Women and the Wall: Gender Attitudes and Political Engagement in Unified Germany

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Women are generally less likely to express an interest in politics, join political organizations, and participate in political activities. Scholars posit that gender-(in)egalitarian attitudes are an important determinant of women's political engagement. Yet, existing work finds mixed support for this claim. Using the German General Social Survey (1991–2016), we compare citizens' attitudes toward gender across birth cohorts from East and West Germany. We find that cohorts socialized in the East hold more progressive gender attitudes than West Germans. We then show that traditional gender attitudes are negatively correlated with political interest and participation and that this effect is somewhat greater for women. Importantly, women who hold gender-egalitarian attitudes are nearly as politically engaged as men. We then assess the robustness of these results, show the findings hold in cross-national analyses, and explore an individual-level mechanism underlying our results. Together, our findings reveal an important barrier to political engagement.

Across countries and over time, women have generally been less likely to express an interest in politics, join political organizations, and engage in other political activities (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012). Women's lower level of political interest and participation is concerning because it "reflects and further reifies gender stratification throughout society" (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010, 318) and also "undermine[s] the quality of deliberation, representation, and legitimacy in the democratic process" (Kittilson 2016, 1). If women are less politically engaged, this "may result in a clear disadvantage in women's capacity to voice their political wants and needs, and thus to influence the political decision-making process" (Fraile and Gomez 2017, 601).

Given these pernicious consequences, researchers aim to identify the factors that depress women's interest and participation in politics. This work shows that women often lack the resources to participate on an even playing field with men and that societal- and institutional-factors—including women's underrepresentation among political elites—erect additional barriers to inclusion. Less clear, however, is the role played by gender-(in)egalitarian attitudes.

Intuitively, traditional gender-role attitudes—essentialist views and beliefs that encourage women to be more passive and focused on the private sphere—should be associated with lower levels of political engagement among women. Indeed, inegalitarian attitudes could be an especially powerful obstacle for women's political interest and participation, as they suggest that women have internalized norms that limit their own abilities and confine their roles to the domestic arena. Yet, the relationship between gender-(in)egalitarian attitudes and political engagement remains unclear. Whereas some scholars find support for this link, others find null results.

Even when gender-role attitudes and political engagement are correlated, the nature and direction of this relationship remain unclear. Gender-egalitarian attitudes might predict women's political interest and participation, or citizens (and countries) might display more gender-egalitarian values precisely because women are more engaged. People who hold traditional gender attitudes, moreover, differ from their more egalitarian counterparts in many ways, just as countries in which citizens on average express gender-traditional attitudes

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differ from more egalitarian states on many dimensions. Women's depressed political engagement may thus be a consequence of traditional gender attitudes or one of the many other factors that separate more- and less-progressive citizens and states.

Do traditional gender-role attitudes hamper women's political interest and participation? To help answer this question, we examine gender-role attitudes and citizens' political engagement in unified Germany. The German case is especially compelling because the Cold War division and subsequent reunification of the country offer a "unique opportunity to investigate . . . [the] understanding of political issues of citizens who were socialized in different contexts" (Neundorf 2009, 202). The East and West had a similar history—one in which women were excluded from politics and kept the home according to the mantra "Kinder, Küche, Kirche" ("children, kitchen, church"). Then, the two states experienced four decades of exposure to radically different gender ideologies. Whereas under communist rule East Germany (the German Democratic Republic [GDR]) actively propagated gender equality (at least in some areas), during the same period, West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG]) was characterized by a strong adherence to the male breadwinner–female caregiver model (Banaszak 2006; Bauernschuster and Rainer 2012).

The separation of Germany allows us to observe the effects of semi-exogenously formed gender attitudes on stated interest in politics and political participation (i.e., vote intention and party membership). By leveraging this case, we minimize many of the inferential barriers inherent in studying the relationship between gender-(in)egalitarian attitudes and women's political engagement. To establish that the East–West separation did, in fact, influence citizens' gender attitudes, we first use the German General Social Survey (1991–2016) to compare the beliefs of men and women within different birth cohorts in East and West Germany. We find no differences in gender attitudes between birth cohorts from the East and West who were socialized after the fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequent German reunification. Consistent with existing research, however, we show that among the Cold War generation, those from the West hold significantly more traditional attitudes than those from the East.

Having confirmed that women and men socialized in the GDR express more egalitarian attitudes, we next show that these traditional gender attitudes are on average negatively correlated with political interest, intention to vote, and party membership. This effect holds for both men and women but is somewhat greater among women. Importantly, women who hold gender-egalitarian attitudes are nearly as politically engaged as their male counterparts.

We explore the robustness of these findings in several ways. For example, we address the possible endogeneity between reported gender attitudes and political engagement through instrumental variable regressions. We replicate our results with cross-national data, suggesting that the positive relationship between egalitarian gender-role attitudes and political engagement on average holds for both men and women across Europe. Finally, we examine one possible individual-level mechanism underlying our findings: women's access to education. We demonstrate that women in East Germany had higher education rates than their West German counterparts and that having an educated mother is associated with both more egalitarian gender attitudes and greater political interest and participation.

Taken together, our findings suggest that traditional gender-role attitudes likely remain an impediment to women's political engagement in democracies today. We offer insights into the potential for change via policies that promote egalitarian values, including women's enrollment in tertiary education. Importantly, our work suggests that fostering egalitarian attitudes might strengthen democracy by bolstering both women's and men's political interest and participation.

GENDER AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Women are on average less politically engaged than men. There is good reason, moreover, to be concerned about women's lower levels of political interest and participation. Men's preferences are more likely to be represented in politics (Homola 2019; Reher 2018), and lower levels of political engagement among women are thought to result in an underrepresentation of their interests, especially when men and women have sharply divergent preferences (Gottlieb, Grossman, and Robinson 2018). When women's political engagement is limited, society also loses out on the talents, skills, and leadership qualities that women possess not only as engaged citizens but also as potential candidates, as interest is a prerequisite for political ambition (Conroy and Green 2020).

More generally, engagement matters because a strong democracy relies on an "informed, knowledgeable, and confident citizenry" (Hinojosa and Kittilson 2020, 7). For individuals, political interest and participation are crucial for fulfilling the ideals of democratic citizenship. At a societal level, high levels of political engagement strengthen democratic processes (Hinojosa and Kittilson 2020). Democratic systems thrive when they reflect the diversity of their populations and ensure equal opportunities for all individuals to participate. When important constituencies, such as women, are less engaged in politics, it can result in democratic deficits and diminish the legitimacy of decision-making processes for

all citizens (women and men alike) (Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2025).

Existing work identifies myriad individual- and contextual-level factors that influence women's political interest and participation, including their reduced inclination to discuss politics, contact elected officials, join political parties, and so on. At the individual level, scholars note that women often enjoy fewer of the civic resources associated with political engagement, including money, time, access to networks, and political knowledge (Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2021; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001).

