



Utrecht  
University

# **Polar Opposites: Opinions on Gender Equality in the Dutch Political Landscape**

Master Thesis Sociology: Contemporary Social Problems

Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Emma Koornneef — 5097711

Thesis supervisor: Noël Koster

Second assessor: Tali Spiegel

**Date: 26/06/2023**

## **Acknowledgement**

In front of you lays my master thesis. After four months of hard work, I would like to express my gratitude for all of those who have supported me during this academic journey. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Noël Koster for his encouragement and expertise. The feedback received from him and my fellow supervision members has been instrumental in shaping this research.

I would also like to thank my internship supervisor Devika Partiman for giving me the opportunity to work at Stem op een Vrouw. I enjoyed our conversations about the Dutch political landscape, and I have gained a lot of knowledge from our interactions. Thereby, I would like to thank researcher Zahra Runderkamp for providing me with the right resources required at the time, providing me with ideas and alternatives when I needed it most.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, friends, roommates, and partner for the encouragement and love. Their support has been a constant source of motivation to overcome challenges and strive for excellence. I feel truly fortunate to have such a wonderful network of individuals around me.

Emma Josine Elise Koornneef,

Utrecht, 26 juni 2023

# Abstract

**Introduction.** Despite political effort, gender inequalities decrease at a slow pace in the Netherlands. Scholars state that political polarization is the cause of this disappointing decline. **Objective.** Contrary to twoparty contexts, multiparty contexts like the Netherlands are underresearched in light of political polarization. It is important to understand how political polarization affects opinions on gender equality in multiparty context in order to reduce gender inequalities at a faster pace. **Theory.** Gender Ideology Theory and the Political Polarization Framework were used to understand how political polarization affects the opinions on gender equality on both the public- and institutional level, and to support the expectation that feedback dynamics strengthen these effects. **Method.** The relationship between public- and institutional polarization and the opinions on gender equality was measured using the European Social Survey and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Europe. Multiple regression techniques were utilized to understand the relationship between political polarization and opinions on gender equality on both levels, and how these relationships are strengthened by feedback dynamics. **Results.** Political polarization affects opinions on gender equality in both the public- and institutional sphere. The extreme identification with right-wing ideology causes more negative opinions on gender equality, whereas the extreme identification with left-wing ideology causes more positive opinions on gender equality. Feedback dynamics did not moderate the relationship on the public- nor institutional level. **Conclusion and implications.** Higher levels of political polarization might hinder progress towards gender equality in the Netherlands. The decline in gender inequalities in the Netherlands can be fastened by depolarization measures on both the public- and institutional levels of society. Public dialogue initiatives and civic education programs are recommended to depolarize the public sphere. Policy measures and diverse representation are recommended to depolarize the institutional sphere.

## Ethical statement

The study is approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University under filing number 23-0661.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Gender inequality in the Netherlands

Gender inequality continues to pervade many aspects of society. The topic perhaps remains most pronounced in the political arena (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999). Therefore, postindustrial democracies made official commitments to promote gender equality in international and domestic agendas (Engeli & Mazur, 2018; Profeta, 2020). Per illustration, various gender equality programmes have been implemented in a broad range of sectors, and gender components have been added to originally gender-blind programmes (Engeli & Mazur, 2018; Profeta, 2020).

Despite these political efforts, data continues to show the slow and disappointing pace in which gender inequalities decline in European countries (Shreeves & Boland, 2021; Verloo, 2018). And if so, the decline is far from linear nor self-evident (Shreeves & Boland, 2021). For example, women obtained the right to participate in politics for one hundred years, but they remain underrepresented in political institutions (Kenworthy & Malami, 1999). Thereby, gender inequality remains to cause unequal opportunities in various other domains, such as academia, education, fertility, and job stratification (Perugini & Vladislavljević, 2019; Rosa et al., 2020; Van Bavel, 2012). Some experts therefore state that reducing gender inequality is an illusion — one similar to turning lead into gold (Engeli & Mazur, 2018).

The Netherlands faces similar challenges. Although the Netherlands has scored a fifth rank in the Gender Equality Index in 2020, gender inequalities remain to decrease slowly (EIGE, 2020; Verloo, 2009). For example, gender inequality persists in domains such as knowledge, education, and decision-making (EIGE, 2020). This bares detrimental consequences for society (Verloo, 2018). Gender inequality namely feeds substantial between-group differences between men and women (Verloo, 2009). This creates gaps in civic engagement and access to power and rights (Carter & Reardon, 2014). These gaps can further lead to the disruption of democratic governments like the Netherlands (Verloo, 2018). Whereas democratic governments should continuously be responsive to the preferences of its citizens, it becomes unclear whether public policies truly meet the needs of *all* (Dubrow, 2007; Gallego, 2014). Given these pressing consequences, the Dutch government has declared gender equality as a widely accepted political goal (Verloo, 2018). However, the question remains how to achieve it.

## 1.2 Political polarization as a cause

Despite political effort, gender inequalities in the Netherlands remain to decrease slowly (EIGE, 2020). Experts might therefore be right: solving gender inequality is easier said than done (Engeli & Mazur, 2018). However, this hatchet is not buried so easily in political science.

Scholars uncover *political polarization* as a phenomenon that could potentially hinder progress toward gender equality (Kooiman, 1999). Political polarization is the divergence of political attitudes away from the center and towards ideological extremes (Bockman & Gayk, 1977). This bolsters support for extreme political ideologies that stand far apart (Jenkins, 2021). Consequentially, persistent themes of disagreement enter the political arena and lead to the increasing separation of political groups — both on the public- and institutional levels of society (Leonard et al., 2021; Theriault 2006). Through these systematic disagreements, the efficacy of policymaking is heavily affected (Barber et al., 2015). As specific issue areas are not agreed on by the political elite, it becomes more difficult to create consistent policies (Evers et al., 2019). This slows down progress for fruitful solutions and could ultimately lead to the inability to solve societal problems together (Levin et al., 2021).

Especially in light of gender inequality, political polarization is problematic. Gender inequality becomes a thorny issue in polarized nations (Jenichen, 2018; Jenkins, 2021). That is because political ideology matters as a great deal for the opinions on gender equality (Kantola, 2022). For example, radical right-wing supporters often voice their fundamental contestation of gender equality principles, whereas radical left-wing supporters advocate for them (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020). An “*all hands on deck*” mentality vanishes, and opinions split into opposing camps (Verloo, 2009). In such dooming polarization cases, people refuse to listen to other viewpoints whilst blindly accepting their own (Harteveld et al., 2015). In those cases, there is no way in which differences can be bridged — or, that a solution for gender inequality will be found (Harteveld et al., 2022; Verloo, 2009).

## 1.3 Feedback dynamics

Polarized nations are known for extreme opinions that overshadow nuanced viewpoints (Semaan et al., 2014). Ironically, nuanced viewpoints are crucial to find middle ground and develop effective solutions for societal problems (Harteveld et al., 2022). Scholars therefore state that it is vital to *depolarize* in order to reduce gender inequality more rapidly (Levin et al., 2021). However, depolarization is a complicated task — especially since it relies on several intercepting factors (Kelly & Enns, 2010).

Scholars appoint *feedback dynamics* to feed polarization and complicate depolarization. Feedback dynamics entail the influence of political attitudes of citizens on political actors which, in return, influence the political elite in policymaking processes (Leonard et al., 2021). By definition, feedback dynamics yield a pattern of increasing polarization; they disregard moderating opinions and repeat homogenous opinions (Leonard et al., 2021). For example, people receive an overflow of positive feedback for their own viewpoints but lack opposing ones. As a result, ideological positions extremize even further (Leonard et al., 2021).

This study aims to identify the relationship between political polarization and the opinions on gender equality in the Netherlands and will explore whether feedback dynamics moderate this relationship. First, this research aims to identify the current political opinions on gender equality. Second, we attempt to identify the relationship between political polarization and the opinions on gender equality. Third, this research aims to identify whether these relationships are moderated by feedback dynamics. The aforementioned research goals will be assessed on both the public- and institutional level, as scholars state that polarization is rooted in both societal spheres (Leonard et al., 2021). Therefore, this research will attempt to answer the following research questions:

**(Q1a):** What is the current distribution of political opinions on gender equality amongst Dutch citizens?

**(Q1b):** What is the current distribution of political opinions on gender equality amongst the political parties in the Dutch House of Representatives (DHR)?

**(Q2a):** To what extent does political polarization influence the opinions on gender equality of Dutch citizens, and is this effect moderated by public feedback dynamics?

**(Q2b):** To what extent does political polarization influence the opinions on gender equality of Dutch political parties in the DHR, and is this effect moderated by public feedback dynamics?

Good governance creates qualities of systems that contribute to solving societal problems (Kooiman, 1999). Therefore, the findings of this study will be translated to policy implications. Based on the conclusions of this study, an effort will be made to understand how Dutch governmental organizations can reduce polarization in the political landscape in order

to promote gender equality in a more fruitful manner. Ultimately, this could lead to a faster reduction of gender inequalities in the Netherlands. This research will attempt to answer one final research question:

**(Q3):** How could governmental organizations depolarize the Dutch political landscape in order to promote gender equality in the Netherlands?

