

Assessing the Impact of Religiosity, Populism, Ideology, and Gender on Elite's Gender Equality Attitudes

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Abstract

How do religiosity, populism, ideology, and gender independently and interactively shape Latin American legislators' attitudes towards gender equality? Drawing on data from the 2015–2018 wave of the Parliamentary Elites of Latin America survey, we analyse the responses of 1,061 legislators across thirteen countries. Results reveal a clear and consistent pattern: religiosity strongly suppresses support for liberal positions on values issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage whereas populism correlates most strongly with traditional gender-role attitudes, and right-leaning ideology reinforces conservative stances across both domains, but to a lesser degree. Gender, on the other hand, remains a significant progressive force, with female legislators expressing more egalitarian views across issue areas. Crucially, the effects we observe are additive rather than multiplicative. Our findings are particularly

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relevant in the Latin American context, where religiosity remains high and right-wing populist movements continue to gain ground, often mobilising around resistance to “gender ideology.”

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Populism, gender attitudes, religion, elites, legislatures

Gender equality has become a contentious political issue globally and Latin America is no exception. Yet, the pushback against gender equality has primarily been studied with a focus on Europe or the United States following the electoral successes of right-wing populist actors. Such studies point to the salience of religion and Christian family values in the narratives of right-wing populists against the perceived threat of “gender ideology” (e.g. Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Turner, 2018). In the European context, right-wing populist parties have integrated gender issues into the immigration debate (e.g. Akkerman and Hagelund, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015), depicting themselves as bulwark against Islamisation and defenders of gender equality. Liberal notions of gender relations, however, appear to be “merely instrumental to an anti-Islam agenda” (Akkerman, 2015: 15; cf. Moffitt, 2017), while the traditional morality espoused seems to intersect with social conservatism stemming from their ideological hue. Still, others detect tensions with feminist policies also within European secular left-wing populism as epitomised by the Spanish party *Podemos* (Caravantes, 2021; Kantola and Lombardo, 2019), underscoring that populism in and off itself is problematic for feminist policies (see also Mostov, 2021).

While illuminating, the usual Western settings where populism and religiosity are mainly associated with the ideological right therefore pose limitations to studying the distinct and potentially interacting roles that populism, religion, and ideology might have in gender equality. Indeed, many Latin American countries had adopted reforms often earlier than countries in other regions such as introducing gender quota laws to boost women’s political representation (Barnes and Córdova, 2016; Piscopo, 2015; Schwindt-Bayer, 2018), legislation on violence against women, and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in historically conservative societies. But gender has become a central issue and dividing line in politics, with conflicts over abortion and LGBTQ+ rights provoking intense debates and backlash against progressive policies more broadly (Biroli and Caminotti, 2020). While Latin America’s dynamic landscape of normative change and contestation therefore seemingly echoes global trends, its social and political context is characterised by combinations of religious and ideological currents that are less pronounced elsewhere.

Historically a Catholic stronghold, the region has seen a dramatic rise in Evangelical Protestant churches over the last few decades (Parker, 2016) and while

the Catholic Church remains influential, it now must compete with growing Evangelical and Pentecostal movements that wield their own political clout (Boas, 2020). Additionally, the region's ideological landscape has been deeply influenced by currents such as liberation theology on the left – a faith-infused progressive ideology that advocates social justice for the poor – and a neoconservative religious right alliance in recent years that prioritises traditional family values and free-market policies (Vaggione and Machado, 2020). This means that political ideology in Latin America often intersects with religion, producing tendencies like Christian-inspired socialism or market-friendly moral conservatism. And finally, unlike in Europe or in North America, Latin America's populists tend to span the ideological spectrum (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; de la Torre, 2017), with prominent left-wing populist leaders such as Hugo Chávez or Evo Morales and right-wing populists like Jair Bolsonaro or Nayib Bukele. Combined, the region therefore provides a compelling context to further disentangle the impact of populism, religion, and ideology on shaping attitudes towards gender equality.

We focus on gender equality attitudes among legislators as they have important implications for policy outcomes and societal norms. Scholars of gender and politics have documented patterns in public opinion – for example, that higher religiosity correlates with more patriarchal attitudes among citizens globally (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Seguino, 2011) and that populist voters in Europe tend to hold more sexist views (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024; Spierings et al., 2015). Yet, elite attitudes towards gender matter because legislators wield disproportionate influence over policy changes and public discourse on gender issues. Lawmakers not only reflect prevailing public opinions but can also lead or lag social change through their advocacy (or resistance) on gender-related policies (Alexander et al., 2023; Celis and Childs, 2020; Htun and Power, 2006; Morgan and Buice, 2013; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Wängnerud, 2015).

Despite the importance of legislators' beliefs for policy, systematic studies of Latin American political elites' gender equality attitudes are rare. Only recently has the cross-national Parliamentary Elites of Latin America (PELA) survey run by the University of Salamanca begun to include questions on gender equality (PELA-USAL, 2022), enabling direct analysis of legislators' views. Using PELA data, Alexander et al. (2023) take a first step by showing that Latin American legislators' attitudes towards gender equality cluster into three distinct dimensions and are shaped by factors like gender, religiosity, and ideology. They find, for instance, that religiosity is a powerful predictor of holding traditional gender role attitudes, which not only underscores religion's influence, but also invites further enquiry into additional factors – such as populism – that might drive variation in legislators' gender equality attitudes.

This article seeks to fill these gaps by examining how populism, religion, left–right ideology, and gender each contribute to shaping gender equality attitudes among Latin American political elites and whether they intersect in doing so. The next section discusses how we expect each of these factors to show impact on legislators' attitudes towards gender equality and how they might interact. Subsequently, we test our

hypotheses with a sample of 1,061 legislators in thirteen Latin American countries using the 2015–2018 wave of PELA data.

Our findings highlight the distinct and independent contributions of religiosity, populism, ideology, and gender to elite attitudes towards gender equality. Contrary to our expectations, these factors do not interact in ways that amplify their effects. Their cumulative influence, however, remains substantial: multiple conservative influences may converge within a single legislator and thereby produce strongly conservative positions, yet there is no evidence of a runaway synergy among populism, religiosity, and ideology that would push attitudes towards extremes. As a result, in highly religious, populist, or ideologically conservative contexts, significant resistance to progressive reform is likely to persist. At the same time, the effect of gender remains largely stable, indicating that gender exerts an independent and additive influence on legislators' attitudes. Put differently, female legislators continue to represent a potential countervailing force in debates over gender equality.

