Contested Feminism

Backlash and the Radical Right

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Cover: The picture on the cover page stems from the exhibition "Demokrati finns inte - vi gör den!" (translates to: "Democracy doesn't exist - we make it!") in the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg and was designed by Mexican activist Mariana. According to Mariana, the cage symbolizes patriarchal society and the ivy plant stands for women's empowerment. I added the shears on the back to metaphorically illustrate antifeminism.

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Abstract

During the past decade, various societies have observed feminist mobilizations and antifeminist counter-mobilizations, the latter being partly driven by radical right parties. Even in societies marked by institutions and norms that should be most conducive to progressive gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms, feminism is a point of contestation. Through a compilation of five papers using multiple methods, this dissertation investigates the contested nature of contemporary feminism across different European contexts.

Specifically, the papers examine a) conservative/liberal polarization over feminism; b) the effect of (anti)feminist attitudes and feminist issue salience on radical right voting; c) radical right voters' (anti)feminist attitudes; d) young men's perceptions of feminism as a threat; and e) radical right voters' cultural grievances over feminism. Theoretically, I apply research on issue salience and threat perceptions to the study of attitudes toward feminism. Methodologically, I analyze existing and originally collected, experimental and observational data from surveys and interviews. In doing so, I theoretically and empirically contribute to research on cultural backlash, radical right voting, mass ideological polarization, antifeminism, and sexism.

I find that people who oppose or counter-react against certain progressive gender and sexuality issues tend to vote for the radical right and distrust institutions. Demographically, they tend to be young men living in regions with increasing unemployment. They particularly oppose gender and sexuality issues that are salient in the public debate and evoke threat perceptions. Based on the findings, I develop a framework that may serve as guidance for future research on socially conservative backlash, as well as liberal-conservative polarization.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Feministisk mobilisering, och antifeministiska motrörelser delvis drivna av högerradikala partier, har uppmärksammats i flera länder under det senaste decenniet. Feminism är en omtvistad fråga även i samhällen som kännetecknas av institutioner och normer som främjar både jämställdhet och HBTQI+-rättigheter. Denna avhandling undersöker den samtida feminismens omdebatterade tillstånd i olika europeiska samhällen genom att tillämpa ett antal olika forskningsstrategier.

Avhandlingens fem delstudier undersöker: a) konservativ/liberal polarisering om feminism; b) huruvida antifeministiska attityder, och i vilken utsträckning feministiska frågor präglar politisk och samhällelig debatt, påverkar röstning på högerradikala partier; c) högerradikala väljares (anti)feministiska attityder; d) unga mäns uppfattningar om feminism som ett hot; samt e) högerradikala väljares missnöje med feminism. I denna avhandling tillämpar jag forskningen kring politiska frågors vikt i politisk och samhällelig debatt samt generella uppfattningar om hot, på studiet av attityder till feminism. Jag analyserar ett brett spektrum av dels befintligt material, dels nyinsamlat. Sammantaget använder jag experimentdata, data från personliga intervjuer och opinionsundersökningar. Därmed bidrar jag teoretiskt och empiriskt till forskningen om kulturell backlash, röstning på högerradikala partier, ideologisk polarisering, antifeminism och sexism.

Mina resultat påvisar att personer som motsätter sig eller reagerar mot vissa progressiva frågor rörande kön och sexualitet tenderar att rösta för högerradikala partier samt att misstro institutioner. Rent demografiskt tenderar dessa individer att vara unga män bosatta i områden med tilltagande arbetslöshet. De motsätter sig i synnerhet frågor om kön och sexualitet som tar stor plats i den allmänna debatten och uppfattas som ett hot. Avhandlingen konstruerar ett teoretiskt ramverk baserat på dessa resultat, vilket ämnar understödja framtida forskning om socialkonservativa motreaktioner likväl som liberalkonservativ polarisering.

Acknowledgments

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Earlier in my PhD when I was struggling with my first paper, a draft that I eventually ditched altogether, Nicholas optimistically told me that I am "on to something!". While that paper draft clearly wasn't going anywhere, this spirit has been characteristic of the whole supervision. Thank you, Nicholas, for being sure that things will work out fine, and for encouraging me to be confident in my work and aim high. Beyond being a great teacher, you are an inspiration to go about my research with curiosity and creativity.

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I thank Mikael Persson for all the support with many questions – be it

dinners, Christmas baking and Easter brunches, birthday and midsommar celebrations. The perks of an international PhD program also include many housewarming parties (thanks to Gothenburg's housing market). Thank you, everyone, for so much fun. Federico – thank you for this year of cheering, ranting and caring. Ronja, Fiona, Gustav, Memo, Okka, Erika and Mareike - thank you for showing interest, listening to my nagging and, more importantly, distracting me.

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My greatest thanks go to Joni, for keeping up long-distance during a pandemic, moving to Gothenburg, celebrating my wins more than anyone else (including myself), for always seeing the good in me, and in us. Wir sind cool!

A "Hamelner Brotratte", which my grandma got me for my office desk to support me in writing this thesis

Contents

1   Introduction

The ivy plant is known for being evergreen and growing in various different environments. It is perhaps therefore that, when asked by the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Mexican activist Mariana chose to illustrate feminist achievements in the form of an ivy plant. As shown on this book's cover, Mariana's ivy plant is growing out of a golden birdcage, which in turn symbolizes patriarchal society. While the spread and successes of feminist movements over time and space may metaphorically be illustrated by an ivy plant, antifeminist mobilizations aim to curtail or reverse this development. Hence the shears on the backside of this book.

During the past decade, feminist mobilizations have taken place on a global scale, both online and offline. After the inauguration of former President of the United States Donald Trump in January 2017, millions of people took to the streets in so-called Women's Marches all over the world to protest for women's rights. Later that year, the #MeToo campaign, in which women shared their experience with sexual violence, became a global online phenomenon with consequences for the offline world: Prominent #MeToo cases led to global headlines about famous men losing their jobs and reputation. Similarly, March 8th has been celebrated as International Women's Day with large-scale demonstrations and online campaigns across various countries. The scale of these protests, partly enabled through social media, has been described as unprecedented on various occasions (Idoiaga Mondragon et al. 2022; Malone and Gibson 2017).

As is often throughout the history of feminism, feminist mobilizations are met with antifeminist counter-mobilizations (Corredor 2019; Chappell 2006;

Chafetz and Dworkin 1987). Contemporary antifeminists connect, organize and mobilize online (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Bjork-James 2020; Saresma, Karkulehto, and Varis 2021). They further organize in antifeminist organizations or transnational networks like *Women of the World* and *Agenda Europe* who organize protests, antifeminist congresses and lobby politics, amongst others (Chappell 2006; Kuhar and Paternotte 2018). While on a smaller scale than the above-described feminist mobilizations, antifeminists also join offline protests, for instance in opposition to or in favor of specific legislation, or as counter-demonstration to feminist protests (Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012).

Feminist and antifeminist mobilizations illustrate occasions during which people express strong attitudes in favor of or against feminism, with consequences for their political behavior. Such mobilizations exemplify the contentious nature of contemporary feminism, including in societies marked by developed democratic political and economic institutions, and postmaterialist, emancipative values conducive to progressive gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms (Alexander and Welzel 2011; Alexander, Inglehart, and Welzel 2016; Inglehart and Baker 2000). Even in societies marked by institutions and norms that should be most conducive to progressive gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms, such as the United States or European countries, feminism becomes a point of contestation.

Focusing on European contexts, broadly, *this dissertation aims to improve our understanding of the contested nature of contemporary feminism.* Specifically, it does so by examining conservative/liberal polarization over feminism (paper 1), the effect of (anti)feminist attitudes and feminist issue salience on radical right voting (paper 2), radical right voters' (anti)feminist attitudes (paper 3), young men's perceptions of feminism as a threat (paper 4), and radical right voters' cultural grievances over feminism (paper 5).[1]

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[1]Radical right voting plays a twofold role in the empirical parts of this dissertation. First, given that radical right ideology is commonly characterized as socially conservative, radical right voting is considered an expression of social conservatism in paper 2.

The dissertation's five papers use multiple methods and study different European countries. Papers 1 and 4 take a comparative approach by studying all European Union member states using experimental and observational survey data analysis. Paper 2 applies observational survey data analysis on the case of Sweden. Finally, papers 3 and 5 employ qualitative interview studies in the context of (East) Germany.

Based on developments in third-wave feminism, feminism is broadly understood as a movement to challenge and change "women's subordination to men" (Ferree and Tripp 2006, p.8), as well as structures of discrimination of LGBTQI+ people (Mann and Huffman 2005). Attitudes towards feminism may regard (parts of) the feminist movement itself or focus on particular issues that have been or are being advanced by (some) feminists, for instance abortion rights, equal pay or liberal sex education.

The dissertation theoretically builds on the research on issue salience and threat perceptions. While both of these literatures have engaged with explaining the formation of increasingly strong anti-immigration attitudes and subsequent political behavior, their application to explaining attitudes towards feminism is novel. Issue salience is here understood as the increased salience of an issue at the societal level through public debates, which may for instance be triggered by large-scale events, new policies or political elite discourse and respective mass media coverage. One consequence of such public debates is that an issue becomes salient to various people in society simultaneously. In this context, threat perceptions consist of the notion that harmful consequences may result from such public debates and their implications. Compared to immediate threats that evoke physical and psychological

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Herein, social conservatism is broadly understood as the support for traditional, authoritarian and nationalist ('TAN') values (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). Second, radical right voters are considered particularly likely to hold socially conservative views about sociocultural issues, including feminism. In papers 3 and 5, radical right voters therefore serve as a most-likely case for a population group with antifeminist attitudes and cultural grievances more generally. Radical right voting and voters therefore constitute both an operationalization and a case in this dissertation's different studies.

fight-or-flight responses, such threat perceptions may be of a more diffuse nature with less instantaneous effects on a person's behavior and more long-lasting effects on the person's attitudes and political behavior. While various members of society are likely to perceive societal issue salience, given the rather universal nature of large-scale public debates, different people should perceive salient issues as threatening to differing degrees and in different ways.

Paper 1 theorizes and tests *to what extent the salience of threat perceptions related to feminism and immigration affects social conservatism* across 27 European Union member states. Social conservatism is operationalized as support for traditional values. The study finds that, in the population as a whole, there is no increase in conservatism in reaction to feminism. Rather, the salience of threat perceptions related to feminism provokes increased polarization between social conservatives and social liberals. Paper 1 contributes to understanding heterogeneous reactions to different sociocultural issues in society.

Paper 2 theorizes and tests *the moderating effect of feminist issue salience on the relationship between gender and sexuality values and radical right voting* in Sweden. Herein, radical right voting is considered an expression of social conservatism. I find that, when feminist issues are salient, conservative gender and sexuality values are positively related to radical right voting. Given that radical right parties tend to advance antifeminist stances, this finding suggests that radical right voting can constitute an expression of antifeminist backlash in times of strong feminist issue salience. Such issue salience is generated by, for instance, public debates related to the #MeToo campaign or prominent cases of sexual assault, amongst others. The moderating effect of feminist issue salience on the relationship between gender and sexuality values and radical right voting may explain mixed conclusions about this relationship in previous research.

Paper 3 considers radical right voters as people who are likely to hold socially conservative views about feminism and *investigates East German radical right voters' attitudes towards feminism*. Amongst others, I find that radical right voters tend to oppose mostly recently salient feminist policy issues, including the gender quota and gender-inclusive language, but not necessarily other feminist policy issues, such as equal pay. The paper further

contributes to understanding mixed evidence on radical right voters' gender values in previous research.

Paper 4 theorizes and tests *the relationship between gender, age and the likelihood to perceive feminism as a threat, as well as to what extent such threat perceptions relate to perceived competition between men and women.* Studying 27 European Union member states, it finds that young men are most likely to perceive further advances in women's rights as threatening, compared to older men and women in general. Job insecurity and institutional distrust exacerbate their threat perceptions, which supports the hypothesis that perceived (unfair) competition between men and women drives young men's opposition to further advances in women's rights. The paper adds to research by proposing and testing a theoretical mechanism explaining antifeminist backlash among young generations: The perceived competition between men and women.

Finally, paper 5 investigates *how radical right voters in Germany argue about discrimination, and advantages and disadvantages of natives vs. immigrants, men vs. women, and cis-hetero vs. LGBTQI+ people.* Its findings point to a perception of advances for immigrants, women and LGBTQI+ people coming at an unfair material or symbolic cost for natives, men and cis-hetero people. The paper contributes to explaining parallels, differences and intersections between threat perceptions related to immigration and feminism. It thereby advances a multidimensional understanding of cultural grievances, which previous research largely treats separately.

Based on its empirical findings, the dissertation develops a framework that may serve as guidance for future research on socially conservative backlash, as well as liberal-conservative polarization (see section 8). The framework focuses on when and why backlash and liberal-conservative polarization occur: when sociocultural issues are salient in the public debate, and because people feel threatened by the salient issues. Further, the framework takes into account the influence of people's value predispositions on whether and how they feel threatened. It argues that, when a sociocultural issue is salient in the public debate, people are more likely to perceive threats related to the issue. The kinds of perceived threats are in turn influenced by people's value predispositions. Finally, these threat perceptions lead people to take stronger attitudes towards the sociocultural issue in question. By propos-

ing this framework for future research, this dissertation aims to contribute to the study of the circumstances under which people adopt more extreme sociocultural political attitudes.