#### **1.4 Societal relevance and scientific relevance**

Gender inequality creates systematic barriers, further contributing to gender gaps in different parts of society (Jenkins, 2021). It is crucial to identify the opinions on gender equality in order to prevent minorities from marginalization (Nigam, 2014). For example, women's interests are far less well articulated in politics than men's (Shreeves & Boland, 2021). As a result, gender bias affects the education, quality of healthcare, employment, and autonomy of citizens (Rosa et al., 2020). Thereby, it is societally relevant to research political polarization, as it could weaken long-established democracies and hinders the governmental ability to create policies which address societal problems (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019). This study lends itself for insights in the societal impact of political polarization in the Netherlands and helps to reduce gender inequalities at a faster pace.

Experts state that it is difficult to pinpoint the dynamics of political polarization due to its interdisciplinary character (Van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2022). Only as of recently, experts succeeded in the identification of the dynamics of political polarization in the United States (Leonard et al., 2021). However, the implications are rather simplified in comparison to other countries. The United States operates within twoparty context in which political divides are clearer (Abramowitz, 2010). In comparison to nations with multiparty contexts like the Netherlands, political polarization is more difficult to measure due to the variety of political voices (Wagner, 2021). Therefore, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on political polarization — and the measurement thereof — in multiparty contexts.



## 2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality will be explained using *Gender Ideology Theory* and the *Political Polarization Framework* (Gwiazda, 2020; Leonard et al., 2021). Mechanisms derived from these frameworks will be applied to argue whether political polarization is expected to influence the opinions on gender equality. We derive four hypotheses based on the notion that political polarization influences (1) the public level, and (2) the institutional level (Leonard et al., 2021). We expect that extreme right-wing ideology leads to more negative opinions on gender equality, and that extreme left-wing ideology leads to more positive opinions on gender equality. In this study, we use the rightist direction as a reference point for clear interpretation. We thereby expect that these relationships are strengthened when feedback dynamics are present. We explain the aforementioned expectations sequentially. The pathmodels stemming from these hypotheses will be presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

### 2.1 The effect of political polarization on the opinions on gender equality

First, we argue that political polarization influences the opinions on gender equality by using *Gender Ideology Theory (GIT)*. This theory allows for clear direction of our expectations in H1a and H1b. Second, we argue that political polarization influences both the public- and institutional levels of society using the *Political Polarization Framework (PPF)* (Leonard et al., 2021).

#### 2.1.1 *Gender Ideology Theory (GIT)*

A core factor that feeds to gender inequality is people's *gender ideology*. This concept stems from the study of feminist and gender considerations of political ideology and serves as a frame through which people consider what is good and proper (Saguy et al., 2021). Gender ideology refers to an individual's set of beliefs about the social roles of men and women (Duerst-Lahti, 2008; Saguy et al., 2021). Individuals use these beliefs to either *legitimize* or *refute* gender inequalities in terms of gender stratification (Saguy et al., 2021). Per illustration, gender ideologies concern the division of paid work and family responsibilities. Ideas reflect the endorsement (or the lack thereof) of binary separation of family versus work responsibilities along gender lines, and the acceptance or disregard of gender hierarchy resulting from it (Saguy et al., 2021).

There are several perspectives on gender ideology. On the one hand, individuals could support *biological* beliefs which revolve around the deconstruction of essentialist assumptions about gender and sexuality (Toldy & Garraio, 2021). These beliefs are derived from the argument that men and women are built different according to their biological make-up (Kováts, 2018). Individuals with the biological perspective believe that men and women have distinct ‘essences’ and are thus predisposed to behave differently — both mentally and behaviorally (Saguy et al., 2021). The attitudes of this gender ideology concern the opposition of abortion, sexual education, and LGBTQ+ rights in areas such as marriage, adoption, surrogacy, and reproductive technologies (Toldy & Garraio, 2021). On the other hand, individuals that hold more *feminist* beliefs heavily contest these attitudes. They identify a connection between ‘gender’ and ‘individualism’ (Kováts, 2018). Their attitudes on gender equality revolve around the notion that gender is freely chosen, not constrained by norms, nature, or biological sex, and focuses on the recognition of systematic gender inequalities in society (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). For example, supporters of the feminist perspective aim for a system that sustains rights independent from gender (Kováts, 2018).

Beliefs and practices related to gender ideology play a big role in the recent identity movements in politics (Anić, 2015). Whereas some scholars see gender ideology as an anthropological threat, others see it as a covert *political strategy* of extreme political parties to gain power (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). As political parties are regarded as agents of gender representation, they make gendered claims and propose gender-related policies (Anić, 2015; Gwiazda, 2020). Gender ideology hereby enters the political arena, as politicians support certain gender beliefs and advocate for them in policymaking processes (Anić, 2015). However, as gender ideologies often include opposing views, politics becomes an important site for radical leftist and rightist parties to voice their support or contestation in regard to gender ideology (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021). Per illustration, leftist actors generally support the feminist perspective. They are more positive towards gender equality and promote affirmative action. This clashes with the beliefs of the radical right, which generally support the biological perspective. They are more negative towards gender equality and promote conservative norms (Gwiazda, 2020). As these distinct views form a powerful polarizing factor, gender ideology is often associated with political polarization (Anić, 2015; Kováts, 2018). Scholars even state that political polarization is closely tied to — if not, rooted in — debates regarding gender ideology (Gwiazda, 2020).

### 2.1.2 *The Political Polarization Framework (PPF)*

Political polarization recently gained more attention in political science. In previous years, scholars stated that public opinion caused political polarization (Fisher et al., 2013; Garcia et al., 2015). However, contemporary authors shed light on the institutional level, in which political elites instigate polarization (Leonard et al., 2021).

The impact of public opinion substantially influences the political sphere (Burstein, 2003; Leonard et al., 2021). It is therefore often stated that public opinion causes the ideological rifts that cause polarization (Burstein, 2003). *Public polarization* happens when the population moves from one consensual state to its opposite (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Thus, if more members of the public adopt extreme opinions, or if fewer members occupy the middle of the distribution, the more the public will become polarized (Hill & Tausanovitch, 2015). A polarized public heightens levels of animosity and motivates citizens to distinguish themselves from their political opponents. They do so by taking positions on issues that differ from other (disliked) parties and match their own preferred party — sorting the mass into clearly defined political groups (Druckman et al., 2021).

Contemporary authors state that polarization also exists on the institutional level (Farina, 2015; Leonard et al., 2021). Institutional polarization takes place when political parties craft distinct leftist and rightist ideologies and create homogeneity in interest groups (Leonard et al., 2021). This hardens legislative gridlock, as rightist and leftist parties persistently propose divergent policies in regard to political issues — and oppose each other simply because the other side approves it (Hout & Maggio, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2019). For example, institutional polarization causes ideological battles on gender equality amongst political parties, as right-wing supporters voice their fundamental contestation towards liberal policy for gender equality, whereas leftist parties advocate for it (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021).

Both theories allow to formulate hypotheses on the relationship between political polarization and the opinions on gender equality. *GIT* allows for directions as to how polarization influences opinions on gender equality. As we work under the assumption that extreme identification with political ideology suggests polarization, literature supports that (1) identification with extreme rightist ideology has a negative effect on opinions on gender equality, and (2) identification with extreme leftist ideology has a positive effect on opinions on gender equality. As the relationship is linear, we use the rightist direction as a reference point for clear interpretation. Thereby, the *PPF* appoints two societal levels of polarization. Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**(H1a):** The more extreme a citizen identifies with right-wing ideology, the more negative their opinion on gender equality becomes.

**(H1b):** The more extreme a political party identifies with right-wing ideology, the more negative their opinion on gender equality becomes.

## **2.2 The moderating effect of feedback dynamics**

Leonard and colleagues (2021) succeeded to combine the public- and institutional level of political polarization into one cohesive model. To extend the *PPF*, they focus on additional components on both levels that further explain polarization: *feedback dynamics*. Feedback dynamics entail the influence of political attitudes of citizens on political actors which, in return, influence elites in policymaking processes (Leonard et al., 2021).

First, Leonard and colleagues (2021) identify a feedback mechanism on the public level: *policy mood*. This contains the opinion of citizens on political issue areas and serves as the first input for the institute to polarize (Leonard et al., 2021). Citizens, who are already polarized themselves, feed their political opinion to the elite (Abramowitz, 2010). Whilst doing so, citizens signal where their political opinion falls along the leftist/rightist dimension (Stevenson, 2001). For example, they communicate their political desires through surveys, activism, and voting out incumbents (Leonard et al., 2021). As a result, political parties must anticipate on the policy mood of citizens by revising their platforms, supporting different candidates, and voting for policies that the public wants — or they will lose elections (Leonard et al., 2021). Thus, the policy mood of citizens becomes reflected in the levels of institutional disagreement between leftist and rightist supporters; and since parties favor ideological consistency, the institutional landscape further polarizes (Bartle et al., 2015).

