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Understanding Female Legislators' Substantive Representation in the Australian Parliament

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ABSTRACT

Female legislators are typically assumed to act for other women when policy-making. Contemporary literature challenges this, and a need to “tow the party line” complicates the process of attributing acts of substantive representation vis-à-vis policy to any individual political actor. Using 1,047 private member's bills tabled in the Australian federal parliament (1995–2022), we address this limitation by employing a quantitative text analysis approach. We find gendered differences in the propensity to propose such bills across parties and over time. Further, our analysis reveals that substantive gender differences in legislation extend beyond linguistic variations to distinct thematic concerns. These findings underscore the role of gender but also other biographical and contextual factors in shaping legislative priorities, contributing to ongoing debates about the substantive representation of women in policymaking.

KEYWORDS

Political representation;
private member's bills;
Australia; gender

Introduction

Women are increasingly represented in parliaments globally, with the share of seats in national legislatures held by female representatives doubling worldwide over the past two decades (Inter-Parliamentary Union, and UN Women 2023). Despite this progress, women continue to be inadequately represented, both descriptively and substantively (e.g., Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes 2020). Drawing on the assumption that the gender of delegates shapes their legislative choices, female legislators have often been considered the only actors capable of legitimately representing the interests and preferences of women (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1998). This approach logically implies that gender imbalanced governments make unrepresentative policy decisions, undermining their core democratic function.

Building on this premise, the feminist literature on descriptive and substantive representation has traditionally asked whether a greater number of female legislators bring increased attention to women-specific issues (Celis et al. 2008). However, this approach has ultimately produced inconclusive findings (e.g., O'Brien and Piscopo 2019; Towns 2003; Wängnerud 2009) and faced criticism for several shortcomings, including a failure to account for the diversity among women and its tendency to overlook the potential for men to legitimately represent women's interests (Celis et al. 2008; Childs 2006). Scholars have responded by calling for a reconceptualization of the issue (Celis et al. 2008; Childs 2006; Childs and Krook 2009; Mackay, Monro, and Waylen 2009), presenting a revised research agenda that shifts the focus away from questions like “do women act for women?” and toward the interrogation of “where, why, and how does substantive representation of women occur” and “who claims to act for women?” (Celis et al. 2008). In contrast to earlier approaches, this way of thinking steers clear of *a priori* assumptions about what constitutes women's interests (Celis et al.

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2008), providing room for a “thick” understanding that reflects the complexity and contingency of representation to emerge (Mackay 2008).

This article is positioned to respond directly to these critiques and contribute to the revised research agenda by investigating the substantive representation of women in the underexplored legislative contexts of a) private member’s bills and b) the Australian federal parliament (1995–2022). Private member’s bills are a particularly valuable site for examining the “where” of substantive representation. Unlike government-sponsored legislation, private member’s bills provide individual legislators with an opportunity to articulate their policy priorities independently of party discipline, a key factor that often obscures individual voices in Westminster-style systems. While party affiliation may still exert some influence, private member’s bills offer a useful yet underutilized lens through which to observe the dynamics of substantive representation. By focusing on these two underexplored legislative contexts, this study addresses ongoing calls to pay greater attention to the “where” of substantive representation.

Our approach acknowledges the diversity among representatives by analyzing male and female legislators equally, recognizing that men can also act as legitimate representatives for women. The use of quantitative text analysis allows us to identify patterns in the types of policies legislators propose, regardless of their gender, and examine how these align and diverge across gender lines. Much of the research on the substantive representation of women in politics has centered on the behavior of female legislators, frequently using male legislators as a “neutral base” (Hömann 2020, 31) to compare against; potentially at the expense of uncovering critical insights about how men may – or may not – act “for” women. By systematically exploring the language and themes of the private member’s bills proposed by both genders and their differences, we aim to arrive at an updated understanding of what constitutes “women’s” and “men’s” issues, questioning whether such a binary remains relevant. Against this backdrop, we position private member’s bills as a key mechanism for uncovering the “who” and “how” of substantive representation, providing insights that extend beyond the confines of traditional party politics.

Australia provides a particularly relevant case for exploring these dynamics. As the first country to enact dual rights for women – with the notable exclusion of First Nations people – to both vote and run for politics, it occupies a significant place in feminist political history. Our study comes at a timely moment, given that Australia’s most recent federal election saw the greatest representation of women in parliament to date at 44% (Hough 2022). Although women remain in the minority in the House of Representatives, they have occupied the majority of seats in the Senate since 2019. Despite these promising advances, scholarship on Australian politics has extensively documented barriers to gender equality, including “toxic” political cultures (Sawer and Maley 2024) and biased media treatment of female politicians (Williams 2017).

Private member’s bills have been overlooked in the study of gender and representation in Australia. Julie Bishop, the country’s first female foreign minister, has recently spoken about the constraints imposed by party politics on advancing individual policy agendas (Rizvi *n.d.*; Stephenson 2024), illustrating how party discipline continues to be an issue in understanding the independent legislative interests and preferences of elected representatives. While quantitative research on this topic in the Australian context remains limited, initial studies from other polities suggest that private member’s bills serve as a key mechanism for examining women’s substantive representation in national legislatures (e.g., Akirav 2020; Bektas and Issever-Ekinci 2019).

To address this research gap, we conduct a quantitative text analysis of an original dataset of private members’ bills. Our findings reveal gendered differences in both the frequency and thematic focus of proposed legislation. While female legislators are more likely to introduce bills relating to “feminized” policy (detailed definition and discussion of this concept to follow) areas, male legislators also engage with these themes; though to a lesser extent. These results refine our understanding of substantive representation by demonstrating how gender shapes legislative priorities across party lines and over time while also highlighting the value of private members’ bills as a site for studying policymaking dynamics.

Gender, substantive representation, and private member's bills

Women remain underrepresented in political assemblies across the globe. As of 2023, women comprised only 22.8% of cabinet members heading ministries and 26.5% of Members of Parliament (IPU and UN Women 2023). Descriptive underrepresentation is a concern as it theoretically impacts legislative behavior. Akirav (2020, 2) argues that female legislators – as an underrepresented group – “want to be heard” and are therefore more likely than their male counterparts to use the parliamentary tools at their disposal (like private member's bills) to achieve this aim. Research has found that women are generally more active and effective in certain legislative activities, with Khan (2018) noting that female representatives in the National Legislature of Pakistan were responsible for 71.4% of successful private member's bills. Further, women were more likely to introduce private member's bills in the first place; with the content of their contributions covering a broad range of topics, not just those “traditionally thought to be of women's interest” (Khan 2018, 218). Whilst Akirav's (2020) cross-comparative study of legislatures in the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel found no significant numeric difference in the number of private member's bills presented, female legislators were more effective at passing legislation than male representatives. Explaining their legislative success, the author notes that women “invest much more effort” (Akirav 2020, 3) and are better at building consensus than their male colleagues. Altogether, the gender of a legislator may influence their propensity to propose such legislation and their efficacy in doing so.

