

# Gender, Legislators and Political Responsiveness: Field Experiments from Europe and Latin America

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Since 2011, 53 field experiments have examined political elites' responsiveness to constituents. The vast majority took place in the United States, and the few outside the US were usually single-country studies. To overcome the difficulty of finding generalization, we conducted the first comparative audit experiment in 11 countries: 5 in Europe (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands) and 6 in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay). We explore gender bias in legislators' responsiveness, which has received little attention in the experimental literature. A citizen alias whose gender is randomized sends an email to members of parliament inquiring about unemployment benefits (Europe) or healthcare services (Latin America). Gender has a surprising effect. Legislators are significantly more likely to respond to women (+3%), especially in Europe (+4.3%). This result is driven by female legislators, who reply more often to women (+8.4%). This work contributes to the comparative study of political representation.

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African Americans and Latinos in the US are less likely than Whites to receive a response when they contact their political representatives, as experimental evidence shows (Butler and Broockman 2011, Butler and Crabtree 2015, Mendez and Grose 2014, Mendez n.d.). Racial bias, along with inquiries about policy positions, has been the main focus of the rapidly growing number of audit experiments (Grose 2014). According to a recent meta-analysis, 53 studies have evaluated the responsiveness of elected officials between 2011 and 2017 (Costa 2017).

Yet, the possible existence of gender bias has received little attention in the experimental literature.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the great majority of audit experiments (43 out of 53) has taken place in the United States. The few non-American studies have usually been single-country experiments, which greatly limits the possibility for finding generalization.<sup>3</sup> As a result, we know little about how responsive elected officials are to men and women outside the United States.

To fill this gap, we ask: are legislators equally responsive to men and women? We present the first comparative audit experiment carried out with all sitting members of parliament from 11 countries across two regions: 5 in Europe (France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, and the Netherlands) and 6 in Latin America (Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia). Our country selection allows for variation in the type of electoral system (majoritarian, open-list PR, and closed-list PR) – which may influence legislators’ extrinsic motivations – and in the proportion of female members of parliament – which could shape the link between gender and responsiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> An important recent exception is Kalla et al. (2017).

<sup>3</sup> As we explain below, we are aware of only three unpublished studies that considered more than one country: Breunig et al., Butler et al., and De Vries et al.

In the experiment, a citizen alias whose gender is randomized to be either female or male sends an email to members of parliament inquiring about access to unemployment benefits (in Europe) or healthcare services (in Latin America). We find that gender has a surprising effect on responsiveness. Legislators are overall significantly more likely to respond to women (+3%), especially in Europe (+4.3%). In Europe, this result is driven by the behavior of female legislators, who reply significantly more often to women than to men (+8.4%).

Our cross-national audit experiment offers two fundamental contributions. First, while existing scholarship has investigated racial bias, we focus on a form of identity that has received little attention in the experimental literature on representatives' responsiveness: gender. Second, although this is not the first experiment with political elites outside the US, no study has previously included such a large number of countries across two regions, which allows us to more confidently address finding generalizability.

### **Field Experiments, Elite Responsiveness, and Gender**

Legislators' responsiveness to the electorate is an important dimension of representation. One strategy to study responsiveness is to record whether representatives reply to correspondence from citizens. Existing work generally focuses on the US and relies on emails or letters that inquire about legislators' policy positions or ask for help with constituency service. Such work finds that legislators are more likely to reply to questions about service rather than policy positions (Butler et al. 2012). If they do respond to policy inquiries, representatives often tailor their explanations to the positions expressed by constituents (Grose et al. 2015).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Legislators also respond to grassroots mobilization and constituents' opinions (Butler and Nickerson 2011, Bergan 2009).

Most experiments focusing on race find that elected officials often exhibit racial bias. Black constituents are less likely to receive a response than their white counterparts (Butler and Brockman 2011). Similarly, Latinos are less likely than whites to obtain an answer (Mendez and Grose 2014, White et al. 2015), especially if they are undocumented immigrants (Mendez n.d.). Less affluent citizens also face bias (Butler 2014).