Overall, this dissertation theoretically contributes to research on cultural backlash, radical right voting, and mass ideological polarization. While cultural backlash theory (Norris and Inglehart 2019) and the radical right voting literature mostly focus on cultural grievances over immigration, this dissertation explores the hitherto under-researched gender and sexuality dimensions of cultural backlash and radical right voting. Further, while cultural backlash theory explains backlash among older generations, this dissertation explores backlash across different population groups, not focused on a specific age group. The dissertation moreover adds to cultural backlash theory by proposing an explanation for *when* cultural backlash happens, namely when cultural issues are salient in the public debate. Finally, by exploring the mechanisms of societal issue salience and related threat perceptions, the dissertation adds to the literature on the micro-level causes of mass ideological polarization.

Empirically, the dissertation contributes to various research fields through its original data collections and use of multiple methods. First, contributing to cultural backlash, antifeminism and sexism research in Europe, it includes a newly designed survey experiment to test backlash to advances in women's rights. The experiment includes an original measure of modern sexism and was fielded in the 2021 European Quality of Government Index survey at the subnational level in 27 European Union member states (Charron et al. 2022). Second, adding to the largely quantitative existing research on radical right voting, the dissertation includes the collection of 28 qualitative interviews with radical right voters in Germany.

Beyond its contributions to research, this dissertation also carries broader societal relevance. Its empirical focus on antifeminist attitudes in particular is important because of their potential consequences for antifeminist political behavior, which can stall future feminist policies and reverse hitherto feminist achievements. In fact, antifeminist policies are already implemented in several democracies. Prominent cases include abortion restrictions in Poland in 2021 and the United States in 2022, the introduction of so-called LGBT-free zones in Poland in 2020, and the 2021 Hungarian law prohibiting

the sharing of LGBTQI+ content with minors. As these political developments demonstrate, rising antifeminism can have important consequences for the lives of women and LGBTQI+ people. Understanding the causes of increasingly antifeminist attitude formation may open pathways to address antifeminism among voters before it translates into antifeminist political behavior. Further, understanding how salient feminist debates can provoke antifeminist backlash may help anticipate such backlash and safeguard women's and LGBTQI+ rights before they are dismantled.

Overall, the dissertation's findings suggest that conservative counter-reactions against feminism emerge when feminist issues are salient in public debates, and these issues are perceived as threatening by some. Politically, people who oppose or counter-react against feminism tend to distrust institutions and vote for the radical right. Demographically, they tend to be young men living in regions with increasing unemployment. The dissertation does not empirically test how conservative counter-reactions against feminism can be addressed or prevented. However, its findings suggest that it is important that salient feminist issues are not perceived as threatening. Further, the fostering of institutional trust and full employment may help to mitigate such threat perceptions in young men in particular. Finally, it is important to raise awareness of the potential advantages of feminism for society as a whole, rather than just for women and LGBTQI+ people.

The introductory chapter of this dissertation is structured as follows. Section 2 clarifies my understanding of the main concepts used in this dissertation. In section 3, I review academic literature relevant to this dissertation as to its main contributions and limitations. Section 4 develops the theoretical considerations underlying this dissertation's empirical work. This is followed by an introduction of the cases studied in this dissertation (section 5), and an explanation of the dissertation's empirical studies' research designs (section 6). Section 7 proceeds with summarizing the dissertation's empirical work. In section 8, I develop the above-mentioned framework for future research on liberal-conservative polarization over sociocultural issues. I conclude with the dissertation's theoretical and empirical contributions to research (section 9), its limitations (section 10), and its implications for society (section 11).

2 Conceptual clarifications

The concepts of feminism, intersectionality, antifeminism, social liberalism and social conservatism, as well as backlash lie at the heart of this dissertation. In the following, I briefly define how these concepts are understood in this dissertation.

While there are various definitions of feminism, simply put, feminism can be understood as "the goal of challenging and changing women's subordination to men" (Ferree and Tripp 2006, p.8). More specifically, feminists advocate measures to work towards flexible gender roles in society or combat different forms of gender-based violence, amongst others. Herein, feminists understand gender as a social construct (Mann and Huffman 2005), implying that gender, in contrast to sex, is a product of socialization rather than biology. As a consequence of the more general questioning of heteronormative genders and sexuality, various strands of contemporary feminism are inclusive of the struggle against LGBTQI+ discrimination. Yet, it is noteworthy that different strands of contemporary feminism partly disagree on certain issues, including some LGBTQI+ issues. In this dissertation, I aim to capture potential counter-reactions against various recently salient feminist debates, including debates that different strands of feminism may disagree upon. Various LGBTQI+ issues have been salient in public debates over the past years in many of the studied contexts, for instance in debates about same-sex adoption, liberal sex education, or transgender rights. This dissertation's definition of feminism includes the struggle for these issues in order to capture potential counter-reactions against these debates. I thus understand contemporary feminism as inclusive of the struggle against any LGBTQI+ discrimination. While there are other key features of contemporary feminism, for instance the intersectional approach to understanding discrimination in society (Yuval-Davis 2006; Crenshaw 1989; Collins and Bilge 2016), the above-mentioned ones are most central to this dissertation.

The term 'feminist issues' then refers to issues that have been or are being advanced or discussed by (parts of) the feminist movement with the aim to counteract different types of women's and LGBTQI+ discrimination. These include issues that were forwarded by different waves and strands of feminism. Relevant examples of such issues in this dissertation include, amongst

others, the #MeToo campaign, the issues of sexual assault and consent more generally, equal rights and equal pay, childcare and shared parenting responsibilities, female representation and gender quota, abortion rights, gender-inclusive language, liberal sex education, and same-sex adoption. If addressed by policy-makers, such issues may be considered as 'feminist policy issues'.

The above-mentioned intersectional approach to the study of discrimination requires further clarification. Intersectionality describes the consideration of multiple forms of discrimination, such as discrimination based on gender, race, sexuality, class, disability and other forms of discrimination, in assessing power structures in society (Yuval-Davis 2006; Crenshaw 1989; Collins and Bilge 2016). Most prominently, this literature calls for an intersectional approach to the study of gender-based and racial discrimination, and more specifically, the acknowledgment of the different discrimination forms that white women and women of color experience. Rather than using an intersectional approach to the study of discrimination itself, in this dissertation's paper 5, I use an intersectional approach to the study of radical right voters' views about discrimination.

I understand antifeminism as the opposition to past or contemporary feminist demands and understandings of gender and sexuality. It is often conceptualized as a countermovement or backlash to feminism (Chappell 2006; Chafetz and Dworkin 1987; Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012; Thomas 2008; Faludi 1991). If feminism is understood as movement for increased equality on behalf of discriminated social groups, antifeminism can be understood as "reactionary with regard to power politics and the social order", as "it mobilizes on behalf of or in the interest of a dominant class and in opposition to forces of dissent" (Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012, p.29). The conceptualization of antifeminism as a countermovement implies a dynamic element of antifeminism: As feminist movements rise and develop, antifeminism evolves in response. As such, contemporary antifeminism includes the opposition to contemporary feminism. It can however also entail opposition to longstanding feminist demands, such as the demand for the right to abortion. In this dissertation (particularly in paper 3), I advance the understanding that antifeminist attitudes may be specific to certain feminist issues and do not necessarily target all advances of the feminist movement.

It is noteworthy that the antifeminism literature not only conceptualizes antifeminism as a counter-movement to feminism but also as its own movement that operates in favor of a patriarchal societal order independently of the feminist movement (Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012). While the debate about how to best conceptualize antifeminism is important for our understanding of the movement as a whole, in this dissertation, I limit myself to the study of individuals' antifeminist attitudes. In doing so, I am particularly interested in understanding individuals' reactions to (anti)feminist mobilizations, (anti)feminist policy, or debates about feminist issues. However, I do not intend to contribute to the more general debate about how to conceptualize the antifeminism movement as a whole.

Another term used in the literature to describe the contemporary antifeminist movement is 'anti-gender'. The 'anti-gender' movement's supporters oppose so-called 'gender ideology', a concept used to describe feminist understandings of gender as a social construct, non-traditional family models and LGBTQI+ issues, amongst others (Korolczuk 2020; Kuhar and Paternotte 2018). Building on both the antifeminism and the anti-gender literatures, moving forward, I use the concept of antifeminism rather than anti-gender to include antifeminists' opposition to so-called 'gender ideology' as well as other feminist issues.

More broadly speaking, in this dissertation, feminism and antifeminism are understood as examples of social liberalism and social conservatism. Herein, social liberalism and conservatism are considered as the two ends of the so-called cultural or value-based cleavage (Kriesi 2010; Bornschier 2010), which is politically represented by the New Left and radical right parties, respectively (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). Social liberalism thus includes Green-Alternative-Libertarian ('GAL') values, for instance in support of multiculturalism, environmentalism and feminism. In contrast, social conservatism is characterized by Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist ('TAN') values and thus the rejection of immigration and other breaches with traditional society, such as those advocated for by feminists (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). Similarly, other conceptualizations of conservatism and related concepts include notions of collectivism, social conformity and order, maintenance of the status quo, respect for traditions, deference to authority, and nationalism. Such notions are contrasted with liberal support for in-

dividualism, self-expression, independence, tolerance for outgroups, minority rights, curiosity, creativity, and environmentalism (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Schwartz 1994; Inglehart and Flanagan 1987; Kaasa 2021). In this dissertation, in line with previous work on (social) conservatism and (social) liberalism/libertarianism, feminism is generally understood as a socially liberal attitude. In contrast, antifeminism is considered a socially conservative attitude - while the degree of conservatism may differ depending on which feminist issues are opposed.

Based on cultural backlash theory (Norris and Inglehart 2019), I use the term 'backlash' to describe individuals' socially conservative counter-reaction to socially liberal value change in society. As socially liberal values have spread in many Western democracies for several decades (Norris and Inglehart 2019), a socially conservative backlash can be considered as a break with this trend. What distinguishes socially conservative backlash, as understood in this dissertation, from social conservatism more generally, is its relationship to social liberalism: While social conservatism may exist rather independently of social liberalism, I consider socially conservative backlash as a counter-reaction to social liberalism. Taking a micro-perspective, I study backlash as an individual-level phenomenon. However, it is at the macro-level, when many individuals in a society counter-react against socially liberal value change during a similar time period, that backlash becomes noticeable and comes with potential consequences for society. While longer time periods of backlash at the societal level will likely more strongly affect society, in my understanding, a backlash does not need to be long-lasting to have important effects: For instance, if it occurs shortly before an election, it can affect people's voting behavior and, consequently, the election outcome. Depending on a country's political opportunity structure, a backlash can be consequential even if it occurs among small parts of society: For example, a small political party representing socially conservative backlash can more easily become influential in political systems with low electoral thresholds and proportional representation.

Finally, in this dissertation, individuals' antifeminism is considered an example of backlash. While antifeminist attitudes may as well exist independently of feminist advances and not necessarily constitute a counter-reaction, this dissertation conceptually focuses on antifeminist attitudes that emerge or

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intensify in reaction to feminism. It is noteworthy that, due to the cross-sectional nature and availability of some of the data used in this dissertation, antifeminism is not consistently operationalized as a counter-reaction throughout the dissertation's empirical work. To operationalize antifeminism as a counter-reaction, ideally, more longitudinal data would be needed. However, conceptually and theoretically, I understand antifeminism as a counter-reaction to feminism and use my empirical work to contribute to a better understanding of antifeminism as such.

3   Previous literature

When and why do people develop increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards feminism? Considering the rise of increasingly feminist and antifeminist attitudes as a phenomenon of mass ideological polarization, in this section, I first discuss how the literature explains such polarization. Given this dissertations' empirical focus on conservative antifeminist backlash against feminism, I then discuss the cultural backlash literature. Based on the assumption that radical right voting can constitute a consequence and expression of antifeminist backlash, I proceed with a brief review of the literature on cultural grievances in radical right voting. Finally, I shed light on how the antifeminism and sexism literatures explain increasing antifeminism and sexism, respectively. A summary of relevant previous literature, its main claims and shortcomings is presented in Table 1 on page 25.

Mass ideological polarization

Mass ideological polarization describes a phenomenon where the general public is increasingly divided in their attitudes over political issues. Herein, the divide is usually theorized to occur between two groups with attitudes that increasingly differ from each other, leading to a bimodality in the distribution of attitudes (Hetherington 2009). More extensive definitions of mass ideological polarization also include ideological sorting, meaning that people within each of these groups become increasingly homogenous in their attitudes (Mason 2015; Traber, Stoetzer, and Burri 2022; Hetherington 2009). However, in this dissertation, I restrict myself to theorizing and studying the first part of the above definition of mass ideological polarization: The increasing divide in mass attitudes towards political issues, in this case in attitudes towards feminism, along a one-dimensional spectrum between those strongly in favor and those strongly against. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to study whether and to what extent ideological sorting occurs among feminists and antifeminists, given that I consider (anti)feminism as an attitude rather than a social or political group identity in this dissertation. The study of (anti)feminism as a potential social or political group identity is subject to future research. Further, in this dissertation, I do not study affective polarization over feminism, given that I do not investigate

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(anti)feminists (dis)like for each other.