Populism, Religion, Ideology, and Gender Equality

We argue that three forces – populism, religion, and ideology – each play a crucial role in shaping Latin American legislators' attitudes towards gender equality. However, we do not expect a uniform impact as each of them can be understood as offering individuals frameworks through which to interpret reality and guide behaviour but that pertain to different realms of life. Both religion and ideology function as comprehensive worldviews. Religion typically focuses on existential and spiritual questions – such as the nature of the sacred or the ultimate purpose of life – alongside moral norms and communal rituals. Ideology, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with how societies should be organised and governed, emphasising power dynamics, social structures, and the distribution of resources. While religion anchors moral and spiritual values in a transcendent realm, defining social rules and ideals by which people should strive to live, ideology defines normative principles for social and political life within material and institutional contexts that inform the desired direction of social change. Populism, on the other hand, articulates a narrower set of ideas about the political world and its actors, resulting in an understanding of politics as a conflictive struggle, but without a comprehensive programme of its own. Rather, as a thin-centred ideology, as posited by the ideational approach to populism, it combines with a thick ideology (Hawkins et al., 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

We build on theories of political behaviour to argue that religion and populism are two distinct sources of traditionalist gender equality attitudes, while we expect that left–right ideology can either reinforce or mitigate these influences. In addition, we expect that their impact will differ across men and women legislators, with the latter typically being more supportive of gender equality issues. In sum, religiosity and populist attitudes are expected to push legislators towards conservative positions on gender, but their impact may depend on a legislator's core political ideology and their own gender. In the following we discuss our expectations of how each of these forces relate to gender-equal attitudes.

Religion and Gender Equality Attitudes

Religion influences social and political attitudes through prescriptive moral and ethical frameworks that shape believers' perceptions and decisions. Religiosity, the intensity of an individual's religious beliefs and practices, often correlates with adherence to the moral teachings of their faith, and thus will guide perspectives on family, sexuality, and gender roles (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Seguino, 2011). Many religious traditions for instance promote complementarianism – the belief that men and women have distinct, God-given roles, stressing women's roles as mothers and caregivers and reinforcing male authority (Chaves, 1997; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Woodhead, 2004).

In Latin America, the Catholic Church historically has set the tone on gender and sexuality norms. The Catholic doctrine has generally maintained conservative positions: opposing abortion and same-sex marriage, restricting women's roles in church, and valorising the heterosexual nuclear family. While the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) encouraged some modernising currents, including the acceptance of liberal democracy and attention to social justice, it did not liberalise the Church's stance on gender hierarchy or reproductive issues (Casanova, 1994). The emergence of liberation theology in the early 1970s within Latin American Catholicism promoted a progressive agenda on poverty and human rights and thus legitimised Christians' adopting ideological leftist positions (Parker, 2016). Notably, however, even liberation theologians rarely challenged core church teachings on gender and sexuality as their radicalism was directed more at class inequality than at patriarchy or heteronormativity.

Thus, while a minority of Catholic elites might frame gender equality as part of broader social justice, the institutional Church remains a guardian of traditional gender norms. A key area in which it actively undermines gender equality is its opposition to what it labels as “gender ideology,” a concept coined by the Vatican following the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development, and Peace in Beijing (Leimgruber, 2020). This way, the Church has effectively framed the advancement of women's and sexual minorities' rights as an ideological threat to society stemming from secular liberalism. The Catholic Church has actively lobbied in legislative debates – for example, in Brazil's Congress and in recent Argentine abortion votes – to block expansions of reproductive rights (Htun and Weldon, 2018; Vaggione and Machado, 2020). At the same time, the region's growing Evangelical Protestant movement has introduced another potent source of religious traditionalism (Boas, 2020; Melkonian-Hoover and Hoover, 2022). Many Evangelical denominations preach family values and emphasise men's spiritual authority in the home, reinforcing patriarchal norms. Indeed, Melkonian-Hoover and Hoover (2022) find that across the region, Evangelicals are more conservative than average on abortion rights and same-sex marriage. Yet, whether Catholic or Evangelical, as a reactionary movement, religious (neo-)conservatism in Latin America have found common cause in resisting gender equality policies and have forged strong alliances “that were previously unthinkable” (Vaggione and Machado, 2020: 8). Legislators with strong faith convictions may

thus internalise these positions, yielding more conservative attitudes on gender equality, in particular on values issues (Bohigues et al., 2022). We therefore expect that:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Higher religiosity among legislators is associated with less gender equality attitudes, especially on values issues.

Populism and Gender Equality Attitudes

Populism divides society into two opposing poles and positions “the people,” glorified as the true representatives of democratic sovereignty, against “the elite,” depicted as self-serving and conspiring, undermining the common good (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). As categories, both “the people” and “the elite” are constructed as determinate and homogeneous, ensuing a conflictive relationship. Consequently, populism thrives on simplified, binary framings of political conflict (Mudde, 2004) which leaves little room for cross-cutting compromise, resulting in a deeply rooted tension with pluralism. As Müller (2016) points out, this inherent anti-pluralism implies that populists typically deny the legitimacy of minority interests that complicate the notion of a single, unified will of the people. This often means downplaying or rejecting the idea of subgroup identities or inequalities within “the people,” and the relationship between populism and gender in Latin America has fluctuated over time (Kampwirth, 2010; Rousseau, 2022).

Calls for women’s rights or gender equality can therefore be dismissed as divisive identity politics. Not coincidentally, populism often directs its critique towards a perceived global elite, whose agenda is associated with values such as multi-culturalism, diversity, and equal rights. Framed as a project of elite liberalism imposed on “the people,” women’s rights advocates or gender minorities may be portrayed as being part of the “corrupt elite” and as posing threats to the unity of “the people” by creating artificial divisions (Ackerly, 2021; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). Hence, populists may be more likely to dismiss gender inequality as a legitimate concern and regard gender equality efforts as privileging one group over the unified people or as a distraction from what they define as the real cleavage (people vs. elite). Although populism itself does not prescribe specific positions on gender equality, its core elements of anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manichean dualism often foster resistance to feminist and gender-equality initiatives (Kantola and Lombardo, 2019; Spierings and Zaslove, 2017). Indeed, Marcos-Marne et al. (2024) show that higher populist attitudes correlate with sexist attitudes even when controlling for ideology.