Existing research has thus explored different forms of identity. Surprisingly, gender has received little attention. To our knowledge, only two (published) experimental studies – both conducted in the US – have explored the impact of citizens’ gender on elite responsiveness, and they have found no evidence of gender bias (Butler 2014, Kalla et al. 2017).

This finding has not been subjected to scrutiny in other countries. In fact, in general, audit experiments outside the US are rare and inconclusive. For instance, while McClendon (2015) and Distelhorst and Hou (2014) show that racial and ethnic discrimination are common among local officials in South Africa and China, Grohs et al. (2015) find little evidence of such bias in Germany. The scarcity of comparative work further obstructs drawing generalizable conclusions. Only a few unpublished studies have examined officials’ responsiveness in more than one country. This research has focused on members of the European Parliament (De Vries et al. n.d), French and German officials (Breunig et al. n.d.), and European mayors (Butler et al. n.d.).

Observational work also suggests that politicians’ demographic traits can conditionally influence their responsiveness to citizens. An explanation for the connection between descriptive and substantive representation draws on legislators’ intrinsic motivation to advance the interests of their own group (Burden 2007, Mansbridge 2003, Whitby 1997). A contending argument poses that politicians are especially sensitive to the demands of constituents who share their personal characteristics because of strategic electoral calculations (Canon 1999, Grose 2011).

Results on the impact of gender are mixed. Female legislators sometimes promote legislation that furthers women's rights (Caiazza 2004, Dodson 2006). Other work, however, casts doubt on whether the number of female members of parliament shapes substantive representation, especially outside the US (Goetz 2002, Reingold 2008, Tripp 2005, Yoon 2001). Recent work also shows that political parties tend to be more responsive to the preferences of men than of women (Homola 2017).

### **Experimental Design**

We conducted a comparative field experiment with members of parliament from 11 countries to test whether elected officials exhibit bias against women and whether legislators are more responsive to citizens of their own gender. In the experiment, a citizen alias contacted MPs via email. We wrote to all sitting MPs in the countries in our study, sending a total of 3,685 emails. We collected the full list of MPs and their email addresses from the website of each country's national parliament.<sup>5</sup>

The messages were written in the official language of each country and were sent during the three central weekdays (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday).<sup>6</sup> The email asked for help with

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<sup>5</sup> The total number of MPs was 3,820. Some MPs could not be reached because the email address was not working, the email inbox was full, or the MP was on leave.

<sup>6</sup> The emails were sent in June 2016 (Ireland and Argentina), January 2017 (Italy and Chile), February 2017 (Netherlands and Mexico), March 2017 (Germany and Brazil), and April 2017 (France, Colombia, and Uruguay). In each country, all the emails were sent within a two weeks' time, and the number of emails sent by female and male aliases was equally distributed over that time.

access to unemployment benefits (in the European countries) and healthcare services (in the Latin American ones). We formulated comparable requests focused on two issues that are especially relevant to the region's political discourse. The messages are short, written in an elementary language, and composed of simple sentences to increase the credibility of the request. We chose questions that can be quickly answered by MPs to avoid excessive burden on elected officials. Specific text is shown below:

Message in European countries:

*Dear Mr./Ms. XXX,  
My name is FirstName LastName. I lost my job and I don't know what to do. What should I do to get unemployment benefits? No one will tell me where to go.  
Thank you,  
FirstName LastName*

Message in Latin American countries:

*Dear Mr./Ms. XXX,  
My name is FirstName LastName. Last year, I was diagnosed with kidney failure, I don't have insurance and don't know what to do. How can I get access to free treatment? I hope you can help me. Thank you very much.  
Sincerely,  
FirstName LastName*

Our treatment consists of randomly varying the gender of the citizen alias that sends the message, who can therefore be either female or male. Thus, in each country, we randomize the sender's first name, selecting a common first name whose gender can easily be identified. We also choose popular last names – which are the same for men and women in each country – that have no regional connotation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In the appendix, Table A1 shows the experimental balance, Table A2 the list of first names.

