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‘I Never Thought Gender Would Be a Campaign Theme.’ Political Communication on Sexual and Gender Diversity during the 2024 Elections in Belgium

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Abstract
This article examines political communication on sexual and gender diversity by seven major Flemish political parties during the 2024 pre-election period in Belgium. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines (RQ1) to what extent Flemish party manifestos for the 2024 elections address themes related to sexual and gender diversity, and (RQ2) the rhetorical strategies used across different communication channels (manifestos, social media, and traditional media) to (de)legitimize LGBTQ rights. The exploratory quantitative analysis reveals ideological divides, left-wing parties positioning LGBTQ rights within their social justice agendas, more (centrist-)right conservative parties being more restrained, and the radical-right party framing these issues as direct threats to traditional values. More in-depth qualitative analysis identifies ten rhetorical strategies, progressive parties supporting LGBTQ rights by invoking legislation, science, and allyship, while the radical-right employed anti-gender rhetoric and called for the protection of children and traditional norms. Additionally, mutual accusations emerge, left-wing parties warning against ‘far-right dangers’ and right-wing parties targeting ‘the woke left’.

Keywords
LGBTQ rights, anti-gender ideology, political elections, rhetoric strategies

Introduction

The 2024 Belgian elections were particularly important as it was the first time European, federal, and regional votes were held simultaneously on 9 June, followed by local and provincial elections on 13 October. In the lead-up, TV show *Het Conclaaf* (VTM) united seven leading Flemish politicians. A heated exchange arose between Tom Van Grieken, leader of radical-right party Vlaams Belang, and transgender politician Petra De Sutter, (then) deputy prime minister and Green Party member. Van Grieken claimed that 'true extremists' are those who deny the existence of only two genders, men and women. Following the episode, interviews and debates amplified the controversy, Van Grieken reaffirming his belief that individuals like Petra De Sutter are men. De Sutter responded, stating: 'I never thought gender would become a campaign theme. That hit hard, not only for me but for hundreds of thousands of Flemish people with me' (Terzake, 7 June 2024). This incident is part of a broader pattern, whereby LGBTQ themes became a topic of political discussion, while these had been less prominent in political debate over the past years.

From the early 2000s, Belgium was a frontrunner in relation to legal LGBTQ rights with its progressive framework to protect sexual and gender minorities (ILGA, 2024; Eeckhout & Paternotte, 2011). The country was among the first to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003 and adopt strong anti-discrimination laws based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Borghs, 2016). Compared to some other Western countries like the U.S., these policies were implemented with relatively limited opposition (Eeckhout & Paternotte, 2011). In such a context, openly anti-LGBTQ rhetoric would be expected to carry little electoral appeal, typically being perceived as too radical or socially unacceptable. Yet, the 2024 campaign revealed the growing backlash from political actors presenting these rights as a threat to cultural values and national identity. This is particularly evident among radical-right parties in Europe, where anti-gender rhetoric has risen alongside far-right extremism (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), as exemplified by Flemish radical-right party Vlaams Belang (Gustin, 2024).

This development points to a striking paradox: how does rhetoric that challenges sexual and gender diversity gain traction in a political context internationally framed as progressive? More broadly, it raises questions about how backlash against LGBTQ rights operates in settings where formal equality has largely been achieved. While such dynamics have been extensively studied in countries marked by stronger institutional resistance to LGBTQ inclusion, less is known about how similar rhetorical strategies emerge and function in contexts like Belgium.

As media studies scholars, we approach this question through a two-fold analysis, with a specific focus on the role of communication. First, through a quantitative exploration we examine to what extent themes related to sexual and gender diversity are addressed in election manifestos, a key form of political communication that reflects the collective position of a party (Allen & Bara, 2017). Second, using qualitative analysis we investigate how party leaders address these topics in election manifestos but also broader political communication, attentive to rhetorical strategies legitimizing or delegitimizing sexual and gender diversity. Combined, these analyses disclose how Flemish political actors engage with sexual and gender diversity, while also providing insights of relevance to other countries facing political polarization on related issues (Close et al., 2024; Kins et al., 2024; Piazza, 2023).

Political communication on sexual and gender diversity

Contemporary political actors utilize various communication channels to convey their messages and influence public discourse. Election manifestos outline a party's medium-term policy priorities and can shape both media coverage and the focus of election campaigns (Agarwal & Das, 2025; Allen & Bara, 2017, 2019; Pérez et al., 2023). While manifestos reflect the collective position of the entire party (Allen & Bara, 2017), parties and their politicians increasingly rely on other communication channels as well. This includes legacy

media such as televised debates (Barbaros, 2012; Heiberger et al., 2022), as well as content distributed through social media platforms (Bast, 2024; Larsson, 2023). Different media serve distinct functions in political communication, enabling parties and politicians to use each channel strategically to reach diverse audiences and highlight specific topics and messages (Hau et al., 2025).

More specifically, political communication on sexual and gender diversity has evolved in recent decades, shaped by broader social movements and the growing visibility of LGBTQ issues (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016; Kemper, 2016; Canto & Arregui, 2024). In Western contexts, LGBTQ activism in the late 20th century led to increased political attention (Fejes, 2016; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). Movements for the decriminalization of homosexuality marked significant turning points in the modern LGBTQ rights agenda (Sherkat et al, 2011; Berlet & Sunshine, 2019). The need for political actors to address these issues arose from growing public awareness, advocacy, and the demand for equality by LGBTQ communities. The focus shifted over time, from non-discrimination in the 1970s, to same-sex marriage (bans) in the 2000s and transgender rights in the 2010s (Magni, 2020).