Until recently, the literature on mass ideological polarization has been dominated by a debate on whether mass ideological polarization is occurring or not, largely focused on the United States. While some scholars find that the public is not polarizing in their attitudes over political issues such as abortion, government spending, affirmative action measures, and LGBTQI+ rights (Mason 2015; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hetherington 2009; Bishin et al. 2021; Lelkes 2016), others find evidence of mass ideological polarization, partly over the same issues (Garner and Palmer 2011; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Given its focus on the United States, with some exceptions (Castanho Silva 2018; Wojcieszak, Azrout, and De Vreese 2018; Traber, Stoetzer, and Burri 2022; Adams, De Vries, and Leiter 2012; Cohen and Cohen 2021), this literature often studies mass polarization by measuring the divergence in attitudes between Democrats and Republicans – a design that conflates different types of political polarization, such as partisan polarization and polarization in attitudes, and is difficult to replicate in contexts characterized by weaker partisanship or multi-party systems.

So far, we know little about how this phenomenon plays out in other contexts, and about how to measure polarization when it does not play out between two groups as clearly defined as the US-American Democrats and Republicans. Traber, Stoetzer, and Burri (2022) are among the few to conceptualize mass ideological polarization in European multi-party systems characterized by more multifaceted group identities than partisanship, assessing the phenomenon based on "the overlap of ideology distributions between groups" (p.3). This dissertation adds to this literature by proposing a measurement (paper 1) and a framework for future research (section 8) to explain and capture mass ideological polarization independent of partisanship or political party-system in European countries. Further, this dissertation adds to previous research using mostly single-country studies by assessing polarization in a cross-country study (paper 1).

Less research has focused on the macro- and micro-level causes and mechanisms underlying mass ideological polarization (Traber, Stoetzer, and Burri 2022). Macro-level causes of mass ideological polarization raised in the literature regard mechanisms through which an issue's salience may increase and

individuals may receive some ideological orientation as to which position to take on the issue. For example, much research argues that political elite (de)polarization can drive mass (de)polarization (Adams 1997; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Nicholson 2012; Callander and Carbajal 2022; Adams, De Vries, and Leiter 2012), for instance in the form of rising radical right parties (Castanho Silva 2018; Bischof and Wagner 2019). Further, media coverage on contentious issues has been shown to provoke mass ideological polarization (Wojcieszak, Azrout, and De Vreese 2018).

At the micro-level, researchers highlight the importance of issues revealing deep philosophical differences that "can be understood on the gut level" (Hetherington 2009, p.430) and require no complex considerations (Baldassarri and Park 2020). Examples of such issues can be sociocultural issues, and feminist issues in particular: Whether a person is in favor of gay rights or abortion rights may depend much more on a gut-level understanding of what she considers right or wrong, than, for instance, attitudes towards complex fiscal policies. Leeper (2014) further argues that the strength of individuals' prior attitudes predicts whether they will come to hold even stronger attitudes. Thus, people's prior attitudes may need to be accounted for in the study of mass ideological polarization. This dissertation's paper 1 attempts to account for those prior attitudes.

Combining the macro- and micro-levels, Hetherington (2009) further argues that the salience of issues that evoke strong feelings provokes mass ideological polarization: When many people strongly feel that something is right or wrong and simultaneously consider the issue as important, mass ideological polarization may occur. However, while Hetherington (2009) develops this suggestion through a critique of the inability of previous research to explain the micro-level mechanisms underlying polarization, he leaves it to future research to theoretically develop and test this mechanism. In this dissertation, I build on Hetherington (2009) to further develop a theoretical understanding to explain why and when mass ideological polarization over feminism occurs.

Cultural backlash

Cultural backlash theory (Norris and Inglehart 2019) focuses on conservatives becoming increasingly conservative in their attitudes as a counter-

reaction to socially liberal value change. The idea that conservatives counter-react against liberal value change is long established (Ignazi 1992), however, the mechanisms behind the phenomenon are less clear.

Cultural backlash theory, as defined by Norris and Inglehart (2019), explains conservative backlash against liberalizing sociocultural values by generational value change. The authors theorize that older generations are least familiar with recent developments in social norms and values towards increasing social liberalism. Because old generations tend to hold values that were predominant in society when they were young, i.e. more conservative values, their values are most likely to clash with ongoing liberal value changes in society. Such liberal value changes can include, for instance, trends towards multiculturalism, environmentalism and feminism. Given their higher likelihood to hold conservative values, older generations are expected to be more likely to counter-react against such developments. Therefore, Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that old generations are most likely to a) hold more conservative values, b) counter-react against socially liberal value change, and c) express this conservative counter-reaction through their voting behavior. Such conservative cultural backlash is argued to explain 2016 votes for Donald Trump, 2016 votes for Brexit, and votes for populist radical right parties in European democracies.

However, recent studies contradict important implications of cultural backlash theory. Replicating and adding to the empirical analyses by Norris and Inglehart (2019), Schäfer (2021) shows that, while older generations tend to hold more conservative attitudes than young generations across European countries, the generational differences are just a matter of degree. Further, he shows that, despite these existing differences, young people are more likely to vote for so-called authoritarian-populist parties when controlling for various demographic, socioeconomic variables and political attitudes.

Moreover, in a meta-analysis of studies predicting radical right voting, Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer (2018) find that young age is more likely to predict radical right voting than old age, even though the effect of age is generally not very consistent across studies. Overall, the main theoretical mechanism explaining populist radical right voting proposed by cultural backlash theory, i.e. generational value change, does not seem to hold when empirically tested. Given the empirical evidence on young voters' similar or higher like-

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lihood to vote for the radical right, alternative mechanisms are needed to complement cultural backlash theory and explain cultural backlash among young voters.

Further, theoretically, cultural backlash theory fails to explain *when* a conservative backlash occurs. The authors theorize that the levels of economic and physical security and ethnic diversity, as well as the spread of liberal values and the immigration rate in a society influence when a conservative backlash occurs. However, this theorization remains vague and does not enable researchers to predict the occurrence of a conservative backlash.

Empirically and theoretically, while cultural backlash theory is claimed to apply to sociocultural issues in general, it has mostly been applied to issues related to immigration and neglected other sociocultural issues. However, besides their association with liberal value change, sociocultural issues can theoretically differ in important ways: They can challenge different parts of the status quo, with different potential consequences for different population groups. For instance, while immigration may lead to a multicultural rather than a culturally homogenous society, feminism aims for a gender-equal and LGBTQI+-inclusive rather than cis-male-dominated society, and environmentalism strives for a low-carbon rather than a high-carbon society. While social conservatives may generally counter-react against any of those challenges to the status quo, they may do so in different ways and to differing degrees. Further, social conservatives may not be a homogenous group in this regard: Different subgroups of social conservatives may react differently to these different liberal value changes. Cultural backlash theory does not theorize or test such potential differences between sociocultural issues. By applying cultural backlash theory to the sociocultural issue of feminism, I theoretically and empirically add to this literature that has so far primarily focused on immigration.

Overall, cultural backlash theory has three important theoretical shortcomings: First, the weakness of the generational value change mechanism in explaining radical right voting; second, the inability to predict *when* conservative backlash occurs; and third, the neglect of other sociocultural issues than immigration. Using antifeminism as an example of cultural backlash, this dissertation aims to address these theoretical shortcomings.

Radical right voting

The recent rise of radical right parties in various European democracies may be understood as a symptom of increasing socially liberal-conservative mass ideological polarization in society (Castanho Silva 2018), and more precisely of the increasing social conservatism among some population groups. On the one hand, the rise of radical right parties may lead individuals to take more socially conservative attitudes because of political elites' influence on voters' opinion formation (Castanho Silva 2018; Zaller 1992). On the other hand, radical right voting has been considered as a consequence of conservatives' cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019). The radical right voting literature may help explain why people develop increasingly socially conservative attitudes, assuming that they previously held less socially conservative values and considering their vote choice as an expression of their increased social conservatism.

In this dissertation, the radical right takes a twofold role. First, I consider radical right voting as an expression and electoral consequence of socially conservative backlash more generally, as previously done in cultural backlash research (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Assuming that radical right voting approximates a general socially conservative backlash allows me to study whether counter-reactions against feminism are part of such backlash. Second, based on antifeminism research (De Lange and Mügge 2015; Akkerman 2015; Paternotte 2018), I treat radical right parties as antifeminist organizations who take antifeminist positions and contribute to the political manifestation of antifeminism. Consequently, I consider radical right supporters as supporters of antifeminist organizations, and therefore as potential people with antifeminist attitudes themselves. In my dissertation, this allows me to identify a sample of respondents who are likely more antifeminist, on average, than other population groups.

The literature has explained radical right voting mostly by attitudes including political distrust or dissatisfaction (Geurkink et al. 2020; Lubbers, Gijsberts, and Scheepers 2002), economic grievances (Negri 2019; Dehdari 2022), cultural grievances mostly over immigration (Rydgren 2008; Ivarsflaten 2008), and social status threat (Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018; Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer 2018). The two latter strands of literature are particularly relevant to this dissertation: Cultural grievances may help

explain why individuals come to take increasingly conservative attitudes towards sociocultural issues. Explanations of radical right voting related to threat are particularly relevant to this dissertation's theoretical considerations and are therefore discussed below in the theory section (section 4) of the dissertation. Given the dissertation's focus on (anti)feminism and cultural grievances, previous research explaining radical right voting by political distrust/dissatisfaction and economic grievances is of less theoretical relevance to this dissertation. This research informs methodological choices made in this dissertation's empirical work; however, the dissertation does not aim to theoretically or empirically contribute to these literature strands.

Regarding the study of cultural grievances and radical right voting, most studies of radical right voting approximate cultural grievances by anti-immigration attitudes (Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer 2018). This dissertation adds to the study of cultural grievances and radical right voting by investigating the role of conservative gender and sexuality attitudes in this voting behavior. On the one hand, radical right parties often advocate in favor of women's or LGBTQI+ rights to portray allegedly patriarchal and homophobic immigrants as a threat (Farris 2017; Spierings 2020a). On the other hand, the party family is known to otherwise represent relatively and often distinctly conservative positions on issues related to gender and sexuality (Akkerman 2015; De Lange and Mügge 2015; Towns, Karlsson, and Eyre 2014). Further, radical right parties tend to considerably underrepresent women politicians in descriptive terms (Mudde 2007; Erzeel and Rashkova 2017; Weeks et al. 2022).

How are these gender and sexuality dimensions reflected in their electorate, and to what extent do they matter in the decision to vote for a radical right party? While an extensive literature has studied the gender gap in radical right voting (Donovan 2023; Chueri and Damerow 2022; Mayer 2015; Harteveld et al. 2015; Harteveld and Ivarsflaten 2016; Givens 2004), to date, there is inconclusive evidence on the relationship between gender and sexuality attitudes and radical right voting. Previous research finds a positive relationship between different types of conservative gender attitudes and voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 United States elections (Ratliff et al. 2019; Cassese and Barnes 2019; Valentino, Wayne, and Oceno 2018), as well as voting to "Leave" in the 2016 Brexit referendum (Green and Shorrocks

2021) and voting for the Conservatives in the British 2019 elections (de Geus, Ralph-Morrow, and Shorrocks 2022).[2]

However, research on the role of gender and sexuality attitudes in radical right voting in European contexts is relatively scarce and existing studies have come to mixed conclusions. Some scholars find that traditional gender attitudes (Christley 2021; Anduiza and Rico 2022) and anti-LGBTQI+ attitudes (Finnsdottir 2022) increase the likelihood of radical right voting in various European countries. Others point to the coexistence of anti-immigration and nationalist attitudes with progressive attitudes towards gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights in radical right voters (Spierings, Lubbers, and Zaslove 2017; Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Spierings 2020a; Lancaster 2019; Lancaster 2022). This dissertation empirically contributes to the debate on the role of gender and sexuality attitudes in radical right voting, amongst others, by adding nuance to our understanding of radical right voters' gender and sexuality attitudes.

Finally, most studies on radical right voting apply quantitative analyses of survey data. However, as Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer (2018) point out in a meta-analysis of these studies, they come to mixed results as to the role of most variables captured by survey data in radical right voting, especially with regard to socioeconomic and demographic variables (the most consistent predictor of radical right voting being gender). In contrast, qualitative studies of radical right voting are scarcer and come with the drawback of small, unrepresentative samples. However, they allow us to better capture the motivations and perceptions of radical right voters (Stockemer, Lentz,

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[2]Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 US elections and voting to "Leave" in the Brexit referendum have been treated similarly to radical right voting in the cultural backlash literature. However, it is important to note that the US has a two-party political system marked by strong partisanship, and the Brexit referendum offered two vote choices (Leave/ Remain) and cannot be equated to regular national elections. This reduces the comparability of these events with radical right voting in European democracies. Further, I do not claim that the British Conservatives are a radical right party; however, they do represent the culturally more conservative party in the British two-party system.

and Mayer 2018; Damhuis and de Jonge 2022). This dissertation empirically contributes to the literature on radical voting by taking a multi-method approach, including quantitative and qualitative methods to the study of radical right voting, to improve the understanding of radical right voters' perceptions and reasoning.

Antifeminism

Antifeminism can be considered as a conservative counter-reaction to feminist liberal value change (Corredor 2019; Chappell 2006). It has often been studied through the lens of antifeminist elite organizations taking a leading role in financing and politically representing the movement. These include, for instance, religious institutions (Case 2019), radical right parties (Cabezas 2022; Dietze and Roth 2020), men's rights activist groups (Wojnicka 2016), and transnational networks founded for the sole purpose of mobilizing against LGBTQI+ and women's rights, such as *Agenda Europe* (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019). Antifeminist actions and discourses have been analyzed in national and transnational contexts, mostly at the elite level (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2018; Lombardo, Kantola, and Rubio-Marin 2021).