We focus on whether MPs reply or not to the emails asking for help.<sup>8</sup> We record replies received within two months from the date the email was sent. The binary dependent variable equals 1 for MPs who replied and 0 for those who did not. Because we are interested in whether MPs provide information to citizens, we assign 1 only to “real replies.” We consider “real replies” messages that contain information addressing the question. We exclude responses that ask for the sender’s location of residence without offering any answer or help. Therefore, replies that do not provide any information, automatic replies, and lack of replies are all coded as 0 (see McClendon 2015 and Butler 2014 for a similar approach).<sup>9</sup>

### *Case Selection*

Experimental studies analyzing representatives’ responsiveness to constituents have been predominantly conducted in the United States. Our study aims to broaden the scope of this analysis by including both cases where democracy is well established (Western Europe) and cases where democracy is younger and has been less stable (Latin America). Since electoral

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the replies come directly from MPs, others from their staff. We do not differentiate between these types of responses for substantive and practical reasons. Substantively, we are interested in responsiveness as measured by an answer to constituents’ inquiries. As long as there is a reply, this requirement is met regardless of whether the response comes from the MP or from their staff. Practically, we are not always able to establish who sends the reply. While in some cases staff members sign their replies with their own credentials, we cannot be certain that responses coming from MPs are actually crafted by the MPs themselves.

<sup>9</sup> We ran a robustness check coding each reply as 1 regardless of the information provided (with the exception of automatic replies, always coded as 0). Results remain substantively unchanged.

systems may affect responsiveness (De Vries et al. n.d.), within each region we selected countries with majoritarian, open-list PR, and closed-list PR electoral systems. Further, within each electoral system in each region, we selected two countries that have higher and lower percentage of female MPs. Therefore, we have 5 European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Ireland, and the Netherlands) and 6 Latin American countries (Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia) (see table 1).

Table 1 reports the general response rate in each country, which is calculated as the percentage of replies based on the total number of emails sent in each country. Variation across countries is large, with the response rates ranging from 5.3% in Mexico to 89.24% in Ireland. The response rates are generally higher in Europe, although two Latin American countries – Uruguay and Chile – produced response rates higher than the ones observed in France and Italy.

Readers, however, should be careful about making comparisons between countries because MPs' status and expected duties vary substantially across the cases in our sample. While MPs are considered "welfare officers" in some countries (e.g. Ireland), they usually do not have the same function in others (e.g. Italy). Furthermore, the frequency with which citizens contact MPs via email varies from country to country. There is also variation in the degree of parliament professionalization, which could be correlated with the number of staff members and resources available to MPs. Finally, election timing and related electoral incentives for MPs to reply differ from country to country. These differences, however, do not interfere with our experimental treatment because both male and female aliases within countries are exposed to the same conditions. Therefore, this variation does not differently affect the likelihood that men or women within the same country receive a reply.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Table 2 presents results for each country, which are remarkably consistent across countries.

*Table 1 – Case Selection and Overall Response Rate*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Electoral System</b>	<b>Percentage of Female MPs</b>	<b>Overall Response Rate</b>
<i>Europe</i>			<i>36.33%</i>
<b>France</b>	Majoritarian	26.1%	21.57%
<b>Germany</b>	Majoritarian	21.4%	52.96%
<b>Netherlands</b>	Open-list PR	38%	42.28%
<b>Ireland</b>	Open-list PR	22.2%	89.24%
<b>Germany</b>	Closed-list PR	51.14%	53.94%
<b>Italy</b>	Closed-list PR	31%	17.62%
<i>Latin America</i>			<i>8.86%</i>
<b>Mexico</b>	Majoritarian	48.5%	5.4%
<b>Chile</b>	Majoritarian	15.8%	22.50%
<b>Colombia</b>	Open-list PR	18.7%	6.09%
<b>Brazil</b>	Open-list PR	10.7%	6.42%
<b>Argentina</b>	Closed-list PR	38.9%	7.84%
<b>Mexico</b>	Closed-list PR	39.7%	6.18%
<b>Uruguay</b>	Closed-list PR	20.2%	25.26%

France has a 2-round majoritarian system; Ireland has a PR single transferable vote system; Chile adopts a binomial system. Germany and Mexico are listed twice because they have a mixed electoral system. Germany elects 299 members of parliament through majoritarian first past the post and the remaining (roughly) half of the parliament through a closed-list PR system; Mexico elects 300 members of parliament through majoritarian first past the post and 200 members through closed-list PR. The overall response rate for Germany is 53.49%; the overall response rate for Mexico is 5.68%.