Second, Leonard and colleagues (2021) identify an interplay of feedback mechanisms on the institutional level. These feedback mechanisms are rooted in the elite level of politics which, in return, feed public polarization — simply as citizens place the behavior of political elitist at their core (Hetherington, 2001). First, they identify the mechanism of *self-reinforcement*. Self-reinforcement happens when parties polarize, and interest groups have an incentive to join the coalitions (Pierson & Schickler, 2020). Once they do, the goal is to help it win at any cost —punishing defectors and eliminating moderating voices (Leonard et al., 2021). Second, they identify *reflective partisanship*. This mechanism entails political parties opposing a policy simply because the other side supports it (Lee, 2009). This yields a cycle of animosity, wherein one party becomes more extreme as a response to others' extremity (Wilson

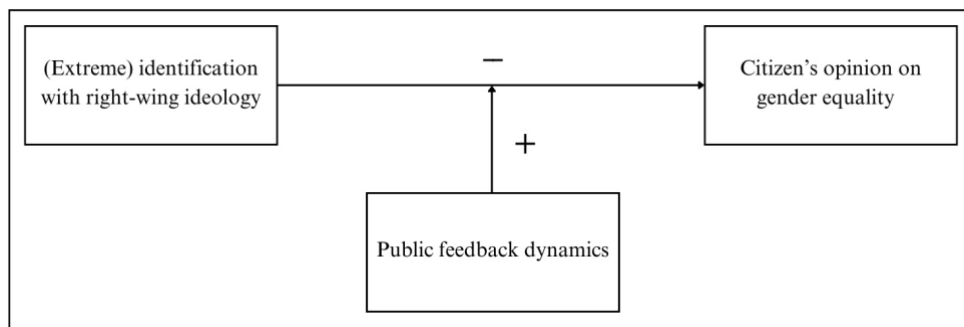
et al., 2020). Lastly, Leonard and colleagues (2021) identify the *additive response* mechanism. This mechanism entails the anticipation of political elites on citizens' policy mood independently of how moderate or extreme the other party's positions are (Leonard et al., 2021; Westfall et al., 2015).

Through the concept of feedback dynamics, it becomes clear that public- and institutional polarization are not “disconnected”, but rather intensify each other through coinciding feedback mechanisms (Leonard et al., 2021). Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

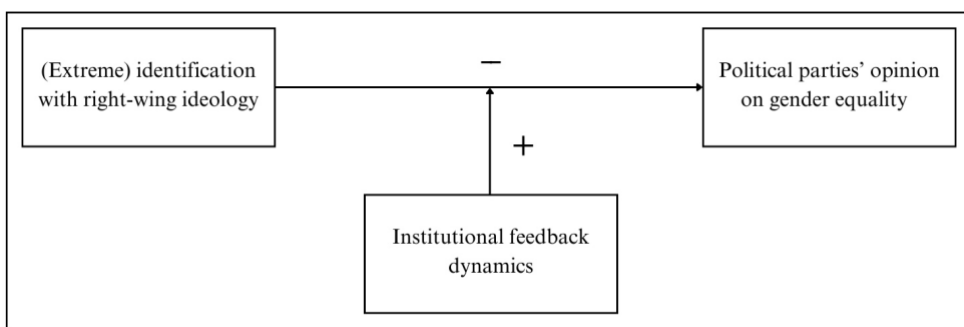
**(H2a):** The negative effect of extreme identification with right-wing ideology on citizens' opinions on gender equality becomes stronger if public feedback dynamics are present.

**(H2b):** The negative effect of extreme identification with right-wing ideology on political parties' opinion on gender equality becomes stronger if institutional feedback dynamics are present.

*Figure 1. Pathmodel on the public level*



*Figure 2. Pathmodel on the institutional level*



## 3. Methods

This study aims to measure the relationship between political polarization and opinions on gender equality on two levels: the public- and institutional level. Therefore, this study includes two independent datasets that are subjected to research techniques separately.

### 3.1 Sampling and Population

#### 3.1.1 European Social Survey (ESS)

To measure the relationship between *public* polarization and opinions on gender equality, we use the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is a quantitative, cross-sectional survey administered to 40 countries to date (ESS ERIC, 2022). This survey has been conducted since 2002 with the aim to create insight in the stability and changes of (institutional) circumstances, interactions, and social structures throughout Europe (ESS ERIC, 2022). In order to translate the results to the current Dutch political landscape, the 10th wave of the European Social Survey is used. This wave includes data from August 2020 to May 2022. Through strict random probability sampling techniques, respondents were gathered regardless of their nationality, citizenship, language, or legal status. The target population includes anyone above the age of 15 within private households. Respondents under the age of 16 must have permission from a parent or guardian, participation is voluntary, and participants are free in answering the distributed questions. The average response rate amongst all countries is 44.7%. Before exclusion criteria, the total number of cases is  $N = 33351$ .

#### 3.1.2 Chapel Hill Expert Survey Europe (CHES Europe)

In order to measure the relationship between *institutional* polarization and opinions on gender equality, we use the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Europe (CHES Europe) (Jolly et al., 2022). This survey has been conducted since 1999 with the aim to estimate party positioning on ideology, policy issues, and international relations for national parties in countries across the world (Jolly et al., 2022). In order to translate the results to the current Dutch political landscape, the 2019 wave of the CHES Europe is used. This wave includes data from winter 2020. The target population includes 421 specialized political scientists that evaluate political parties. The sample includes EU member states, plus parties in Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey. Separate surveys were conducted in the Balkan candidate countries. Ethical procedures were not applied for the distribution of the survey, as no personal data is used. The total number of cases in this dataset before exclusion criteria is  $N = 277$  (Jolly et al., 2022).

### 3.1.3 Selection criteria in the samples

Only a subset of cases from the ESS and CHES qualify for this study. Several exclusion criteria are applied to the ESS. First, only respondents that answered relevant questions are used; for example, those that responded in regard to their opinion on gender equality and political ideology. Respondents that did not apply to this criterium were excluded due to *missing by design*. Second, as this study focuses on the Dutch political landscape, only Dutch respondents were selected to be included in the dataset. Third, respondents are only able to exert influence on politics through voting rights — obtained if they are 18 and hold the Dutch citizenship (Ministry of Justice and Security, n.d.). Therefore, only respondents above the age of 18 and with a Dutch citizenship were selected. Fourth, the European Social Survey integrated self-indicated missing values categories for all variables: (7) refusal, (8) don't know, and (9) no answer (ESS ERIC, 2022). Respondents that answered any of these categories were excluded and treated as missing values. After exclusion, the remaining sample of the ESS is N = 1332.

For the CHES Europe, only the cases are used that answered relevant questions; for example, about political ideology and opinions on gender equality policies (Jolly et al., 2022). Cases that did not apply to this criterium were excluded from this research due to *missing by design*. Second, since this research focuses on the Netherlands, cases from all other countries are excluded. After exclusion, the remaining sample of the CHES Europe is N = 13 cases.

## 3.2 Operationalization and variables

### *Opinions on gender equality — dependent variables*

In order to measure the opinions on gender equality on the public level, the following statement from the European Social Survey is used: *'Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you. Use this card for your answer. She/he thinks it is important that every person in the world should be treated equally. She/he believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life'*. Respondents could answer on a scale ranging from 1 to 6: (1) very much like me, (2) like me, (3) somewhat like me, (4) a little like me, (5) not like me, and (6) not like me at all (ESS ERIC, 2022).

In order to measure opinions on gender equality on the institutional level, the following question from the CHES Europe is used: *'What is the position on social lifestyle (e.g., rights for homosexuals, gender equality)?'*. Political scientists evaluated political parties on a scale ranging from 0 to 10: (0) strongly supports liberal policies and (10) strongly opposes liberal policies (Jolly et al., 2022).

### *Public polarization and institutional polarization — independent variables*

In order to measure polarization on the *public* level, the following question from the European Social Survey is used: ‘*In politics, people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?’*. Respondents answered on a scale between 0 to 10: (0) left and (10) right (ESS ERIC, 2022).

In order to measure polarization on the *institutional* level, the following question from the CHES Europe is used: ‘*What is the position of the party in 2020 in terms of its overall ideological stance?’*. Political scientists evaluated political parties on a scale ranging from 0 to 10: (0) extreme left, (5) center, and (10) extreme right (Jolly et al., 2022).

### *Feedback dynamics — moderation variables*

In accordance with Leonard and colleagues (2021), we hypothesize that the relationship between political polarization and the opinions on gender equality is strengthened by feedback dynamics. Therefore, this research includes feedback dynamics as moderation variables.