Focusing on contextual-level factors, mounting evidence points to the institutional and cultural determinants of women's political engagement. Significant attention has been paid, for example, to "role model effects" and the influence of women's presence in political institutions on women in the mass public (Barnes and Burchard 2013; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2025). Other work explores the power of women's collective action (Prillaman 2023). Still others emphasize party competition (Corder and Wolbrecht 2016; Teele 2024) and party system institutionalization (Fraile and Gomez 2017) on women's interest and participation. Scholars also examine the effects of legal (Tudor 2022) and electoral rules (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012; Teele 2023), including the impact of electoral gender quotas on women's engagement (Davidson-Schmich 2016; Kittilson 2016; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012).

With respect to cultural explanations, Inglehart and Norris (2003) and others focus on the modernization process—in other words, the shift from agrarian to industrial and, finally, postindustrial societies. Modernization theory posits that socioeconomic development and societal gender equality bolster women's participation in politics (Coffé and Dilli 2015). More generally, scholars draw on cultural explanations, those that "emphasize the attitudes and values that people bring to the electoral process, including their political interest and ideological beliefs" (Inglehart and Norris 2003, 102), to explain (wo)men's willingness to participate in politics.

The degree to which a society holds traditional versus egalitarian gender-role attitudes, in particular, is thought to influence both women's political engagement (Fraile and Gomez 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2003) and presence in elected office (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Paxton and Kunovich 2003). Likewise, attitudes toward gender equality—including hostile and ambivalent sexism—increasingly shape women's and men's political behavior (Cassese and Barnes 2019; de Geus, Ralph-Morrow, and Shorrocks 2022). Below, we explore the link between gender attitudes and women's political engagement, including identifying the obstacles inherent in testing the relationship between the two. We then propose using German separation and reunification to study the link between attitudes and women's interest and participation in politics.

TRADITIONAL VERSUS EGALITARIAN GENDER-ROLE ATTITUDES AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

For much of history, social norms limited women's formal participation in political activities (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; Prillaman 2023). This is in part because attitudes about gender roles shape citizens' expectations about appropriate masculine and feminine behavior within a given culture. Women's traditional gender role, for example, is more passive and focused on the private sphere (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; West and Zimmerman 1987).

At the same time, there is variation in adherence to traditional gender roles over space and time. This can be attributed to myriad factors, including exposure to women political elites (Alexander 2012) and feminist movements (Shorrocks 2018), religion and religiosity (Alexander and Welzel 2011), increases in educational attainment (Plutzer 1988), and so on. Differences in the presence and implementation of gender-egalitarian policies can also affect gender attitudes (Sjöberg 2004; Tavits et al. 2024). Banaszak (2006), for example, shows persistent differences in East and West Germans' gender attitudes, which she attributes to the GDR's "gendered state policies" related to religion and women's employment.

Gender-role attitudes, in turn, have clear consequences in the home and workplace. These attitudes affect relationship formation and dissolution, fertility and birth timing, and the division of household labor (Davis and Greenstein 2009). Husbands and wives exhibiting egalitarian gender-role attitudes, for instance, were found to be more likely to share housework equally (Aassve, Fuochi, and Mencarini 2014). Adherence to egalitarian versus traditional attitudes also influences labor force participation, occupational choice, and even women's hourly wages (Corrigall and Konrad 2007). A more traditional gender-role orientation is linked with lower earnings for women, for example, and thus exacerbates the gender wage gap (Judge and Livingston 2008).

Although adherence to traditional gender roles shapes women's attitudes toward and behavior in the public sphere (Campa and Serafinelli 2019; Lippmann, Georgieff, and Senik 2020), their effects on political engagement are less clear. Intuitively, gender-role attitudes should help to explain women's intention to vote, party membership, and political interest. Indeed, Atkeson and Rapoport (2003, 500) argue that they could be "key in understanding differences between men's and women's willingness or ability to communicate political preferences." Traditional gender roles "promote an

unadventurous political role for women" (Fraile and Gomez 2017, 601), and women are often "trapped by a culture that sees politics as a man's world and keeps women's political self-esteem low" (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003, 500). This reduces women's levels of political engagement. Chhibber (2002) demonstrates, for example, that women who do not have an identity outside the household are less likely to be politically active, even after controlling for demographic factors. Cheema et al. (2023) and Prillaman (2023) point to the role of male gatekeepers in constraining women's political participation in contemporary Pakistan and India, respectively.

Complementary work suggests that women in more gender-egalitarian environments participate in politics at levels comparable to men. Both Brulé and Gaikwad (2021) and Robinson and Gottlieb (2021) demonstrate that the gender gap in political participation is smaller in matrilineal societies, which foster more progressive norms about women's roles. Fraile and Gomez (2017) show that gender gaps in political interest are smaller in countries enacting policies aimed at promoting gender equality. Dassonneville and Kostelka (2021) find that cultural differences, as measured by country-level differences in boys' and girls' math scores, explain the gender gap in political interest. At the individual level, Cassese and Holman (2016) find that women with higher levels of gender consciousness are more likely to participate in politics.

Yet, other studies find that gender (in)egalitarian roles have limited effects. In the American context, Welch (1977) called into question the validity of political socialization explanations, finding no systematic differences in levels of men's and women's participation once accounting for situational and structural variables. Related work by Fox and Lawless (2014) finds that traditional family dynamics—including the division of labor pertaining to household tasks and childcare—do not predict gender differences in political ambition. Looking cross-nationally, in their study of 18 Western democracies, Coffé and Bolzendahl note that "controlling for . . . political attitudes did not impact gender gaps as much as might be expected based on theories of . . . gender role socialization" (2010, 331). Likewise, cross-national differences in the gender gap in political participation in 13 Muslim-majority nations cannot be explained by levels of state Islamization, modernization, or societal gender equality (Coffé and Dilli 2015). Mayer and Schmidt (2004) note the surprisingly small gender differences in political interest and beliefs about political participation across four countries with otherwise different beliefs about appropriate gender-role attitudes—China, Japan, Mexico, and the United States.