In addition, populist parties tend to be leader-centric (Van Kessel, 2013), a leader who is the embodiment of “the people” and is oftentimes depicted as the paternal protector of the nation. Projecting a “strongman” image, such leaders often showcase masculine traits such as assertiveness and dominance (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The rise of female leaders in populist parties may have complicated this association; while some such as Marine Le Pen leverage traditional gender roles, emphasising themes of protection and

care and thus aligning herself with the role of a mother safeguarding the nation, others such as Giorgia Meloni have adopted a “strongwoman” image, projecting resilience and determination akin to their male counterparts (Geva, 2020; Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes, 2024). Notwithstanding, analysing party practices, Kantola and Lombardo (2019) show that populist parties’ internal cultures often reinforce male dominance and personalised leadership, regardless of ideology. Combined we therefore expect that:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Higher levels of populism among legislators are associated with less gender equality attitudes, especially on gender roles and affirmative action.

Moderating Factors

We posit that ideology, the classic spectrum from left (progressive, socially egalitarian, state-interventionist) to right (conservative, traditional, market-oriented), plays a moderating role in the relationship between religiosity, populism, and gender equality attitudes. In Latin America the left–right dimension is often intertwined with positions on moral and religious issues. Yet, generally, leftist parties in the region have been more supportive of expanding women’s rights and secular social policies, whereas right-wing parties align more with church positions and traditionalism (Htun and Power, 2006; Luna and Zechmeister, 2005; Wiesehomeier, 2010). We therefore expect that left-leaning legislators will on average hold more gender equality attitudes than right-leaning legislators.

But how would ideology alter the impact of religiosity and populism? A religious person on the political right is likely encouraged to integrate their religious beliefs with political views – producing a coherent traditionalist stance on gender. In contrast, a devout person on the political left might experience cross-pressures: their personal faith might incline them to conservative positions on values issues such as abortion, but their leftist ideology and party platform might emphasise social equality and rights. That is, a left-leaning legislator who is religious might still accept some gender equality measures that resonate with their gender equality ethos, particularly those that address power dynamics, social structures, and the distribution of resources, even if they oppose abortion. Recent research by Alexander et al. (2023) hints at this nuance, finding that while religiosity strongly predicts Latin American legislators’ stances on gender role beliefs, it was less predictive of their support for state-led gender equality actions – yet the authors do not account for a potential moderating effect of ideology. In contrast, a right-leaning religious legislator might oppose all gender-progressive measures, from economic to sexual rights, viewing them uniformly as against tradition and family.

Similarly, populism on the right often goes together with nativism, authoritarianism, and defence of traditional social hierarchies (Mudde, 2007). For a right-wing populist legislator, both their populist anti-(liberal)elite instinct and their right-wing value system push in the same direction (patriarchal, anti-pluralist views of gender). In contrast, while left-wing populism is generally less antagonistic to gender equality than right-wing

populism, due to its populist nature, it is not inherently pro-gender equality; much will depend on whether this issue is seen as part of “the people’s” struggle or dismissed as a secondary issue. Put differently, a left-wing populist legislator might decry a wealthy oligarchy but still champion the inclusion of women as part of “the people” who have been oppressed, and thus the left’s positions on social progress might counterbalance populist scepticism of subgroup identity politics. Combined we therefore expect that:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Ideology moderates the effects of populism and religiosity such that their negative impact on gender equality attitudes will be reduced for left-wing elites compared to right-wing elites.

In addition, we also anticipate a moderating effect of a legislator’s descriptive identity. Research indicates that women legislators are generally more inclined than their male counterparts to prioritise gender equality issues, and this tendency is evident both globally and in Latin America. Women legislators often bring experiences and perspectives that differ from those of many men, which can translate into a stronger commitment to addressing issues such as gender-based violence, health care, reproductive rights, and labour market discrimination (Biroli, 2018; Krook, 2017; O’Brien and Piscopo, 2019; Paxton et al., 2007; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006). Research also points to the role of women-centric networks and cross-party caucuses for collaboration during the policy-making process (Barnes, 2016; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010), while women legislators often act as critical actors, pushing for feminist agendas even when men outnumber them (Piscopo, 2014). Indeed, Latin American women legislators are more likely to support gender quotas than men legislators (Bohigues and Piscopo, 2021) and to express more gender-equal attitudes (Alexander et al., 2023). We therefore expect that:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Women legislators are on average more likely to hold gender equality attitudes compared to men legislators, even at the same levels of ideology and religiosity or populism and ideology.

Assessing the Impact of Religion, Populism Ideology, and Gender

Variables and Indicators

To assess the impact of religion, populism, ideology, and gender on gender equality attitudes, for our analyses we pool the 2015–2018 PELA data of thirteen Latin American countries for a total of 1,061 responses.¹ The PELA surveys are carried out in the lower or unicameral house following each country’s legislative election. The questionnaires are administered in the initial months of the legislative session through face-to-face interviews with legislators selected randomly from among the political parties. The responses are then weighted according to the parties’ representation in the chamber. Since 2015, PELA has incorporated questions addressing gender inequality

for legislators. As the surveys are kept anonymous, social desirability bias is mitigated (see Alexander et al., 2023).

As pointed out in our previous discussion, we expect the impact of religiosity, populism, and ideology to vary across different areas of gender-equal views while we expect that lived life experiences will make women legislators in general more inclined to having progressive equality attitudes. Contrary to previous work using a compound indicator (see Alexander et al., 2023), we use six attitudinal questions as dependent variables that tap into different areas of interest, thereby allowing us to identify potentially distinct patterns across the dimensions operationalised by each item.

Thus, for values issues, we use legislators (dis)approval of *same-sex marriage* and *abortion*, both on a scale from strongly disapprove (1) to strongly approve (10). We furthermore use a legislator's level of (dis)agreement with four statements that relate to gender roles and affirmative action. They cover the political world (*In general, men are better political leaders than women; Quotas are necessary to increase the number of women*), the labour market (*When jobs are scarce, men should be given priority over women in accessing jobs*), and include a more general question about preferential treatment, that can be also read as hostile sexism towards gender equality (*When women demand equality these days, they are really seeking special favours*), and run on a Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Our main independent variables of interest are religiosity, populism, ideology, and a legislator's gender. For *religiosity*, we include a variable that captures the attendance at religious services and is measured on a six-point scale where 0 indicates a non-believer (who, by definition, do not attend religious services) and 5 someone who is attending services more than once a week. To measure a legislator's level of *populism*, PELA has included a battery of questions following the ideational approach (Andreadis and Ruth-Lovell, 2019) which allows us to construct an index of populist attitudes based on populism's three individually necessary and jointly sufficient sub-dimensions (see Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019).² Across all countries PELA provides three questions measuring people-centrism (*Politicians in Congress must follow the will of the people; The most important decisions should be made by the people, not by politicians; It is preferable to be represented by an ordinary citizen than by an experienced politician*), one question for anti-elitism (*Politicians talk a lot and do very little*), and one for Manicheanism (*In politics, consensus really means renouncing one's principles*), all measured on a Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). We first aggregate the three indicators of people-centrism as an arithmetic mean (see Goertz, 2020: 46–48, on multi-level concepts and the aggregation of indicators of the same attribute), and then aggregate the three sub-dimensions people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manicheanism as a geometric mean (see Wuttke et al., 2020). The resulting populist attitudes index, where higher values indicate higher levels of populism, ranges from 1.19 to 5, and has a mean of 2.74. We include *ideological self-placement* on a scale from 1 – left to 10 – right (mean = 4.94) and use a legislator's self-reported sex (0 = man, 1 = woman, 32.7 per cent) as a proxy for *gender*.