These findings are particularly noteworthy when considering that, across the board, women are not necessarily more likely to speak in parliament than their male counterparts (Bäck and Debus 2019; Broughton and Palmieri 1999). Since politics has been historically dominated by men and norms of masculinity, some scholars theorize that female representatives are deterred from expressing themselves due to gender stereotypes and their marginalized status within many political institutions (Bäck, Debus, and Müller 2014; Broughton and Palmieri 1999). Research into European legislatures has affirmed this, demonstrating that, even in polities with high levels of gender equality, women give fewer speeches in parliament (Bäck, Debus, and Müller 2014; Bäck and Debus 2019). Although not examined in depth, Osborn and Mendez (2010) also note a lower participation mean amongst women in the United States' Senate. However, another study in the same country contradicts this, finding that women address their numeric underrepresentation by speaking more frequently than men (Pearson and Dancey 2011). Observations from the British House of Commons highlight how female representatives are more likely to participate in debate relating to women's issues (Catalano 2009). These findings invite contemplation about the purpose that institutional features may serve in enhancing substantive representation, further cementing the validity of researching private member's bills as a key legislative tool for women.

Taking a step back from private member's bills and turning to the broader question of gender and political representation, male and female representatives differ in what they talk about in parliament. Based on the assumption that the descriptive qualities of legislators heighten their ability and motivation to substantively represent – “speak for” – the experiences of those who share these characteristics (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1998), scholars posit that female representatives are more likely to propose and support legislation that relates to women's issues, i.e., legislation which concerns “soft” policy areas (health, social services and education, for example) or policies about women and their biology such as reproductive rights (Akirav 2020; Khan 2018; Tremblay 1998). Celis (2007) tests this in a study of budget debates in the Belgian Lower House from 1900 to 1970, finding that women intervened more often in parliamentary debate in favor of women and included a broader range of female perspectives in their contributions. Similarly, analysis of speeches made in the American Congress and Senate reveals that women are more likely to discuss women and issues related to their gender, irrespective of party and political chamber (Pearson and Dancey 2011; Osborn and Mendez 2010).

Moreover, the contributions of female legislators to political discussion have been distinct from that of male representatives across numerous institutional contexts and legislatures, including those with

and without gender quotas and a critical mass of women in political offices (Bäck and Debus 2019; Blaxill and Beelen 2016; Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2014). Even when debating issues that fall outside of what is traditionally considered to relate to women, female legislators consistently draw upon different arguments and perspectives to men (Blaxill and Beelen 2016; Broughton and Palmieri 1999). In legal contexts, too, a gendered difference in the opinions of judges is observed (Davis 1992). As such, gender influences the substantive content of political speech and advocacy.

These observations are supported by the existing literature on private member's bills. As the parliamentary process of introducing this type of legislation is not constrained by party discipline, private member's bills may provide more accurate insights into the individual policy interests of legislators and, by extent, reveal gendered patterns which otherwise may be obscured (Dixon 2004). Indeed, when analyzing the 35th Canadian Parliament, Tremblay (1998) observed that women were three times more likely than their male counterparts (454) to introduce private members' bills related to women's issues. Likewise, Bektas and Issever-Ekinci (2019) found that female representatives in the 2011–15 Turkish Parliament sponsored relatively more private members' bills on this topic.

The Australian context

In the literature focused on Australia, private member's bills are under-examined. Quantitative text analysis – as a relatively new approach in political science – has only been applied in this context recently, through our own research on the topic. Scholars across various disciplines note the role that private member's bills have played in reforming laws relating to abortion (Coleman 1988; Davenport 1998; Sawyer 2012; Warhurst and Merrill 1982), same-sex marriage (McKeown 2015; Waitt 2015) and euthanasia (Fleming 1999; Kerridge and Mitchell 1996) at both a state and federal level. Most of these accounts offer a technocratic perspective on the significance of such legislation. For instance, Godbout and Smaz's (2016) research supports an association between private members' bills introduction and lower levels of party unity. Sawyer (2012) also offers an important albeit brief theoretical insight on private member's bills as an institutional feature supporting women's substantive representation.

This lacuna of information is made all the more salient when contrasted against the generally rich literature on gender and politics in Australia. Marian Sawyer has written prolifically on the substantive representation of women, particularly in relation to the impact of institutions (e.g., Sawyer 2014, 2015, 2020). Ian McAllister has documented aspects of the electoral and descriptive representation of women in Australia (McAllister 2012; Studlar and McAllister 2002) and Louise Chappell has contributed feminist institutional approaches to the intersection between gender, government and human rights (e.g., Chappell 2000, 2002). Manon Tremblay – based in Canada – has also added significant value to the literature on women's representation in politics, with some of her research addressing Australia (Sawyer, Tremblay, and Trimble 2006; Tremblay 2003).

In terms of Australia's political context, and therefore the degree to which findings may or may not be globally generalizable, the country is lagging when it comes to gender equality in government, ranking 57th (at the time of writing) in the world in terms of the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women (IPU 2024). Despite being an early “pioneer” (Collier and Raney 2018, 439) of women's suffrage, recent years have seen stagnation and periods of backlash and backsliding, marked by high profile instances of sexual harassment in parliament, misogyny and sexism (Sawyer 2013; Sawyer and Maley 2024).

Operationalizing women's substantive representation

Historically, scholars have defined women's substantive representation through *a priori* categories that reflect feminist agenda items or the women's movement, often focusing on terms like “women,” “family,” and “children” in political speeches to identify women's issues (e.g., Bäck and Debus 2019; Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2014). However, some academics have critiqued this method for its lack of nuance and tendency to essentialize the female experience (e.g., Beckwith 2011; Trimble 2006;

Young 2002). This critique opens the door to a broader conception of substantive representation, one where women's interests and perspectives "permeate every political question" (Blaxill and Beelen 2016, 415). Expanding this concept is crucial for a more accurate and inclusive reflection of how women engage with policymaking across various domains.

In response, a shift to a more flexible, *a posteriori* methodology is required – one that allows women to define their own interests rather than relying on predefined categories. Quantitative text analysis serves this purpose effectively, offering a systematic approach to examining legislative content. Through this method, patterns in representation can emerge across diverse policy areas, revealing latent expressions of women's concerns that are not bound by a narrow conception of women's issues. The power of this methodology lies in its capacity to uncover these nuances, broadening the scope of what constitutes substantive representation and allowing for great inclusivity.