However, little scholarly attention has been paid to antifeminist voters. While some research investigates how radical right antifeminists express themselves in online fora (Fiers and Muis 2021; Saresma, Karkulehto, and Varis 2021), we know little about how individual antifeminism functions in the offline world. Which feminist claims do antifeminist voters oppose? How do "ordinary" voters with antifeminist attitudes justify and express their attitudes? Analyzing survey data from the United States, Elder, Greene, and Lizotte (2021) show that people who self-identify as antifeminists do not considerably differ in their attitudes about feminist issues from people who self-identify as feminists. The authors explain their puzzling finding by suggesting that antifeminism may rather constitute a symbolic identity than a political attitude. With the exception of some interview studies with supporters of far-right parties and activist groups (Ralph-Morrow 2020; Sanders-McDonagh 2018; Kamenou 2023), the antifeminist voter remains understudied so far, leaving important gaps in our understanding of how the movement is reflected at the individual level. By studying voters' an-

tifeminism, this dissertation contributes to this gap in the literature.

Finally, much previous antifeminism research has studied cases with strong religious institutions (Wojnicka 2016; Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Norocel 2018) who are generally considered as drivers of antifeminism (Vaggione 2020; Case 2019). Contexts marked by strong religious institutions and widespread religiosity can thus be considered as most-likely cases for the spread of antifeminism. With the exception of a study on Swedish antifeminism (Martinsson 2020), secular contexts remain largely understudied. However, given the transnational success of the antifeminism movement, the study of its adaptation to secular and therefore rather atypical contexts is particularly useful to improve our understanding for how the movement develops. By partly focusing on the cases of atheist East Germany and secular Sweden, this dissertation contributes to this gap in the antifeminism literature.

Sexism

Similar to antifeminism, increases in sexism can be considered an example of increasingly conservative attitudes towards feminism. The sexism literature explains sexism as individuals' attitudes that justify the patriarchal system (Manne 2017). Amongst others, such attitudes can include hostile attitudes towards women, benevolent ways of "cherishing" women for their stereotypically female traits (Glick and Fiske 1996), or the denial of existing gender discrimination and the need for further gender equality policy, often described as modern sexism (Swim et al. 1995). While antifeminism is often conceptualized as a counter-reaction and countermovement to feminism, sexism is usually studied as a rather stable attitude or value. As such, it may be considered a value predisposition for antifeminist counter-reactions to feminism.

This literature has largely been advanced by psychology scholars conceptualizing and developing quantitative measures of sexism (Glick and Fiske 1997; Swim et al. 1995). These measures have in turn been tested for their correlations with religiosity, personality traits and ideological factors, includ-

ing social dominance orientation[3], right-wing authoritarianism[4] and facets of narcissism (Christopher, Zabel, and Miller 2013; Christopher and Wojda 2008; Austin and Jackson 2019; Sibley, Wilson, and Duckitt 2007; Hammond, Sibley, and Overall 2014; Grubbs, Exline, and Twenge 2014; Van Assche, Koç, and Roets 2019; Akrami, Ekehammar, and Yang-Wallentin 2011; Glick, Lameiras, and Castro 2002). This dissertation builds on the sexism literature insofar as it has developed an understanding of the profile of individuals who are most likely to counter-react against feminism, based on their sexist value predispositions.

However, the psychology literature on sexism comes with two important shortcomings that this dissertation seeks to address: First, its static conceptualization of sexism; and second, its empirical limitations in terms of data availability. Theoretically, as above mentioned, sexism is conceptualized as a relatively stable individual attitude influenced by personality traits, fundamental ideological attitudes or religiosity, which are all considered as relatively stable. This literature thus implies that sexism is a rather stable attitude. Yet, the antifeminism movement constitutes a movement of people who counter-react against feminism, which may result in *increases* in some forms of sexism (e.g. modern sexism).

This dissertation studies changes in individuals' (anti-)feminist attitudes towards the liberal or conservative extreme, and thus the *increase* or *decline* in some forms of sexism. In other words, while individuals may hold relatively stable value predispositions to be sexist (or not), the sexism literature fails to explain changes in individuals' sexism over time. In fact, Anduiza and Rico (2022) distinguish between sexism as a predisposition that can be acti-

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[3]Social dominance orientation refers to a general understanding of intergroup relations as hierarchical, with some being superior and others being inferior (Christopher and Wojda 2008).

[4]Right-wing authoritarianism refers to "high degrees of deference to established authority, aggression toward societal outgroups when authorities permit such aggression, and support for traditional values when authorities endorse those values" (Christopher and Wojda 2008, p.66).

vated by related events, and sexism as an attitude that changes in reaction to such events. This dissertation contributes to the study of sexism as a dynamic attitude by theorizing micro-mechanisms that may lead to changes in sexism at the individual level.

The second shortcoming of the sexism literature is empirical: Given that many psychology studies are subject to data limitations and rely on small and unrepresentative population samples, it is difficult to a) generalize from their findings, and b) derive conclusions about the effects of demographic and contextual factors on sexism. Only few studies on sexism allow for inferences on demographic and contextual factors (Hammond et al. 2018; Glick et al. 2004). This dissertation's empirical part contributes to this gap in the literature by partly using representative survey data from all European Union countries. Finally, while most (political) psychology literature on sexism is quantitative, this dissertation takes a multi-method approach to understanding the reasoning of sexist (or antifeminist) individuals, including a qualitative interview study. Given the conceptual overlaps between antifeminism and modern sexism, particularly in the denial of existing discrimination of women, the dissertation thereby contributes to the literature with new insights on mechanisms explaining the increase and decline in (modern) sexism.

Table 1: Explanations for individuals' change in attitudes towards increasing social conservatism (antifeminism)/ liberalism (feminism)

Literature	Main claim(s)	Unit of analysis	Theoretical limitations	Empirical limitations
Mass ideolog. polarization	Causes of mass ideolog. polarization are elite cues, issue salience, and strong feelings	Individual	Micro-level causes of mass ideolog. polarization are under-theorized	Focus on the US (strong partisanship & two-party-system)
Cultural backlash	Social conservative backlash occurs due to generational value change	Individual	Only explains backlash among the old; imprecise account of *when* backlash occurs; does not theorize differences by socio-cultural issue	Focus on backlash against immigration
Radical right (RR) voting	Cultural/ economic grievances and populism explain RR voting	Individual		Inconclusive evidence on the role of gender attitudes in RR voting; little qualitative research
Antifeminism	Antifeminism is a countermovement to feminism	Statements/ actions of antifeminist elites		Focus on elites rather than voters; focus on religious cases
Sexism	Psychological/ ideological factors explain sexism	Individual	Explains sexism in a static way, does not explain changes in gender attitudes	Little research on contextual and demographic factors

4 Theoretical considerations

This dissertation mainly builds on two literatures in theorizing when and why people develop increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards feminism: The literatures on issue salience and threat perceptions. With the exception of paper 1, these mechanisms are treated separately in the dissertation's empirical work. By applying these mechanisms to the study of attitudes towards feminism, the dissertation partly builds on previous research investigating the role of these mechanisms in explaining attitudes towards other policy issues. These mechanisms allow theorizing about *when* and *why* people develop increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards feminism.

The issue salience mechanism

> *"If we want to know how issues affect behavior, we must first find out which issues are salient to individual voters."*

> (RePass 1971, p.391)

In this dissertation, I understand issue salience as a societal phenomenon: An issue is salient when it is prominent in the public debate and therefore perceived as salient by various people in society, largely independent of their ideology. Thus, people with socially liberal and socially conservative views should be similarly aware of the ongoing debates surrounding the salient issue. While I understand issue salience as a societal phenomenon, I also build on the literature on issue salience more generally, including the research investigating issue salience at the individual level.

The effect of issue salience has been theorized and tested in various studies on different political behavior outcomes, often with the conclusion that it has considerable explanatory power (Dennison 2019). At the individual level, issue salience is broadly defined as the importance that individuals ascribe to an issue (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Dennison 2020), either for society more generally or for the individual personally (Edwards III, Mitchell, and Welch 1995; Mayer and Tiberj 2004). While the perceived importance of an issue for the individual personally is rather stable, an issue's perceived importance

for society varies more strongly over time (Dennison 2019). Such variation over time often occurs as a result of a salient event (Bishin et al. 2016; Mayer and Tiberj 2004; RePass 1971) and media coverage on such events (Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar 2016). Further, issue salience differs between different population groups, with some population groups considering some issues more important than others as a function of, for instance, their social identity and ideology (Walgrave and Lefevere 2013; Mayer and Tiberj 2004).

In general, there is agreement in the literature that issue salience in interaction with policy attitudes influences political behavior, which is most commonly tested for vote choice or party support (Dennison 2019; Franko and Witko 2022). For instance, Dennison (2020) finds that immigration issue salience, operationalized as the percentage of individuals who consider immigration as an important issue for society, predicts radical right vote shares. As regards the role of issue salience in policy attitude formation, the salience of European unification (Franklin and Wlezien 1997) and public spending (Wlezien 1995) have been found to affect how people's attitudes towards these issues change in reaction to policy-making on these issues.

The mechanisms through which issue salience affects political behavior are less well established (Dennison 2019). Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar (2016) argue that individuals will think "frequently and deeply" (p.127) about an issue that they consider important, react more emotionally, accumulate information on the issue in their long-term memory, and base political behavior choices on that information. The argument that salience can evoke emotional reactions is in line with the claim that "feelings are relatively stronger in the electorate today than they were twenty years ago, because issues with the ability to provoke strong feelings have become more important [i.e. salient]" (Hetherington 2009, p.436). Regarding the supply of information, Walgrave and Lefevere (2013) theorize that, as an issue becomes salient in society, more information on the issue is generated and accessible for individuals. Similarly, Jiménez-Sánchez, Fraile, and Lobera (2022) find that issue salience triggered by large-scale feminist mobilizations related to the International Women's Day generate interest and spark conversations over the issue, and contribute to opinion confirmation.

Societal issue salience has further been theorized and studied as a condition for attitudinal change. For instance, Hopkins (2010) argues that opposition

to immigration emerges in places with recently increasing shares of immigrant population, only when the issue of immigration is salient and politicized in national mass media. In absence of societal salience of immigration, he argues that people do not take anti-immigration attitudes in response to demographic changes in their surroundings. Societal issue salience in the form of extensive national mass media coverage here takes the role of providing individuals with frames about the salient issue. By providing individuals with a framing of how the issue is understood and why it may be important or problematic, societal issue salience facilitates individuals' attitude formation about the issue. This is in line with Wojcieszak, Azrout, and De Vreese (2018) who find that media coverage of an issue can provoke individuals to polarize over the issue. They further argue that, when exposed to media coverage of an issue, people take stronger attitudes towards the issue because they selectively consume media to confirm the attitudes that they previously held. The authors theorize that this should be especially the case for contentious issues.

The potentially contentious nature of salient issues is further emphasized in the literature on politicization, where politicization is understood as determined by the intensity and visibility of conflict between political parties over the politicized issue (Hutter and Grande 2014; Ares 2022). Hutter and Grande (2014) consider issue salience as a precondition and key dimension of politicization because it creates visibility of the issue. Consequences of politicization include that more information on the parties' positions becomes available to voters, the parties' positions become clearer and the parties will mention their positions more frequently (Ares 2022). This in turn can exacerbate divisions in public opinion over the issue (Ares 2022). Politicization thus constitutes another mechanism through which societal issue salience can provoke changes in individuals' attitudes.

This dissertation theorizes that societal issue salience constitutes one condition for changes in individuals' attitudes towards the more conservative (liberal) to occur at a large scale. Herein, issue salience can, for instance, be caused by large-scale events and public debates. For changes in attitudes to happen for many different people in a society, the causes of increasing issue salience should lie at the societal level. In the absence of such increases in societal issue salience, it is unlikely that large parts of the population si-

multaneously perceive increases in issue salience. It is, however, important to note that this dissertation does not study the emergence of societal issue salience. Rather, I am interested in whether or not issues are salient at the societal level, and the effects thereof.

I thus theorize that societal issue salience may contribute to explaining *when* people develop increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards the sociocultural issue of feminism. I thereby address the inability of cultural backlash theory to answer this question. As a sociocultural issue becomes highly salient on a societal level, perceived by various different people in society, we may expect to see liberal-conservative mass changes in attitudes relatively shortly afterwards. Societal issue salience thus constitutes one important theoretical mechanism investigated in this dissertation, particularly in papers 1 and 2. The inductive analysis in paper 3 further highlights the role of this societal issue salience in antifeminist attitude formation.

Finally, while the universal nature of societal issue salience constitutes a precondition for various different people to develop stronger attitudes, it also constitutes a theoretical limitation in this dissertation: While various different people are likely to perceive an issue as salient, not all of them will react to the salience in the same way. Whether or not people react to a salient issue by taking stronger attitudes towards the issue remains unexplained by this mechanism. The mechanism of societal issue salience thus addresses the question of *when* people develop stronger attitudes, but not the questions of *why* people develop such attitudes, and *who* is most likely to do so.