On the *public* level, feedback dynamics will be measured through the following question from the ESS: ‘*How much would you say the political system in the Netherlands allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?’*. Respondents answered on a scale ranging from 1 to 5: (1) not at all, (2) very little, (3) some, (4) a lot (5) a great deal (ESS ERIC, 2022). After centering the means and multiplying public political polarization and public feedback dynamics, an interaction term is created in preparation for the moderation analysis.

Feedback dynamics in the *institutional* sphere consist of three separate mechanisms: self-reinforcement, reflexive partisanship, and additive response (Leonard et al., 2021). As the CHES Europe did not allow for the measurement of all three mechanisms, only additive response is measured within this research — that is, whether the political elite take into account the policy mood of citizens (Leonard et al., 2021). Institutional feedback dynamics will be measured through the following question from the CHES Europe: ‘*What is the position on people vs. Elected representatives?’*. Political scientists evaluated political parties according to a scale ranging from 0 to 10: (0) elected office holders should make the most important decisions and (10) the people, not politicians, should make the important decisions (Jolly et al., 2022). After centering the means and multiplying institutional political polarization and institutional feedback dynamics, an interaction term is created in preparation for the moderation analysis.



### *Age, gender, and number of seats per party — control variables*

In order to correct for confounding factors, this research includes several control variables. On the public level, confounding factors are controlled for by ‘gender’ and ‘age’. On the institutional level, ‘number of seats per party’ serves as a control variable.

The relationship between political polarization and opinions on gender equality on the *public* level is controlled for by *gender* and *age*. It is often underlined that men have a tendency to identify more as rightist and less as leftists than women (Gillion et al., 2020). Per illustration, while most men move in the rightist, conservative direction in which gender equality issues are less important, a segment of women retain their leftist, liberal opinions on the topic. Hence, political opinions might differ based on *gender* (Norrander & Wilcox, 2008). The control variable ‘gender’ is measured by using the dichotomous item of gender in the ESS: (1) male, (2) female (ESS ERIC, 2022). This variable is transformed into a dummy variable: (0) male, (1) female. Therefore, male becomes the reference group within this study. Second, researchers believe that *age* influences views on gender equality as gender inequalities accumulate throughout the lifecycle (Bennett & Zaidi, 2016). For example, young people are often more leftist as education and employment exposes them to inequalities, whereas older people tend to become more conservative over the lifespan (Treleaven, 2015). The control variable ‘age’ is measured by using the ESS item: ‘*Age of the respondent, calculated*’.

Third, in order to control for obscure effects on the institutional level, the control variable *seats per political party* is used. Institutional polarization intensifies the impact of party endorsements on opinions and decreases the impact of substantive information — especially if a political party has a considerable number of *seats* (Druckman et al., 2013). Therefore, the variable ‘number of seats per party’ from the CHES Europe is used: ‘*seat share of the party in national election most prior to YEAR.*’

### **3.3 Analytical Strategy**

Several research techniques are conducted using IBM SPSS software version 27. Variables are approached as continuous. This research includes two separate multiple regressions: (1) on the public level using ESS data, and (2) on the institutional level using CHES Europe data.

With ESS data, we first perform a linear regression on the public level (M1). This linear regression takes into account the effect of public polarization on opinions on gender equality amongst citizens. Second, this linear regression is tested by adding the control variable ‘gender’ to the model (M2). It is important to note that the control variable ‘age’ did not show significant results in preparational testing. Hence, it was excluded from the model. Third, a multiple

regression is performed in order to measure the moderation variable of public feedback dynamics. This multiple regression takes into account the relationship between public political polarization and opinions on gender equality, together with the control- and moderating variable of public feedback dynamics (M3). Although the relationship of political polarization is linear, an additional multiple regression was conducted in order to showcase results for left-wing ideology as a reference point (Appendix A).

With CHES Europe data, we first perform a linear regression on the institutional level (M1). This linear regression takes into account the effect of institutional polarization on opinions on gender equality amongst political parties. Second, this linear regression is tested by adding the control variables ‘number of seats per political party’ to the model (M2). Third, a multiple regression is performed in order to measure the moderation variable of institutional feedback dynamics. This multiple regression takes into account the relationship between institutional political polarization and opinions on gender equality, together with the control- and moderating variable of institutional feedback dynamics (M3). Although the relationship of political polarization is linear, an additional multiple regression was conducted in order to showcase results for left-wing ideology as a reference point (Appendix B).

### **3.4 Regression assumptions**

To ensure quality and reliability of both multiple regressions, statistical assumptions were tested in preparation for the analyses. First, the normality distribution is checked for all variables and were found to be normally distributed. Second, all variables are tested on Multicollinearity with Variance Inflation Factors (VIF). As the VIF of all variables was around 1, no multicollinearity was indicated. Third, homoscedasticity was controlled for in all variables. Lastly, outliers were checked, which appeared not to be present. None of the assumptions were violated. Therefore, both multiple regression analyses were conducted.

### **3.5 Descriptive statistics**

In Table 1, the descriptive statistics of all included variables of the regression analyses on the *public* level are stated. After the application of all selection- and exclusion criteria, the sample size consisted of 1332 respondents. Of these 1332 respondents, 48% was female whereas 52% was male (min= 0, max= 1). The average age was 49.38. The average of public political polarization was 5.13 on a 0 to 10 scale, suggesting that the average of political ideology amongst respondents was neutral. However, the standard deviation of the variable indicates that many respondents were above or below this mean. This suggests that a variety of

respondents identifies more rigidly with a political ideology on either the right- or left side of the spectrum (S.D. = 2.112). The average of opinions on gender equality was 1.88 on a 1 to 6 scale, meaning that respondents generally found gender equality important. The average of public feedback dynamics amongst respondents was 2.67 on a 1 to 5 scale, meaning that the respondents are neutral in regard to the political system taking into account public opinion during policymaking processes (min = 0, max = 10, S.D. = 1.804). As the control variable ‘age’ did not show significant results in preparational testing, the variable was excluded from the model in further testing.

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics of all variables included in the regression analyses on the public level*

	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
Public political polarization	1332	0	10	5.13	2.112
Opinion on gender equality issues	1332	1	6	1.88	.785
Public feedback dynamics	1332	1	5	2.67	1.804
Gender (0 = male <sup>a</sup> )	1332	0	1	.48	
Age	1332	18	90	49.38	18.017

<sup>a</sup> ref. group 0= male, 1 = female.

In Table 2, the descriptive statistics of all included variables of the regression analyses on the *institutional* level are stated. After the application of all selection- and exclusion criteria, the sample size consisted of 13 cases. Each case represents a party in the Dutch House of Representatives (DHR). The average of political polarization was 5.431 on a 10-point scale. This suggests that the gross of political parties is neutral (min = 1.385, max = 9.538, S.D. = 2.647). The average of opinions on gender equality was 4.567 on a 10-point scale. This suggests that parties are generally neutral in regard to their position on gender equality (min = 1.636, max = 9.000, S.D = 2.146). The average of institutional feedback dynamics is 4.869, suggesting that parties are generally neutral in regard to whether they anticipate on public opinion in policy making (min = 1.182, max = 9.455, S.D. = 2.745). Lastly, the mean of seats per party is 7.685, meaning that each party had 7.685 seats on average (min = 1.300, max = 22.00, S.D. = 6.215).

There are two important things to note from the descriptive statistics on the institutional level. First, all included variables have a high standard deviation. This means that, although the mean suggests that parties are neutral, some cases were above or below this mean. This suggests that some cases were more rigidly evaluated. For example, as the standard deviation of the variable ‘institutional political polarization’ is high, it indicates that some parties identify more rigidly with either right-wing or left-wing ideology (S.D. = 2.647). Second, the descriptive results of ‘number of seats per party’ show a minimum is 1.300 seats. The CHES Europe aggregated the data in order to compare different countries with each other. Hence, data does not simulate the exact political system that applies to the Netherlands, in which the minimum of seats would contain 1.

*Table 2. Descriptive statistics of all variables included in the regression analyses on the institutional level*

	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
Institutional political polarization	13	1.385	9.538	5.431	2.647
Opinion on gender equality issues	13	1.636	9.000	4.567	2.146
Institutional feedback dynamics	13	1.182	9.455	4.869	2.745
Seats	13	1.300	22.00	7.685	6.215

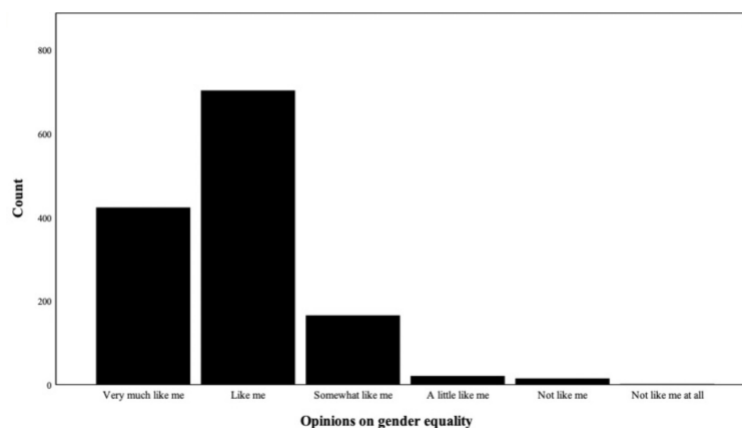
## 4. Results

Results have been divided per societal level. First, the results of the distribution of opinions on gender equality are presented. Second, the results on two moderation analyses will be presented in order to assess the relationship between political polarization and opinions on gender equality on (1) the public level, and (2) the institutional level. Results are interpreted under the assumption that identification with extreme political ideology suggests political polarization. As a reference point, results are interpreted according to identification with right-wing ideology. Although this relationship is linear, tables concerning left-wing ideology as a reference point can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B.