Although adherence to traditional gender roles clearly varies across countries, whether and how this affects women's political interest and participation remain in doubt, particularly when accounting for other individual- and contextual-level factors. This uncertainty, in turn, has significant consequences for how we seek to bolster women's political engagement. Weighing in on this important debate, *we first posit that, on average, women are less politically interested and less likely to participate in politics than men.*

At the same time, we expect that this gender effect is conditioned on attitudes toward traditional gender roles. Women who hold more progressive beliefs about women's place in the public and private spheres should be as likely as men to express political interest, vote in elections, and join political parties. Women who believe that their main responsibilities lie at home and with their families, on the other hand, are expected to be especially unlikely to engage in what are traditionally regarded as male spheres of activity. *We thus propose that women who espouse traditional gender-role attitudes are less likely to express political interest and participate in politics, whereas women who hold egalitarian gender-role attitudes are (almost) as likely to be politically engaged as men.*

Finally, because of the focus on addressing women's lower levels of political engagement, few studies consider the impact of traditional gender roles on men's political interest and participation. Traditional gender roles position men as autonomous, self-reliant leaders who engage in the public sphere (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; West and Zimmerman 1987). Yet, we have not established whether adherence to these roles correlates with political interest and participation or whether men who adopt more egalitarian views withdraw from the public sphere. Indeed, it is possible that egalitarian roles positively influence both men's and women's political engagement, as they may lead individuals to feel a stronger sense of responsibility to contribute to a more equitable society. Thus, although we are principally concerned with understanding how gender-role attitudes shape women's political interest and participation, *we allow for the possibility that gender-role attitudes may also shape men's political engagement.*

IDENTIFYING THE EFFECT OF GENDER ROLE ATTITUDES ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Although we expect that holding egalitarian gender-role attitudes increases women's political engagement, concerns about unit heterogeneity and reverse causality make it difficult to test this claim. First, countries in which citizens express gender-egalitarian attitudes differ from more traditional states in multiple ways. For example, they are more secular, enjoy higher levels of economic development, and elect more women to political office (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Paxton and Kunovich 2003). This calls into question whether women's lower levels of participation are a consequence of egalitarian attitudes

or one of the many other alternative factors that separate more- and less-progressive states.

Second, there is reason to suspect reverse causality. Aggregate-level gender-egalitarian attitudes may predict women's political engagement or countries may be more gender egalitarian precisely because women engage and participate more (Alexander 2012). At the individual level, women may be more engaged in politics because they hold more progressive beliefs about gender roles. Or, their political interest and participation may determine their attitudes.

Our inability to randomly assign traditional or egalitarian attitudes represents a central challenge to assessing the connection between gender-role attitudes and political engagement. Following other studies in political science and economics (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündel 2007; Banaszak 2006; Banaszak and Plutzer 1993; Bauernschuster and Rainer 2012; Neundorf 2009; Rohrschneider 1994), we mitigate these issues by taking advantage of the division of post–World War II (WWII) Germany into two distinct political, economic, and ideological regimes. The quasi-exogenous imposition of radically divergent gendered state policies allowed for the formation of distinct gender-role attitudes among East and West Germans who might otherwise have held similar beliefs about what constitutes appropriate behavior for men and women. This allows us to identify whether these attitudes in turn influence political interest, intention to vote, and party membership in unified Germany.[1] Below, we explain more about the case and then turn to our empirical strategy.

Gender-role attitudes in the two Germanies

With respect to gender attitudes, East and West Germany had broadly similar starting conditions. Historical sources on gender and family norms in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany support the idea that birth cohorts from both parts of the country socialized before the Cold War were similar with respect to their attitudes about gender (Bauernschuster and Rainer 2012; Boak 1990; Hausen 1983; Tenfelde 1992). Studies examining fertility, marriage, and women's employment rates from the first half of the twentieth century, for example, show no divergence across the two regions (Banaszak 2006; Bauernschuster and Rainer 2012). Women's representation in state parliaments throughout the Weimar Republic was also similar in Eastern and Western states (Boak 1990).

The creation of the socialist-controlled GDR and the conservative-corporatist democracy under the auspices of the Western allies, the FRG, marked "the beginning of a monumental social experiment." In both systems, the "political culture had to be reconstructed to conform to the new regimes" (Rohrschneider 1994, 928). And, although East and West Germany had similar starting conditions (though, see Becker et al. [2020]), their subsequent stances on the place of women in society were as divergent as their approaches to regulating the economy, particularly with respect to women's education and employment.

These "very different positions on the role of women in society" were clearly "reflected in the two governments' social policies" (Banaszak 2006, 31–2). West Germany represented the conservative welfare state or male-breadwinner model (Orloff 1993). The dominant strategy of the postwar West German government was to propagate a gender regime that idealized men as breadwinners and women as mothers and housewives devoted to their "natural" calling of home and family life (Budde 1999, 54–5). Education and employment policies explicitly promoted this traditional gender hierarchy (Pfau-Effinger 1998, 156). West German parents, for example, largely decided whether their children would pursue higher education, and, even in the 1970s, many "still consider[ed] the education of daughters as a luxury" (Shaffer 1981, 130). Likewise, until the late 1950s, women could only take up paid employment with their husband's expressed permission. Even if women did work outside the home, the Civil Code maintained that their principal responsibility lay in supporting their family through domestic work. This male-breadwinner model changed only marginally in the late 1960s and 1970s despite the notable efforts of the West German second-wave feminist movement (Pfau-Effinger 1998, 454–55).[2]

East Germany, by comparison, was a dual-breadwinner state (Sandole-Staroste 2002). The Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) regime formally granted women the right to abortion, education, and paid employment. Education in particular was one of the signature policies for the GDR, and this drew women into universities at much higher absolute and relative rates than in the FRG. Likewise, in the aftermath of WWII, the shortage of male workers and economic mismanagement and resource loitering by the Soviet occupiers created a situation in which women's labor force participation was of vital importance for postwar recovery (Sandole-Staroste

1. Becker, Mergele, and Woessmann (2020) argue that preexisting differences between East and West Germany before separation—coupled with selective migration in subsequent years—disqualify Germany as a natural experiment to study the long-term effects of regime type. We do not claim to identify the effect of a political regime on women's political engagement but rather use the setting to compare political interest and participation between regions with differing gender attitudes. For other recent work using this case to study the effects of gender role attitudes, see, for example, Zoch (2021) and Jessen (2021).

2. See table SI.1 for a list of family- and gender-policy milestones in the FRG and GDR.

2002). The introduction of the Mother- and Child Act (*Mütter- und Kinderschutzgesetz* 1950), an independent family law (*Familiengesetzbuch* 1966), and other family support policies (*Familienförderungspolitik*) further strengthened women's rights as mothers and workers. SED rhetoric and socialist media also propagated the notion that women were entitled to education and should be able to combine domestic and paid work (Einhorn 1995).

While the FRG reinforced traditional gender attitudes, GDR policies were markedly more progressive. These differences had long-term consequences. Even after the end of the Cold War, East Germans were stronger supporters of women's employment (Banaszak 2006). East German women continue to contribute more to household income than their West German counterparts and can earn more than their husbands without having to increase their housework hours (Lippmann et al. 2020). Women from East Germany are also more likely to place importance on career success than women from the West (Campa and Serafinelli 2019), and views on maternal employment remain substantially different between the two regions (Zoch 2021). For example, the long-run child penalty on women's income share is lower for East German couples (Jessen 2021).