The threat perception mechanism

In an attempt to explain *why* people develop stronger attitudes towards a sociocultural issue, I theorize that threat perceptions evoked by a salient issue may cause individuals to take more extreme attitudes towards the issue. A threat can broadly be understood as a potential source of harm, for instance of existential, physical, material or symbolic nature. Psychologically, threat perceptions generally cause people to respond quickly, reevaluate situations and consider taking action to make changes to their situation, which in turn can affect their (political) behavior (Miller and Krosnick 2004). In this dissertation, as further explained here below, the material and symbolic

threat dimensions are particularly relevant. In contrast, this dissertation is not concerned with threats that evoke immediate physical and psychological fight-or-flight responses.

Threats related to sociocultural issues likely regard intergroup relations. For instance, when immigration is salient, threat perceptions related to native-immigrant relations are activated (Wright and Citrin 2011). Similarly, if feminist debates are salient, threat perceptions related to men-women relations should be activated (Chafetz and Dworkin 1987). Intergroup threats can take different forms and are often conceptualized as either material or symbolic (Stephan, Ybarra, and Rios 2009), wherein material threats regard threats to resources or jobs, for instance, and symbolic threats concern the "integrity or validity of the ingroup's meaning system" (pp.43-44).

More recently, social status threat has been considered as a dimension of threat at the intersection of material and symbolic threats (Mutz 2018; Gidron and Hall 2017). Given that social status relies on both material and symbolic factors, for instance affluence and social recognition, the threat of status loss combines both dimensions rather than distinguishing between the two. Seldomly, the political psychology literature also considers existential threats, such as threats stemming from terrorist attacks (Hopkins 2010; Vasilopoulos et al. 2019; Agerberg and Sohlberg 2021). In the case of some sociocultural issues, existential threats may also be relevant. For instance, some consider abortion rights as existential threats to the lives of the unborn, while others perceive existential threats due to the detrimental effects of abortion restrictions on women's health (Nambiar et al. 2022; Espey, Dennis, and Landy 2019). Depending on the issue, people may thus perceive different kinds of threat.

In general, it may be in the nature of sociocultural issues to evoke threat perceptions: As Hetherington (2009) argues, sociocultural issues often activate "core values" (p.430) and "attitudes that people hold deeply" (p.429), leaving little room for a middle ground between supporters and opponents of a sociocultural issue. At the same time, sociocultural issues tend to have fundamental implications for certain population groups' rights, including immigrants, LGBTQI+ people and women. Given these characteristics, sociocultural issues may thus evoke symbolic, material, status and sometimes existential threat perceptions to an individual's core values, socioeconomic

situation and/or fundamental rights. For the case of sociocultural issues, I therefore argue that threat perceptions play a key role in explaining why people develop increasingly strong attitudes towards an issue.

The effect of outgroup threat perceptions on ingroup political behavior have often been explained through group and status threat theory. While previous research usually uses examples of immigration or race to study the implications of group and status threat theory (Quillian 1995; Stephan and Stephan 2000; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002; Zárate et al. 2004; Laurence, Schmid, and Hewstone 2019; Schlueter and Davidov 2013), I argue that these theories can be applied to the case of feminism.

In this case, men, or advocates of the patriarchal status quo in general, constitute the "ingroup" and women or feminists in general form the "outgroup". According to group threat theory, threat perceptions related to an outgroup partly depend on the size of the outgroup (Quillian 1995; Schlueter and Davidov 2013) and the ingroup's unfamiliarity with the outgroup (Schneider 2008). By their nature, these mechanisms may apply to outgroups that vary in size over time and are relatively new to the ingroup. Thus, these mechanisms may apply to the outgroup of feminists but may generally not apply to the outgroup of women, given that women constitute roughly half of the population and most men frequently encounter women in their daily lives. Thus, feminists in particular may constitute a symbolic threat to social conservatives by challenging the validity and integrity of the patriarchal system. Still, while women may not be thought of as an outgroup by many, they have largely been excluded from the public sphere until rather recently and continue to constitute a minority in most countries' labor force and politics, especially in leading (business) positions. Given these dynamics and patriarchal power structures in society more generally (Manne 2017), women may also be considered an outgroup relative to men.

In addition to relative group size, group threat perceptions are often explained by a perceived economic competition between ingroup and outgroup, which depends on both groups' socioeconomic status and (potential future) changes therein (Quillian 1995; Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders 2002). As above-mentioned, status threat theory similarly argues that people who perceive and feel threatened by (potential future) declines in their social status are more likely to take exclusive attitudes towards outgroups (Mutz

2018; Gidron and Hall 2017; Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Im et al. 2022; Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer 2018). As social status depends to a great extent on socioeconomic factors such as education or income levels, group and status threat theory overlap with regard to the socioeconomic competition mechanism.

While different mechanisms may drive group threat perceptions for different outgroups, depending on outgroup size and familiarity, the socioeconomic competition mechanism may be particularly useful to explain dynamics between men (as an ingroup) and women (as an outgroup). As women bypass men in terms of educational achievement, female labor force participation increases and women are increasingly represented in leading business positions and political office, socioeconomic competition may drive men's group threat perceptions related to women, more than the mechanisms of outgroup size and unfamiliarity. Experimental evidence supports the argument that (socioeconomic) competition between men and women drives group threat perceptions: Men are shown to become increasingly hostile towards women as a function of their personal relative deprivation (Teng et al. 2022) and their own poor performance and status loss risk (Kasumovic and Kuznekoff 2015). Kim and Kweon (2022) further find that young men oppose gender quotas in politics when primed with information about women's advances in the labor market. This dissertation's paper 4 particularly builds on the theorization of perceived threats related to increases in socioeconomic competition between men and women.

As regards the consequences of threat perceptions, political psychology research has related threat perceptions and negative emotions to increased political activism. Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar (2016) find that people are more likely to become politically active when threatened by an undesirable political outcome than when facing a positive outlook on a desirable outcome. Threat perceptions have been shown to induce negative emotions such as fear (Stephan and Stephan 2000), anger (Vasilopoulos et al. 2019; Valentino, Wayne, and Oceno 2018) and/or anxiety (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Brader and Marcus 2013; Marcus et al. 2005). These emotions in turn affect people's vote choice (Vasilopoulos et al. 2019; Valentino, Wayne, and Oceno 2018), changes in political attitudes (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Marcus et al. 2005) and other political behavior (Brader

and Marcus 2013).

Based on this literature, in this dissertation, I theorize threat perceptions as catalysts for changes in political attitudes towards the more extreme. In doing so, I attempt to explain *why* people develop increasingly strong attitudes towards the sociocultural issue of feminism. In this dissertation, papers 4 and 5 particularly engage with the kinds of threats that are perceived in relation to feminism.

5 Case selection

To investigate when and why people develop increasingly strong attitudes towards feminism, I investigate all current 27 European Union countries in comparative cross-country studies (papers 1 and 4), as well as the cases of Sweden (paper 2), and (East) Germany (papers 3 and 5) in single-country studies. In the following, I explain why these contexts are particularly relevant for the study of attitudes towards feminism.

First, most studied contexts are, globally speaking, relatively advanced as regards their levels of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights.[5] All studied countries have comparatively advanced democratic political and economic institutions, which should benefit the development of postmaterialist and emancipative values, including progressive gender equality and LGBTQI+ values (Alexander and Welzel 2011; Alexander, Inglehart, and Welzel 2016; Inglehart and Baker 2000). Given their relatively advanced gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms, one may not expect feminist issues to become points of contestation in these contexts. Yet, the antifeminism literature illustrates the transnational spread of the movement, even in contexts marked by relatively advanced gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms (Kuhar and Paternotte 2018; Chappell 2006; Martinsson 2020). Further, the European Union includes countries such as Poland and Hungary that have recently witnessed antifeminist policy-making in the form of anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI+ legislation. The studied cases thus pose an interesting research puzzle: Why is it that feminism becomes a point of contestation even in

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[5]Sweden has repeatedly ranked first on the European Gender Equality Index (EIGE 2021) and is renowned for its relatively LGBQTI+-friendly laws and policies (ILGA World 2022). Germany ranks 10th on the European Gender Equality Index (EIGE 2021) and grants LGBTQI+ people more protection than most countries in the world (ILGA World 2022). East Germany constitutes a particular context: Due to its Socialist legacy of relatively progressive gender equality policy, gender norms regarding female labor force participation, early child care and abortion are distinctly more progressive than in other parts of Germany (Hanschmidt et al. 2020; Lee, Alwin, and Tufiş 2007; Rosenfeld, Trappe, and Gornick 2004).

societies marked by institutions and norms that should be most conducive to generally progressive gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms?

In fact, despite the generally relatively advanced gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms in European Union countries, there is a large variation in these countries' gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms (EIGE 2021), which may in turn affect people's attitudes towards feminism. At least two factors should particularly affect countries' gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms. First, different European Union countries have different religious legacies. Religious institutions and individuals' religiosity have consistently been shown to impact a society's gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights norms, and individuals' attitudes towards these issues (Alexander and Welzel 2011; Sasunkevich 2021; Cassese and Holman 2016; Banaszak 2006; Glick, Lameiras, and Castro 2002; Fitzpatrick Bettencourt, Vacha-Haase, and Byrne 2011; Hellmer, Stenson, and Jylhä 2018). Second, most European Union countries now have radical right parties. As above described, these parties tend to challenge feminism and its goals. However, they do so to differing degrees and in partly context-specific ways (Donà 2020; Spierings 2020b; Dietze and Roth 2020), sometimes influenced by their contexts' religious norms (Norocel and Giorgi 2022). European Union countries thus constitute interesting cases for comparative analyses of (anti)feminist attitude formation, with interesting variation in factors influencing such attitude formation, despite generally advanced gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms.

Second, the relatively gender-equal and secular contexts of Sweden and East Germany are particularly interesting cases for the study of increasingly conservative attitudes towards feminism. First, on the one hand, studying antifeminist backlash may be particularly interesting in contexts where feminism has made the greatest strides, and therefore potentially provokes backlash. On the other hand, in contexts where important feminist goals are long achieved and normalized, we may not expect strong counter-reactions against them. Studying antifeminist backlash in Sweden and East Germany thus contributes to understanding why feminism becomes a contentious issue even in contexts with relatively advanced gender equality norms. The study of these rather gender-equal contexts can further provide important lessons about potential sources of future social conflict in less gender-equal contexts, in which women's empowerment and LGBTQI+ rights are currently being

promoted.

Further, most previous studies on antifeminism or backlash against feminism have focused on contexts with relatively strong religious institutions and/or widespread religiosity. For instance, recent studies focus on Hungary and Poland (Norocel 2018; Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Wojnicka 2016; Gwiazda 2021), the United States (Ratliff et al. 2019; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Deckman and Cassese 2019; Cassese and Barnes 2019), or Spain (Alonso and Espinosa-Fajardo 2021; Cabezas 2022). Some studies of antifeminism even focus solely on religious institutions (Korolczuk 2016; Case 2019; Vaggione 2020). However, given the transnational spread of antifeminism across various contexts, the study of antifeminism in secular contexts is highly relevant and has so far received little attention in research. How does antifeminism spread in the absence of strong religious institutions and widespread religiosity? A recent study on antifeminism in Sweden speaks to this gap in the literature (Martinsson 2020). Given that East Germany and Sweden are among the world's most secular contexts (Inglehart and Baker 2000), this dissertation further contributes to the literature on antifeminism in secular contexts.

Moreover, East Germany is an interesting case because its population is relatively polarized along the sociocultural liberal-conservative dimension, compared to West Germany: East Germans are more likely than West Germans to vote for either the New Left, which has historical ties to the former East German Socialist regime, or the radical right. In 2021, 10.4 percent of East Germans voted for the New Left *DIE LINKE*, compared to 3.7 percent of West Germans. Meanwhile, 20.5 percent of East Germans voted for the radical right *Alternative für Deutschland*, compared to 8.2 percent of West Germans (Träger and Matthies 2022). Herein, the *Alternative für Deutschland* constitutes Germany's most sociocultural conservative party, as approximated by its score of 9.52 out of 10 on the GAL-TAN dimension.[6] While the Green Party constitutes Germany's most sociocultural

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[6]The GAL-TAN dimension is often used to describe social liberalism/conservatism.

liberal party, *DIE LINKE* ranks second-lowest with a score of 2.81 on the 0-10 GAL-TAN scale (Jolly et al. 2022). The relatively high sociocultural liberal-conservative mass polarization in this context makes it a suitable case to study potential mechanisms behind this phenomenon. Finally, given its Socialist past and subsequent reunification with West Germany, the case of East Germany may offer unique insights with potential lessons for both Eastern and Western European contexts.

To what extent can I generalize my results from these cases to other places? Given the partly different political systems, prevailing gender and sexuality values, and meanings ascribed to feminism, one should be cautious with generalizing the results of these studies to contexts outside Western democracies. However, in light of the transnational spread of antifeminism beyond Europe, it may be possible to cautiously generalize the findings of this dissertation's two comparative studies to other liberal democracies that have antifeminist organizations, such as radical right parties. Due to various case-specific features of Sweden and (East) Germany, the findings of this dissertation's single-country studies should rather be considered as contributions to theory-building. However, the theoretical mechanisms investigated in these studies may be relevant for the study of other cases, too. While their findings may not generalize to other contexts, the theoretical implications may inform future research on contexts beyond Sweden, (East) Germany, and potentially even beyond the European Union. Finally, despite the context-specific nature of this dissertation's single-country studies, the *Alternative für Deutschland* constitutes a rather typical case of a radical right party with many similarities to other European radical right parties (Jolly et al. 2022). The study of its voters may thus be of particular interest for the study of radical right voters more generally.

