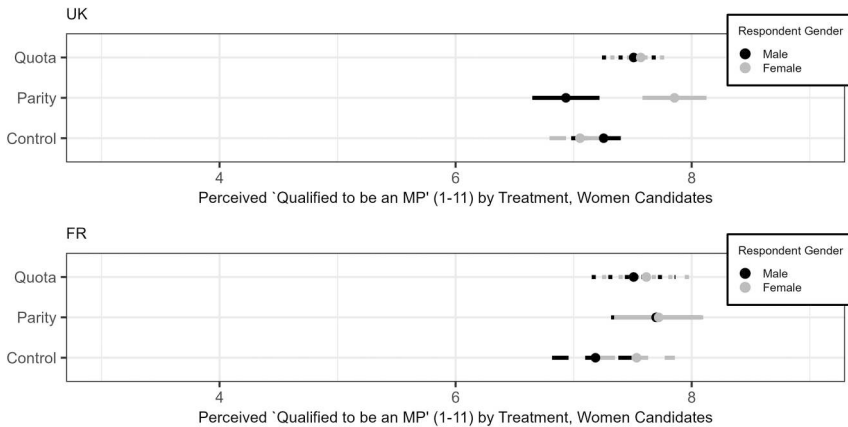
### *Respondent gender, gender quotas, parity laws, and perceived qualifications of women candidates*

How does respondent gender impact perceptions about the qualifications of women candidates in these different positive action contexts? Figure 6 shows the results of a regression model interacting respondent gender and the treatment (quotas, parity, or control) for women candidates (see Table S2



**Figure 5.** Quotas, parity, and perceived qualifications of women candidates.

Notes: The figure shows mean 'qualified' ratings by treatment for women candidates for the UK (top) and France (bottom). Error bars show 95% confidence intervals (dotted for Quota, solid for Parity, dashed for Control).



**Figure 6.** Quotas, parity, and perceived qualifications of women candidates by respondent gender.

Notes: The figure shows mean ‘qualified’ ratings by treatment and respondent gender for women candidates for the UK (top) and France (bottom), with 95% confidence intervals (dotted for Quota, solid for Parity, dashed for Control).

in the Appendix for the regression results). Contrary to H7, the figure suggests that men do not downgrade the qualification ratings of women elected under PAMs more than women. French men and women respondents react no differently to the treatment conditions. In the UK, however, women respondents in the parity treatment increase the qualification rating of women candidates, while men respondents slightly decrease it. This gender difference of 1.2 points on the 11-point qualification rating of women candidates is significant at conventional levels for the parity treatment. We also explore whether masculinity has different effects for men and women (the triple interaction of treatment, binary gender, and masculinity), but we fail to find any significant interactive effects (see Table S2 in the Appendix for regression results). We thus reject H8, that masculine men will be more likely to decrease the ratings of women candidates in a hypothetical PAM context.

Overall, our findings about the link between PAMs and potential backlash against women candidates are positive. They suggest that, when PAMs (either quotas or parity) are justified and explained, citizens do not respond by automatically downgrading the quality of women running in these contexts. One interpretation of the unexpected findings about PAMs increasing the perceived qualifications of women candidates is that our results could reflect information effects. Our experimental treatment informs respondents about the levels of men and women in office, showing persistent political inequality. It also informs respondents that PAMs are widespread. Making (the lack of) gender equality salient in this way could lead women

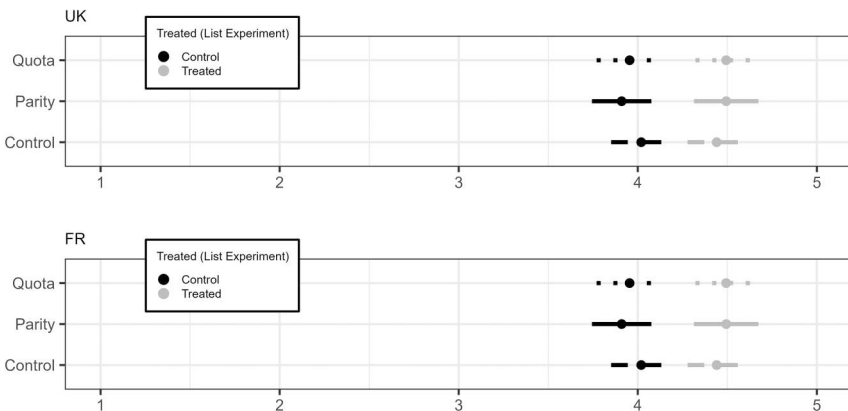
respondents especially to perceive women candidates as more qualified compared with the control condition, where gender or gender equality is not primed at all. We thus observe initial evidence of what might be an empowering public impact of PAMs: debate about these might remind (women) voters of the importance of gender equality in politics.<sup>11</sup>