However, even a more flexible analytical approach demands a theoretical framework to guide the interpretation of findings. To ensure the analysis remains rooted in the gendered dynamics of policymaking, it is important to examine how female legislators interact with both "feminized" and "masculinized" policy areas. The concept of "feminized" legislation, in particular, helps classify policy domains where women's voices have historically been central, such as health, education, and family welfare. In contrast, "masculinized" policies are associated with traditionally male-dominated spheres like defense, finance, and industry. By categorizing policies in this way, we can better assess the extent to which female legislators engage with these gendered areas and understand the unique gendered contributions they bring to various discussions.

This framework — see Table 1 — is adapted from Krook and O'Brien's (2012) categorization of policy areas, which distinguishes between the feminized and masculinized domains, based on their historical associations with gender. However, we modify the traditional labels by replacing "feminine" and "masculine" with "feminized" and "masculinized," respectively. This shift reflects an understanding of gendered policy as socially constructed rather than inherently tied to one gender. The adaptation helps avoid the risk of essentializing gender roles within policymaking while acknowledging the historical gender power dynamics that shape different policy areas. While there remains room for further refinement, this framework provides a workable approach to analyzing how gender and policy areas intersect.

Findings from studies of gendered political speech provide indirect support for this framework, showing that female representatives are more likely than their male counterparts to address issues associated with traditionally feminized domains (Blaxill and Beelen 2016; Broughton and Palmieri 1999; Celis 2007; Osborn and Mendez 2010). However, female legislators do not limit themselves

Table 1. "Feminized" versus "Masculinized" Policy Areas (Adapted from Krook and O'Brien 2012).

Masculinized policy areas	Agriculture, Food Safety Fisheries & Livestock Communication & Information Construction & Public Works Correctional Services/Police Defence, Military & National/Public Security Enterprise Finance & Economy	Foreign Affairs Government/Interior/Home Affairs Industry & Commerce Labor Religious Affairs Science & Technology Transportation
Neutral policy areas	Civil Service Displaced Persons & Expatriates Energy Environment & Natural Resources Housing Justice Minority Affairs	Parliamentary Affairs Public Works Planning & Development Regional Reform Sports Tourism
Feminized policy areas	Aging/Elderly Children and Family Culture Education	Health & Social Welfare Heritage Women's Affairs Youth

to these areas. Research shows that they bring distinct perspectives to discussions within what can be classified as masculinized policy domains, such as defense and the economy (Blaxill and Beelen 2016; Broughton and Palmieri 1999; Celis 2007). This highlights the importance of analyzing the broader spectrum of women's contributions, not just within feminized sectors but across the entire policy landscape. Furthermore, as more women enter politics and gain influence, the gendered gap in the content of political speech appears to be narrowing, challenging the rigid boundaries between what has traditionally been seen as men's and women's issues (Blaxill and Beelen 2016). This development creates space to rethink how we define and measure women's substantive representation.

In our analytical approach, we reject the traditional label of "women's issues" and instead use the concept of "feminized" to describe legislation that not only affects women but also advances gender equality and addresses the structural disadvantages women face. This conceptual shift allows for a richer understanding of substantive representation, integrating gender equality as a core concern that transcends the boundaries of "niche" issues. By focusing on policy areas historically gendered through power dynamics, we acknowledge that these labels are social constructions rather than inherently associated with specific genders.

Thus, we categorize policy domains as "feminized" or "masculinized" based on their historical associations, without essentializing the gender of those who work within them. By understanding these classifications, we can analyze the potential alignment or challenge female legislators pose to gendered political norms – particularly through private member's bills and other policy proposals. Further work beyond the scope of this article can be done to categorize and interpret whether such proposals are "feminist," which we might define as policy approaches which address gendered inequalities and power dynamics at a structural level and that may occur across a range of policy areas – not just historically *feminized* areas. Categorizing feminist legislation may be difficult using our methodology, given that it would require a more detailed reading of any particular proposed bill, and one could argue does not strictly rely on just the bill contents or discussion, but the process used to develop the bill (who was consulted and how) and implement any legislation arising from the bill. Whilst this is beyond the scope of our article, such an approach would allow us to understand how women's legislative activities shape broader political agendas, reflecting their influence in pushing for policies that directly or indirectly address women's lived experiences of inequality, representing an avenue for further study.

As such, based on the above literature and our own previous analysis, the following hypotheses are presented:

H₁: male and female members of parliament focus on different topics in the content of their private member's bills.

H₂: private member's bills proposed by female members of parliament are more associated with feminized issues than those proposed by men.

Materials and methods

The original data set used for this quantitative text analysis draws upon a sample of private member's bills proposed at the federal level of government in Australia (1995–2022). This time scope was chosen due to data availability, as records of bills preceding this period are generally not digitalized. Data were acquired from parliamentary records and include the permalink, title, type, originating chamber, status, sponsor, summary, progress, and earliest date. This was supplemented by independently collected and recorded data on the gender and party of proposing members. The data set contains 1047 observations, each of which represents a unique private member's bill.

The dependent variable in this study is the summary, which is coded as a string containing high-level information about the content of a bill. Summaries are provided by the representative that is proposing the legislation. To illustrate, a summary of the *Workplace Relations Amendment (Paid Maternity Leave) Bill 2002 [2004]* proposed by the former senator Natasha Stott Despoja reads:

Amends the Workplace Relations Act 1996 to provide for a system of paid maternity leave, including provision for a government funded basic maternity payment, for employees not employed by Commonwealth, State or Territory governments; and A New Tax System (Family Assistance) (Administration) Act 1999 to provide that women who receive this new maternity payment will be ineligible for the existing maternity allowance and maternity immunisation allowance.

The methodology used in this study was quantitative text analysis, which implies treating documents as data; turning “something directly meaningful” into that which yields “meaningful insights” through the identification of patterns (Benoit 2020, 40). This approach is increasingly relevant and useful in political science given the increasing accessibility of technology and the large volume of texts available to researchers (Benoit 2020, 40). The main utility of text analysis is that it can be used to draw out and measure many of the central concepts in the discipline which are otherwise unobservable (Benoit 2020, 1). Qualitatively analyzing documents is nothing new to social sciences as researchers have long used such an approach to categorize and extract meaning from texts. That said, the quantitative dimension of text analysis is relatively novel and stands to expand the field significantly by allowing statistical techniques to be used to demonstrate qualitative patterns in data.