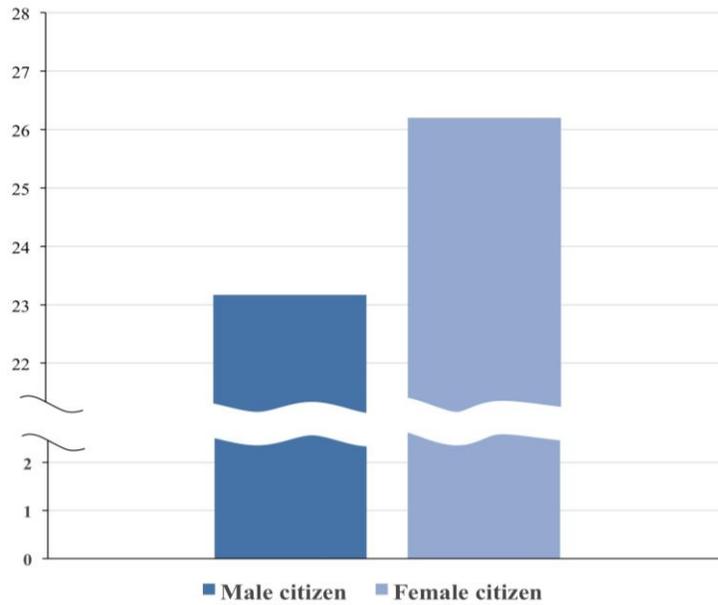
The total numbers of emails sent within each country are: France: 561; Germany: 630 (Majoritarian: 287; PR: 343); Netherlands: 149; Ireland: 158; Italy: 630; Mexico: 458 (Majoritarian: 280; PR: 178); Chile: 120; Colombia: 115; Brazil: 514; Argentina: 255; Uruguay: 95.

## **Results**

Results from the entire sample of countries reveal that female aliases are more likely to receive a response. The response rate for women is 26.2% as opposed to 23.17% for men (figure 1,

difference = 3.03%, p-value = 0.03). Members of parliament, therefore, reply more often to women. This finding is quite surprising if one considers previous results in the literature (Butler 2014, Kalla et al. 2017) and the fact that gender bias is common in many societies.

**Figure 1 – MPs response rate to female and male citizens**



Overall n = 3,685. The y-axis reports percentage values: 23.17% (male citizens) vs. 26.2% (female citizens).

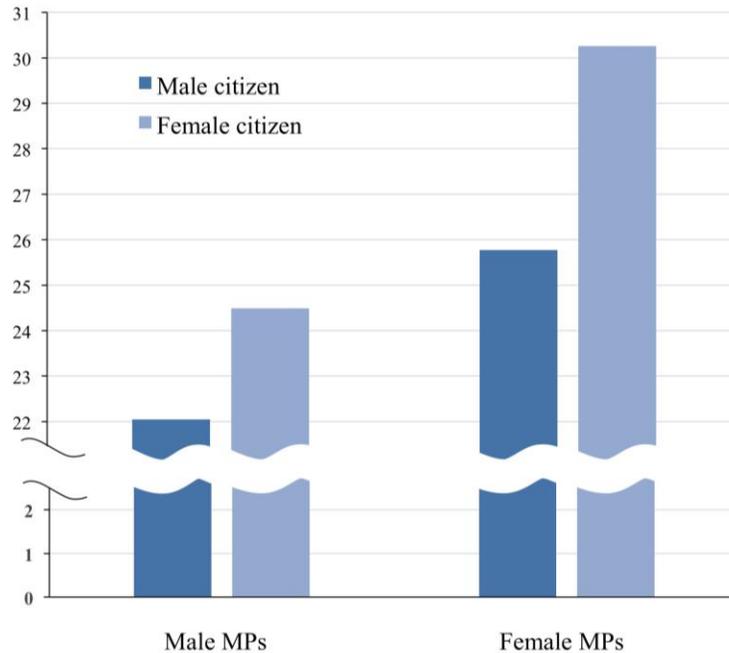
We now evaluate the treatment effect across countries. Table 2 reveals that female aliases receive a higher number of replies in both regions. The impact of gender is stronger in Europe, where legislators reply more often to women in every country in our sample. Overall, the largest percentage differences in response rate to female vs. male aliases emerge in France, Germany, and Chile (5-6 percentage points).

