EDITORIAL

Political masculinities as an analytical category

Elin Bjarnegård, Elin.Bjarnegard@statsvet.uu.se
Uppsala University, Sweden

Kathleen Starck, starck@uni-landau.de
University of Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany

Keywords political masculinities • men and masculinities • gender and politics • political science

To cite this article: Bjarnegård, E. and Starck, K. (2024) Editorial: Political masculinities as an analytical category, European Journal of Politics and Gender, XX(XX): 1–5, DOI: 10.1332/25151088Y2024D000000045

This special issue brings together ideas from the two research networks: Men in Politics and Political Masculinities. The former consists of a group of political scientists who study men as gendered actors and how political norms, institutions and ideals are gendered masculine. Their engagement with masculinity theory is, however, rather limited. The latter is an interdisciplinary group of researchers from such disciplines as psychology, cultural studies, sociology, literary studies, history, media studies, security studies, education and political science. They are more strongly engaged with theories from critical masculinity studies, and their focus on the ‘political’ tends to be broader, including non-state areas, structures and interpersonal relationships.

Against this background, the point of departure for this special issue is the observation that the critical study of men and masculinities has not been as influential in political science as it has in many other disciplines. While there is a growing tendency for political scientists in the field of gender and politics to focus on the role of male politicians as men, they are still quite rare. Examples include studies by some contributors to this special issue (Bjarnegård, 2013; Murray, 2014; Sperling, 2015; Bjarnegård and Murray, 2018; Valdini, 2019) and the subfield of international relations, where a focus on masculinity has long been prominent (see, for example, Zalewski and Parpart, 1998; Hooper, 2001; Tickner, 2001; Cohn and Enloe, 2003).

In addition, not only has masculinity theory made a greater impact on social sciences outside of political science but colleagues in the Political Masculinities network have even developed an analytical concept – political masculinities – to capture and analytically scrutinize the masculinities pertaining to the political space. Kathleen
Starck, who coined the original definition of the concept together with political scientist Birgit Sauer, has written extensively on political masculinities together with a number of scholars who have also found the concept useful (Starck and Sauer, 2014; Starck and Luyt, 2019; Löffler et al, 2020; Luyt and Starck, 2020). However, even though it seems directly relevant to political science, the concept of political masculinities has generally not been picked up in the discipline. Instead, it has been used only by the relatively small number of political scientists who do engage with masculinity theories.

When we became aware of the similar objectives of our networks, that is, Men in Politics and Political Masculinities, we decided to merge them. An initial project of the merged networks was a workshop on political masculinities as an analytical category, organized with Russell Luyt and Rainbow Murray in 2021. The objective of the workshop was to evaluate the merit of the concept of political masculinities for not only political science but also other academic disciplines, such as cultural studies, sociology and literary studies, as well as the field of applied gender studies. Some of the contributions selected for this special issue have been developed from the keynote presentations and papers presented at this event.

Even though this cross-disciplinary dialogue has only just started, members of the network seek to anchor the concept of masculinity as an analytical category in political analyses. Thus, this special issue aims to assess the applicability of the analytical concept of political masculinities in general and within political science in particular. This emphasizes the need for political science to incorporate insights from areas that have a longer tradition of focusing on masculinity practices. In addition, this special issue provides a valuable opportunity to develop and refine the concept of political masculinities through political science expertise.

All contributions engage with the concept of political masculinities to illustrate how it may (or may not) be applied to their field of research. Contributors examine: how citizens regard and evaluate politicians through their understanding of political masculinities; how artists manoeuvre in the political field and essentialist masculinist codes; and how masculinities operate in political rhetoric and discussion. They also explore complicit masculinities in relation to neoliberalism, the masculine construction of the antifeminist online manosphere and ideals of masculinity among men on the far right of the political spectrum.

The first half of the special issue comprises four theoretical articles, inquiring into the relevance of the concept of political masculinities for political science, evaluating its merits as a concept in general and offering an enriched and more specific definition. These are followed by contributions that discuss the concept in relation to different areas of research. Thus, in the first article, Murray and Bjarnegård (2024) review research on men and masculinities in political science. They elaborate on the surprising lack of focus on men and masculinities within political science and how the discipline could benefit from greater engagement. They further suggest that the concept of political masculinities has focused on the importance of ‘the political’ to masculinities scholarship and argues for an extension of the concept to analyse men and masculinities within political science. In the two following articles, the concept of political masculinities is critically interrogated and evaluated by two experts and pioneers in the field of men and masculinities. Hearn (2024) asks three main questions: how does the concept add to, complement or contradict existing
and established concepts and theories? How is it constructed? And, finally, how might the application of the concept be extended into fields beyond those usually acknowledged as ‘political’? Messerschmidt (2024), on the other hand, challenges the current definition of political masculinities and raises doubts about its utility. Lastly, Starck (2024) responds to the most prominent points raised by its critics. She enriches the concept by suggesting a focus on political practices instead of politics as a domain. Thus, she defines the political in political masculinities as practices that can also occur outside of the traditional spheres of the state and related institutions, the main focus of many political scientists.

In the second half of this special issue, Wolfman (2024) relates the concept of political masculinities to ‘complicit masculinities’ and identifies and incorporates three interrelated dimensions of complicity: intentional, structural and intersectional. Next, Holm (2024) applies the concept to a case study of Swedish antifeminist groups’ online political activity. Sperling and Boatright (2024) use the concept to explain public responses to US governors’ COVID-19 policies. Finally, Gerlsbeck (2024) studies how Caribbean(-British) activist-artists imagine political masculinity in relation to central issues, such as citizenship, nation building and cultural authority.

Finally, the ‘Gender update’ section includes a commentary on the field of political masculinities by Valdini. Valdini (2024), author of The Inclusion Calculation, focuses on the US legislature to discuss how the concept of political masculinities also applies to women representatives, suggesting that some women may, in fact, be representing the interests of men instead of those of women.

So, what do we consider the takeaway of this cross-disciplinary evaluation of the concept of political masculinities? As different contributors come to divergent conclusions about the concept’s merits for the interrogation of men and masculinities in political settings, the ultimate evaluation will be made by other scholars in the field. It will depend on our colleagues’ assessment of the concept’s capacity to help illuminate gendered aspects of the political world that have hitherto remained unexplored. As editors of this special issue, we are proud to provide the starting point for this evaluation process. We hope to convince readers of the necessity for an intensified exchange between scholars from political science and other disciplines who work on men and masculinities that are ‘political’. Moreover, we want to encourage the interdisciplinary development and application of theoretical tools, such as political masculinities, which can help to identify, explore and understand the gendering of political practices across academic disciplines.

Note
1 For example, when a religious Colorado baker refused to make a wedding cake for a homosexual couple (BBC News, 2018).

Funding
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgements
We would like to thank Russell Luyt and Rainbow Murray for their engagement when organizing the workshop that led to this special issue. We would also like to thank the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) for hosting the online workshop in 2021.
Author contributions
Authors are listed in alphabetical order. Both have contributed equally as guest editors of the special issue and as authors of this introduction.

Author biographies
Elin Bjarnegård is Professor of Political Science at Uppsala University, Sweden. Her research focuses on men and masculinities, as well as political institutions. She has published in such journals as the American Political Science Review and Journal of Democracy, and she is the author of Gender, Informal Institutions and Political Recruitment.

Kathleen Starck is Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany. Her research interests include gender studies, Cold War cultures, contemporary drama and popular culture. She founded the research network Political Masculinities, recently merged with the Swedish network Men in Politics, and has published widely on ‘political masculinities’.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References