The acronyms GAL and TAN stand for Green-Alternative-Libertarian and Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002).

6   Research design

This dissertation takes a multi-method approach to study the contested nature of contemporary feminism. In doing so, it attempts to address this topic from multiple angles and take advantage of the applied methods' different strengths, while acknowledging their limitations. The dissertation's empirical studies combine quantitative and qualitative methods, observational and experimental data, comparative cross-country and single-country studies, as well as nationally and regionally representative samples for survey data analyses, and small purposive samples for in-depth analyses. While the following section explains each paper's research question(s), data, operationalizations, and findings in more detail, this section gives an overview of the different research designs applied in the five empirical papers.

Paper 1 uses a cross-country comparative analysis of nationally and subnationally representative experimental survey data. To test the effects of the above-theorized mechanisms of issue salience and threat perceptions as catalyzers of liberal-conservative polarization over feminism, this paper applies a survey experiment. It is the only paper in this dissertation that allows for causal inference. The survey experiment further compares the effects of the theorized mechanisms on polarization over both the issues of feminism *and* immigration. The experimental study thus contributes to understanding to what extent different sociocultural issues provoke similar reactions, across 27 national and 208 subnational contexts in the European Union.

Paper 2 uses nationally representative, observational survey data from Sweden. Sweden is an atypical case for the analysis of antifeminist backlash, given its comparatively advanced gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms. On the one hand, given the normalization of various feminist policies in Sweden for several decades and a history of strong feminist movements, one might not expect backlash against feminist mobilizations in Sweden and therefore consider it a least-likely case for this analysis. On the other hand, given the already relatively advanced state of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights in Sweden, people may not perceive a need for any further feminist policy and therefore be most-likely to counter-react against feminist mobilizations. The analysis of the case of Sweden thus gives insights into how we may expect antifeminist backlash to take place in contexts marked by relatively pro-

gressive gender equality and LGBTQI+ norms. The study compares data from 2014 and 2018. In doing so, it takes advantage of the stark increase in feminist issue salience prior to the 2018 elections, using the over-time comparison to test the effect of issue salience.

Paper 3 employs a qualitative case study of radical right voters' antifeminism using interviews in the context of East Germany. While radical right voters are considered a most-likely population to hold antifeminist attitudes, East Germany constitutes an atypical case for the analysis of antifeminism. This is due to its Socialist legacies of atheism and gender equality in the labor market, extensive childcare and liberal abortion rights. Antifeminism is usually analyzed in most-likely cases marked by highly religious contexts with rather traditional gender norms. While East Germany differs from such contexts, it still observes the highest vote shares of the arguably antifeminist radical right party in Germany. Given these seemingly contradictory influences on radical right voters' antifeminism, this qualitative atypical case study helps improve the understanding of how individuals make sense of antifeminist attitudes despite their partly contradictory socialization.

Paper 4 applies a comparative correlational analysis of modern sexism using cross-country nationally and subnationally representative individual survey data, and subnational contextual data from all European Union countries. The study tests the effects of individual-level demographic and attitudinal factors, as well as contextual-level variables, on individuals' modern sexism. Given that most existing studies of sexism use small unrepresentative samples and therefore cannot make inferences on various demographic or contextual factors, such large-scale correlational analysis constitutes an important contribution to this literature.

Finally, paper 5 applies a qualitative case study of cultural grievances related to feminism and immigration, using interviews with German radical right voters. Radical right voters are here considered as a most-likely population group to hold cultural grievances, and therefore constitute the population group of interest for this study. The in-depth nature of the analysis of these voters' social group perceptions and related cultural threat perceptions justifies the non-representative, purposive approach to sampling in this study. Its findings contribute to the research on cultural grievances by highlighting how different cultural grievances can be studied jointly.

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7 Empirical findings

The empirical papers contribute to explaining when and why people develop increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards feminism by exploring the mechanisms of societal issue salience and threat perceptions. Paper 1 tests the effects of feminist and immigration issue salience and related threat perceptions on social conservatism. Paper 2 tests the effect of feminist issue salience on the relationship between gender and sexuality attitudes and radical right voting. Paper 3's explorative findings further highlight the role of feminist issue salience in radical right voters' antifeminist attitudes. As regards the threat perceptions mechanism, paper 4 theorizes and tests who is most likely to perceive feminism as a threat, and why. Finally, paper 5 deductively and inductively explores threat perceptions related to feminism and immigration. For an overview of the papers, see Table 2 on page 47.

Although the dissertation's research aim focuses on both increasingly strong liberal *and* conservative attitudes, its empirical studies largely focus on social conservative attitudes towards feminism. Paper 1 constitutes an exception, as it studies both social conservative and liberal attitudes. Papers 1 and 5 further distinguish themselves from the other studies by investigating both the issues of feminism *and* immigration rather than focusing on feminism alone.

Paper 1: Testing the effects of issue salience and threat perceptions

Paper 1 with the title *For every action a reaction? The polarizing effects of women's rights and refugee immigration* (co-authored with Amy Alexander and Nicholas Charron) tests both theoretical mechanisms: issue salience and threat perception.

In a survey experiment embedded in the 2020 European Quality of Government Index (EQI) survey (Charron et al. 2022), fielded in 27 European Union countries, we expose respondents to a) a treatment portraying advances in women's and girls' rights as a threat to men's and boys' opportunities, and b) a treatment portraying refugee immigration as a threat to "our way of life". Control group respondents are not exposed to any treat-

ment. Subsequently, we measure respondents agreement with the statement that "we would be better off if we went back to living according to [country]'s traditional values", where higher agreement operationalizes stronger social conservatism and lower agreement operationalizes stronger social liberalism. The experiment thus aims at testing whether exposure to threat statements about women's rights and refugee immigration provoke changes in respondents' social conservatism.

In these treatments, women's rights and refugee immigration exemplify sociocultural issues, about which respondents can hold socially conservative or liberal attitudes. Exposure to the treatments operationalizes the mechanism of issue salience. We assume that the issues' salience to the individual temporarily increases as respondents read the treatments. The treatments further operationalize the mechanism of threat perception, given their wordings about women's rights and refugee immigration constituting threats to some status quo. As regards the women's rights treatment, this threat could be perceived both by conservatives who consider women's rights as a threat to men's opportunities, and by liberals who consider the content of the statement as a threat to further advances in women's rights. Similarly, conservatives may agree that refugee immigration constitutes a threat, and liberals may perceive the treatment statement as threatening to refugees. As a function of issue salience and threat perception, liberals (conservatives) may thus become more liberal (conservative) in response to these treatments.

Our results show that conservatives and liberals polarize in their levels of support for traditional values in response to the treatments. While both liberals and conservatives drive the polarization over refugee immigration, the polarization over women's rights is driven by liberals rather than conservatives. Liberals counter-react to the presentation of women's rights as a threat. These findings show that liberal-conservative polarization over sociocultural issues should be regarded as a two-sided dynamic: Conservatives and liberals counter-react to each other, taking more extreme attitudes at both ends of the conservative-liberal spectrum. Further, the findings show that these dynamics can differ by sociocultural issues. Finally, the results suggest that issue salience and related threat perceptions can catalyze the development of increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards

sociocultural issues.

Paper 2: Testing the effect of societal issue salience

In Paper 2, with the title *Gender equality salience, backlash and radical right voting in the gender-equal context of Sweden* (published in *West European Politics*), I test the moderating effects of feminist issue salience on the relationship between gender and sexuality values and radical right voting. I demonstrate that the salience of feminist issues provokes increasingly conservative gender and sexuality attitudes among radical right voters. Further, feminist issue salience affects the relationship between gender and sexuality values and radical right voting: When feminist issues are salient in the public debate, conservative gender and sexuality values are positively related to radical right voting. When these issues are not salient, there is no significant relationship between these variables. The moderating effect of issue salience may contribute to explaining why previous research on the relationship between gender values and radical right voting comes to mixed conclusions.

My analysis is based on Swedish national elections survey (SNES) data from 2014 and 2018. Thus, I compare the relationship between gender and sexuality attitudes and radical right voting before and directly after 2017/2018 feminist mobilizations and debates related to the #MeToo-debate, the Women's Marches, famous cases of sexual assault, and legislation about sexual assault and consent. The occurrence of these feminist debates operationalizes the increased societal issue salience of feminism. Given the social conservatism in radical right ideology, radical right voting operationalizes social conservative attitudes in this paper. Paper 2 thus demonstrates that social conservatives counter-react against feminism when gender-related issues are salient in the public debate. As a result, they become more likely to vote for a radical right party based on their conservative gender and sexuality values.

Paper 3: Inductive support for the societal issue salience mechanism

Paper 3 with the title *Complexities and nuances in radical right voters' (anti)feminism* (published in *Social Politics*) takes a partly deductive and a partly inductive approach to understanding radical right voters' views about feminism. It thereby further contributes to understanding the mixed evidence in previous research on the role of gender values in radical right voting. Given that radical right parties can be considered as antifeminist actors, radical right voters are here considered as a most-likely case of antifeminist voters. This paper thus does not investigate the influence of gender attitudes on radical right voting, but rather explores radical right voters' gender attitudes in an in-depth analysis.

The paper's analysis constitutes of two steps. First, I analyze previous research on antifeminism for prominent frames used by antifeminist actors to advance their stances. I further use secondary literature on the *Alternative für Deutschland* as well as its most recent party program to show whether and how these frames are used by the party. The second step is based on 25 qualitative interviews with radical right voters of the German radical right *Alternative für Deutschland* in East Germany. Based on the antifeminist frames identified in the first step of the analysis, I deductively analyze whether and how the interviewed radical right voters use these frames.

While I find that most of the identified frames are used by the interviewees, further inductive analysis highlights more nuances in the interviewees' arguments about feminist issues. In fact, the interviewed radical right voters do not generally oppose all feminist issues. They mostly oppose recently salient feminist issues, and sometimes support or at least do not oppose other feminist issues. This finding supports the argument that societal issue salience plays a role for the development of antifeminist attitudes. In addition to lending support for the theoretical mechanism of societal issue salience, these findings highlight that support or opposition for some feminist issues do not necessarily come with similar attitudes towards other feminist issues. This, in turn, complicates the inferences on a person's gender and sexuality attitudes that we may be able to draw from the analysis of few survey indicators on such attitudes.

Paper 4: Deductively explaining threat perceptions

In Paper 4, with the title *Who perceives women's rights as threatening to men and boys? Explaining modern sexism among young men in Europe* (with Nicholas Charron and Amy Alexander, published in *Frontiers in Political Science*), we conduct observational survey data analysis on EQI 2021 data from 208 subnational regions in 27 European Union countries (Charron et al. 2022). Specifically, we test the relationship between gender, age, and the likelihood to perceive feminism as a threat, as well as to what extent such threat perceptions relate to perceived competition between men and women.

We theorize that young men are most likely to perceive advances in women's rights as a threat. More precisely, we argue that young men feel threatened by women's rights because they perceive increases in competition between men and women as threatening to their own future life courses. We further argue that young men are particularly likely to perceive women's competition as threatening, compared to older men, because they tend to find themselves in less stable family and job situations than older men. Our findings confirm the theoretical expectation that young men feel most threatened by advances in women's rights. This is especially the case when they distrust institutions, resulting in perceptions of unfair competition, or reside in regions with recently increasing unemployment, resulting in increased competition in the labor market.

Paper 4 thus investigates threat perceptions related to feminism. While threat perceptions have long been studied in relation to the issue of immigration, the study of threat perceptions related to feminism is under-researched. This paper contributes to understanding the role and nature of such threat perceptions and consequent opposition to feminism.

Paper 5: Deductively and inductively exploring threat perceptions

Finally, in Paper 5 with the title *Multidimensional and intersectional cultural grievances over gender, sexuality and immigration*, I use 28 interviews[7] with German radical right voters. The paper takes a partly deductive and partly inductive approach to understanding how radical right voters perceive and argue about discrimination, and advantages and disadvantages of natives vs. immigrants, men vs. women, and cis-hetero vs. LGBTQI+ people. The paper contributes to the literature on cultural grievances: By advancing an understanding of cultural grievances that includes immigration, gender and sexuality dimensions, it brings together hitherto separate strands of the literature. It further gives insights into how these different dimensions of cultural grievances compare and intersect.

As in paper 3, radical right voters are here understood as a most-likely case of socially conservative voters, given the social conservative ideology of the radical right *Alternative für Deutschland*, and therefore as most-likely to hold cultural grievances. It is beyond the scope of the paper to investigate to what extent these grievances influence the decision to vote for the radical right.

Corroborating previous research, I find that many interviewees either do not perceive existing discrimination structures against immigrants, women or LGBTQI+ people, or do not consider them as unfair. Further, the interviewees tend to perceive natives, men and cis-hetero people as (currently or potentially) disadvantaged. In contrast, they perceive that immigrants, women, and LGBTQI+ people are advantaged in corresponding ways. Generally, the interviewees express that advances of one group are perceived as coming at the expense of another. Therefore, they consider ingroups (i.e.