*Table 2 – MPs Response Rate to Female and Male Citizens across Countries*

<b>Countries:</b> <b>Europe</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>		<b>Countries:</b> <b>Latin America</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
<b>France</b>	18.41%	24.75%	<b>Argentina</b>	7.87%	7.81%
<b>Germany</b>	50.80%	56.15%	<b>Brazil</b>	4.67%	8.17%
<b>Ireland</b>	88.61%	89.87%	<b>Chile</b>	20%	25%
<b>Italy</b>	16.19%	19.05%	<b>Colombia</b>	7.41%	4.92%
<b>Netherlands</b>	40.54%	44%	<b>Mexico</b>	4.42%	6.90%
			<b>Uruguay</b>	29.79%	20.83%
<b>Total Europe</b>	<b>34.18%</b>	<b>38.45%</b>	<b>Total Latin America</b>	<b>8.04%</b>	<b>9.54%</b>

What drives the higher response rate to women? A possible answer could lie in the differentiated response rate of male and female elected officials. We therefore now consider whether female MPs are significantly more likely to reply to women. As Figure 2 shows, both male and female MPs reply more frequently to women, but the difference in the response rate to women and men is larger for female MPs. While 30.26% of all female MPs in our sample reply to women, 25.77% reply to men (difference = 4.49%; p-value = 0.10). In contrast, 24.49% of all male MPs in our sample reply to women and 22.05% reply to men (difference = 2.44%; p-value = 0.14).

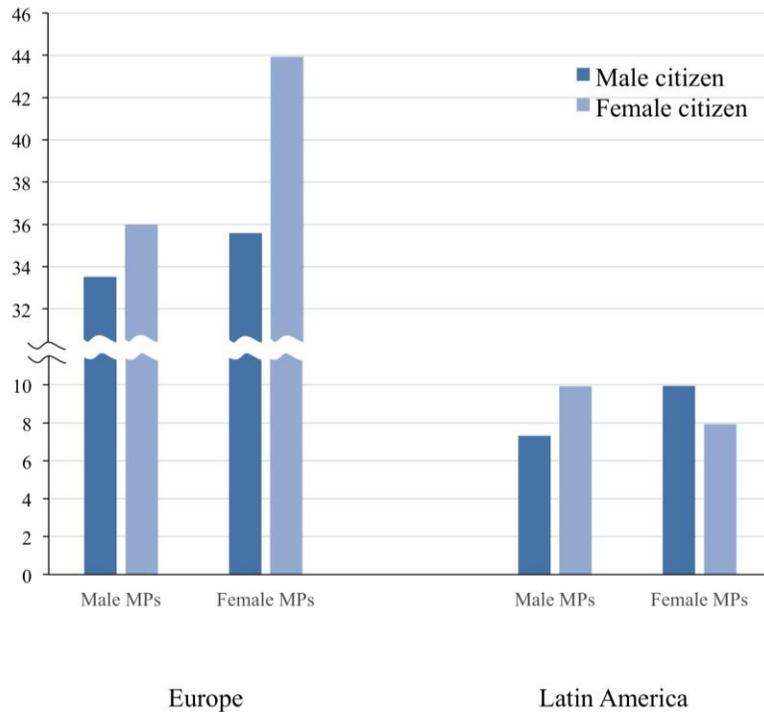
*Figure 2 – MPs response rate to female and male citizens conditional on MPs Gender*



The total number of emails sent to male MPs is 2,602 and the total number to female MPs is 1,083.