It is important to recognize the limitations inherent in this methodology. Quantitative text analysis, by nature, treats texts as datasets, which strips them of their nuanced, stylistic features. This inevitably limits the ability to understand the deeper meaning behind the texts themselves (Benoit 2020). Furthermore, while text analysis can identify patterns and measure frequency, it does not account for potential confounding variables that might skew the results, such as the political ideology, party affiliation, and institutional contexts in which the bills are introduced. For example, prior studies have found that these factors – such as the party or ideological leanings of a legislator – can influence how likely a representative is to advocate for issues related to gender equality (Erzeel and Celis 2016; Höhmann 2020; Kittilson 2016). This limitation of the approach means that while the methodology provides valuable insights into trends and patterns, it cannot control for all potential variables that might affect legislative behavior.

Irrespective of the program used to analyze texts, there is typically a standard procedure for analyzing documents as data. For this article, Quanteda – a package available on R – was used to perform text analysis, informing the terms used to describe the procedure. First, a corpus is formed including the texts to be analyzed. This is similar to a dataset but specific to the program being used. Then, data are tidied into common formats by, for instance, removing punctuation, making it easier to spot patterns. The final step is converting the corpus into a document feature matrix before analyzing the data with relevant statistical procedures such as keyness plots and topic modeling, which are used in this article.

Keyness plot

A keyness plot is a version of a bar plot which shows the likelihood of specific token association with a certain group, allowing for language characteristics to be compared (Benoit 2022). The direction and length of the bars indicate the strength of a word’s association and are measured using the chi-squared statistic, which demonstrates statistically significant differences between expected frequencies and observed frequencies. In the case of a null hypothesis, there would be no token association with either the target or reference group.

For this article, the corpus was used to create a keyness plot relating to the language used in private members bills by male and female members of parliament, allowing words most strongly identified with each gender to be identified. Differences in men and women’s policy proposals can be treated as

a proxy for substantive representation, highlighting gendered patterns in political expression for analysis.

Topic modeling

Topic modeling uses algorithms to discover central ideas across collections of data (Benoit 2020). This can help extract information and patterns from unstructured data, producing topic lists which must be analyzed. Latent Dirichlet allocation is utilized in this particular model, which is a method that breaks down a corpus into three components – words, topics, and documents. Two main assumptions are utilized here:

- (1) *A document is defined as “a distribution over topics:” all documents consist of topics that are dispersed among the documents with a certain probability.*
- (2) *A topic is defined as “a distribution over words:” all topics consist of words that are dispersed among the topics with a certain probability.* (Benoit 2022)

In order to find the *k* value – the number of topics that the algorithm is tasked to find – a range of values must be tested to visually assess which produces the most distinct topics. Whilst this is the standard process of arriving at the *k* value, it admittedly involves a degree of arbitrariness (Benoit 2020). This has been controlled for in this study by producing several different models using different *k* values, comparing the fit of the different models by assessing how distinct each topic grouping was before proceeding to conduct analysis with the best fitting model.

Results

Across the dataset, men proposed 597 private members’ bills (66%), while 307 bills (44%) were proposed by women. Compared to the average proportion of women occupying parliament during this period (31.4%), women were more likely than men to propose private member’s bills relative to their overall descriptive representation. In other words, women seem to “punch above their weight” in proposing matters of individual concern in parliament; an observation which aligns with existing findings in the literature (Akirav 2020; Khan 2018).

Understanding these gendered patterns requires situating them within their broader political landscape. Mackay’s (2008) “thick” conceptualization of representation challenges us to look beyond descriptive statistics and consider the substantive dimensions of women’s legislative activity. In this section, we begin our analysis by exploring how the rate of women proposing private members’ bills has evolved as governments have changed and women’s representation in parliament has grown.

Figure 1 illustrates the gender composition of the Australian Parliament alongside the gender of members proposing private members’ bills across successive parliamentary terms, from the 37th to the 47th Parliament.¹ The left axis represents the percentage of men and women in parliament, while the right axis indicates the count of private members’ bills proposed by men, women, and in total.

The graph shows that the volume of private members’ bills proposed by women was greatest during the 46th Australian Parliament. This peak coincides with the period during which women achieved the greatest numeric representation in politics. The alignment between the two suggests that the descriptive representation of women may help explain this gendered pattern in legislative activity, lending support to the idea that the presence of other women can have a positive effect on participation in parliamentary processes.

However, the graph also indicates that despite gains in representation, women have not consistently sponsored private members’ bills at the same rate as their male colleagues. In earlier parliaments, even as female representation steadily increased, their legislative activity, measured by private bill sponsorship, did not always rise in parallel. This suggests that institutional factors, party dynamics, or historical barriers may have constrained their engagement, beyond simple numeric representation.

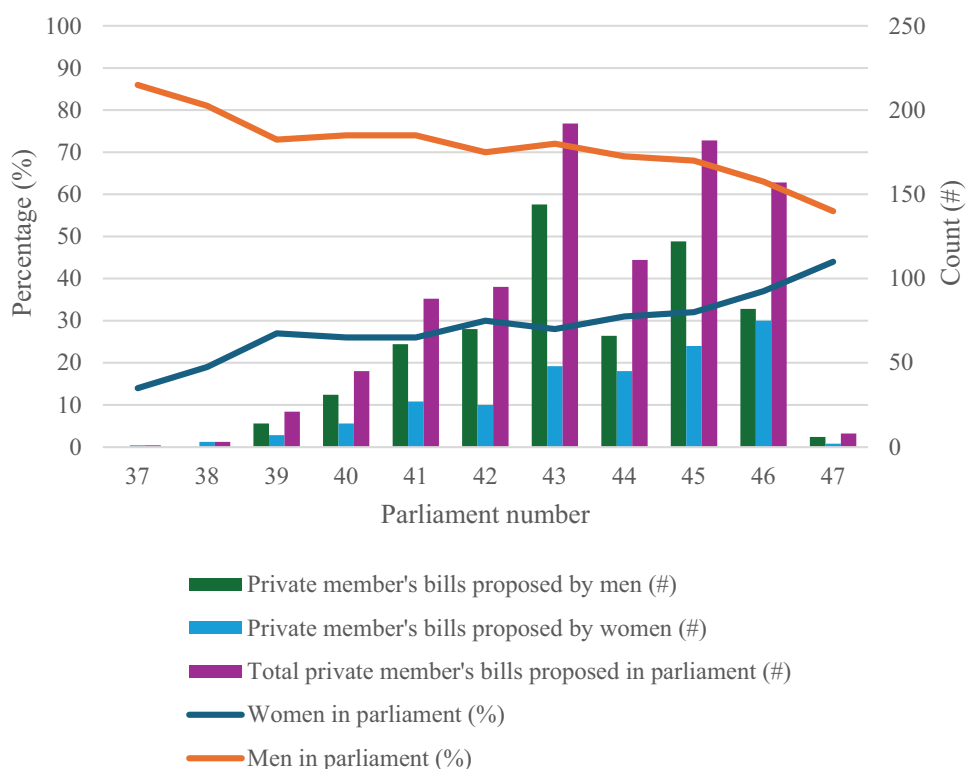


Figure 1. Gender Composition in Parliament and Gender of Proposing Members of Private Member's Bills, Over Time