In addition, we include a series of controls. As a contrast to populism, we include pluralist attitudes, an arithmetic mean of two questions probing legislators' views on tolerance of differing opinions (*In a democracy, it is important to achieve consensus among different points of view; In a democracy, it is important to listen to the opinions of all groups*) measured on a Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), a dummy variable indicating *Evangelical denomination*, and account for *education* and *age*. As politicians are nested in countries, we run multi-level models, which in the case of the values issues are multi-level regression analyses and for gender roles and affirmative action models are performed as ordered multi-level regression analyses.³

The Distinct Roles of Populism, Religion, and Ideology

Table 1 provides a baseline model for how populism, religion, and ideology shape attitudes on the two values issues (same-sex marriage and abortion) and the four gender-role and affirmative action items (leaders, jobs, favours, and quotas), controlling for pluralism, Evangelical denomination, and demographic variables.

Populist attitudes are particularly influential for how legislators view women's roles in society. For instance, higher levels of populist attitudes heighten significantly the belief on political leadership skills of men or the approval of the statement that men should have priority when jobs are scarce (coefficient 0.34). As anticipated, we find the strongest impact on agreement with the statement that women are seeking special favours (coefficient 0.46). Somewhat paradoxically, legislators with higher levels of populist attitudes – with more people-centrist, Manicheanist, anti-elitist views – show slight support for legislative quotas, arguably the starkest manifestation of affirmative action (coefficient 0.17). Nevertheless, of all significant relationships it is the weakest with the smallest impact, suggesting that populist legislators may support certain formal state-led measures while also embracing a broader discourse of traditional gender roles.

As for religiosity, on the other hand, a one-unit increase in church attendance – from monthly to weekly attendance, for example – reduces approval of same-sex marriage by roughly 0.70 points and abortion by about 0.87 points, both statistically significant at the 1 per cent level. Highly religious legislators also tend to favour traditional gender norms, although the effect on those items, such as the idea that “men are better political leaders,” is, as anticipated, weaker.

Right-leaning ideology exerts an additional pull towards conservative stances, especially regarding same-sex marriage and abortion (values issues). For example, a one-unit move from the left towards the right along the 1–10 scale reduces approval of abortion by 0.29 and same-sex marriage by 0.23, both significant effects. On gender-role and affirmative action the coefficients remain in the conservative direction, although the effect is not statistically significant in the case of giving men job priority. Female legislators, as opposed to their male peers, however, consistently emerge as a more liberal influence. Being a woman increases approval of same-sex marriage by roughly 0.97 points and of abortion by about 0.54 points. It also substantially reduces agreement with statements like “women are seeking special favours” (–0.83) and “men are

Table 1. Populism, Religiosity, and Gender Equality.

	Same-Sex Marriage	Abortion	Leaders	Jobs	Favours	Quotas
Populism	-0.34** (0.11)	-0.17 (0.10)	0.26** (0.09)	0.34** (0.09)	0.46** (0.08)	0.17* (0.08)
Religiosity	-0.70** (0.07)	-0.87** (0.06)	0.17** (0.06)	0.14* (0.06)	0.12* (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
Ideology	-0.23** (0.04)	-0.29** (0.04)	0.07* (0.03)	0.02 (0.07)	0.13** (0.03)	-0.13** (0.03)
Woman	0.97** (0.20)	0.54** (0.18)	-1.00** (0.17)	-0.58** (0.19)	-0.83** (0.16)	0.94** (0.14)
Pluralism	-0.13 (0.23)	-0.33 (0.21)	-0.48** (0.17)	-0.46* (0.18)	-0.95** (0.16)	0.36* (0.15)
Evangelical	-1.69** (0.35)	-0.67* (0.32)	0.38 (0.24)	0.62* (0.27)	0.15 (0.25)	-0.13 (0.23)
Education	0.14** (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.04)
Age	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Constant	9.71** (1.31)	9.54** (1.17)	-	-	-	-
cut1	-	-	-0.14 (1.00)	0.32 (1.09)	-2.62** (0.94)	-0.34 (0.83)
cut2	-	-	0.86 (1.00)	1.27 (1.09)	-1.61 (0.93)	0.35 (0.83)
cut3	-	-	2.15* (1.01)	2.09 (1.09)	-0.86 (0.93)	1.00 (0.83)
cut4	-	-	3.21** (1.02)	3.12** (1.10)	0.19 (0.94)	1.91* (0.83)
Variance country	0.14 (0.21)	-0.24 (0.23)	0.26* (0.13)	0.28* (0.14)	0.24* (0.12)	0.23* (0.11)
N legislators	963	962	966	953	961	966
N countries	13	13	13	13	13	13

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Own elaboration from Parliamentary Elites of Latin America (PELA).

better leaders” (-1.00). Put differently, even after accounting for ideology, religiosity, and populism, female legislators retain a strongly pro-equality and more morally liberal stance.

Considering the impact of our control variables, pluralist attitudes emerge as a strong and consistent progressive force when it comes to attitudes towards gender roles and affirmative action (leaders, jobs, favours, quotas), while it has no effect on values

issues (same-sex marriage and abortion). A potential explanation may be that the questions directly aim at tolerance for differences in opinion and do not encompass broader pluralistic visions of society. Evangelicals are strongly opposed to same-sex marriage, followed by abortion and demonstrate more conservative views on gender roles, prioritising jobs for men when jobs are scarce. Education only bolsters support for same-sex marriage, while older legislators tend to be less approving of same-sex marriage. In short, these results provide evidence for our first two hypotheses and underscore the strong, separate contributions of religiosity (H1), especially on values issues, and populism (H2), particularly on gender roles and partially on affirmative action. As anticipated, they also highlight the effects of ideology consistently pushing attitudes in a conservative direction as one moves to the right and that woman, as expected, stands out as a robust force for more gender equality positions across both moral and gender-role domains.