### 4.1 The distribution of opinions on gender equality

In Figure 3, the results of the distribution of opinions on gender equality are presented for the *public* level. Respondents mostly answered that it is like them to allow people to have equal opportunities in the Netherlands. Merely 700 out of 1332 respondents answered (2) like me. Thereby, a proportion of merely 400 out of 1332 respondents answered it is (1) very much like them to find equal opportunities important. Smaller proportions of respondents answered that it is somewhat or less like them to find equal opportunities important.

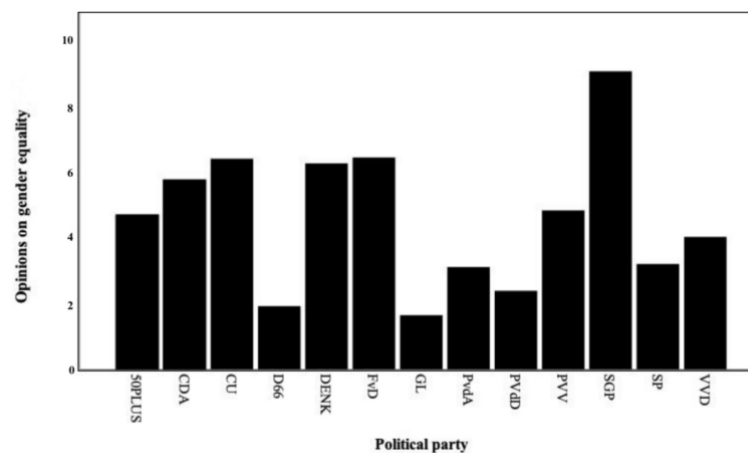
Figure 3. The distribution of opinions on gender equality on the public level



In Figure 4, the results of the distribution of opinions on gender equality are presented for the *institutional* level. The distribution has been divided per political party currently active in the Dutch House of Representatives (DHR). Figure 4 shows that political parties from the DHR generally have neutral opinion towards gender equality policies. Namely, a large proportion of parties was evaluated around the fifth to sixth rank on a 10-point scale — in which evaluation

in the middle of the spectrum suggest a neutral opinion towards policy initiatives concerning gender equality. However, several parties divert from this mean. Leftist parties such as GroenLinks (GL) and D66 show lower scores, which suggest that they more strongly support liberal policies in regard to gender equality policies. On the other hand, rightist parties such as FvD and SGP more strongly contest liberal policies in regard to gender equality policies.

Figure 4. The distribution of opinions on gender equality per political party



#### 4.2 Regression analyses on the public level

In Table 3, the results of all regressions on the public level can be found. Model 1 includes the regression parameters of the effect of public polarization on the opinion on gender equality. Regression Model 1 was significant ( $R^2 = .081$ ,  $F(1, 1330) = 118.709$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A proportion of 8.1% of the variance is explained by political polarization. The results of the regression show a significant positive effect of public political polarization on opinions on gender equality ( $B = .106$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Model 2 shows the results of the regression analysis of the effect of public polarization on the opinion on gender equality whilst controlling for gender. Model 2 is significant and explains 8.9% of the variance in opinions on gender equality ( $R^2 = .089$ ,  $F(2, 1329) = 66.038$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A significant positive effect was found for the effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality whilst controlling for gender ( $B = .100$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Hypothesis 1a can be confirmed, in which we expected that extreme identification with right-wing ideology has a negative effect on citizens' opinions on gender equality. Results show that, if a person identifies more with right-wing ideology, they move .100 up on the 6-point scale of opinions on gender equality, in which (0) very much like me and (6) not like me at all. As respondents become higher situated on the scale due to the effect of political polarization, results suggest

that the opinion on gender equality becomes more negative when a respondent identifies more with right-wing ideology. Thereby, the model shows a significant negative effect for the control variable gender on opinions on gender equality. This result suggests that, if respondents are female, they hold more positive opinions on gender equality as opposed to men. Respondents move  $-.147$  on the gender equality scale if they are a female. This scale is interpreted as (0) very much like me and (6) not like me at all. Hence, the lower down the scale respondents are situated, the more positive opinions they hold in regard to gender equality. ( $B = -.147$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, female respondents find gender equality principles more important than male respondents.

Model 3 shows the results of the regression of the effect of political polarization on the opinion on gender equality and tests whether this effect is moderated by public feedback dynamics. Model 3 is significant and explains 9.4% of the variance in opinions on gender equality ( $R^2 = .094$ ,  $F(4, 1327) = 35.493$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Results show no significant interaction effect ( $B = .021$ ,  $p > .05$ ). This means that the relationship between political polarization and opinions on gender equality is not moderated by public feedback dynamics. We reject hypothesis 2a in which we expect that feedback dynamics would strengthen the effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality. As the effect is not significant, we cannot accept hypothesis 2a. Thereby, in line with Model 2, gender is significant. The results of Model 3 indicate a significant negative effect of gender, meaning that females moved  $-.141$  on the scale of the opinion on gender equality ( $B = -.141$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

In sum, support for hypothesis 1a was found; the more a citizen identifies with right-wing political ideology, the more negative their opinion on gender equality becomes. Given the linearity of the relationship, the contrary happens in case of identification with left-wing ideology (Appendix A). Thereby, no support was found for hypothesis 2a. The results show an insignificant moderation effect of feedback dynamics. As can be derived from Appendix A, the same accounts for left-wing ideology.

Table 3. Regression analyses for variables predicting opinions on gender equality issues on the public level

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	1.332***	.054	1.436***	.062	1.570***	.179
Public political polarization <sup>a</sup>	.106***	.010	.100***	.010	.048	.030
Gender <sup>b</sup>			-.147***	.042	-.141***	.042
Public feedback dynamics					-.054	.060
Public feedback dynamics*public political polarization					.021	.011
N	1332		1332		1332	
F	118.709		66.038		35.493	
R <sup>2</sup>	.081		.089		.094	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup> identification with right-wing ideology

<sup>b</sup> ref. group 0= male, 1= female

### 4.3 Regression analyses on the institutional level

In Table 4, the results of all regressions on the institutional level can be found. Given the small N derived from the dataset, the power of the model was calculated for running the multiple regression analyses. No problems were concluded in terms of power, given that the calculated observed statistical power contains .96. Model 1 includes the regression parameters of the effect of institutional political polarization on the opinion on gender equality. Regression Model 1 was significant ( $R^2 = .382$ ,  $F(1, 11) = 8.413$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A proportion of 38.2% of the variance is explained by political polarization. The results of the regression show a significant positive effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality. Thus, the more a party identifies with right-wing ideology, the less they favor liberal policy on gender equality ( $B = .534$ ,  $p < .05$ ).



Model 2 shows the results of the regression analyses of the effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality whilst taking into account the number of seats per political party. Model 2 is significant and explains 60.6% of the variance in opinions on gender equality on the institutional level ( $R^2 = .606$ ,  $F(2, 10) = 10.247$ ,  $p < .01$ ). A significant positive effect was found for the effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality ( $B = .585$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, hypothesis 1b can be confirmed; the more a political party identifies with right-wing ideology, the more negative their opinion on gender equality becomes. Namely, they move .585 up on the 1 to 10 scale in which (0) strong support for liberal policies on gender equality and (10) opposition of liberal policies on gender equality. As political parties become higher situated on the scale and are more likely to contest liberal policy on gender equality due to the effect of polarization and, hypothesis 1b is accepted. In addition, a significant negative effect was found for the number of seats represented by a party and the opinions on gender equality ( $B = -.170$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This means that, the more seats are held by a political party, the more they favor liberal policy regarding gender equality. Political parties move -.170 down on the 0 to 10 scale in which (0) support for progressive policy on gender equality and (10) oppose progressive policy on gender equality. These results suggest that progressive policies on gender equality receive more support from parties with more seats.