Table 2. Party Affiliation and Gender Breakdown of Sponsors of Private Member's Bills

Party of sponsoring member	% distribution of sponsoring party	% proposed by women	% proposed by men
Greens	34.11	55.52	44.48
Independents	16.83	76.97	23.03
Labor	13.95	69.84	30.16
Liberal	7.20	81.54	18.46
Australian Democrats	5.54	34.00	66.00
Centre Alliance	4.43	45.00	55.00
Katter's Australia	3.99	100.00	0.00
Family First	2.55	100.00	0.00
National Party	2.44	68.18	31.82
Nick Xenophon Team	2.21	75.00	25.00
One Nation	1.99	27.78	72.22
Liberal Democratic	1.55	100.00	0.00
Democratic Labour	0.66	100.00	0.00
United Australia	0.66	100.00	0.00
Australian Christians	0.66	100.00	0.00
Jacqui Lambie Network	0.44	0.00	100.00
Palmer United	0.33	100.00	0.00
Justice Party	0.22	100.00	0.00
Australian Progressive Alliance	0.11	100.00	0.00
Shooters, Fishers, and Farmers	0.11	0.00	100.00

Analyzing the party affiliation of sponsoring members provides additional context for these findings. Table 2 summarizes the percentage distribution of private members' bills across parties and their respective gender breakdown. Legislators from the Greens proposed the highest proportion of private members' bills (34.11%), with a near-even gender distribution: 55.52% of bills were sponsored by women and 44.48% by men. This gendered pattern could reflect the party's strong

commitment to gender equity, with the Greens having historically strived for balanced representation (The Greens 2023).

Independent members contributed 16.83% of all private members' bills, with women sponsoring 76.97% and men 23.03%. This significant gender imbalance among Independents likely reflects the historical composition of Independents in Parliament, where women have been notably more visible and active. The higher proportion of bills proposed by women among Independents could be indicative of a broader trend in which independent politicians, often acting outside traditional party structures, have provided a platform for women who may feel marginalized or constrained within major political parties – see, for instance, Jacqui Lambie.

Among the major parties, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) accounted for 13.95% of private members' bills, with women sponsoring 69.84% and men 30.16%. In contrast, the Liberal Party contributed 7.20% of private members' bills, with women sponsoring 81.54% and men 18.46%. These figures reflect the broader gender dynamics and institutional contexts within each party, particularly their approaches to female representation and the empowerment of women within the political structure.

The ALP has long been committed to improving gender representation, a commitment formalized through the introduction of a mandatory 35% pre-selection quota for women in winnable seats by 2002, which was later updated to a “40:40:20” system in 2012 (Hough 2021). This policy has resulted in a significant increase in the number of women in the ALP, including notable female appointments to cabinet positions. The first cabinet of the 47th Parliament saw women comprise 10 out of 23 cabinet minister roles, marking the highest female representation in Australian history (Chappell and Annesley 2022). With such representation in key decision-making roles, female ALP members may be less inclined to sponsor private members' bills as a means of influencing policy, given their more direct involvement in shaping the party's legislative agenda.

In contrast, the Liberal Party has faced ongoing criticism for its relatively low representation of women, with no equivalent policy to ensure gender parity. Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull acknowledged this gender disparity, calling the party “far too blokey” and recognizing the need to address gender inequality (Turnbull in Doherty 2019). The lack of formal gender quotas or substantial female presence in leadership positions likely drives women in the Liberal Party to propose private members' bills more frequently. For these women, sponsoring such bills may represent a key alternative avenue to exert influence within a party structure where female voices have historically been underrepresented in higher-level decision-making processes.

These dynamics highlight how party-specific policies and cultures influence the legislative behavior of female parliamentarians. Across all the major parties and Independents, women propose a higher proportion of private member's bills than men. However, numerical patterns alone do not fully capture the substance of these legislative efforts.

To delve deeper into the nature of these contributions, we examine the content of private members' bills through a keyness plot, which identifies terms most distinctly associated with bills proposed by women compared to men. This approach allows us to move beyond descriptive statistics and explore the substantive focus of women's legislative activity. Figure 2 presents the results of the keyness analysis, highlighting the topics most frequently discussed in private members' bills based on the gender of the sponsoring legislator.

The results of the keyness plot (Figure 1) immediately demonstrate a gendered difference in token association, allowing the null hypothesis – that there is no distinction between private members bills proposed by male and female legislators – to be firmly rejected. Women (the target group) and men (the reference group), with reference to one another, have “key” words that occur unusually frequently, as measured through the chi-squared statistic. The tokens associated with female members of parliament are, on average, more strongly correlated to their gender (i.e., their grouping) than those of men, implying a particularly distinctive use of language. Whilst this initial impression cannot demonstrate whether gender contributes to these differences in expression, it tells us that men and women in parliament have contrasting ways of expressing themselves through private member's bills.

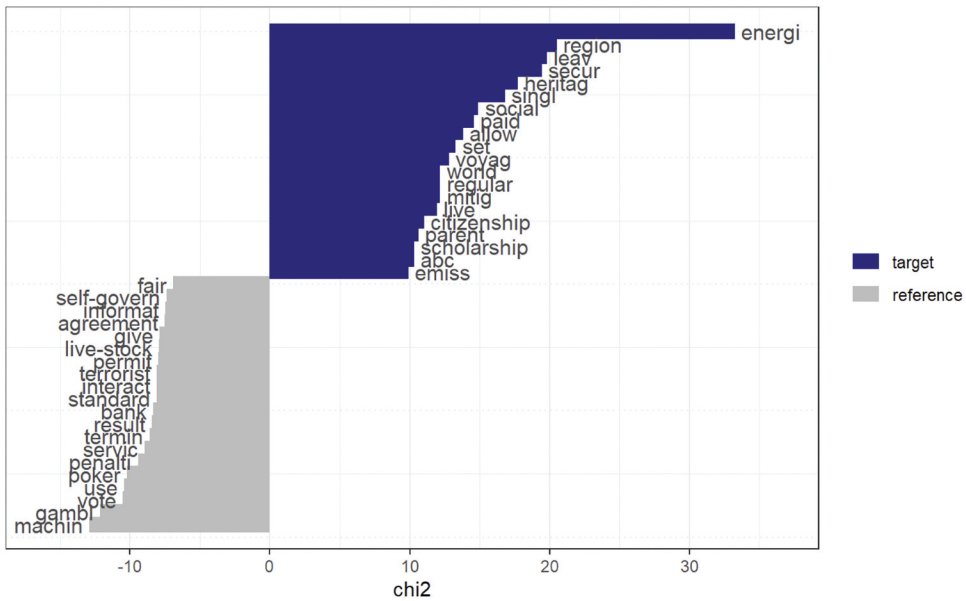


Figure 2. Keyness Plot of Topics Discussed in Private member's Bills, by Gender (Men i.e., Reference Group and Women i.e., Target Group)

An observation that can be made from the plot is that tokens relating to the environment are relatively frequent in women's proposed legislation, suggesting a thematic concern across party lines. The word that is most strongly associated with this group when compared to their male counterparts is "energi-." When viewed in context, this typically appears in proposed legislation relating to emissions reduction and climate change. Supporting this interpretation is the relatively frequent appearance of the words "mitig-" and "emiss-" in women's private member's bills. Additionally, the terms "region," "world," and "live" could be used in the context of discussions surrounding the environment and climate change. A similar theme cannot be observed in the tokens associated with men.