The Interactions between Populism, Ideology, and Religiosity

To test the potential for an interactive effect, we introduce interactions between populism and ideology and religiosity and ideology respectively (H3). Table 2 confirms the strong main effect of religiosity on values issues, and the much weaker relationship with populist attitudes, whereas the interaction effects are in both cases statistically insignificant.⁴

Similarly, Table 2 also underscores the absence of a multiplicative effect on attitudes on gender roles and affirmative action. The interaction terms Populism \times Ideology, and Religiosity \times Ideology are statistically non-significant across all models and marginal effect plots confirm the consistent effect of ideology across levels of religiosity and populism (see Supplemental Appendix), except for quotas.

On the latter, however, Figure 1 reveals a more nuanced pattern. This figure plots interactions from Table 2, more specifically the effect of ideology on the agreement that gender quotas are necessary for the lowest (twentieth) and the highest (eightieth) percentiles of populism (left) and religiosity (right). Thus, Figure 1 shows that the likelihood of strongly disagreeing with the statement that gender quotas are necessary increases sharply with right-wing ideology for legislators with low levels of populism and those with high religiosity. This suggests a potential interaction effect at the extreme end of the ideological scale and the response distribution, even though such effects are not significant across the full range of the ordinal outcome; thus, the non-significant coefficient from Table 2. All in all, we do not find evidence for an expected interaction effect (H3); rather the main effects of populism and religiosity appear to account for most variation.

The Gender Gap

We also expected to observe a gender gap, that is, that women legislators be consistently more progressive than their male counterparts with comparable levels of ideology and either religiosity or populism (H4). Table 3 shows the results for three-way interactions (Woman \times Populism \times Ideology, and Woman \times Religiosity \times Ideology). The main effects for religiosity, populist attitudes, and ideology on their own remain strong. The

Table 2. Populism, Religiosity, and Ideology: Interactions for Values Issues, Gender Roles, and Affirmative Action.

	Same-Sex Marriage		Abortion		Leaders		Jobs		Favours		Quotas	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Populism	-0.21 (0.24)	-0.34** (0.11)	-0.34 (0.22)	-0.17 (0.10)	0.54** (0.20)	0.25** (0.09)	0.62** (0.21)	0.33** (0.09)	0.54** (0.19)	0.45** (0.08)	0.06 (0.17)	0.17* (0.077)
Religiosity	-0.71** (0.07)	-0.72** (0.14)	-0.87** (0.06)	-1.02** (0.12)	0.16** (0.06)	0.31* (0.12)	0.13* (0.06)	0.20 (0.12)	0.12* (0.05)	0.24* (0.11)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.070 (0.096)
Ideology	-0.15 (0.12)	-0.24** (0.09)	-0.38** (0.11)	-0.39** (0.08)	0.22* (0.11)	0.17* (0.08)	0.19 (0.11)	0.07 (0.08)	0.17 (0.10)	0.20** (0.07)	-0.19* (0.09)	-0.067 (0.064)
Woman	0.98** (0.20)	0.97** (0.20)	0.53** (0.18)	0.54** (0.18)	-0.99** (0.18)	-1.00** (0.18)	-0.56** (0.19)	-0.58** (0.19)	-0.83** (0.16)	-0.84** (0.16)	0.93** (0.14)	0.94** (0.14)
Populism × Ideology	-0.03 (0.04)	—	0.03 (0.04)	—	-0.05 (0.04)	—	-0.06 (0.04)	—	-0.02 (0.03)	—	0.02 (0.03)	—
Religiosity × Ideology	—	0.01 (0.03)	—	0.03 (0.03)	—	-0.03 (0.02)	—	-0.01 (0.02)	—	-0.03 (0.02)	—	-0.021 (0.019)
Pluralism	-0.13 (0.23)	-0.13 (0.23)	-0.33 (0.21)	-0.33 (0.21)	-0.48** (0.17)	-0.48** (0.17)	-0.46* (0.18)	-0.45* (0.18)	-0.95** (0.16)	-0.95** (0.16)	0.36* (0.15)	0.36* (0.15)
Evangelical	-1.69** (0.35)	-1.69** (0.36)	-0.67* (0.32)	-0.72* (0.32)	0.37 (0.24)	0.42 (0.25)	0.61* (0.27)	0.64* (0.27)	0.14 (0.25)	0.18 (0.25)	-0.13 (0.23)	-0.11 (0.23)
Education	0.14** (0.04)	0.14** (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.04)
Age	-0.032** (0.01)	-0.032** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.0013 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Constant	9.35** (1.44)	9.77** (1.35)	9.99** (1.29)	9.93** (1.20)	9.93** (1.20)	9.93** (1.20)	9.93** (1.20)	9.93** (1.20)	9.93** (1.20)	9.93** (1.20)	9.93** (1.20)	9.93** (1.20)
cut1					0.63 (1.13)	0.23 (1.05)	1.11 (1.21)	0.49 (1.13)	-2.40* (1.04)	-2.31* (0.97)	-0.62 (0.93)	-0.076 (0.87)
cut2					1.63 (1.13)	1.23 (1.05)	2.07 (1.21)	1.44 (1.13)	-1.40 (1.04)	-1.31 (0.97)	0.073 (0.93)	0.62 (0.87)

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued

	Same-Sex Marriage		Abortion		Leaders		Jobs		Favours		Quotas	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
cut3					2.92*	2.53*	2.89*	2.26*	-0.65	-0.56	0.72	1.26
					(1.14)	(1.06)	(1.22)	(1.13)	(1.04)	(0.97)	(0.93)	(0.87)
cut4					3.99**	3.59**	3.92**	3.29**	0.40	0.50	1.63	2.18*
					(1.15)	(1.07)	(1.23)	(1.15)	(1.04)	(0.97)	(0.93)	(0.87)
Variance country	0.14	0.14	-0.24	-0.24	0.26*	0.26*	0.29*	0.28*	0.24*	0.24*	0.22*	0.23*
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.23)	(0.23)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.12)
N legislators	963	963	962	962	966	966	953	953	961	961	966	966
N countries	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Own elaboration from Parliamentary Elites of Latin America (PELA).