We now consider the treatment effect conditional on MPs' gender separately for Europe and Latin America. Figure 3 reveals that female MPs are more likely to reply to women than to men to a greater extent in Europe. In Europe, the difference between the proportion of female MPs who reply to women (43.94%) and the proportion of those who reply to men (35.59%) equals 8.4% and is statistically significant (p-value = 0.03). In comparison, the response rate of male MPs to women (35.99%) is higher but not statistically significantly different from the response rate of male MPs to men (33.52%, p-value of difference = 0.32). In Latin America, male MPs are more responsive to women, while female MPs reply more often to men, but these differences are not statistically significant.

**Figure 3 – MPs response rate to female and male citizens conditional on MPs Gender in Europe and Latin America**



Observational results also reveal interesting findings based on MPs’ characteristics. Female MPs are overall more likely than male MPs to reply to citizens.<sup>11</sup> Emails sent to female MPs received responses 27.95% of the time, whereas those sent to male MPs received responses 23.29% of the time. Age also matters, with younger MPs generally exhibiting higher responsiveness.

We also examined whether response rates varied based on partisan ideology.<sup>12</sup> In Europe, with the exception of Ireland, left-leaning parties are always more responsive. This effect is

<sup>11</sup> See table A3 in the appendix for response rate by MPs’ gender across countries.

<sup>12</sup> To classify party ideology, we rely on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) for European countries and the Latin America and the Caribbean Political Dataset by Huber et al. (2012) for Latin American countries. The CHES provides a general measure of party ideology that ranges

especially strong in the Netherlands (52.7% vs. 39.5%), Italy (21.8% vs. 9.4%) and Germany (57% vs. 49.8%). In Latin America, results are less clear. Mexico (7.84% vs. 5.16%) and Brazil (7.14% vs. 4.7%) are similar to France, in that left-leaning parties are slightly more responsive than right-leaning parties. In contrast, Argentina (7.07% vs. 11.25%), Chile (21.28% vs. 26.53%), and Colombia (0% vs. 7.89%) show the opposite trend.<sup>13</sup> Belonging to the governing coalition or to the opposition does not significantly affect the likelihood of response.

## Conclusions

In recent years, a growing number of experimental studies have explored elite responsiveness to citizens. This literature has largely focused on the United States and highlighted racial bias. Our study is the first comparative audit experiment evaluating gender bias in 11 countries across two regions. We find that female citizens are more likely to receive a reply than male citizens (+3%). We also show that this effect is stronger in Europe (+4.3%), and that in Europe – but not in Latin America – this is due to the fact that female MPs reply more often to female citizens (+8.4%).

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from 0 (left) to 10 (right). We classify as left-leaning parties that have a value smaller than 5 and as right-wing parties with a value bigger than 5. In the Latin American dataset, the party ideology variable ranges from 1 (left) to 5 (right). We classify as left-leaning parties with a score of 1 or 2 and as right-wing parties with a score of 4 or 5. We exclude parties with a score of 3, which in the Latin American dataset corresponds to a centrist position. In both European and Latin American countries we exclude independent and unaffiliated MPs for whom a party ideology measure is not available.

<sup>13</sup> See table A4 in the appendix for response rate by MPs' party ideology across countries.

If one considers the amount of requests that legislators receive on a daily basis, a 3 percentage point difference likely corresponds to thousands of replies. This matters especially because the messages in our experiment concern issues that are highly relevant in each region and that crucially affect the wellbeing of individuals: access to unemployment benefits and healthcare services. Furthermore, the regional-dependent results in our study suggest that future experimental work should take into account different historical and institutional contexts. Future studies could also explore why female MPs are more responsive to women, considering whether the intrinsic motivation to promote the interests of their own group or strategic electoral calculations play the greater role.

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