Although necessarily brief, and therefore generalized, our comparison of East and West Germany during the Cold War demonstrates that the two states pursued radically different sets of policies concerning women's involvement in the public sphere. Even if women's roles in the private sphere may have been similar across the two Germanys, attitudes toward women's role in society diverged starkly. Thus, like Banaszak (2006), Campa and Serafinelli (2019), Lippmann and colleagues (2020) and others, we expect that citizens raised in the former GDR hold different gender-role attitudes than those from West Germany. We also posit that these traditional or progressive gender attitudes explain women's (un)willingness to engage with politics. We turn now to testing these claims.

DATA AND METHOD

We examine the relationship between traditional gender-role attitudes and political engagement using the biennial cumulative data from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS 1980–2018). We focus on data from 1991 through 2016, which include respondents from both the East and West and questions tapping into respondents' gender attitudes and political engagement. In our first analysis, we examine whether citizens raised in the GDR express more progressive gender-role attitudes than those brought up in the FRG by testing differences in gender attitudes in the new and old federal states and across generations. To capture citizens' gender-role attitudes, we rely on responses to six statements related to women's labor force participation, which are included in eight waves of the ALLBUS survey. Respondents are asked, for example, whether they agree that "It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself" and that "A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works" (see Supplemental Information [SI] for all six statements).

For each statement, responses range from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). Each variable was recoded such that 1 corresponds to egalitarian and 4 corresponds to traditional attitudes toward gender roles. Traditional attitudes are understood to be those that view women's responsibilities as primarily in the private sphere. Mokken scaling analysis demonstrates that responses for these statements can be summarized into a single scale ($H = 0.43$ and each $Hi > 0.30$). Based on these scaling results, we created an index capturing traditional gender-role attitudes, with values ranging from 1 (most egalitarian outlook) to 19 (most traditional outlook).[3] After establishing that respondents raised in the East and West hold different gender-role attitudes, we next explore the effect of these attitudes on men's and women's political interest, vote intention, and party membership. In our SI, we also provide results for political efficacy and union membership (see fig. SI.5).

Our models use dummy variables for gender as well as for East Germany. The ALLBUS survey does not record respondents' birthplace in every survey year. To retain the largest possible sample size, the explanatory variables of East and West combine the territory in which the interview was conducted and information on whether the respondent migrated from East to West (or from West to East). Our results are unchanged when we re-run all regressions excluding East-to-West and West-to-East migrants from the sample (see fig. SI.3).[4] Because we are interested in the differences in gender attitudes and political engagement between cohorts socialized during and after Germany's Cold War separation, we include birth cohort dummies based on respondents' year of birth. The analyses also include socioeconomic controls that account for important factors identified in the literature on gender-role attitudes and political engagement, including income, employment, education, marital status, religiosity and religious denomination, and household size.

3. Mokken scaling is based on item response theory. It is preferable to other scaling methods because it is nonparametric, making virtually no assumptions about the precise shape of the item response function (Van Schuur 2003). We also subtract 5 from our additive scale so that it runs from 1 to 19 (as opposed to 6 to 24).

4. In some years, the ALLBUS survey includes a variable indicating the state in which the respondent was raised. Using this, along with birth and interview location, we identified 287 West-to-East and 703 East-to-West migrants. Excluding these migrants from the regression models did not alter the results (see fig. SI.3)

Method

In our analysis, we aim to distinguish birth cohorts from both age effects based on respondents being at the same point in their life cycle and period effects based on respondents' exposure to the same contemporaneous events. The starting point for such estimation is typically the Age–Period–Cohort (APC) model (Holford 1985). A well-documented problem with these models is that only two of these effects can be identified, as age (years since birth), period (year), and cohort (year of birth) are exact linear functions of each other (Winship and Harding 2008). A useful approach for solving the APC identification problem, without imposing strong assumptions about which birth years to group together, is to use annual birth cohorts and a control group to aid in the identification of cohort effects while also accounting for period effects (Dinas and Stoker 2014; Pischke 2007).

Like Pischke's analysis of the impact of policy change on school performance, we estimate the effect of exposure to the FRG/GDR regimes on gender attitudes by within-cohort comparisons between West and East Germany before, during, and after the Cold War. If those raised in the GDR have more progressive gender attitudes as compared with those raised in West Germany in the same period, then we would expect the East–West differences in gender-role attitudes to be largest for cohorts from the Cold War era. We do not expect attitudinal differences among those socialized following reunification. Period effects are controlled in our analysis to capture any aggregate time trends within the time series that could influence our East–West comparison (Dinas and Stoker 2014; Pischke 2007).

Finally, our first set of results report the findings from an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with the gender attitudinal scale as the dependent variable, annual birth year cohorts, and interactions with region. Our second set of findings relies on both OLS regression (political interest) and linear probability (vote intention and party membership) models. All models include period controls and a set of socioeconomic variables.

CONFIRMING EAST–WEST DIFFERENCES IN GENDER ATTITUDES

Following Banaszak (2006), Campa and Serafinelli (2019), Lippmann and colleagues (2020), and others, we first establish the link between exposure to the GDR regime and more egalitarian gender-role attitudes. Figure 1 displays the predicted traditional gender attitudes in East and West Germany by birth cohorts with 95% confidence intervals based on a fully specified OLS regression model accounting for socioeconomic background factors—secondary education levels, employment status, personal income, religious denomination, regular church attendance, marital status, household size, and period effects (full results reported in table SI.2).

We confirm that the difference in gender-role attitudes between the East and West is statistically significant for all but

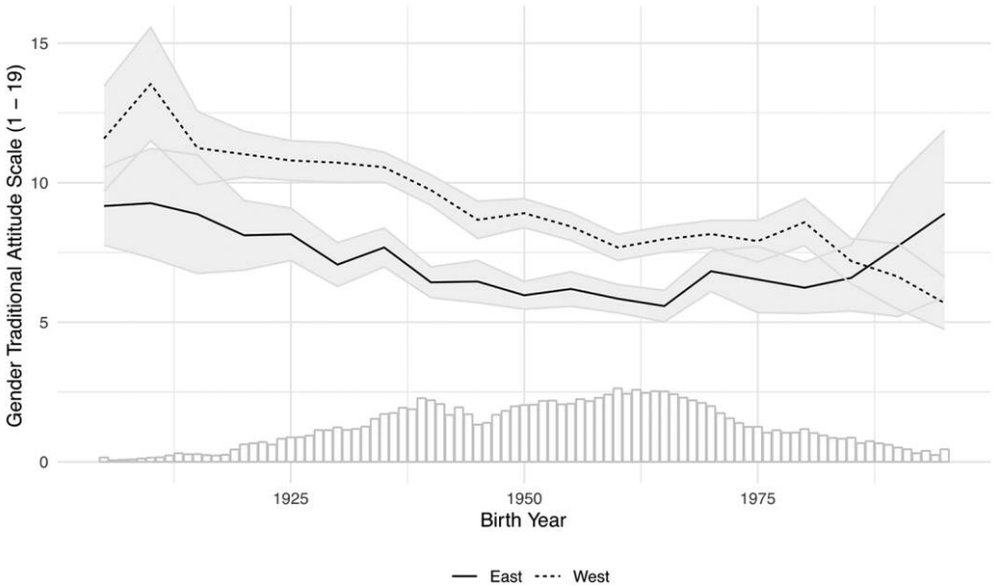

Figure 1. Traditional gender role attitudes by birth year. Predicted gender attitudes by birth cohort in East and West Germany, from OLS model controlling for socioeconomic and period effects. Weighted for regional oversampling; unweighted results are similar. Histogram shows birth cohort distribution. See table SI.2 for full results. Source: ALLBUS (1991–2016).