### **Gender backlash: attitudes towards PAMs**

Finally, as an alternative measure of backlash we included a list experiment in the survey. This question randomly varied which respondents see the statement, 'A gender quota [parity] law in politics', where the framing of the measure described matches the framing treatment condition. As [Figure 7](#) shows, overall, PAMs trigger some people to become angry or upset. However, the framing of these measures (quotas vs parity) is again not a significant determinant of backlash in either country (see Online Appendix, Section 10 for results). This is reassuring; not only do we find no evidence that quota or parity framing negatively impacts evaluations of women candidates, we also find no evidence that the framing of PAMs negatively impacts feelings about the policy in general.

### **Sensitivity checks**

We conduct several checks on the robustness of our findings. First, following the recommendations of Kane and Barabas (2019), we use a factual manipulation check (FMC) to assess attentiveness and test whether the treatment manipulations conducted in the experiments were perceived by the subjects.



**Figure 7.** Quotas, parity, and list treatment results.

Notes: The figure shows the mean number of statements that make respondents angry or upset by list treatment and framing (Quota, Parity, or none) for respondents in the UK (top) and France (bottom), with 95% confidence intervals (dotted for Quota, solid for Parity, dashed for Control).

Such a test is particularly important when the treatment stimuli require that participants read carefully, as the framing passages in our experiments do. In Section 4 of the Online Appendix, we rerun our analyses on a subset of respondents who pass the check, which asks them to distinguish between whether the information they saw was related to 'quota' versus 'parity' laws, and 'the share of women in politics' versus 'the balance of men and women in politics' (i.e., they chose which of the 4 combinations of these options was most correct). We note that this question did not immediately follow the treatment but came at the end of the survey, which has been shown to reduce the share of respondents answering the FMC correctly (Kane & Barabas, 2019). It is thus a hard test that requires a high level of attentiveness. Accordingly, the number of observations drops significantly in some of our FMC models; e.g., in analyses of support for quotas versus parity among the treated respondents, the N falls to 387 in the UK (35 per cent of respondents pass) and 169 in France (27 per cent of respondents pass). In the FMC sample, we find that our findings mostly hold, except for H4, that masculine men in France support quota laws less than parity laws, which does not emerge as a pattern in this robustness check (Tables S5–S6). Given the smaller sample size and the triple interaction in this model, it could be that our robustness check data is underpowered for this hypothesis. Nonetheless, we advise that this finding be treated as preliminary. Overall, the results of the FMC suggest that despite some inattentiveness and/or treatment imperceptibility, the treatments were strong enough to exert the theorised effect.

Another interpretation is that social desirability bias could be driving the findings, though we note that we employ two experimental methods that are known to reduce the potential for social desirability effects: conjoint and list experiments (e.g., Burden *et al.*, 2017; Horiuchi *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the survey is carried out online, where research suggests respondents are less likely to report socially desirable answers (Chang & Krosnick, 2009) – but we cue gender in both treatments. To examine the degree to which answers are influenced by the desire to appear socially acceptable, we follow Berinsky and Lavine (2012) and include three questions gauging self-monitoring (see Section 3 of the Online Appendix for the list of questions). These questions load onto a single factor, and we used the psych package for R to create a composite measure of respondent social desirability. Respondents with higher scores exert more effort to seem socially desirable. As a robustness check in Section 3 of the Online Appendix, we conduct our analysis on a subset of respondents (for support, N = 401 in UK; 180 in France) who score below the mean of the composite score and therefore are less likely to provide socially desirable answers. In this sample, similar to the FMC sample, all of our findings hold except for H4 regarding masculine men and lower support for a quota law in France (Tables S3–S4).

