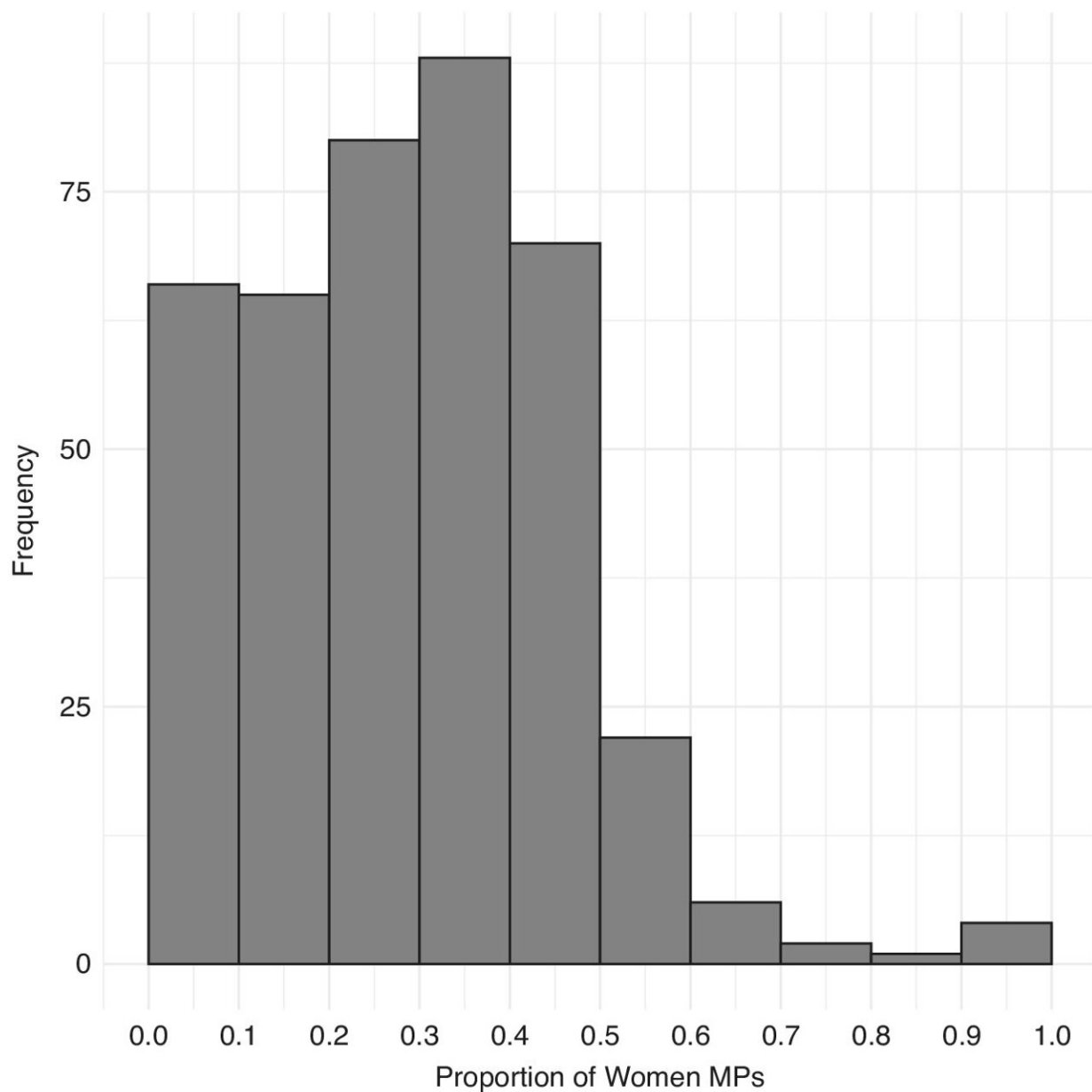


Female politicians help to diffuse polarization, hostility and distrust, study shows

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Proportion of Women MPs in Party Parliamentary Delegations across 20 Western Democracies, 1996–2017. Note: Data collected by the authors. Credit: *American Political Science Review* (2022). DOI: 10.1017/S0003055422000491

Nominating and electing more female politicians can help to diffuse polarization and reduce levels of hostility and distrust across party lines, a study shows.

Political parties that elect a greater number of [women](#) representatives are viewed more favorably by voters who support opposing parties.

Political polarization, or animosity towards opposing [political parties](#), takes many forms.

There is growing concern about the link between political polarization and increases in hostility and distrust across [party lines](#) in countries around the world.

Researchers used data on women's presence in 125 political parties over 20 Western democracies from 1996 to 2017, combined with [survey data](#) on how people rated opposing political parties,

The data came from an original dataset on women's representation in political parties combined with survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) for 20 Western nations, including the U.S., Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Austria, Israel, Portugal, Spain, Greece and France.

The work is published in the journal *American Political Science Review*.

The study was carried out by James Adams and David Bracken, from the University of California, Davis, Noam Gidron from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Will Horne from Princeton University, Diana Z O'Brien from Rice University, and Kaitlin Senk, now at the University of Exeter.

Both men and women voters reacted positively to parties that they normally do not support if those parties elected higher numbers of women MPs. Additionally, in parties led by men—75 percent of those in the study—there was an even larger bonus for women MPs, with these parties viewed even more favorably by [political opponents](#) when they nominate more women to their delegations.

Dr. Senk said, "Our research shows increasing women's parliamentary presence could mitigate cross-party hostility and help boost feelings of efficacy and trust towards politicians. This shows that by nominating and electing more women MPs, parties can broaden their electoral appeal and defuse affective polarization while also providing better descriptive gender representation. There is a danger though that radical right-wing parties could use women's representation to enhance their affective standing in the general public."

On average, women made up 29 percent of the 125 party delegations included in the study. Researchers measured voter evaluations of opposing parties on a 0 to 10 point thermometer scale, where zero denotes maximum dislike and 10 denotes maximum liking of the opposing party. They found that moving from a proportion of 13 percent to 45 percent women MPs improved voter evaluations of that political party by .55 units on the 10-point scale.

Dr. Senk said, "When political parties nominate and elect more women,

opposing party supporters tend to evaluate that party more positively. This was true throughout the time period of the study, despite the shift across this period to a greater reliance on online campaigning, where partisan hostility can be particularly mobilized by racist and sexist memes."

More information: JAMES ADAMS et al, Can't We All Just Get Along? How Women MPs Can Ameliorate Affective Polarization in Western Publics, *American Political Science Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055422000491](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000491)

Provided by University of Exeter

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