A potentially confounding factor worth noting here is that women from the Greens party have been disproportionately active in proposing private member's bills during the period under examination, potentially skewing results. However, it is also the case that male members of parliament from this minority party (and others) are overrepresented. One might expect this to moderate some of the bias, particularly if – as per the null hypothesis – both genders were proposing similar legislation. It bears repeating that private member's bills are uniquely capable of highlighting the individual policy interests and preferences of representatives beyond the specter of party discipline, meaning that private member's bills may be less straightjacketed by ideology. Because of this, issues that are typically partisan are more readily discussed, explaining why common themes may emerge in the proposed legislation of members from across the political spectrum.

Returning back to analysis, women used words with direct relevance to families and social welfare more often than men. Their private members bills are associated with the words "parent" and "single," suggesting a focus on households, particularly separated ones. "Paid" and "leave" could refer loosely to labor rights or, viewed in the context of families, to parental leave. Finally, the words "secur-," "regular," and "Paid" may be referring to welfare payments flowing toward households. Nearly all of these tokens are more strongly associated with women or feminized policy areas than those that are most associated with men, indicating the extent to which female representatives are raising these issues. Policy relating to families and social welfare affect women deeply, highlighting a link between gendered experiences and political representation through the proposal of private member's bills, whilst a similar concern with feminized issues is not reflected in the results shown for men.

Further, the content of women's private member's bills relates clearly to culture, media and education, whereas men appear to have a strong focus on gambling and industry. References to "heritag-" and "abc" in female legislators' vocabulary are fairly unambiguous references to the arts – the ABC being Australian's national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, that has taken a significant funding hit in recent years. Further, the token "scholarship" could signal discussions relating to education. These topic areas contrast starkly with what male legislators are discussing, with the strongly associated tokens "poker," "gamb-," and "machin-" containing clear references to gambling. Additionally, men's private members bills appear to discuss finance and industry at a higher rate, as per the words "live stock," "permit," and "bank." Interesting to note also is the use of the word "fair," with an equivalently moralistic term not being observed in women's vocabulary. Once again, these tokens fall fairly unambiguously into traditionally feminized and masculinized portfolio areas.

Finally, it seems that both male and female members of parliament are using words related to security and international affairs but are engaging with different aspects of these themes. The association of the token "terrorist" with men indicates an engagement with the issue of terrorism. Women, on the other hand, appear to be discussing travel or human migration, with the tokens "voyag-," "world," and "citizenship" appearing in their policy lexicon. Male members of parliament also appear to be concerned with diplomacy and sovereignty, which can be associated with the tokens "self-govern" and "agreement." Altogether, security and international affairs appear to be presented differently according to gender, with men seemingly providing a more realist interpretation of global politics. Whilst security and international affairs are well-recognized as a male-dominated and masculinized domain of government (Stephenson 2024), the way it is discussed affirms theoretical and observed patterns of behavior whereby women are more dovish in their approach to so-called "hard" issues of security and international affairs (Bendix and Jeong 2020).

Turning to topic modeling, for this study we conducted topic modeling separately on male and female members of parliament. This method was applied as a way to further test the findings of the keyness plot; examining whether gendered substantive differences are reflected at not just a linguistic level, but also at a thematic one. If the null hypothesis is true and women and men are discussing the same topics, then this may weaken the argument that there is a concerted effort going on by either group to substantively represent elements of their gendered interests. Furthermore, where other methods might rely on *a priori* categorizations of women's issues, topic modeling allows for an *a posteriori* understanding of gendered priorities to emerge. To help guide topic selection, the topics listed in the parliamentary library (see Appendix) browser were used as a reference point. Whilst this categorization is not exhaustive, it provides a standardized framework from which to relate common subjects of discussion in Australian politics to the output of the two models. Topics are listed in Table 3.

As in Table 3, the first topic seems to relate closely to the idea of welfare. The words "social," "secur-," "payment," "rate," "increase-," "service," and "elig-" could be interpreted as references to government support schemes such as Centrelink. Families, employees, and parents are mentioned in the model results, which are groups that typically receive such payments. References to "care," "violence," "single," and "domestic" allude to issues that are known to disproportionately impact the experiences of women, providing an interesting substantive representational link to the gender of proposing members. Additionally, words like "increase," "fair," and "provid" seem to frame welfare in supportive and potentially moralizing terms, implying a generally positive and altruistic attitude toward welfare.

The second topic reads, at first glance, as defense and national security, with terms like "secur-," "nation," "intelligence," and "monitor" closely matching this. However, there are some confounding ideas that appear, particularly those relating to finance, discrimination and rights. It could be that proposers are discussing the topic from a human security standpoint, which emphasizes the protection of citizen's dignity and freedoms. However, the more plausible explanation is that this topic model cannot be readily explained as it draws upon disparate elements of parliamentary discussion in a way that is not thematically suggestive. The generation of excess topics that are difficult to interpret are to be expected when applying topic modeling (Benoit 2019), highlighting a potential issue with using this

Table 3. Topic Model of Topics Discussed in Women's Private Member's Bills

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5
Provid	Secur	Requir	Provid	Prohibit
Social	Nation	Energi	Commiss	Environ
Secur	Provid	Establish	Requir	Protect
Payment	Territori	Provid	Person	Export
Care	Assist	Report	Marriag	Provid
Work	Requir	Renew	Commission	Conserv
Employ	Consum	Nation	Establish	Biodivers
Leav	Legisl	Review	Integriti	Control
Allow	Inform	Function	Elector	Approv
Age	Protect	Power	Disclosur	Area
Paid	Govern	Emiss	Make	Service
Administr	Intellig	Water	Includ	Food
Parent	Monitor	Assess	Power	Requir
Employe	Relat	Chang	Law	Industri
Famili	Servic	Annual	Polit	Penalti
Fair	State	Region	Ombudsman	Live
Singl	Remov	Climat	Relat	Great
Rate	Credit	Committe	Entiti	Make
Increas	Loan	Make	Migrat	Activ
Member	Amount	Communiti	Code	Corpor
Elig	Payment	Author	Report	Consequenti
Violenc	Right	Commiss	Within	Mine
Servic	Small	Scheme	Conduct	Action
Superannu	Discrimin	Financi	Public	Gas
Domest	Limit	Set	Industri	Grant

approach. Whilst it would be beneficial to do deeper analysis on these bills to confirm their theme, this was not possible due to the pooling of data which occurs during topic modeling.