Another concern might be the potential for reverse causality in the relationship between treatment and masculinity. What if our treatment priming gender equality (parity) or increases in women's political power (quota) either elevates or reduces the expression of respondents' masculine traits? The ideal approach to address this concern would be to use panel data where respondents have already been asked about masculinity in a previous round (Montgomery *et al.*, 2018). This is not possible for our current study; however, to account for this potential source of endogeneity we use a control function approach which has been shown to address potential endogeneity problems (Woolridge, 2015). This consists of a two-stage estimator, where fitted residuals from the first stage (regressing masculinity on treatment) are used as a control in the second-stage model (regressing the outcome on treatment, covariates including masculinity, and the first-stage residuals). Our main results continue to hold when applying the control function approach (see Online Appendix Section 14). We note that future research on gendered identities as a key covariate should consider the potential for post-treatment bias when designing the survey.

Finally, our research design randomises the arguments for and against positive action measures, as well as candidates' attributes, so that we measure our latent treatment of interest (the framing of the positive action measure) marginalised over the same kinds of complex information environments that individuals encounter in the real world. The design also allows us to explicitly test for potential confounding – i.e., whether some arguments or candidate traits might be associated both with both the treatment and the outcome of interest (see Fong & Grimmer, 2023, Assumption 4). We explore this in Sections 12 and 13 of the Online Appendix. We find that none of our arguments are associated with treatment at conventional levels ( $p < .05$ ), suggesting the randomisation worked well, and no argument was associated with support at conventional levels, either. Considering candidate traits, we find that some levels are linked to treatment at conventional levels, which of course is possible with a large number of randomly allocated traits/levels. Yet none of these are also related to perceived qualifications of the candidate at conventional levels, ruling out their role as potential confounders. Our results are thus not driven by specific arguments or candidate traits linked to both treatment and our outcomes of interest.

## Conclusion

PAMs for women are now commonplace in democracies worldwide, yet they are still controversial (Bacchi, 2006; Teigen & Karlsen, 2020). Understanding what motivates public support and opposition for PAMs is key to implementing policies that are viewed as legitimate and likely to promote fair

democratic representation, rather than social conflict. To shed light on these questions, our study investigates how the framing of PAMs affects levels of public support and potential backlash. Using an original experimental approach, we examine differences in support between gender quotas and gender parity laws. While both PAMs aim at increasing women's representation, a gender parity law is intended to promote an equal gender balance in parliament while a gender quota law is intended to reduce the underrepresentation of women.

Measuring support for PAMs, our analyses – relying on UK and French samples – show that there is a significant difference in support between these measures, but only in France, a country with a well-established gender parity law. In France, support for parity is significantly higher than support for a quota law, whereas we report no difference in support for quotas versus parity in the UK. A plurality of citizens support both quotas and parity laws in their own country, though support is more widespread in France, where a majority of both men and women support both types of PAMs, compared with the UK. In addition, we find no evidence that voters view women running for office under these hypothetical measures as less qualified – a finding that aligns well with observational data suggesting that women candidates elected under a positive measure framework are just as qualified as those not elected under such framework (e.g., Weeks & Baldez, 2015; Besley *et al.*, 2017). On the contrary, instead of PAMs reducing perceived qualifications of women, we find that such measures can *increase* perceived qualifications of women. When citizens receive balanced information about PAMs and their potential consequences, they tend to be supportive and we find no evidence that they punish women candidates in a context with PAMs.

Our findings also confirm that respondent gender conditions support and backlash. Women have higher overall levels of support for both quota and parity measures than men, suggesting that people do seem to want representatives that 'look like them' (Plutzer & Zipp, 1996). Men are, however, not more or less supportive of parity laws compared with gender quotas. Moving beyond a binary gender measure, our study provides initial evidence about the important role that masculinity plays in moderating support for both gender quotas and parity laws, especially among men. Masculinity decreases support for both types of PAMs among men, and masculine men in France have lower levels of support for quota laws especially. Future research is needed to unpack the diversity inherent in the social group of 'men' and such research would benefit from large(r) sample sizes.