Model 3 shows the results of the regression of the effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality, and tests whether this effect is moderated by institutional feedback dynamics. Model 3 is significant and explains 73.7% of the variance in opinions on gender equality ( $R^2 = .737$ ,  $F(4, 8) = 9.389$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Results show no significant interaction effect ( $B = -.087$ ,  $p > .05$ ). This means that the effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality is not influenced by institutional feedback dynamics. We reject hypothesis 2b, in which we expected that the influence of political polarization on opinions on gender equality would be stronger due to institutional feedback dynamics. As our results show no significant interaction effect, we reject hypothesis 2b. Thereby, the number of seats remains significant in Model 3. Our results suggest that a party with more seats is more likely to support progressive policy on gender equality. The results of Model 3 show a significant negative effect for the number of seats of a party and their opinions on gender equality. This means that, the more seats are held by a political party, the more likely they are to support liberal policies that promote gender equality. Namely, they move -.195 down on the 0 to 10 scale in which (0) support for liberal policy on gender equality issues and (10) oppose liberal policy on gender equality. Hence, the lower down the scale they are situated, the more strongly they support progressive policy on gender equality.

In sum, support for hypothesis 1b was found. The more a political party identifies with (extreme) right-wing political ideology, the more negative their opinion on gender equality becomes — they are more likely to contest liberal policy on gender equality. As this relationship is linear, the contrary happens in case of identification with left-wing ideology (Appendix B). Thereby, we reject hypothesis 2b in which we expected that institutional feedback dynamics would strengthen the effect of political polarization on opinions on gender equality. Our results suggest that there is no significant interaction effect. As can be derived from Appendix B, the same accounts for left-wing ideology.

*Table 4. Regression analyses for variables predicting opinions on gender equality issues on the institutional level*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	1.669	1.103	2.695**	.959	.415	2.886
Institutional political polarization <sup>a</sup>	.534*	.184	.585**	.148	1.125*	.154
Seats			-.170*	.063	-.195**	.051
Institutional feedback dynamics					.384	.500
Institutional feedback dynamics*public political polarization					-.087	.065
N	13		13		13	
F	8.413		10.247		9.389	
R <sup>2</sup>	.382		.606		.737	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup> Identification with right-wing ideology.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

### 5.1 Conclusion and discussion

Despite political efforts, gender inequality in the Netherlands decreases at a slow pace. Scholars appoint *political polarization* to underly this issue. This study aimed to understand whether the opinions on gender equality were affected by political polarization in the multiparty context of the Netherlands. Thereby, this study theorized that feedback dynamics would moderate these relationships.

For context, this study showcased the current distribution of opinions on gender equality on the public- and institutional level. Per first conclusion, the current distribution of opinions on gender equality in the Netherlands differs per societal level. The opinions of citizens were centered. Citizens generally found equal opportunities important (*Q1a*). On the other hand, the opinions on gender equality on the institutional level were more widespread. Rightist parties strongly contest liberal policy in regard to gender equality, whereas leftist parties strongly support liberal values in regard to gender equality (*Q1b*).

This difference in distribution is striking in light of political polarization, as it counteracts the assumption that both the public and the institute hold divisive opinions on gender equality (Gwiazda, 2020; Leonard et al., 2021). However, this finding could be supported by alternative explanations. First, non-experts, such as citizens, are more likely to treat gender equality as a *de facto*. They see gender equality as a protected political and civil right — which it is not (Stenner, 2011). Thus, citizens might evaluate their opinion on gender equality in a high category of importance, as they might feel it is not a matter of opinion but a solid right. Second, the findings for the public level could be obscured due to conformity bias. Conformity bias contains the tendency of people to give a response that fits societal norms, whereas their answer does not truly reflect their views (Padalia, 2014). This might obscure results (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Political scientists participating in the CHES Europe were not susceptible to conformity bias, as they evaluated political parties according to scientific standards (Jolly et al., 2022). Contrary to that, citizens participating in the ESS were susceptible to conformity bias as they had to express personal opinions. Therefore, results from the ESS might be obscured — and public opinions could, in fact, just be as widespread as the institutional level showcases.

Per second conclusion, findings of this study show that political polarization could indeed hinder progress on gender equality in the Dutch context. In line with *Gender Ideology Theory*, results showed that political polarization affects opinions on gender equality to the

extent that extreme identification with right-wing ideology leads to more negative opinions, and that the extreme identification with left-wing ideology leads to more positive opinions. Thereby, consistent with the *Political Polarization Framework*, this effect occurs on both the public- and institutional levels of society. Although these findings need to be interpreted with caution, this suggests that political polarization could indeed create a bigger schism in political opinions and slow down progress toward gender equality in the Netherlands. Per illustration, results suggest that left-wing parties merely support liberal policies in regard to gender equality and right-wing parties more strongly contest liberal policies for gender equality. These findings support the notion that it is the systematic political disagreement that slows down progress due to inconsistent policymaking processes— and that solving societal problems becomes increasingly difficult in polarized nations (Jenichen, 2018; Levin et al., 2021).

Per third conclusion, the extended model of the *Political Polarization Framework* is not supported by this study. Contrary to our expectations, feedback dynamics did not moderate the public- nor institutional relationship between political polarization and the opinions on gender equality. First, this might be due to the fact that feedback dynamics do not exist in multiparty contexts like the Netherlands — and do only exist in twoparty contexts in which the model was designed. For example, the concept of additive response is supported by the notion that elites are able to live in their own *echochamber* in which participants have similar beliefs that amplify or reinforce their preexisting beliefs by communication and repetition (Dubois & Blank, 2018). This concept could well exist in a twoparty context in which information homogeneity is more likely. However, scholars state that feedback dynamics have a harder time enduring in multiparty contexts like the Netherlands (Markgraf & Schoch, 2019). For example, there is frequent interaction with opposing opinions, and homophily is relatively low in multiparty contexts. Therefore, segregated political discussions become more difficult. Hence, the feedback dynamic (*i.e.*, echochamber) is continuously disrupted by other elites that hold heterogenous opinions (Markgraf & Schoch, 2019). Hence, it could be that additive response mechanisms have a harder time enduring in the Dutch political landscape — or might even not exist (Markgraf & Schoch, 2019). Second, the operationalization of the variable for public feedback dynamics only partially covers the construct validity of the concept. As the ESS provides attitudes towards the Dutch political system, public feedback dynamics were measured based on the *opinion* of respondents. However, the mechanism as described by Leonard and colleagues (2021) implies the *factual* anticipation on policy mood by the political elite.

In sum, findings of this study contribute to the knowledge on political polarization in the multiparty context of Netherlands. We can conclude that, similar to twoparty contexts, political polarization affects both the public- and institutional opinions on gender equality. As it causes more divisive opinions in both spheres, the impact of political polarization could hinder progress toward gender equality. However, contrary to twoparty contexts, this study does not support the notion that these relationships are moderated by feedback dynamics in the Dutch multiparty context (*Q2a* and *Q2b*).

## **5.2 Strengths and limitations**

Although this research was conducted with great care, there are a few limitations that should be considered. First, results of this study were interpreted under the working definition that extreme identification with political ideology suggests political polarization (Brockman & Gayk, 1977; Van den Hurk, 2021). Although this was carefully selected from other studies, scholars state that measuring political polarization involves more than ideological extremity alone (Van den Hurk, 2021). Complex ideologies are otherwise simplified into single left-right dimensions that overlook nuances and diversity within political beliefs and systems (Carroll & Kubo, 2021; Stanig, 2011). Therefore, findings of this study could be seen as generalizations, excluding other reasoning to oppose liberal implications of gender equality such as conservatism and religiosity. For future research implications, it would be more fruitful to analyze political polarization to the extent that goes beyond ideological left-right consistency and includes alternative reasoning for opinions on gender equality (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005; Fiorina et al., 2005; Van den Hurk, 2021).

Second, the *Political Polarization Framework* by Leonard and colleagues (2021) was only conceptually adopted within this research. This means that concepts were derived from the model but were fed with different data than the original model. Although this allowed for the measurement of political polarization in Dutch context, we must also conclude that it decreases the construct validity of the measured variables. For example, Leonard and colleagues (2021) explain that there are multiple facets to institutional feedback dynamics, such as self-reinforcement, reflexive partisanship, and additive response among elites (Leonard et al., 2021). However, the CHES Europe did only allow for the measurement of the additive response mechanism. Hence, it is of added value to run the same analysis with policy mood data in future research; specifically, to re-examine whether feedback dynamics could be present in the Dutch multiparty context.

Third, this research approaches political polarization as a *state*. However, Leonard and colleagues (2021) also show how, over time, feedback loops between elites and public opinion drive polarization to extremity. Therefore, this research fails to acknowledge that there could be significant differences in the extent of political polarization over time, and that it is rather a *process* than a state. For future research, it is important to look at different timespans of political hardship, as it provides more insight in the dynamics of political polarization.

This study also has several strengths that should be highlighted. First, this research generates insights into political polarization — going beyond the extensively researched two-party context and into the underresearched multiparty context. Second, this research provides insights into how political polarization affects the opinions of citizens and political actors whilst encountering specific issue areas. Not only can societies now recognize the impact of political polarization, but also reckon with the phenomenon while critically evaluating the pace in which they solve societal problems together — and ultimately, opt for a faster pace of change. Third, this research could serve as a methodological basis for different demographic contexts or other political areas of friction. Both the European Social Survey and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey have also been conducted in other European countries. Therefore, this study could be replicated in other multiparty contexts in order to add to the current body of literature on polarization. Thereby, this study allows for measurement on other salient political themes, such as climate change, economics, immigration, and discrimination.