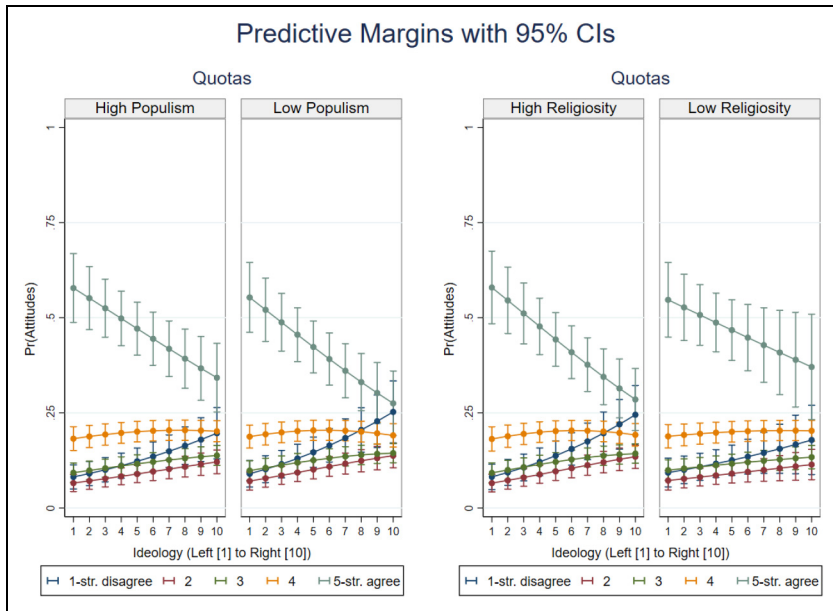


Figure 1. Predicted Scores for Gender Quotas Across Ideology Crossed by Populism and Religiosity.

Source: Own elaboration based on Table 2.

interaction terms are not statistically significant, suggesting that the gender gap may not be as uniform as anticipated.⁵

Table 3 also extends the analysis of gender gaps to gender roles and affirmative action and once again the results confirm the strong individual effects of populist attitudes and religiosity on their own.⁶

Similar to Figure 1, Figure 2 plots interactions from Table 3, more specifically the effect among women of ideology on the agreement that men make better political leaders, and that gender quotas are necessary, for the lowest (twentieth) and the highest (eightieth) percentiles of populism (left) and religiosity (right).

Thus, as Figure 2 (top) shows, for low populist attitudes or low levels of religiosity, left-wing ideology is muting difference, whereas the gender gap for high populism and high religiosity persists across the entire ideological scale in the case of leadership skills. Interestingly, as illustrated also in Figure 2 (bottom), for high populist legislators, gender differences on quotas are more compressed, especially in categories of agreement, and more pronounced on the ideological right. Conversely, the gender gap persists across ideology among highly religious respondents and among those low in populism. In sum, our hypothesis (H4) is broadly supported by the analysis of predictive margin contrasts. Across a range of gender-equal views, female legislators exhibit significantly more gender equality attitudes than their male colleagues. But this gender gap is not uniformly

Table 3. Populism, Religiosity, Ideology, and Gender: Three-Way Interactions for Values Issues, Gender Roles, and Affirmative Action.

	Same-Sex Marriage			Abortion		Leaders		Jobs		Favours		Quotas	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	
Populism	-0.11 (0.30)	-0.35** (0.11)	-0.22 (0.27)	-0.17 (0.10)	0.63** (0.24)	0.26** (0.09)	0.66** (0.25)	0.34** (0.10)	0.66** (0.23)	0.48** (0.08)	0.13 (0.20)	0.16* (0.08)	
Religiosity	-0.71** (0.07)	-0.83** (0.17)	-0.88** (0.07)	-1.10** (0.16)	0.16** (0.06)	0.33* (0.15)	0.13* (0.06)	0.36* (0.16)	0.11* (0.05)	0.24 (0.14)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.04 (0.12)	
Ideology	-0.14 (0.15)	-0.36** (0.11)	-0.32* (0.14)	-0.47** (0.10)	0.24 (0.13)	0.21* (0.09)	0.24 (0.13)	0.18 (0.10)	0.27* (0.12)	0.30** (0.09)	0.27* (0.11)	-0.09 (0.08)	
Woman	1.69 (1.41)	-0.17 (0.86)	1.59 (1.29)	-0.01 (0.78)	0.24 (1.32)	-0.35 (0.85)	-0.013 (1.36)	1.10 (0.79)	0.51 (1.21)	0.25 (0.73)	1.60 (1.03)	0.29 (0.61)	
Woman × Ideology	-0.07 (0.25)	0.36 (0.19)	-0.17 (0.23)	0.24 (0.17)	-0.02 (0.22)	-0.17 (0.18)	-0.12 (0.24)	-0.36* (0.18)	-0.23 (0.21)	-0.34* (0.16)	0.16 (0.18)	0.06 (0.14)	
Populism × Ideology	-0.04 (0.05)		0.01 (0.05)		-0.05 (0.04)		-0.06 (0.04)		-0.03 (0.04)		0.04 (0.04)		
Woman × Populism	-0.34 (0.51)		-0.35 (0.46)		-0.30 (0.46)		-0.04 (0.46)		-0.19 (0.42)		-0.43 (0.37)		
Woman × Populism × Ideology	0.04 (0.09)		0.05 (0.08)		-0.02 (0.08)		0.01 (0.079)		0.03 (0.07)		-0.02 (0.06)		
Religiosity × Ideology		0.04 (0.03)		0.06* (0.03)		-0.04 (0.09)		-0.05 (0.03)		-0.04 (0.03)		-0.02 (0.02)	
Woman × Religiosity		0.30 (0.28)		0.23 (0.26)		-0.11 (0.26)		-0.46 (0.25)		-0.07 (0.23)		0.11 (0.20)	
Woman × Religiosity × Ideology		-0.10 (0.06)		-0.09 (0.05)		0.03 (0.05)		0.10 (0.05)		0.05 (0.05)		0.00 (0.04)	
Pluralism	-0.13 (0.23)	-0.13 (0.23)	-0.32 (0.21)	-0.32 (0.21)	-0.47** (0.17)	-0.45* (0.18)	-0.48** (0.17)	-0.45* (0.18)	-0.46* (0.18)	-0.94** (0.16)	-0.94** (0.16)	0.36* (0.15)	
Evangelical	-1.68** (0.35)	-1.70** (0.36)	-0.66* (0.32)	-0.73* (0.32)	0.39 (0.25)	0.39 (0.25)	0.42 (0.25)	0.62* (0.27)	0.64* (0.27)	0.15 (0.25)	0.19 (0.25)	-0.16 (0.23)	
Education	0.14** (0.04)	0.14** (0.04)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.09)	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.10 (0.01)	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.067 (0.04)	