To summarise, our data collected using an original experiment manipulating the framing of PAMs shows relatively high levels of support for both gender quotas and gender parity laws, and no evidence either frame inspires



negative gender backlash. Our findings in the case of France suggest that the framing of PAMs, and associated information given to justify them, can impact levels of support for these policies. One policy implication of our study is that 'parity' does indeed seem to be more palatable than 'quotas', or at least equally supported (as we find in the UK). To maximise levels of support, positive action advocates would do well to use the framing of 'parity', and its associated normative justifications. Our two-cases study also provides additional evidence that public support is higher in countries with pre-existing PAMs (supplementing e.g., Barnes & Córdova, 2016). This might indicate that policy familiarity matters and shores up support. While we anticipate that similar findings would emerge in comparisons involving comparable cases, conducting a broader study encompassing more countries would be valuable and insightful. By including more countries, we can better understand the nuanced dynamics at play and the generalizability of our findings beyond the two cases examined in the current study. This broader approach would enhance the robustness of our conclusions regarding public support for PAMs and the role of legislative frameworks in shaping societal attitudes towards PAMs. Additional data collection over time would strengthen these findings even more. Without longitudinal data, we cannot rule out selection effects whereby countries with already higher levels of support are more likely to adopt PAMs. Further research is needed to understand whether long-term exposure to PAMs may (further) increase public support for such measures and how these effects may vary depending on political knowledge and ideology. While policy makers should obviously consider public support when implementing policies, their policies might also reinforce support.

## Notes

1. Some scholars have advocated reframing gender quotas as 'quotas for men', to place the onus not on women but on men to justify their presence (Murray, 2014). Although compelling, no country has yet framed a positive action measure in this way.
2. Thrupp, Jake, 'Quotas will not help women, or the Liberal Party,' *The Chronicle*, 7 April 2021.
3. Albrechtsen, Janet, 'Women in politics: Quotas idea needs more careful debate', *The Australian*, 7 April 2021.
4. Weights provided by YouGov are employed for both UK and France samples throughout. Summary statistics are in the Online Appendix, Section 5.
5. We registered hypotheses related to this manuscript in the following pre-analysis plan: [https://osf.io/6hfmt/?view\\_only=30a3981430324807a3eeddf5eb5686ce](https://osf.io/6hfmt/?view_only=30a3981430324807a3eeddf5eb5686ce). The hypotheses we present in the manuscript correspond to H1-H4 and H8-H9 of our plan, with the exception that we do not present expectations about femininity (but see footnote 10, which explains that we find no significant results). We exclude H5-H7 and H10 for two main reasons. First, we needed to keep the manuscript within the word count and present a cohesive narrative. Second, we could

not include all items of the validated modern sexism scale (an alternative measure of backlash; H6–H7 of the plan) in the survey, and the items did not all load on a single factor, posing concerns for reliability.

6. We employ forced-choice design to mimic a real-life election context, where voters must choose among a discrete set of candidates.
7. List treatment respondents in the framing control condition see the statement, 'A gender quota or parity law in politics.'
8. Binary gender and gendered identities are correlated in the expected directions. The point biserial correlation score between respondent gender and masculinity is 0.635, showing that men are associated with higher self-reported masculinity scores compared to women. For respondent gender and femininity, the point biserial score is  $-0.673$ , showing that men are associated with lower self-reported femininity scores compared with women.
9. Subgroup analysis by respondent gender confirms that masculinity is negatively linked to overall support among men and positively linked to overall support among women (both significant at conventional levels of significance).
10. We also explored whether feminine gendered identities condition support for PAMs. We find no evidence that 'traditional', more feminine women, support PAMs more or less than less feminine women. The interaction between respondent gender and femininity is not significant for either country, nor is the triple interaction of treatment, respondent gender, and femininity (to save space, results available from authors). This is in line with research on political behaviour and attitudes that shows that masculinity among men in particular matters (e.g., Gidengil & Stolle, 2021b), potentially because women are less susceptible to threats about their femininity (Willer et al., 2013).
11. Our results also show no evidence of backlash when we use vote choice as the dependent variable, rather than perceived qualifications. In the United Kingdom and France, respondents are overall neither more nor less likely to vote for women political candidates across experimental conditions (control, parity, or quota). Similarly, in both samples, there are no differences by respondent gender or masculinity. Please see Table S19 of the Online Appendix for full regression results.

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## Notes on contributors

*Hilde Coffé* is Professor in Politics at the University of Bath.

*Sparsha Saha* is Lecturer on Government at Harvard University.

*Ana Catalano Weeks* is Senior Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the University of Bath. All authors contributed equally to this work.

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