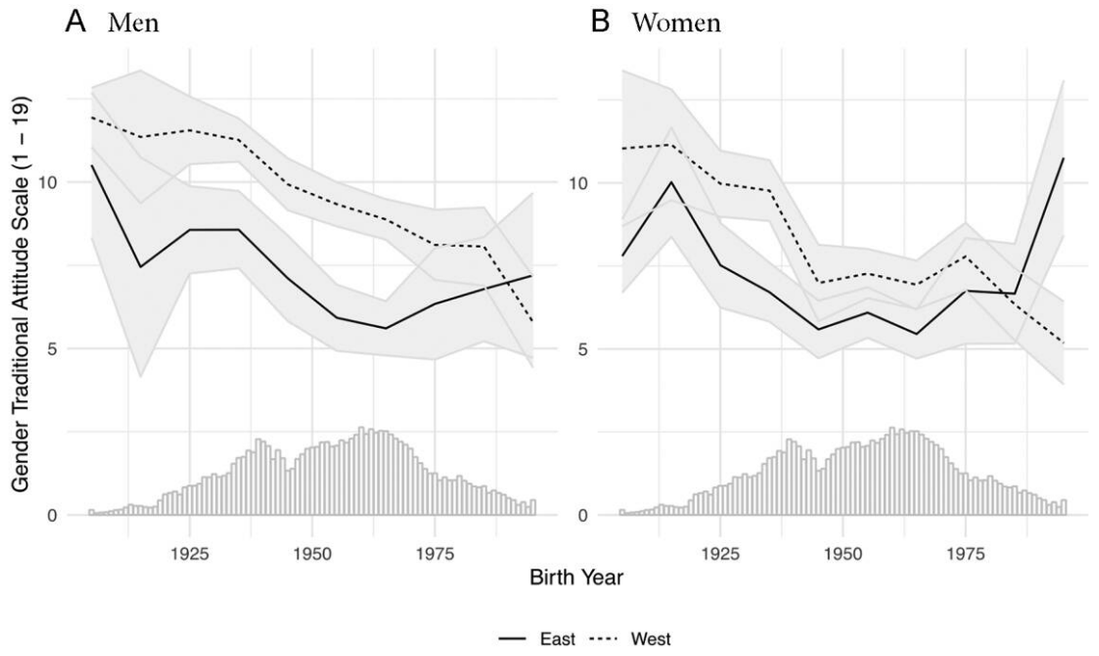

Figure 2. Traditional gender-role attitudes by birth year and gender. Predicted traditional gender attitudes by birth cohort and gender in East and West Germany, from an OLS model controlling for socioeconomic and period effects. Weighted for regional oversampling; unweighted results are identical. See table SI.3 for full results. Source: ALLBUS (1991–2016).

the youngest birth cohorts (fig. 1). As expected, on average, respondents in East Germany hold less traditional gender attitudes than those in West Germany, and this difference stems primarily from birth cohorts socialized during the Cold War.[5] In fact, birth cohorts in the East and West socialized after German reunification do not significantly differ in terms of gender attitudes.

For the West, we witness an overall steady decline in traditional gender attitudes from the 1905 birth cohort to the 1990 birth cohort, which reflects the gradual introduction of more progressive gender legislation since the end of WWII. For the East, in contrast, we witness a decline in traditional gender attitudes among the earliest birth cohorts, which then stabilizes for birth cohorts after. Interestingly, for those socialized following the end of the Cold War, we observe a slight increase in traditional gender attitudes as compared with the West. This may indicate a breakaway from the comparatively more progressive gender policies in the GDR after reunification.

Figure 2 replicates the analysis presented in figure 1 but separates out the effects for women and men. This allows us to address the concern that the differences in gender attitudes observed between birth cohorts in East and West are primarily explained by differences in the resources of women in the two regions. Women in the GDR, for example, had greater access to the labor market as compared with those in the FRG, whereas men in the East and West had similar access to work. If the differences in gender attitudes that we observe between East and West (fig. 1) are merely a function of the disparate resources that were available to women, then we should find few differences in men's gender attitudes in the two regions. Figure 2 suggests that the differences in gender attitudes between the two regions are similar for both groups and perhaps even more pronounced for men (full results are reported in table SI.3).

Finally, we consider how long respondents were exposed to the two regimes. The GDR originated in 1949 and collapsed in 1989, so our measure of length of socialization varies between a minimum of one year (those born in 1989) to a maximum of 40 years (those born in 1949 or before). Those born after 1989 serve as the reference category (0). Figure 3 displays the difference in gender attitudes between respondents socialized in East and West Germany by length of socialization (see table SI.4 in the SI for full results). We find that differences in gender attitudes between those socialized in the East versus the West increase with length of socialization. Together, our findings reported in figures 1–3 support the expectation that

5. See fig. SI.1 for a replication of fig. 1 without control variables, fig. SI.2 for a replication without survey weights, and fig. SI.3 for a replication excluding migrants. These results are also robust when we relax the parallel period assumption (see fig. SI.4) and when we add fixed effects (see table SI.7).