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued

	Same-Sex Marriage			Abortion		Leaders		Jobs		Favours		Quotas	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	
Age	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.012 (0.01)	0.012 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Constant	9.14** (1.54)	10.2** (1.39)	9.56** (1.38)	10.1** (1.24)									
cut1					1.15 (1.20)	0.44 (1.08)	1.44 (1.29)	1.11 (1.18)	-1.68 (1.12)	-1.86 (1.00)	-0.60 (1.01)	-0.39 (0.90)	
cut2					2.15 (1.21)	1.44 (1.08)	2.40 (1.30)	2.07 (1.18)	-0.67 (1.11)	-0.85 (1.00)	0.11 (1.00)	0.31 (0.90)	
cut3					3.45** (1.21)	2.74** (1.09)	3.22** (1.30)	2.90* (1.18)	0.08 (1.11)	-0.092 (1.00)	0.76 (1.00)	0.96 (0.90)	
cut4					4.52** (1.23)	3.80** (1.10)	4.24** (1.31)	3.93** (1.20)	1.14 (1.12)	0.97 (1.00)	1.69 (1.00)	1.87* (0.90)	
Variance country	0.13 (0.21)	0.14 (0.21)	-0.24 (0.23)	-0.24 (0.23)	0.28* (0.14)	0.26* (0.13)	0.29* (0.15)	0.28 (0.15)	0.24* (0.12)	0.24* (0.12)	0.21* (0.11)	0.23* (0.11)	
N legislators	963	963	962	962	966	966	953	953	961	961	966	966	
N countries	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Own elaboration from Parliamentary Elites of Latin America (PELA).

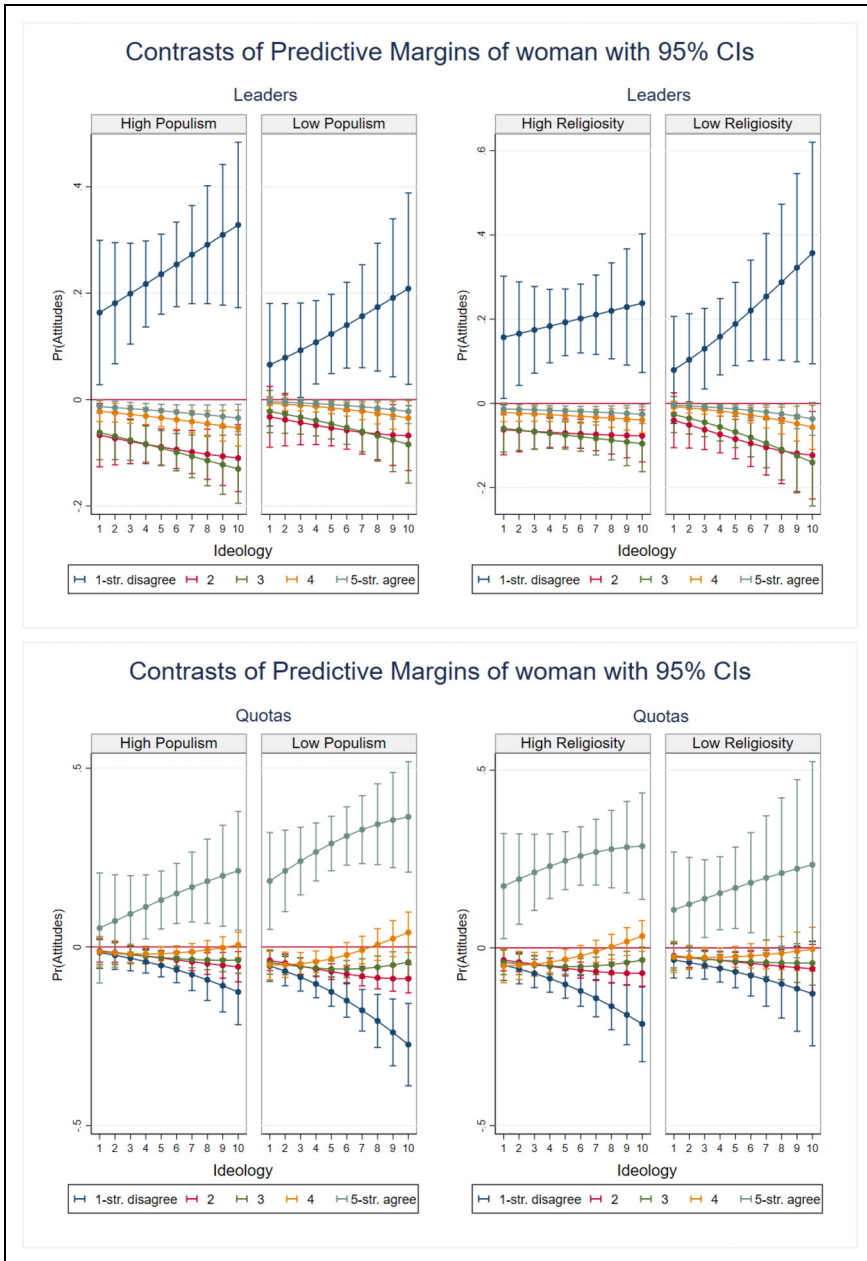


Figure 2. Contrast of Predicted Scores for Leadership Skills (Top) and Quotas (Bottom) Across Ideology Crossed by Populism and Religiosity. Source: Own elaboration based on Table 3.

significant across the ideological spectrum. Rather, results indicate that radical left-wing ideology produces a convergence in attitudes regardless of a legislator's gender.

Discussion and Conclusion

Across the different specifications, our results reveal a clear pattern of how religiosity, populist attitudes, ideology, and a legislator's own gender shape attitudes on values issues, gender roles, and affirmative action. In our cross-national sample of 1,061 legislators in thirteen Latin American countries we consistently find that these factors influence attitudes in distinct, meaningful ways, yet crucially, their effects are best characterised as additive rather than multiplicative. Put differently, each factor exerts its own influence without systematically amplifying or dampening the effect of the others. While multiple conservative influences can accumulate in a single legislator, and thus produce substantial conservative views, there is no runaway synergy of populism, religiosity, and ideology, pushing attitudes to extremes.