The third topic appears aligned with environmental regulation. Climate and natural resources are clearly discussed in this topic, as indicated by the tokens “energi-,” “emiss-,” “water,” “climat-,” and “change.” Verbs like “require-,” “establish,” “report,” and “review” imply regulatory action on the issue, with the federal government playing a leading role as a body with the “power” to “set-,” “financi-,” and “make” legislation relating to the environment. Interesting to note are the tokens “region,” “nation,” and “communiti-” which are indicative of a perspective that encompasses both the macro and micro level. References to “commiss-,” “review,” and “committee-” imply the existence of a parliamentary or public body which may guide decision-making surrounding environmental regulation. This topic can be seen as a significant, and gendered, topic. There is a growing corpus of literature on the relationship between women and climate change, with some studies supporting the finding that women are more likely to worry about climate change and more willing to invest in solutions now (Xiao and McCright 2012). Further, climate change is well-recognized as a “threat multiplier” for climate change, disproportionately impacting women (UNFCC 2023).

The fourth topic seems to draw upon the concepts of advocacy and the law. References to “commission,” “integriti-,” “disclosure,” “ombudsman,” “code,” and “conduct” are broadly suggestive of procedures which hold representatives, individuals, and other public or private bodies in check. The tokens “polit-,” “entiti-,” and “industri-” allude to the groups which are being held accountable, noting that they typically wield substantial “power.” Ideas of justice and fairness are central to this and present themselves in other aspects of the topic model relating to the “law.” In particular, it seems that social issues such as “marriag-” and “migrat-” are being raised in this context, suggesting a particular judicial focus.

The fifth and final topic seemingly relates to resources and industry. Australia’s economy relies significantly on many of the sectors mentioned, such as “mine,” “export,” “gas,” and “service”. References to “industri-” and “corpor-” further substantiate the idea that this topic relates to private business. Yet, there seems to be a concern with environment and livestock underscoring the discussion, as indicated by the tokens “conser-,” “biodivers-,” “live,” and “export.” Verbs such as “prohibit,”

Table 4. Topic Model of Topics Discussed in Men's Private Member's Bills

Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5
Provid	Provid	Provid	Requir	Requir
Energi	Establish	Requir	Export	Provid
Marriag	Requir	Servic	Prohibit	Nation
Migrat	Commiss	Offenc	Environ	Consum
Renew	Secur	Elector	Provid	Chang
Right	Work	Broadcast	Protect	Climat
Establish	Servic	Prohibit	Conserv	Credit
Visa	Report	Polit	Live stock	Emiss
Law	Commission	Person	Biodivers	Fee
Make	Fair	Disclosur	Standard	Territori
Review	Function	Year	Water	Loan
Discrimin	Independ	Penalti	Food	Bank
Power	Make	Tax	Slaughter	Charg
Remov	Relat	Advertis	Approv	Machin
Person	Employ	Entiti	Control	Relat
Human	Social	Foreign	Import	Greenhous
Sex	Nation	Code	Use	Competit
Countri	Appoint	Crimin	Area	Northern
Legisl	Integriti	Report	Communiti	Framework
Protect	Payment	Make	Includ	Penalti
Consequenti	Power	New	New	Impos
Relat	Employe	Public	Develop	Remov
Nation	Public	Regist	Agreement	Regul
Solemnis	Member	Corpor	Product	Protect
Decis	Care	Provis	Industri	Carbon

“protect,” and “approve” potentially allude to the “activ-” role that government should play in regulating the economy, or the need to “control” the “activities” of business. Moreover, it seems that resources and industry are discussed in a way that is closely tied to regulation and public intervention. For comparison, topics that recur for men who propose private member's bills are listed in Table 4.

As in Table 4, the first topic can be interpreted as social issues. The tokens of “marriag-,” “energi-,” “migrat-,” “sex,” “human,” “person,” “visa,” and “discriminat-” appear to correspond with ideas relating to human rights, the climate and migration. These have appeared in parliament over the years as divisive political topics, with the left and right looking to distance themselves from each other by taking strong stances on matters such as gay marriage and environmental commitments. Tokens like “protect-,” “remov-,” and “renew” suggest an array of government action on these issues, all of which invariably “legisl-” the “rights” of the public. An intriguing inclusion in the model is the words “countri-” and “nation-” which may relate either simply to migration or imply the use of nationalistic rhetoric.

The second topic appears closely linked to governance, discussing initiatives that uphold principles such as “integriti-,” “fair-,” and “independ-” through the establishment of “commission-” and “report-” mechanisms that act as a check on “power.” These tokens form part of a vernacular which is used when discussing ways to hold public and private groups accountable. In particular, male representatives may be referencing the labor market, as suggested by the tokens “work” and the twice-included “employ-.” Additionally, other forms of “power” that affect the “public” or the “nation-” may form part of the discussion, although it is not immediately clear from these results what these may be.

The third topic links to the second in that it appears to discuss issues that are relevant to the public interest through the paradigms of transparency and justice. Misuse of government resources is potentially something being discussed, as tokens “broadcast-” and “tax” relate to government levers which are often manipulated by ruling parties for political ends. Additionally, financial and other types of crime are alluded to by words such as “crimin-,” “offenc-,” “entity-,” and “corpor-.” “Elector-,” “polit-,” “person-,” and “public” all point toward how these issues are being discussed in the context of the public interest and democracy. More broadly, the topic appears to be advocating for procedures

that “provide, and “require” clear “code” and “disclosure” relating to political, criminal, and financial conduct.

The fourth topic seems to be clearly relevant to the agricultural industry, which is politically and economically powerful in Australia. “Live-stock,” “food,” and “water” are tokens which relate to different sectors within this whilst “product” and “industri-” highlight the commercial angle through which they are being framed. Trade features in this discussion, as alluded to by the words “export,” “import,” and “agreement.” Interestingly, the environment and community are mentioned within the context of this topic as per the tokens “environ-,” “conserv-,” “biodivers-,” and “communiti-.” This may explain why a regulatory approach to the industry is being implied through verbs such as “requir-,” “prohibit,” and “standard.”