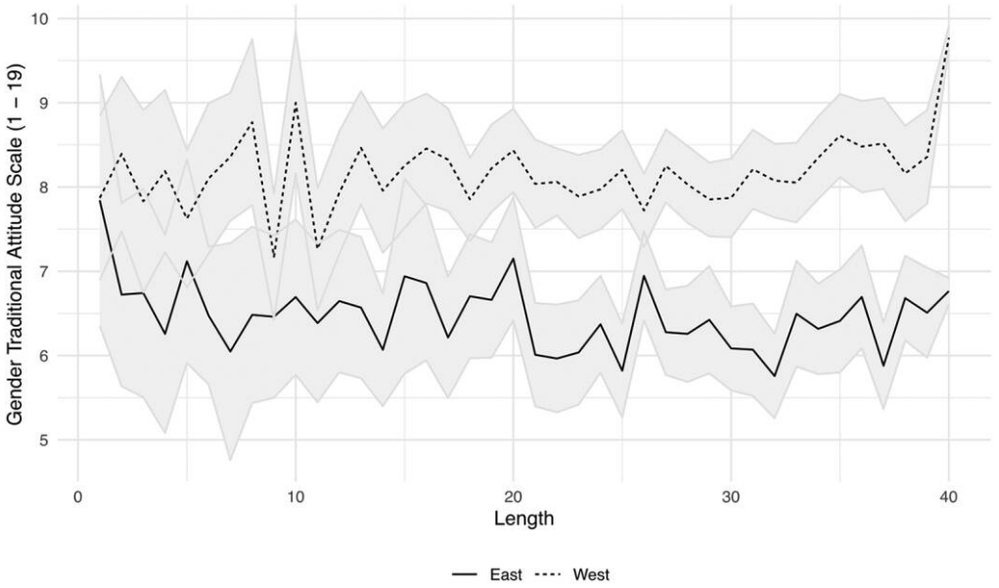

Figure 3. Traditional gender-role attitudes by length of socialization. Predicted traditional gender attitudes by length of socialization in East and West Germany, based on an OLS model controlling for socioeconomic and period effects. Weighted for regional oversampling; unweighted results are identical. See table SI.4 for full results. Source: ALLBUS (1990–2016).

exposure to the GDR is associated with citizens holding less traditional gender-role attitudes.[6]

TESTING THE EFFECTS OF GENDER-ROLE ATTITUDES ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Having established that East and West Germans socialized during the Cold War hold distinct gender-role attitudes, we exploit these differences to address an unresolved question in the gender and politics and political behavior literatures: Do traditional gender-role attitudes affect women's political engagement? Below, we first show that more egalitarian attitudes increase political interest, vote intention, and party membership in unified Germany and that this effect is somewhat more pronounced for women. We then demonstrate the robustness of our results by showing that these effects hold across East and West Germany and can be replicated using both instrumental variable regressions and cross-national data.

To determine whether traditional attitudes toward gender roles correlate negatively with (women's) political engagement, we estimate three models using a respondent's political interest, vote intention, and party membership as the dependent variables. The main independent variables are a respondent's gender and traditional gender attitudes. Note that because respondents' gender-role attitudes are causally subsequent to the East–West separation, the index of traditional gender attitudes incorporates the difference between East and West. That is, the influence of the East–West separation is channeled through respondents' gender-(in)egalitarian attitudes, so the analysis need not also control for the East–West divide.

Table 1 provides an overview of the results. We first consider the effect of respondent gender. The gender dummy coefficient shows that women are less politically engaged than men. Women in unified Germany report lower levels of political interest and party membership than men. Counter to our expectation, but consistent with other work (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012), we find no statistically significant gender differences with respect to propensity to vote. In terms of the size of these effects, women respondents are on average approximately 8% less interested in politics and approximately 2.5% less likely to be members of a political party.[7]

The results presented in table 1 also suggest that, ceteris paribus, there is a statistically significant negative correlation between traditional gender attitudes on the one hand and political engagement on the other. That is, citizens who are less egalitarian in their views on gender roles are also less likely to be interested in politics, intend to vote in an election, or be members of a political party.

6. Looking across a broader set of countries, Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2017) find lasting legacies of communism on citizens' political and economic attitudes but not their gender-role attitudes.

7. Consistent with existing work, the results also show that, controlling for gender and survey year effects, being East German decreases the probability of being interested in politics and voting.

Table 1. Traditional Gender-Role Attitudes, Political Engagement, and Gender

	Political Interest	Vote Intention	Party Membership
Traditional gender attitudes	−.052***	−.003***	−.003***
	(.002)	(.001)	(.0005)
Female	−.388***	−.005	−.025***
	(.018)	(.005)	(.004)
East	−.303***	−.033**	−.036***
	(.057)	(.017)	(.013)
Constant	2.980***	−.892***	.028
	(.097)	(.028)	(.019)
State fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
F-test	.000	.000	.000
R_2	.14	.02	.03
Observations	16,422	16,438	16,376

Note. Table shows regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Models are weighted for regional oversampling and include socioeconomic and demographic controls. See table SI.5 for full results. Source: ALLBUS (1991–2016).
** $p \leq .05$.
*** $p \leq .01$.

We next examine whether the effects of gender-role attitudes on political engagement differ across women and men by adding an interaction term. Figure 4 plots the conditional marginal effects of traditional gender-role attitudes, coded from 1 (for most liberal) to 19 (for most conservative), on political interest, vote intention, and party membership for women and men (full results are reported in table SI.6). Interestingly, our results suggest that gender-inegalitarian attitudes depress political engagement for both women and men. That is, both women and men are more likely to be interested in politics, intend to vote in elections, or join a political party when they hold more egalitarian gender-role attitudes.[8] This suggest that gender-egalitarian attitudes may be important not only for women but also for the broader quality of democracy, a point we return to in the "Discussion and Conclusion" section.

In addition to bolstering overall levels of political engagement, the results also support the idea that the adoption of more gender-egalitarian attitudes may help reduce the gender gap in political interest and participation. Figure 4 demonstrates that the differences between women and men are smallest among those who hold the most egalitarian gender attitudes (see the results on the left pole of the *x*-axis between 1 and 4 in fig. 4). We also find statistically significant interaction terms between gender attitudes and gender for political interest and party membership. That is, in the case of these two measures of political engagement, the effects of holding (in)egalitarian attitudes are somewhat more pronounced for women compared with men. Figure SI.5 shows similar patterns for other types of political engagement. Although the promotion of egalitarian gender-role attitudes might not wholly eliminate the gender gap in interest and participation, the results suggest that it could meaningfully diminish it.

Extensions and robustness checks

Our analysis suggests that traditional gender attitudes dampen political engagement. We explore the robustness of our findings with three supplementary analyses presented in the appendix. First, we explore whether the effect of gender attitudes on political engagement differs between East and West Germany. Importantly, we assume that more egalitarian women are more likely to be engaged in politics irrespective of the source of these attitudes. That is, the effect of traditional gender attitudes on political engagement should be similar across East and West Germany. To test our intuition, we estimate a triple interaction between respondents' traditional gender attitudes, their gender, and socialization in East or West Germany (see table SI.8 in the SI). The results confirm our intuition. The only exception is vote intention, in which we find a very small but statistically significant difference between East and West for women.

Second, we employ instrumental variable analysis using the gender of respondents' children to create exogenous variation in gender attitudes. In line with previous research, we find that the gender attitudes of respondents with children are more egalitarian when they have daughters. We fit a two-stage least-squares instrumental variables regression.[9] The coefficients for traditional gender attitudes are negative and statistically significant at conventional levels of significance in the case of political interest and party membership (see table SI.9 in the SI).

Third, using cross-national data from the European Social Survey, we confirm that the association between traditional gender attitudes and political engagement extends beyond

8. Fig. SI.6 reports results restricting the sample to the pre–Angela Merkel period (1991–2004). Figs. SI.7 and SI.8 report results while controlling for trust and political efficacy. The results remain substantively identical to those reported above.