## 6. Policy Recommendations

In addition to answering the main research questions, findings of this study allow for implications that might benefit Dutch governmental organizations that aim to overcome political polarization and reduce gender inequalities at a faster pace. As results of this study suggest that public- and institutional polarization might hinder progress towards gender equality in the Netherlands, we aim to answer the following research question:

**(Q3):** How could governmental organizations depolarize the Dutch political landscape in order to promote gender equality in the Netherlands?

We suggest policy recommendations that focus on the depolarization of both the public- and institutional level. Depolarization interventions are known as the efforts and policies that are implemented by governmental institutions to address political, social, and cultural polarization within society (Clark, 2022). Such interventions aim to reduce divisions, promote inclusive dialogue, and foster a more cooperative environment for discussion (Curini et al., 2015). Hereby, gender equality can be more easily promoted in political spheres in order to decrease gender inequalities at a faster pace than now.

### 6.1 Public depolarization interventions

First, the state and its transnational civil organizations should foster constructive conversations amongst citizens through *public dialogue initiatives*. By doing so, a more positive, effective future is created in times of political polarization. Both national and local institutions should foster constructive conversations, so that perspectives can be shared, and diverse viewpoints are presented. Hereby, citizens are more willing to co-create an effective future with positive inquiries in order to generate new meaning and inspire new possibilities (Curini et al., 2015). As the state plays a key role in constructing public discourse related to gender equality, national and local governments should establish platforms or outlets where citizens can engage in constructive conversations (Dejaeghere, 2012). These initiatives might include physical conferences such as townhall meeting and public consultations. On the other hand, technology allows for online platforms that facilitate meaningful discussions with accurate moderation.

A healthy democracy requires informed citizens on all aspects of the political spectrum — especially in times of polarization (DiGiacomo et al., 2021). Therefore, per second recommendation, national and local institutional organs should implement *civic education*

*programs* that promote democratic values, tolerance, and respect for diverse opinions. Civic education initiatives help correct misconceptions by presenting more accurate information on not only political opponents but also the whole political sphere (Hartman et al., 2022). These programs could be implemented in schools, community centers, or through public campaigns. Per illustration, media literacy programs could help citizens to develop skills necessary to critically evaluate information sources, recognize biases, and navigate within the complex political landscape. By promoting media literacy, governments could reduce the influence of misinformation and disinformation — which is known to fuel political polarization and outgroup animosity (Clark, 2023; Hartman et al., 2022). With more information available, it becomes easier for citizens to find commonalities amongst people living increasingly different lives (Hartman et al., 2022). As with any other intergroup conflict, finding common ground is a possible solution towards bridging political divides (Ramiah et al., 2011).

## **6.2 Institutional depolarization interventions**

Through the introduction of *policy measures* aimed at reducing polarization or addressing its underlying causes, national and local governments should be able to reduce political polarization. Such initiatives may include policy implications that bridge socioeconomic gaps, promote social cohesion, or address structural inequalities that contribute to polarization (Evans & Neundorf, 2020).

In democratic systems, diversity substitutes neutrality (Bednar, 2021). Per fourth recommendation, both national and local institutional bodies should actively work towards *diverse representation* in decision-making bodies in order to reduce political polarization. For example, legislatures, advisory committees, or public agencies should be more inclusive. By ensuring that a wide range of voices and experiences are included within higher institutional levels, institutional organs are able to avoid concentration of power and give marginalized groups a say in shaping policies (Clark, 2022). It motivates for political behavior that encourages toleration of diversity, inclusive politics, and the notion that multiple perceptions of truth can coexist —aspects that are frequently forgotten in times of polarization (Shapiro, 2021). In order to enhance diversity specifically, we advise that the DHR should collaborate with NGOs in order to facilitate a mass movement toward diversity. According to Critical Mass Theory, society will only change after a certain number of people get together or enter a setting (Oliver, 2013). By assembling a mass of organizations that contributes to diversity in society, the government will be able to set a new status quo — one that goes beyond polar opposites and connects people in times of political trouble.



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## 8. Appendix

### Appendix A: Regression analyses on the public level with left-wing ideology as reference point for political polarization.

**Table 5.** *Regression analyses for variables predicting opinions on gender equality on the public level*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	2.396***	.052	2.436***	.053	2.046***	.179
Public political polarization <sup>a</sup>	-.106***	.010	-.100***	.010	-.048	.030
Gender <sup>b</sup>			-.147***	.042	-.141***	.042
Public feedback dynamics					.152	.006
Public feedback dynamics*public political polarization					-.021	.011
N	1332		1332		1332	
F	118.709		66.038		35.493	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.081		.089		.094	

*\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < .001*

<sup>a</sup> *identification with left-wing ideology*

<sup>b</sup> *ref. group 0= male, 1= female*



**Appendix B: Regression analyses on the institutional level with left-wing ideology as reference point for political polarization.**

**Table 6.** *Regression analyses for variables predicting opinions on gender equality on the institutional level*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	9.106***	1.356	7.990***	1.269	10.796*	3.843
Institutional political polarization <sup>a</sup>	-.524*	.226	-.580*	.196	-1.266*	.540
Seats			.185	.083	.218*	.070
Institutional feedback dynamics					-.469	.666
Institutional feedback dynamics*public political polarization					.110	.086
N	13		13		13	
F	5.371		6.096		6.187	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.267		.459		.634	

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup> identification with left-wing ideology

## Appendix C: Syntax for ESS data

Encoding: UTF-8.

```
DATASET ACTIVATE DataSet1.  
AUTORECODE VARIABLES=cntry  
/INTO cntrynbr  
/PRINT.
```

*\*Preparation sample\**

*\*1: Country selection Netherlands\**

```
SELECT IF cntrynbr=15.  
EXECUTE.
```

*\*2: Behold Dutch citizenship\**

```
SELECT IF ctzcntr=1.  
FREQUENCIES ctzcntr.
```

*\*3: select sample aged between 18 and 90\**

```
SELECT IF agea GE 18.
```

*\*4: Remove all missing values\**

```
COMPUTE nomiss = nmiss(lrscale, ipeqopt, gndr, psppsgva, agea) = 0.  
FILTER BY nomiss.
```

*\*Preparation variables\**

*\*preparation independent variable: public political polarization\**

```
SELECT IF (lrscale=0 OR lrscale=1 OR lrscale=2 OR lrscale=3 OR lrscale=4 OR lrscale=5
```

OR lrscale=6 OR lrscale=7 OR lrscale=8 OR lrscale=9 OR lrscale=10).

EXECUTE.

FREQUENCIES lrscale.

*\*preparation dependent variable: public opinion on gender equality issues\**

SELECT IF (ipeqopt=1 OR ipeqopt=2 OR ipeqopt=3 OR ipeqopt=4 OR ipeqopt=5 OR  
ipeqopt=6).

EXECUTE.

FREQUENCIES ipeqopt.

*\*preparation control variables: gender\**

FREQUENCIES gndr.

RECODE gndr(1=0) (2=1) INTO female.

EXECUTE.

FREQUENCIES female.

*\*Preparation moderation variable\**

SELECT IF (psppsgva=1 OR psppsgva=2 OR psppsgva=3 OR psppsgva=4 OR  
psppsgva=5).

EXECUTE.

*\*Checking assumptions for moderation\**

EXAMINE VARIABLES = lrscale ipeqopt female psppsgva agea.

/PLOT BOXPLOT STEMLEAF HISTOGRAM

/COMPARE GROUPS

/STATISTICS DESCRIPTIVES

```
/CINTERVAL 95
/MISSING LISTWISE
/NOTOTAL.
```

*\*Descriptives per included variable\**

```
DESCRIPTIVES lrscale.
FREQUENCIES lrscale.
```

```
DESCRIPTIVES ipeqopt.
FREQUENCIES ipeqopt.
```

```
DESCRIPTIVES female.
FREQUENCIES female.
```

```
DESCRIPTIVES agea.
FREQUENCIES agea.
```

```
DESCRIPTIVES psppsgva.
FREQUENCIES psppsgva.
```

*\*RQ1a: Distribution of opinions on gender equality issues in the public sphere\**

\* Chart Builder.

```
GGRAPH
/GRAPHDATASET NAME="graphdataset" VARIABLES=ipeqopt
COUNT()[name="COUNT"] MISSING=LISTWISE
REPORTMISSING=NO
/GRAPHSPEC SOURCE=INLINE.
BEGIN GPL
SOURCE: s=userSource(id("graphdataset"))
DATA: ipeqopt=col(source(s), name("ipeqopt"), unit.category())
DATA: COUNT=col(source(s), name("COUNT"))
GUIDE: axis(dim(1), label("Important that people are treated equally and have equal ",
```

```

    "opportunities"))
GUIDE: axis(dim(2), label("Count"))
GUIDE: text.title(label("Simple Bar Count of Important that people are treated equally and
",
    "have equal opportunities"))
SCALE: cat(dim(1), include("1", "2", "3", "4", "5", "6"))
SCALE: linear(dim(2), include(0))
ELEMENT: interval(position(ipeqopt*COUNT), shape.interior(shape.square))
END GPL.