The fifth and final topic could be understood as relating the general idea of regulation. Mainly, the topic appears to relate to climate change as per the tokens “climate,” “chang-,” “emiss-,” “greenhous-,” and “carbon.” The terms “credit,” “fee,” “framework,” “regulat-,” and “penalti-” could be relating to emission reduction schemes such as cap-and-trade and taxation. However, many of these tokens could also fit into the context of regulating the financial sector, as per the connotations of the words “bank,” “charg-,” “loan,” and “fee.” The noun “machin-” adds another dimension to be considered. If anything, there appears to be a domestic focus for regulation owing to the tokens “nation” and “territory-.”

Discussion

The above findings support the overall claim that there is a substantive difference in the way men and women engage in political representation. For one, each group has their own set of key words which distinguish them from the other, indicating, at the very least, a gendered difference in the use of language. The results of the topic model expand upon this finding by showing that linguistic distinctions are carried through at a thematic level, with men and women raising different policy issues – or at least conceptualizing and perhaps prioritizing them differently. This implies a gendered difference in substantive representation reinforced by the fact that private member’s bills tend to reflect the individual interests and perspectives of legislators. Even without attempting to categorize these tokens as masculinized and feminized, such findings contribute to the literature by allowing *a posteriori* understandings to be formed about the policymaking interests and priorities of men and women in contemporary politics.

What’s more, the above results conform with *a priori* definitions of women’s substantive representation. The keyness plot reveals that, across party lines, female legislators are using words associated with families, welfare, the environment, education, and culture at an unusually high frequency relative to men. Most of these topics are frequently equated with feminized policy areas. That said, the findings of the topic model are less aligned with such *a priori* assumptions. Rather, female legislators are seen to discuss a wide range of issues, including some that could be considered masculinized. Nevertheless, women do raise the issue of more feminized areas of policy around social welfare in relatively unambiguous terms, discussing this in relation to families and other vulnerable groups. No such equivalently feminized topic or perspective is brought forward by men, highlighting the enduring role of female representatives as primary advocates for women.

Admittedly, some of the research findings do not neatly support the hypothesis put forward. For instance, women are not seen to explicitly reference women in their private member’s bills. Additionally, female representatives do discuss issues that can be perceived as more masculinized, whilst male legislators veer into feminized policy territory when talking about the environment. To these observations, two counterarguments are put forward. First, the level at which data was collected is a limiting factor, as the federal government tends to deal with significantly more “masculine” and macro-level policy issues when compared to state legislatures. Gender differences may be difficult to detect in this institutional context as representatives

are limited in their ability to represent traditionally feminized policy areas. Second, private member's bills serve as a political opportunity to get one's voice heard on the important questions of the day. It is therefore hardly surprising that there is some overlap in the topics discussed by men and women in parliament, particularly those considered hot button issues such as climate change and migration.

A more useful approach to interpreting the findings of this study may be analyzing how men and women differ when discussing similar concerns. For instance, on the topic of the environment, female legislators discuss this clearly in terms of climate change and emissions reductions strategies, whereas male representatives discuss this in a broader context of regulation, relating this to other industries such as finance and agriculture. Likewise, insofar as social issues are concerned, men seemingly focus on topics such as migration and human rights whilst women discuss it in the context of welfare policy for families and other vulnerable groups. The findings of the keyness plot confirm the observation that gender seems to entail distinct policy priorities and perspectives and that these differences are captured from across the entire dataset. In a time and place where gender norms are increasingly being challenged (see, for example: the National Strategy for Gender Equality announced in 2024) it may be more appropriate to view substantive representation as less about the topics that men and women discuss in parliament and more about the ways in which they communicate them. Through these small but important distinctions in language, women's political voices are rendered distinct from those of men in a way that is broadly symptomatic of substantive representation.

Conclusion

This study has employed quantitative text analysis to examine the relationship between the descriptive and substantive representation of women in Australia. To do so, it has utilized records of private member's bills proposed in the Australian federal parliament during the 1995–2022 period. Four important findings are made. First, women were more likely than men to propose private member's bills relative to their overall descriptive representation, “punching above their weight” in proposing matters of individual concern in parliament. Second, men and women do not express themselves in the same way through the language of private members bills. Third, male and female legislators are, to a moderate extent, focusing on different topics when proposing such legislation. Even where there is overlap in topics, for instance, in climate change or migration, the focus of language used by men legislators reinforces a more realist, technocratic approach to the topic, whilst the language used by women legislators appears more human-centered, welfare-oriented and rights-focused. Fourth and finally, private member's bills proposed by women are more associated with feminized issues than those proposed by men. In contrast, and supporting the findings made in other research (Blaxill and Beelen 2016; Celis 2007; Höhmann 2020; Krook and O'Brien 2012), men less frequently venture into feminized areas of policy than women venture into masculinized issues.

While it is unclear the degree to which female legislators do propose more *feminist* legislation, the results can be interpreted as female members of parliament generally representing traditionally feminized topics, which although are not exclusively “women's issues,” may still benefit women (or have a higher likelihood of directly benefitting women). Given the important role that private member's bills play in allowing such substantive representation to take place, we should look to this institution as a potential political solution to the problem of gender inequality in parliaments. Additionally, the findings of this research can be used to understand the specific concerns of women in Australia, given that most of the existing literature takes place in European and American contexts.

That said, the research conducted is far from exhaustive and prompts further inquiry. Limitations include that we focused on a large-N quantitative text analysis that still obscures – to a degree – how “feminist” legislation could be considered. Future studies could focus on undertaking this expanded, qualitative analysis, to understand deeper nuance and more accurately map women's substantive representation in policy as well as open up opportunities to understand

how men might substantively represent more feminist policy also. Additionally, further studies could expand the data set to include state jurisdictions, as well as extending the period covered. Finally, ways to include control variables in topic models should be explored; these might include political party, electoral security, overall proportion of women in parliament (critical mass) and duration since the election of government.

In conclusion, this research confirms that gender plays a critical role in shaping the policy agenda of individual legislators. The underrepresentation of women in parliament not only limits their visibility but also undermines the substantive representation of women, highlighting the ongoing need for greater gender equality in politics.

Note

1. Observations from the 37th and 47th Parliaments are incomplete due to the dataset capturing only partial data for these terms.

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Appendix

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs
- Business, industry, and corporate affairs
- Communications and media
- Communities and families
- Population
- Rural and regional affairs
- Science and technology
- Social issues
- Statistics
- Transportation
- Urban affairs
- Welfare
- International relations and trade
- Law
- Parliament, government, and politics
- Culture, arts, and recreation
- Defence and national security
- Economics and finance
- Education
- Employment and training
- Environment, energy, and resources
- Health
- Immigration