9. The Sargan–Hansen test and Wald test statistic both provide support for our instrument.

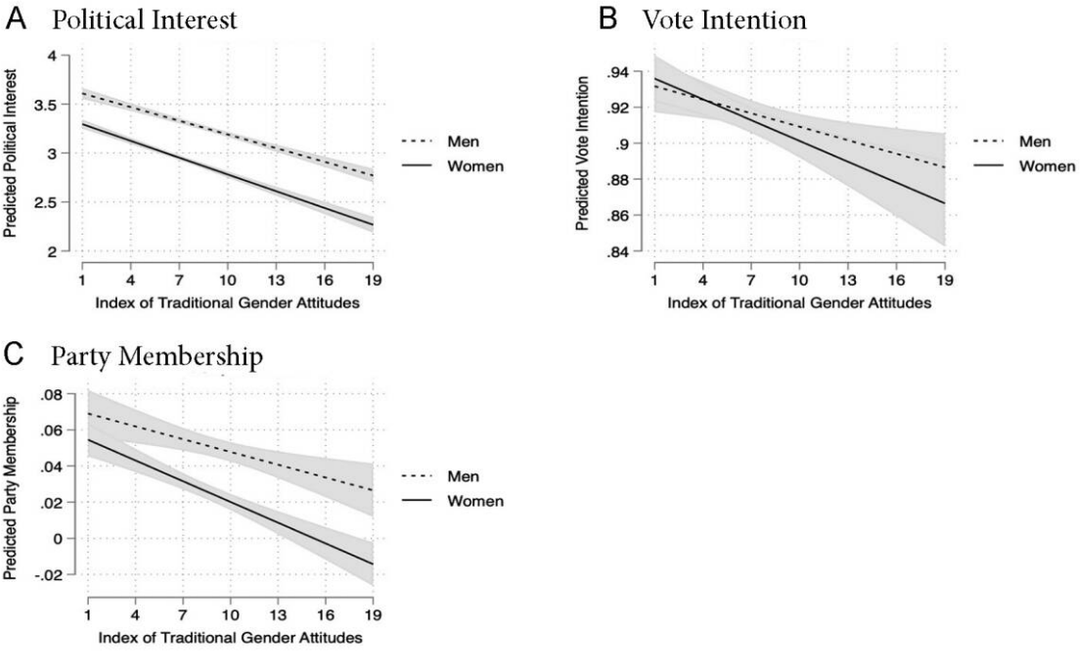

Figure 4. Effect of gender-role attitudes on political engagement by gender. Predicted political interest, party membership, and vote intention by traditional gender attitudes for women and men, based on an OLS model (political interest) and a linear probability model (party membership and vote intention), controlling for socioeconomic and period effects. Weighted for regional oversampling; unweighted results are identical. See table SI.6 for details. Source: ALLBUS (1990–2016).

Germany. Across countries, both men and women who hold traditional gender attitudes display lower levels of political interest and participation (see table SI.12).

TRADITIONAL GENDER-ROLE ATTITUDES, POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT, AND MOTHER'S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In a final exploratory analysis, we examine the effects of a policy on which East and West Germany differed dramatically—women's access to education—as a possible individual-level mechanism underlying our findings. We demonstrate that East German women had higher education rates than their West German counterparts and that having an educated mother is associated with both more egalitarian gender attitudes and greater political interest and participation.

As we note above, East and West Germany's social policies radically diverged following their post-WWII separation, particularly with respect to women's educational attainment. The GDR pursued policies that fostered women's access to university (Shaffer 1981). Parental guidance was replaced by bureaucratic control and a "more objective, sex-neutral (if not discriminatory in favor of women) selection process." Likewise, and in stark contrast to West Germany, "efforts to encourage qualified women to enroll in institutions of higher learning and prepare themselves for professional careers received the full support of college university faculty and administrators" (Shaffer 1981, 130).

The subsequent difference in the educational attainment of women between East and West Germany becomes clear in our data. Figure 5 shows the percentage of respondents whose mothers have completed secondary and tertiary degrees across the two regions. Although the proportion of highly educated mothers clearly increases among those respondents born after 1960, this increase is much more pronounced among those respondents from the GDR as compared with the FRG.

Education was a particularly successful social policy for the GDR, and there is reason to expect that promoting women's education is especially important for bolstering political interest and participation. Maternal educational attainment yields more egalitarian views in adult children (Thornton, Alwin, and Camburn 1983), and parental education influences women's attitudes toward employment (Vella 1994). Relatedly, women's aggregate education levels influence individual respondents' attitudes toward feminism (Banaszak and Plutzer 1993). Education is also linked to political engagement and is especially important for women. Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010), for example, find that among women—but not men—holding a university degree significantly increases the likelihood of political party involvement (whereas

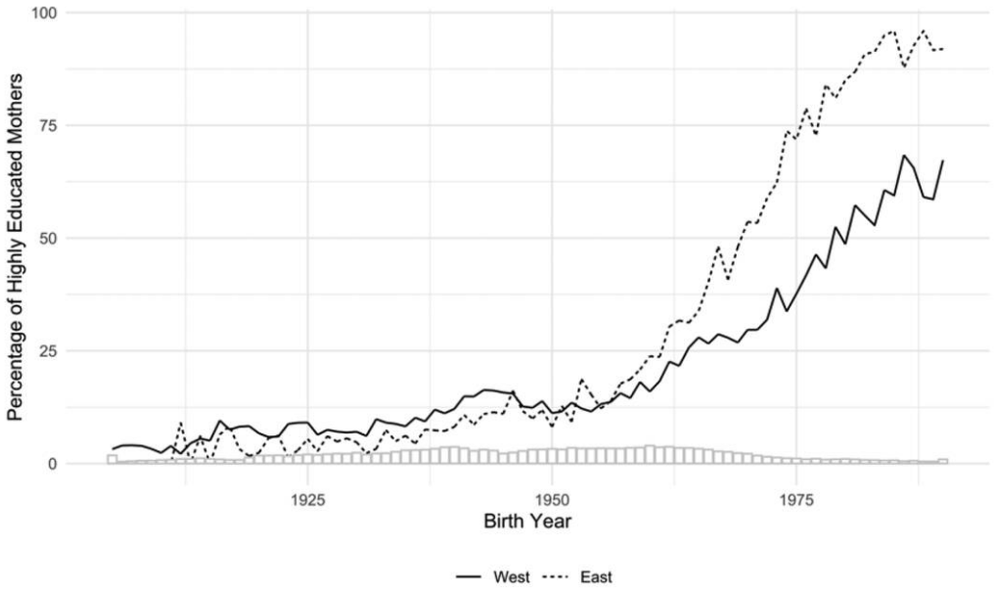

Figure 5. Educational attainment of mothers by region. The figure displays the percentage of respondents from East and West Germany, respectively, and states that their mothers have completed secondary and tertiary degrees. Source: ALLBUS (1990–2016).

employment has only a limited impact). Finally, existing work demonstrates that mothers' interests and experiences affect their adult children's interest in politics, political knowledge, and political participation (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Gidengil, O'Neill, and Young 2010). This research together suggests that higher levels of mother's educational attainment may allow for the transmission of egalitarian gender-role attitudes, thereby yielding greater political engagement.