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[7]While paper 3 is based on 25 interviews with radical right voters conducted in East Germany, paper 5 includes three more interviews conducted with West German radical right voters, resulting in 28 interviews. This is because paper 5 does not rely on the atypical case selection of East Germany for the study of antifeminism.

structurally privileged groups) to be unfairly harmed by outgroups' (i.e. structurally discriminated groups') advances. Further, inductive analysis shows that the kinds of perceived gains and losses at stake differ by social group because the interviewees consider different group characteristics in their argumentation. Depending on the social group in question, the perceived unfair advantages and disadvantages have material, symbolic and/or legal dimensions. Herein, the legal dimension particularly remains underresearched in the literature on cultural grievances and threat perceptions.

Based on inductive analysis, I further introduce the notion of intersectional grievances to illustrate how interviewees make sense of the intersections of different social groups' (dis)advantages in society. I define intersectional grievances as perceptions of injustice that take into account intersections of different perceived ingroup disadvantages and/or outgroup advantages. Accordingly, interviewees who take an intersectional approach to explain their grievances argue that immigrant LGBTQI+ women are most advantaged in society. With every change in one of these attributes, they are perceived as less advantaged. German cis-hetero men are then considered as least advantaged. Such intersectional grievances highlight the importance of jointly studying cultural grievances over immigration, gender and sexuality in future research.

Table 2: Summary of papers

Paper	Title	Case(s)	Data/Method	Main finding
1 (with A. Alexander & N. Charron)	For every action a reaction? The polarizing effects of women's rights and refugee immigration	European Union countries 2021	Original survey experiment	Salient threats related to feminism provoke liberal counter-reactions rather than conservative backlash, and polarize between liberals and conservatives.
2 (published in *West European Politics*)	Gender equality salience, backlash and radical right voting in the gender-equal context of Sweden	Sweden 2014/ 2018	Survey data, pre-/post-event comparison	Salient feminist mobilizations provoke antifeminist backlash, which is related to RR voting.
3 (published in *Social Politics*)	Complexities and nuances in radical right voters' (anti)feminism	East Germany 2021	Interviews with RR voters, frame analysis	RR voters mostly oppose salient feminist issues, and not necessarily all feminist issues.
4 (with N. Charron & A. Alexander, published in *Frontiers in Political Science*)	Who perceives women's rights as threatening to men and boys? Explaining modern sexism among young men in Europe	European Union countries 2021	Original survey measure of modern sexism	Young men are most likely to oppose advances in women's rights because they perceive women's competition as a threat.
5	Multidimensional and intersectional cultural grievances over gender, sexuality and immigration	Germany 2021	Interviews with RR voters, thematic analysis	RR voters' grievances over immigration, gender and sexuality are based on similar yet partly different reasonings. Further, they intersect.

8   A framework for future research

Based on its theoretical considerations and empirical findings, this dissertation proposes the following theoretical framework to guide future studies on the broader question of when and why people take increasingly liberal or conservative attitudes towards a sociocultural issue. While it is beyond the scope of the dissertation to empirically test this framework, it may be considered a theoretical continuation of the above-developed theoretical considerations on societal issue salience and threat perceptions, as well as the above-outlined empirical findings of the dissertation's papers. Future research may test its different components and implications.

The framework brings together the above-outlined mechanisms of societal issue salience and threat perceptions by theorizing their interplay. Its overall theoretical argument forwards that (short-term) mass attitudinal changes towards increased conservatism or liberalism over a sociocultural issue may be explained by three elements: a) the societal salience of a cultural issue, b) a perceived threat related to the salient cultural issue, and c) individuals' value predispositions. It argues that, when sociocultural issues are salient in society, people may perceive threats related to these issues. The kind of perceived threats in turn depends on people's value predispositions. Finally, the threat perceptions can lead people to take increasingly strong attitudes towards the salient issue. The framework thus brings together the literatures on societal issue salience and threat perceptions, as well as the evidence on these mechanisms found in this dissertation's empirical papers. The suggested interplay and temporal sequence of the different theorized mechanisms however remains to be tested in future research.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed framework. The arrows in the figure indicate a temporal sequence and direction of influence. In this figure, societal issue salience is thus considered a starting point for (short-term) mass changes in attitudes towards increased social conservatism or liberalism. When sociocultural issues are salient in the public debate, and thus perceived as salient by various people in society, they can lead these people to perceive threats related to these issues. People's value predispositions influence what kind of threats they perceive in relation to the salient issue. Finally, the threat perceptions may lead people to change their attitudes towards the

issue in question, as to take more conservative or liberal attitudes.

Figure 1: Proposed framework explaining increased social liberalism/conservatism towards a sociocultural issue
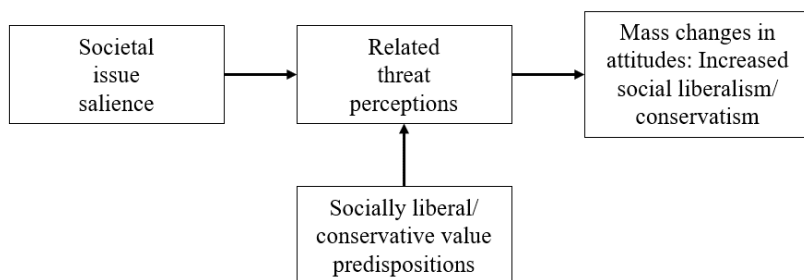
The framework's outcome of (short-term) mass attitudinal changes towards increasing social conservatism or liberalism is based on a (simplified) understanding of such attitudes as ranging on a one-dimensional spectrum between the two extremes of conservatism and liberalism. Given that sociocultural issues such as feminism and immigration are multi-faceted and complex, a one-dimensional spectrum of liberal-conservative attitudes is unlikely to adequately capture individuals' attitudes towards such issues in their entirety. Further, as my findings in paper 3 demonstrate, people can hold different and sometimes opposite attitudes on different feminist issues. Paper 5 further illustrates that the perceived cultural threats of feminism or immigration are related to particular feminist and immigration issues, rather than to feminism and immigration as a whole. I therefore propose to consider this framework for the study of smaller-scale issues related to feminism, immigration or other sociocultural issues. For instance, the framework may guide the study of attitudes towards feminist issues such as gender quotas, abortion rights or same-sex marriage, or immigration issues such as border controls, immigrants' right to work, or citizenship requirements.

Applying the proposed framework to feminist issues, for example, as a more

restrictive abortion policy is widely discussed in the public debate, people with socially liberal predispositions may perceive a threat to liberal abortion rights. As a result, these people are likely to take more extreme positions in favor of liberal abortion rights. In contrast, as gender quotas are widely discussed in the public debate, people with socially conservative predispositions may perceive a threat to men's dominance in leading positions. As a result, they are likely to take more extreme conservative positions against gender quotas.

As I elaborate hereafter, this framework reflects arguments that have been made in previous research. However, these mechanisms' interplay and their consequences on changes in individuals' attitudes have not been theorized and studied in an integrated framework. Doing so may further contribute to understanding when and why people take increasingly strong conservative or liberal attitudes towards sociocultural issues.

The interplay of societal issue salience and threat perceptions

In the proposed framework, I theorize the interplay of the mechanisms of societal issue salience and threat perceptions. Adding to previous research arguing that salient issues can provoke emotional reactions (Hetherington 2009; Miller et al. 2016), I theorize that such strong emotional reactions provoked by salient issues can include threat perceptions. Such threat perceptions based on emotions such as fear, anger and/or anxiety may evoke changes in political attitudes towards increasing social conservatism or liberalism.

The mechanisms of salience and threat perceptions often implicitly go hand in hand in previous research. Studies on the effects of (cultural) issue salience have usually found effects on electoral behavior for salient issues that may evoke threat perceptions, e.g. immigration (Dennison 2020), sexual assault accusations such as the #MeToo debate (Off 2022, paper 2 in this dissertation), crime (Mayer and Tiberj 2004), and environmental issues (Neundorf

and Adams 2018).[8]

While not every salient issue necessarily evokes threat perceptions, individuals should be more likely to feel threatened the more an issue is salient to them. As previously argued, this salience is more likely to induce mass attitudinal change when related to large-scale events or public debates perceived by many. Indeed, Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar (2016) argue that issue salience moderates the effect of threat perception on political activism. Similarly, Fischer, Haslam, and Smith (2010) argue that social identity salience moderates the effect of a perceived group threat on support for political measures to counter that threat. Further, the effects of threat perceptions have often been studied in relation to highly salient events, such as terrorist attacks (Vasilopoulos et al. 2019). I argue that salience is essential to the relationship between threat perceptions and political behavior. Rather than considering salience as a moderating factor, I, however, consider it as prior to and activating of threat perceptions.

The mechanisms of societal issue salience and threat perception are not novel and often implicit in the literature explaining political behavior. For instance, in their analysis of sexism and the radical right vote in Spain, Anduiza and Rico (2022) study backlash against feminist mobilizations, i.e. increases in sexism in periods of high salience of feminism. Herein, building on Sanbonmatsu (2008), they define backlash against feminism as "a reaction to a threat of forthcoming shifts in gendered power relations" (p.5). Similarly, Bischof and Wagner (2019) argue that liberals and conservatives polarize when a radical right party enters parliament, i.e. when this party is particularly salient. The authors explain liberals' counter-reaction by their opposition to, and perceived threats related to, the normalization of radical right politics. While the authors do not specifically theorize these mechanisms, their account of how individuals take more conservative/ liberal

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[8]Herein, arguably, immigration can evoke a perceived ethnic threat, the #MeToo and related debates about sexual assault can provoke a perceived threat to men in power positions, and debates about environmental issues often imply the threat of climate change.

attitudes thus involves the mechanisms highlighted in this framework, i.e. societal issue salience and threat perceptions. I propose that both mechanisms together may help explain currently observed dynamics of sociocultural attitudinal change that remain theoretically unexplained by cultural backlash theory: Cultural backlash among other population groups than the old generation. While increasing societal issue salience sets the precondition for various people to perceive a threat related to the issue, the kind of perceived threat and the degree of threat perception depends on the individuals' value predispositions.

Predispositions and attitudinal change

In this framework, societal issue salience and related threat perceptions constitute the main variables explaining when and why people come to take more conservative (liberal) values on sociocultural issues such as feminism. Further, I theorize that socially conservative (liberal) value predispositions influence the kind of perceived threats related to the salient issue. In the following, I briefly discuss my understanding of value predispositions and attitudinal change.

Previous research has, amongst others, investigated the role of childhood socialization (Jennings and Niemi 1968; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009), social group identity (Tajfel et al. 1979), gender (Giger 2009; Howell and Day 2000; Pratto, Stallworth, and Sidanius 1997), cohort effects (Norris and Inglehart 2019), education (Lindskog and Oskarson 2022; Stubager 2008), and the economic and democratic development in an individual's society of residence (Inglehart and Welzel 2005) in determining a person's value predispositions.

These factors share the implication of relative stability in value predispositions: After a certain stage in their lives, people are expected to hold relatively stable values, or value predispositions. If value predispositions are relatively stable, we should expect conservative-liberal polarization to occur between relatively stable groups of conservatives and liberals. Based on the above-mentioned determinants of value predispositions, conservatives should thus be disproportionately male, old, lower educated and reside in structurally weak areas, and liberals should be disproportionately characterized by the respective opposite features.

Yet, the literature further adds that period effects, such as the effects of an economic crisis (Hierro and Rico 2019), a stark increase in immigration (Dinas and van Spanje 2011), or large-scale feminist mobilizations (Jiménez-Sánchez, Fraile, and Lobera 2022), and life-cycle effects (Alwin and Krosnick 1991) influence value formation. Such effects challenge the stability of value predispositions over time. Period and life-cycle effects may affect the formation of value predispositions in a more flexible way than suggested by the above literature strands.

In the proposed framework, taking into account individuals' value predispositions allows for the possibility that different people perceive different kinds of threats related to the same salient issue. The framework further allows for flexibility in understanding who is likely to take increasingly socially conservative or socially liberal attitudes, allowing for heterogeneous effects across the population. It theorizes mass attitudinal change towards increasing social liberalism or conservatism independently of age, gender, education or other above-mentioned variables. In contrast to cultural backlash theory which explains backlash among the older generation, the framework may apply to various population groups. As such, it comes with the limitation of not being able to predict *who* will take increasingly socially conservative or socially liberal attitudes. Its main explanatory mechanisms, namely societal issue salience and related threat perceptions, rather help explain *when* and *why* people take increasingly socially conservative or socially liberal attitudes: when sociocultural issues are salient in society, and because people feel threatened by them.

Limitations of the proposed framework

This framework comes with several limitations. First, while it argues that societal issue salience predicts *when* people take increasingly socially conservative or socially liberal attitudes, it remains unspecific as to how salient an issue must be for this to happen. The framework argues that, the more salient an issue is in society, the more likely mass changes in attitudes are to happen. While this argument helps predict the timing of mass changes in attitudes in society, such predictions still rely on speculations regarding whether the issue is perceived as salient enough by a large enough portion of society. The framework is thus unable to specify a threshold of salience

that will cause changes in attitudes.

Moreover, this framework is limited to the political demand-side of attitude formation. While I acknowledge that political elites play an important role in influencing voters' attitudes (Leeper and Slothuus 2014), the supply-side of attitude formation remains beyond the scope of the framework. Similarly, while the media and social media likely influence people's reactions to salient events in society, this framework does not include these influences. The influences of political elites, the media and social media may be understood as possible intermediate channels through which socially conservative or socially liberal value predispositions affect people's threat perceptions. In other words, a socially conservative (liberal) person will likely follow socially conservative (liberal) politicians, media, and social media forums, and therefore consume discourse that conveys socially conservative (liberal) framings of threat perceptions. However, this framework does not theorize these channels of influence.