```

*\*Regression Model 1: Linear regression public political polarization\**

```

REGRESSION
/DESCRIPTIVES MEAN STDDEV CORR SIG N
/MISSING LISTWISE
/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA CHANGE
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
/NOORIGIN
/DEPENDENT ipeqopt
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale.

```

*\*Regression Model 2: Linear regression public polarization and opinion on gender equality  
+ control\**

```

REGRESSION
/DESCRIPTIVES MEAN STDDEV CORR SIG N
/MISSING LISTWISE
/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA CHANGE
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
/NOORIGIN
/DEPENDENT ipeqopt
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale female.

```

*\*Regression model 3: Linear regression public polarization X opinion on gender equality issues + control + moderation\**

*\*Step 1: centering means of independent and moderation variable\**

*\*Step 2: creating interaction term\**

```
COMPUTE INT_lrscalexpsppsgva=lrscale*psppsgva.  
EXECUTE.
```

*\*Step 3: perform moderation analyses\**

```
REGRESSION  
/DESCRIPTIVES MEAN STDDEV CORR SIG N  
/MISSING LISTWISE  
/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA CHANGE  
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)  
/NOORIGIN  
/DEPENDENT ipeqopt  
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale  
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale female  
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale female psppsgva INT_lrscalexpsppsgva.
```

*\*Additional testing: political polarization with (extreme) left-wing ideology as reference point\**

```
DATASET ACTIVATE DataSet1.  
RECODE lrscale (0=10) (1=9) (2=8) (3=7) (4=6) (5=5) (6=4) (7=3) (8=2) (9=1) (10=0)  
INTO lrscale_left.  
EXECUTE.
```

*\*Regression Model 1: Linear regression public political polarization\**

```
REGRESSION
```

```
/DESCRIPTIVES MEAN STDDEV CORR SIG N
/MISSING LISTWISE
/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA CHANGE
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
/NOORIGIN
/DEPENDENT ipeqopt
/METHOD=ENTER lrscal_left.
```

*\*Regression Model 2: Linear regression public polarization and opinion on gender equality + control\**

```
REGRESSION
/DESCRIPTIVES MEAN STDDEV CORR SIG N
/MISSING LISTWISE
/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA CHANGE
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
/NOORIGIN
/DEPENDENT ipeqopt
/METHOD=ENTER lrscal_left
/METHOD=ENTER lrscal_left female.
```

*\*Regression model 3: Linear regression public polarization X opinion on gender equality issues + control + moderation\**

*\*Step 1: centering means of independent and moderation variable\**

*\*Step 2: creating interaction term\**

```
COMPUTE INT_lrscal_leftxpsppsgva=lrscal_left*psppsgva.
EXECUTE.
```

*\*Step 3: perform moderation analyses\**

```
REGRESSION
```

```
/DESCRIPTIVES MEAN STDDEV CORR SIG N
/MISSING LISTWISE
/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA CHANGE
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
/NOORIGIN
/DEPENDENT ipeqopt
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale_left
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale_left female
/METHOD=ENTER lrscale_left female psppsgva INT_lrscale_leftxpsppsgva.
```



## Appendix D: Syntax for CHES data

DATASET ACTIVATE DataSet1.

*\*Preparation selection criteria\**

*\*1: Selection correct wave\**

SELECT IF (year=2019).

EXECUTE.

*\*2: delete missing value cases\**

COMPUTE nomiss = nmiss (lrgen, sociallifestyle, seat, people\_vs\_elite) = 0

FILTER BY nomiss.

*\*3: country selection Netherlands\**

AUTORECODE VARIABLES=country

/INTO countrynmbr

/PRINT.

SELECT IF (country=10).

EXECUTE.

*\*Assumptions for regression\**

EXAMINE VARIABLES = lrgen sociallifestyle seat people\_vs\_elite

/PLOT BOXPLOT STEMLEAF HISTOGRAM SPREADLEVEL

/COMPARE GROUPS

/STATISTICS DESCRIPTIVES

/CINTERVAL 95

/MISSING LISTWISE

/NOTOTAL

*\*Descriptives and Frequencies\**

FREQUENCIES lrgen.

DESCRIPTIVES lrgen.

FREQUENCIES sociallifestyle.

DESCRIPTIVES sociallifestyle.

FREQUENCIES seat.

DESCRIPTIVES seat.

FREQUENCIES people\_vs\_elite.

DESCRIPTIVES people\_vs\_elite.

*\*RQ1: Figures for distribution of opinions on gender equality principles\**

GGRAPH

/GRAPHDATASET NAME="graphdataset" VARIABLES=party sociallifestyle

MISSING=LISTWISE

REPORTMISSING=NO

/GRAPHSPEC SOURCE=INLINE.

BEGIN GPL

SOURCE: s=userSource(id("graphdataset"))

DATA: party=col(source(s), name("party"), unit.category())

DATA: sociallifestyle=col(source(s), name("sociallifestyle"))

GUIDE: axis(dim(1), label("party"))

GUIDE: axis(dim(2), label("sociallifestyle"))

GUIDE: text.title(label("Simple Bar of sociallifestyle by party"))

SCALE: linear(dim(2), include(0))

ELEMENT: interval(position(party\*sociallifestyle), shape.interior(shape.square))

END GPL.

*\*RQ2b Model 1: Linear Regression IPP and opinions on gender equality issues\**

REGRESSION

```
/MISSING LISTWISE  
/STATISTICS = COEFF OUTS R CHANGE COLLIN ANOVA  
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05)POUT(.10)  
/DEPENDENT sociallifestyle  
/METHOD = ENTER lrgen.
```

*\*RQ2b Model 2: Linear Regression IPP and opinions on gender equality issues, controlled for by number of seats\**

REGRESSION

```
/MISSING LISTWISE  
/STATISTICS = COEFF OUTS R CHANGE COLLIN ANOVA  
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05)POUT(.10)  
/NOORIGIN  
/DEPENDENT sociallifestyle  
/METHOD = ENTER lrgen seat.
```

*\*RQ2b Model 3: Linear Regression IPP and opinions on gender equality issues, controlled for by number of seats and moderated by feedback dynamics on the public level\**

\*

*Step 1: centering means of independent and moderation variable\**

*\*Step 2: creating interaction term\**

```
COMPUTE people_vs_elite_x_lrgen = people_vs_elite*lrgen.  
EXECUTE.
```

REGRESSION

```
/MISSING LISTWISE  
/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA
```

```
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
/NOORIGIN
/DEPENDENT sociallifestyle
/METHOD=ENTER lrgen
/METHOD=ENTER lrgen seat
/METHOD=ENTER lrgen seat people_vs_elite people_vs_elite_x_lrgen.
```

*\*Additional testing: political polarization with (extreme) left-wing ideology as reference point\**

```
DATASET ACTIVATE DataSet1.
RECODE lrgen (0=10) (1=9) (2=8) (3=7) (4=6) (5=5) (6=4) (7=3) (8=2) (9=1) (10=0) INTO
lrgen_left.
EXECUTE.
```

```
REGRESSION
/MISSING LISTWISE
/STATISTICS = COEFF OUTS R CHANGE COLLIN ANOVA
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05)POUT(.10)
/DEPENDENT sociallifestyle
/METHOD = ENTER lrgen_left.
```

*\*RQ2b Model 2: Linear Regression IPP and opinions on gender equality issues, controlled for by number of seats\**

```
REGRESSION
/MISSING LISTWISE
/STATISTICS = COEFF OUTS R CHANGE COLLIN ANOVA
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05)POUT(.10)
/NOORIGIN
/DEPENDENT sociallifestyle
/METHOD = ENTER lrgen_left seat.
```

*\*RQ2b Model 3: Linear Regression IPP and opinions on gender equality issues, controlled*

*for by number of seats and moderated by feedback dynamics on the public level\**

*\*Step 1: centering means of independent and moderation variable\**

*\*Step 2: creating interaction term\**

```
COMPUTE people_vs_elite_x_lrgen_left = people_vs_elite*lrgen_left.  
EXECUTE.
```

```
REGRESSION
```

```
/MISSING LISTWISE
```

```
/STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA
```

```
/CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
```

```
/NOORIGIN
```

```
/DEPENDENT sociallifestyle
```

```
/METHOD=ENTER lrgen_left
```

```
/METHOD=ENTER lrgen_left seat
```

```
/METHOD=ENTER lrgen_left seat people_vs_elite people_vs_elite_x_lrgen_left.
```