We perform two analyses to examine whether mother's educational attainment affects respondents' gender-role attitudes and political engagement while controlling for a respondent's own education level.[10] First, we estimate the effect of the educational attainment of mothers on gender attitudes generally (table 2, model 1). Second, we model the effect of mothers' educational attainment on political interest, vote intention, and party membership (table 2, models 2–4). This variable ranges from 1 ("no formal education") to 5 ("university education").

The results presented in table 2 suggest that respondents whose mothers have higher levels of education are both less likely to hold traditional gender attitudes and are also more likely to be interested in politics, intend to vote, and join a political party. These effects hold when controlling for region, state, and other respondent characteristics, such as gender and socioeconomic controls, which are generally associated with attitudes toward gender roles. In the SI, table SI.11 shows that having a more highly educated mother correlates with holding more egalitarian gender attitudes and being more politically engaged for both women and men. In fact, the effect seems slightly larger for men in the case of gender attitudes and political interest. Although initially surprising, this finding comports with the previous analysis that shows that egalitarian attitudes are associated with both women's and men's political interest and participation. Having an educated mother encourages both men and women to espouse more egalitarian gender-role attitudes. These egalitarian citizens, in turn, are also more engaged in politics. Promoting women's education may thus have broader effects for political interest and participation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study addresses a central question for scholars and practitioners interested in gender, politics, and political behavior—how can we bolster women's political engagement? We shed new light on this problem by assessing the consequences of traditional gender-role attitudes on women's political engagement in unified Germany. Exploiting the quasi-exogenous imposition of more egalitarian gendered state policies by the GDR, which, in turn, influenced citizens' gender-role attitudes, we show that these attitudinal differences have important consequences for gender gaps in political engagement. Even when accounting for a host of socioeconomic controls, and after adding state fixed effects, traditional gender

10. Note that in our dataset one's mother's education level and one's own education level are weakly positively correlated (Pearson's R: .24, significant at the $p = .001$ level).

Table 2. Traditional Gender-Role Attitudes, Political Engagement, and Mother's Educational Attainment

	Traditional Gender Roles	Political Interest	Vote Intention	Party Membership
Educational attainment of mothers	−.327***	.099***	.008***	.005***
	(.039)	(.008)	(.002)	(.001)
Female	−1.981***	−.302***	.028	−.024***
	(.064)	(.012)	(.003)	(.002)
East	−2.055***	−.274***	−.040***	−.030***
	(.201)	(.039)	(.011)	(.008)
Constant	10.136***	1.545***	−.762***	−.033**
	(.525)	(.090)	(.029)	(.015)
State fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
F-test	.000	.000	.000	.000
R_2	.33	.18	.03	.03
Observations	15,398	33,440	33,470	33,388

Note. Table reports regression coefficients. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Models are weighted to adjust for regional oversampling, and the analysis includes socioeconomic and demographic controls. For full results, see table SI.10. Source: ALLBUS (1991–2016).

** $p \leq .05$.

*** $p \leq .01$.

attitudes are negatively correlated with political interest and participation. This negative effect is more pronounced for women. German women who hold egalitarian gender-role attitudes, on the other hand, are almost as likely to be engaged in politics as men. Several robustness checks further support the link between attitudes and political engagement. A final exploratory analysis suggests that mother's educational attainment might serve as an individual-level mechanism underlying these results.

Our findings indicate that traditional gender-role attitudes likely remain an impediment to women's political engagement in democracies today. Indeed, gender-inegalitarian attitudes may be an especially powerful obstacle for women's political engagement, as espousing these attitudes suggests that women have internalized norms that limit their own abilities and confine their roles to the domestic arena. Given that gender attitudes can be transmitted over generations, moreover, their consequences can be felt over many years. At the same time, we also offer promising insights into the potential for change via government policies. Exposure to different social policies seems to have influenced attitudes for many living under the GDR, which, in turn, affected women's political interest and participation. This suggests that by changing beliefs about who should be active in public life, "gendered state policies" (Banaszak 2006) can have an important effect on women's political engagement.

We focus on women because they are underrepresented in almost all aspects of political life. Importantly, however, we find that although gender-(in)egalitarian attitudes have a somewhat greater effect on women's political interest and participation, they also influence men's attitudes and behaviors. The effect of mother's educational attainment on gender-egalitarian attitudes also seems slightly more pronounced for men. This is a potentially promising finding for gender equality advocates, as it suggests that egalitarian attitudes are correlated with a more engaged citizenry. That is, gender-egalitarian attitudes may have broadly positive implications for democracies. Subsequent research should explore why gender-egalitarian attitudes bolster men's political engagement. This work would contribute to the growing body of scholarship exploring men's political behavior through a gendered lens (Bjarnegård 2018; Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2024; de Geus et al. 2022; Tavits et al. 2024).

Our results suggest several avenues for future research. To begin with, future work should consider the political sources of gender-role attitude change. We provide some cause for optimism, as our results suggest that policies that facilitate women's presence in the public sphere can alter citizens'

attitudes and behaviors. Yet, few regimes are likely to adopt policies as transformative as East Germany's overhaul of its education system. Additional research should examine whether less comprehensive reforms—such as expanding educational access without a strong ideological commitment to gender equality—yield similar results. Other studies should consider the effects of different types of policies. A growing body of scholarship on the effects of quota adoption on women's political engagement, for example, yields more mixed findings (Davidson-Schmich 2016; Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012).

Future work should also address the political consequences of (in)egalitarian gender-role attitudes. These internalized norms shape individuals' beliefs concerning their conduct and capabilities and, owing to their potential to be passed down through generations, they can have long-term consequences. Adherence to, or rejection of, these roles might affect attitudes toward a range of political issues, including conservatism in social values, nationalism, resistance to immigration, and so on. These attitudes might also be linked to a wider array of behaviors, including willingness to engage in unconventional political behavior.

Finally, our results contribute to the burgeoning literature on gender and historical political economy. This important scholarship has primarily concentrated on episodes of reform (e.g., suffrage) as well as on gendered participation in the immediate, postsuffrage era (Corder and Wolbrecht 2016; Kim 2019; Teele 2024). Our work extends this scholarship by considering how major institutional transformations have longer-term legacies for people's understanding of men's and women's roles in society, which, in turn, shape women's political agency. Indeed, although long since removed, the division between East and West continues to influence women's political engagement in contemporary Germany.

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