Drawing our findings together, four overarching conclusions emerge. First, religiosity, measured as attendance at religious services, as expected, dominates moral conservatism on same-sex marriage and abortion. Second, in contrast, populist attitudes play a more substantial role in structuring gender-role conservatism, whereas its influence on values issues is less pronounced. Populist legislators are more likely to agree with the statements that men make better political leaders, that men should be prioritised for jobs when employment is scarce, and, in particular, that women's equality claims constitute demands for "special favours." But somewhat paradoxically, populist attitudes are positively correlated with institutionalised gender equality. Third, ideology matters. Yet, it shapes attitudes particularly on abortion and only to a lesser extent on same-sex marriage, favouritism, and gender quotas. In these areas, right-leaning legislators consistently express more conservative positions, although the effect of ideology is often less robust than that of religiosity. On items related to gender roles, such as beliefs about political leadership and jobs, the influence of ideology tends to point in a conservative direction but is not always statistically significant. And fourth, gender emerges as the most consistent progressive counterbalance. Female legislators are markedly more supportive of gender-equal views than their male counterparts. The gender gap is generally robust, but contrary to expectations often muted among radical left-leaning legislators, while it tends to increase towards the ideological. However, in line with the broader findings, this gap does not increase dramatically in interaction with our primary forces of interest, religiosity or populism; the effects of gender remain largely stable, indicating that gender itself exerts an independent and additive effect.

While our focus was on disentangling the distinct and potentially interactive effects of religion, populism, and ideology, our results also point to another important counterbalance. We find that pluralist attitudes emerge as a strong, robust, and independent predictor of gender equality attitudes. Higher levels of pluralism are significantly associated with rejection of traditionalist views on gender roles and affirmative action. This suggests that pluralist values in the form of emphasising tolerance for differing

opinions are integral to supporting democratic gender norms among political elites. As the lack of a relationship with values issues may stem from the narrower focus on differences of opinion of the questions included in the PELA surveys, this opens interesting avenues for future research.

All in all, the implications of our findings are particularly relevant in a region where religiosity remains high and right-wing populism is gaining ground. A key limitation of this study is that our survey window spans 2015 to 2019, preceding the heightened visibility and momentum that gender-equality backlash has acquired in recent years: from El Salvador in 2019 to Argentina in 2023. In addition, not all countries were included in the PELA sample (most notably Brazil). Despite these constraints, the evidence analysed here offers valuable insight into the underlying rationale and foundations of this backlash, which appear closely linked to religion, populism, and ideology. Future research should draw on more recent surveys and a broader set of countries to assess how these dynamics have evolved.

Thus, the backlash against the so-called “gender ideology” (Biroli and Caminotti, 2020; Biroli and Rousseau, 2025) has emerged as a central narrative of conservative resistance (Teixeira and Biroli, 2022), framing feminist and LGBTQ+ rights as threats to traditional values and national identity (Krizsan and Roggeband, 2019; Roggeband and Krizsán, 2018). Such discourses have been instrumental in galvanising public support among religious and culturally conservative constituencies, contributing to a broader climate of resistance to progressive gender policies (Vaggione and Machado, 2020). The strength of religiosity as a conservative force suggests that reforms aimed at expanding reproductive rights or legal recognition of same-sex marriage will likely encounter significant resistance. At the same time, the entrenchment of populist rhetoric around traditional gender roles may threaten existing support for gender equality and strengthen patriarchal norms. Even under left-populist governments from the so-called “pink tide” the implementation of reforms was uneven. Although women representation was drastically increased via the implementation of quota laws for instance in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico, often economic redistribution was prioritised, social reforms were left to activists or later administrations (Blofield et al., 2017; Welp, 2022).

While these forces do not reinforce each other this finding also implies that there is no strong positive synergy that might offset religious or populist conservatism. Yet, this same additive logic also offers reassurance: in the absence of interaction, conservative forces do not reinforce each other in compounded ways. Instead, progress can be pursued through well-understood and strategic levers. Against this backdrop, our results suggest that the presence of women in legislatures provides an important source of resilience, underscoring the continued importance of promoting women’s political representation. Women legislators consistently express more liberal views across both values issues, gender-roles and affirmative action, offering a potential bulwark against the conservative pull of religion and populism. Thus, in contexts marked by overlapping conservative pressures, there is still room for incremental progress – anchored in growing female representation, cross-partisan women networks, strengthening pluralist commitments, and sustained advocacy.


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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See Supplemental Appendix for information on the year of field work, number of respondents per country, and percentage of legislators covered, as well as the descriptive statistics of the variables.
2. In the remainder of the article, we will use the terms populism and populist attitudes interchangeably.
3. Analyses are run in Stata 16 using commands *mixed* and *meologit*. Legislators are also nested in parties, yet due to the nature of the surveys, for some parties the number of respondents is naturally low and may even include only one legislator. We thus refrain from adding this additional tier.
4. Given that we are dealing with two metric variables, we calculate predictive margins at the twentieth (low) and eightieth percentiles (high) of populism and at the twentieth (low) and eightieth percentiles (high) of religiosity to inspect the effect across the full range of ideology. Low populism corresponds to a populist attitudes value of about 2.08, and high populism to a value of about 3.39. Low religiosity denotes a legislator who never or almost never attends religious services, while high religiosity denotes a legislator who attends once a week.

The marginal effect plots (see Supplemental Appendix) reveal a consistent difference in the levels of approval for both same-sex marriage and abortion between individuals with high and low religiosity, but the parallel lines across the ideological spectrum suggest that the effect of ideology is similar for both groups. In contrast, for populism, the marginal effects plot shows little to no differentiation between high and low populist individuals across ideological positions. Put differently, religiosity rather than populism significantly influences the overall level of support for these social issues, while ideology exerts a consistent effect across levels of religiosity and populism.

5. To further explore this possibility, we examine contrast plots of predictive margins displaying the predicted differences between men and women legislators across the ideological spectrum for individuals with high and low levels of populism and religiosity (see Supplemental Appendix). The results reveal that, e.g. among legislators with low levels of populism or religiosity, the gender gap tends to widen with increasing ideological conservatism for same-sex

- marriage, with women legislators being more progressive. This is also the case for legislators with high levels of populist attitudes, while it widens towards the ideological left for highly religious individuals. For abortion, among low populists, the gender gap is most pronounced on the left and gradually narrows, while the opposite is the case for low religious legislators. In contrast, for individuals with high levels of populism or religiosity, the gender gap remains relatively small and stable across the ideological spectrum and fails to reach statistical significance.
6. The marginal contrast plots for ordinal outcomes (see Supplemental Appendix) reveal that, in general, the gender gap widens among ideologically conservative respondents, and that differences between men and women legislators at the extreme end point of the ideological left are muted. Noticeable exceptions are attitudes towards male political leadership skills and the implementation of gender quotas as a necessary tool to advance women representation.

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