Further, the proposed framework is indifferent as to the type of perceived threats. Will material, symbolic or existential threats be most consequential for mass attitudinal change? While it is to be expected that people react most strongly to existential threats, given their potential consequences for their lives, the distinction between material and symbolic threats is more complicated. It is beyond the scope of this framework to disentangle how different threats affect mass attitudinal changes.

Another limitation concerns the framework's inability to distinguish between perceived threats to the individual in question and perceived threats to a person or group that the individual empathizes with but is not part of. For instance, if gender quotas are salient in the public debate, a man may feel threatened in his own career by the increased female job competition and therefore oppose gender quotas. However, he may as well empathize with women and perceive a threat to women's careers stemming from discrimination, and therefore support gender quotas. While both scenarios are possible, the above-outlined framework argues that value predispositions determine the direction of threat perception. In other words, a socially conservative man who supports the status quo of male dominance will perceive a threat to his own and/or other men's careers, while a socially liberal man who supports societal change towards gender equality will perceive a threat

towards women's careers. However, more complex dynamics may be at play in a situation that entails a clear trade-off: Will a socially liberal man still empathize with women when he just lost a job competition to a woman? The proposed framework assumes that both kinds of threat perceptions affect attitudinal change similarly, i.e. perceived threats to the individual and perceived threats to another group that the individual empathizes with. While this assumption likely constitutes a simplification of reality, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to theorize the dynamics of personal versus collective threat perceptions.

Finally, the framework is limited to explaining short-term attitudinal change, which is conditioned by the fact that issue salience on a societal level tends to be a relatively short-term phenomenon. Just like the 2015/2016 increase in refugee immigration, the 2017 Women's Marches were a short-term phenomenon leading to increased salience of related policy issues for a limited time period. While several issues can be salient at the same time, it is likely that an issue's salience decreases when a newer, more pressing issue becomes salient. Based on the proposed framework, as an issue's salience decreases, we should also be less likely to see short-term attitudinal change towards the issue. The framework thus does not explain long-term changes in attitudes and cannot predict whether attitudes remain stable or change after salience decreases. However, the short-term nature of this framework does not reduce its potential relevance: If temporally coinciding with elections, even short-term attitudinal changes can affect electoral behavior, which can in turn have more long-term political consequences.

9 Contributions to research

This dissertation theoretically and empirically contributes to various research fields. First, the dissertation theoretically contributes to cultural backlash research by proposing an explanation for *when* cultural backlash is likely to happen, namely when cultural issues are salient. It thereby addresses the lack of theory and evidence on triggers of cultural backlash. It further contributes to cultural backlash theory by explaining cultural backlash in other population groups than the old generation. While the mechanism proposed by cultural backlash theory, namely generational value change, applies to the old generation, this dissertation takes a broader approach as to *who* can counter-react to social value change.

Second, this dissertation contributes to the growing research on the role of conservative gender and sexuality attitudes in cultural backlash and radical right voting by theorizing gender and sexuality dimensions of cultural grievances and threat perceptions, and how they relate to grievances over immigration. With the exception of some recent work, the role of gender and sexuality attitudes in cultural backlash and radical right voting remains undertheorized and empirically understudied. However, given the previous and ongoing social value changes towards gender equality and LGBTQI+ inclusion and ongoing debates about these issues, cultural backlash against such value changes may occur. Further, the radical right reveals important gender dimensions, such as the gender gap in radical right voting and descriptive political representation, and the often antifeminist positions of the radical right. In light of these gender dimensions, theorizing and studying the relationship between gender and sexuality attitudes and radical right voting is relevant for the study of cultural grievances and threat perceptions related to radical right voting in general.

Third, the dissertation theoretically contributes to sexism research by theorizing why people can become increasingly sexist, while much previous sexism research explains sexism as a stable attitude. I do not contradict the theoretical assumption that sexism generally is a relatively stable attitude. However, my dissertation emphasizes the dynamic elements of sexism: A person may become more or less sexist in reaction to a salient event or debate that provokes a threat perception. By theorizing a dynamic element of

sexism, I contribute to sexism research.

Fourth, based on its empirical findings, this dissertation develops a theoretical framework that may serve as a guide for future research on (short-term) mass changes in sociocultural attitudes. While its implications remain subject to future empirical tests, this framework may contribute to theoretically understanding the micro-level mechanisms underlying liberal-conservative polarization over sociocultural issues, as well as social conservative backlash. Further, this framework may extend to several sociocultural issues beyond the issue of feminism studied in this dissertation. Previous research on the role of immigration salience and related threat perceptions, as well as this dissertation's papers 1 and 5, suggest that similar dynamics may apply to the issue of immigration. Potentially, other sociocultural issues that have been salient in public debates and invoke different kinds of threat perceptions can also be studied in light of this framework. Such issues may include climate change/environmentalism.

Empirically, I contribute to various research fields by collecting original data. First, in collaboration with Amy Alexander and Nicholas Charron, I co-designed an original survey experiment capturing conservative (liberal) reactions to threat statements about advances in women's rights and refugee immigration. The experiment further includes an original modern sexism survey measure. This data is representative and exists at the subnational level across all European Union countries. It empirically contributes to cultural backlash research, as it allows distinguishing between and comparing attitudes towards different sociocultural issues. It further complements cultural backlash research by testing the theory for the issue of feminism, while most research in the field focuses on the immigration issue. Moreover, this data contributes to sexism research, which so far mostly relies on small, unrepresentative survey samples. In fact, it allows testing contextual and demographic factors behind (modern) sexism, which most existing studies on sexism cannot do due to limited data availability.

Further, in collaboration with Luca Versteegen, I collected qualitative data through interviews with radical right voters in Germany. To date, qualitative analyses of radical right voting are rare (Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer 2018). This data constitutes an important contribution to the radical right voting literature, as it allows studying these voters' perceptions and reasoning in a

more nuanced way than is possible using survey data.

Lastly, this dissertation empirically contributes to mass polarization and antifeminism research through its case selections. First, it contributes to mass polarization research by studying the phenomenon in other contexts than the United States. Given that most existing polarization research studies the United States, which differs in its political system from European countries in various ways, this is an important empirical contribution. Finally, this dissertation empirically contributes to antifeminism research by selecting secular cases of investigation, thereby complementing previous antifeminism research on mostly religious contexts.

10 Limitations

This dissertation is subject to at least six limitations beyond the limitations detailed in each of the empirical studies, and in the above section on the proposed framework for future research. First, I already pointed to limitations in the findings' generalizability to other contexts than those that are studied.

Second, while I consider my case selection of European contexts an empirical contribution to previous research focusing mostly on the United States, this dissertation does not theorize how different institutional contexts influence socially liberal or conservative mass attitudinal changes. Future research may take into account the strength and stability of partisanship, as well as the effects of two- vs. multi-party systems on political party competition and individual vote choice. These institutional factors may influence the politicization of feminist issues by political parties, or individuals' potential social identity formation as (anti)feminists. They may further be related to how consistent and strong (anti)feminist individuals' attitudes are, or how consequential these attitudes are for their vote choice. However, it is subject to future research to theorize and test the effects of institutional factors on (anti)feminist attitude formation and its consequences.

Third, even though I argue that my proposed framework may generalize to social liberals' changes in attitudes, my empirical work largely focuses on social conservatives (except paper 1). More research is needed on social liberals' increasingly socially liberal attitudes, for instance as a reaction to large-scale events or as a counterreaction to social conservatism, especially in light of paper 1's finding that social liberals counter-react to a portrayal of women's rights as threatening.

Fourth, I use two different operationalizations and proxies of socially conservative backlash in different studies. These include the increased support for traditional values measured as a single survey item (paper 1), and the increased likelihood of radical right voting (paper 2), which I consider a consequence of increasingly socially conservative attitudes. While these choices in research design and methodology enable me to study socially conservative backlash against feminism in a multi-faceted way, they limit the comparability of the findings. This limitation needs to be taken into account when

inferring implications of these findings.

Fifth, while two of my studies are comparative across various countries and subnational regions, the dissertation's empirical work is limited in its time dimension. Except for paper 2 comparing Swedish elections data from 2014 and 2018, all studies capture the time period of 2021. While this is due to the original nature of the data, more over-time research is needed to understand long-term trends and to disentangle generational, life-cycle and period effects in explaining social liberal-conservative attitudinal changes.

Sixth, with the exception of paper 3, this dissertation focuses on the demand-side of explaining when and why people develop increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards feminism. As such, it largely overlooks the supply-side, including questions about how political parties communicate about feminist issues, the positions they take towards these issues, how salient these issues are in their communication, and how they frame the issues' relevance. More research is needed to address these questions.

Future research may further consider taking a social identity perspective, and/or an intersectional approach, to the study of when and why people develop increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards feminism. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to apply these theoretical approaches, they may bring important insights. For instance, the salience of an issue may activate certain social identities in people. While feminist issues may activate people's gender and/or sexual identity, immigration issues may activate people's national or ethnic identity. Large-scale public debates may also activate people's political identities, especially when these debates are politicized. The activation of certain identities in turn may influence whether and which threats are perceived in relation to the issue, and how strongly they are perceived. Similarly, the study of threat perceptions may benefit from an intersectional approach. For instance, people of different gender, race, class, and sexuality may perceive different kinds of threats and assign different levels of importance to the perceived threats. It is subject to future research to consider these theoretical perspectives in the study of when and why people develop increasingly strong liberal or conservative attitudes towards feminism.

11   Implications for society

This dissertation comes with several implications for society. First, the dissertation's empirical findings reveal that, in European societies, conservative backlash against feminism among voters does not seem to be happening on a large scale (see paper 1) but rather within certain population groups: According to this dissertation's studies, young men (see paper 4) and radical right voters (see papers 2, 3 and 5) tend to counter-react against feminist advances. However, these groups constitute a considerable part of European populations, and their potential political and societal influence should not be downplayed. As such, the trend towards increasingly progressive gender and sexuality norms that many European societies have been observing is not unchallenged. On the contrary, recent developments in places like Hungary, Poland and the United States suggest that this trend can reverse and should not be taken for granted.

In the population as a whole, the findings suggest that we are likely to see social liberals counter-reacting against conservative positions about feminism, potentially resulting in an increasing divergence in attitudes towards the issue of feminism (see paper 1). Mass ideological polarization, defined as an increasing divergence of political opinions towards an issue, may not necessarily be problematic and can even constitute a valuable feature of democracy, if interpreted as an indicator of pluralism and a catalyst of political participation. However, it may become more problematic for the democratic functioning of a society if accompanied by a dissatisfaction with democracy as the two opposing camps block each others' political influences. In the case of feminism, it may thus block political and social change towards a more equal society. Mass ideological polarization can further lead to a growing dislike between two polarizing camps, i.e. affective polarization. While scholars remain undecided about the consequences of affective polarization, common hypotheses are that affective polarization can undermine democratic norms and electoral accountability (Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2022).

Socially conservative backlash against feminism in particular may have severe implications for basic democratic principles, such as civil rights, if conservative positions result in the infringement of women's or LGBTQI+

rights. This may especially be the case if conservative counter-reactions against feminism translate into votes for antifeminist parties and these parties gain political influence. To prevent conservative counter-reactions against feminism, the dissertation's empirical findings (see papers 4 and 5) and the proposed framework suggest that it is important that salient feminist issues are not perceived as threatening. While threat perceptions are subjective in nature and not necessarily related to individuals' objective living conditions, the empirical findings suggest that the fostering of institutional trust and full employment may help to mitigate such threat perceptions in young men (see paper 4). Further, while it is subject to future research to study the effects of different ways of communicating feminism, the dissertation's findings (see paper 5) suggest that a better communication of the potential advantages of feminism for society as a whole, rather than just for women and LGBTQI+ people, could mitigate perceptions of feminism as a threat.

Finally, this dissertation's findings suggest that all societies should take measures to safeguard women's and LGBTQI+ rights, especially during time periods when issues related to feminism are salient in society. Weeks and Allen (2022) find that mainstream parties tend to accommodate radical right antifeminist backlash by de-emphasizing marginalized social groups and emphasizing socioeconomic issues. This dissertation suggests that the opposite strategy may be necessary: In light of the possibility of a socially conservative backlash against feminism and its potential consequences for women's and LGBTQI+ rights, taking action to safeguard previous feminist achievements is crucial.

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Included papers I-V

1. Alexander, A., Charron, N., Off, G. (2023). For every action a reaction? The polarizing effects of women's rights and refugee immigration. Unpublished Manuscript.

2. Off, G. (2022). Gender equality salience, backlash and radical right voting in the gender-equal context of Sweden. *West European Politics*, 46:3, 451-476.

3. Off, G. (2023). Complexities and nuances in radical right voters' (anti)feminism. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, e-pub ahead of print.

4. Off, G., Charron, N., Alexander, A. (2022). Who perceives women's rights as threatening to men and boys? Explaining modern sexism among young men in Europe. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 4, 1-15.

5. Off, G. (2023a). Multidimensional and intersectional cultural grievances over gender, sexuality and immigration. Unpublished Manuscript.