LGBTQ issues increasingly intersect with established political cleavages. As Engeli, Green-Pedersen, and Larsen (2012) argue, questions of gender and sexuality have become embedded within cultural–moral divides between progressive and conservative camps, shaping how parties articulate support, resistance, or strategic ambiguity. This broader institutional and ideological context helps explain the rhetorical strategies politicians deploy, as their discourses are influenced not only by communication logics but also by party competition, ideological positioning, and the politicization of morality issues. LGBTQ rights have also become increasingly prominent in election campaigns, potentially influencing voter preferences (Magni, 2020), mobilizing supporters for a specific candidate or party and/or persuading voters to reconsider their party loyalty (Campbell & Monson, 2008).

While research has examined public perceptions (Van Wichelen et al., 2024) and media coverage (Verhoeven et al., 2023) of LGBTQ issues, fewer studies investigated how politicians communicate about these issues across different platforms. Existing scholarship often only studies party manifestos (Magni, 2020; Harmer & Southern, 2020) or single social media platforms (Nulty et al., 2016), overlooking today's hybrid media environment (Bode & Vraga, 2017). This creates a gap in understanding multi-platform political communication on sexual and gender diversity. Although digital and social media have broadened opportunities for a greater online participation, they also raise concerns about adverse effects such as misinformation, hate speech, and polarization (Spohr, 2017; Oden & Porter, 2023).

Morality work, political homophobia, and anti-gender mobilizations

Political polarization has intensified, including in Belgium (Close et al., 2024; Kins et al., 2024; Piazza, 2023). This is increasingly visible in how sexual and gender diversity has become a central battleground. Conservative actors increasingly criticize 'gender ideology' in order to delegitimize the LGBTQ community (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017; Köttig et al., 2017; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018), particularly in the context of education (Van Wichelen et al., 2024), family policies (Kemper, 2016; Patrona, 2020) and transgender rights (Verlooy, 2024). Also commonly referred to as the 'anti-gender movement', this rhetoric frames gender discussions as not only 'an anthropological and epistemological threat but also a covert political strategy' (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017, p. 9). Despite different national manifestations, the movement shares common strategies, often presenting itself as a defender of liberal values while framing gender and LGBTQ rights as authoritarian threats to those very values.

Anti-gender mobilizations are often interconnected with right-wing populism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Köttig et al., 2017; Gustin, 2024), although it is important not to conflate these concepts and movements (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). In the Flemish political landscape, these dynamics unfold across the party system rather than being limited to the radical right. The radical-right party Vlaams Belang has most explicitly adopted anti-gender rhetoric, combining homonationalism (Verhoeven et al., 2023), nativism (Gustin, 2024) and

essentialist notions of family to promote a normative vision of Flemish identity. Parties shaped by a Christian-democratic heritage, such as CD&V, have generally supported anti-discrimination measures while remaining more cautious regarding policies that deviate from traditional family values. This caution is also evident in the right-wing party N-VA, which often adopts strategically ambiguous stances: it distances itself from explicit anti-gender discourse while simultaneously criticizing so-called 'woke' or 'ideological' approaches to gender (Dhoest & Paulussen, 2025), signalling cultural conservatism without fully alienating moderate voters. These variations reflect insights from previously mentioned scholarship on morality politics (Engeli, Green-Pedersen & Larsen, 2012), which emphasizes that issues linked to gender, sexuality, and family norms are low in technical complexity but high in symbolic salience, making them key arenas for parties to signal ideological identity and articulate resistance to social change.

In light of growing political polarization and debates on morality, this study examines to what extent and how sexual and gender diversity became a theme in Flemish political discourse. Focusing on the 2024 elections, we investigate election manifestos as well as mediated communication in legacy and social media, aiming to answer two research questions. First, to explore quantitative tendencies in the field, we ask to what extent do Flemish party manifestos for the 2024 elections address themes related to sexual and gender diversity? (RQ1) Second, to qualitatively analyse these discourses more in depth, we ask our main research question: which rhetoric strategies are used by Flemish political actors to (de)legitimize sexual diversity, gender diversity and LGBTQ rights? (RQ2)

Methodology

We focus on the most recent, 2024 elections as these allow to analyse the most recent evolutions in political discourse. Although a comparison between the Dutch-language region of Flanders and French-language Belgium would also be relevant, in this paper we focus on Flanders, which has a distinct political landscape characterized by strong nationalist and radical-right actors. Moreover, as Dutch-speaking researchers we are most familiar with Flemish political debates, which allows us to offer a more grounded analysis.

We used a mixed-method approach, combining a quantitative overview with more in-depth qualitative insights. To answer RQ1, we collected the election manifestos of the seven largest Flemish political parties: radical-left Marxist PVDA, left-wing ecological Groen, centrist-left social-democratic Vooruit, centrist-liberal Open VLD (renamed 'Anders' in 2026), centrist-right Christian-democratic CD&V, right-wing Flemish nationalist conservative N-VA, and radical-right Flemish nationalist conservative Vlaams Belang. We began with a quantitative exploration of the election manifestos because they are among the most reliable sources for assessing a party's policy preferences, reflecting the collective position of the entire party (Allen & Bara, 2017). Viewed as a communication tool (Agarwal & Das, 2025), manifestos allow us to systematically examine the attention parties give to various topics and enable comparisons across parties (Weeks et al., 2024). The second author reviewed the party manifestos to extract paragraphs addressing sexual and gender diversity, i.e. separate parts of the texts consisting of at least one sentence and beginning on a new line. This yielded 162 paragraphs, which were inductively analysed to develop the codebook for quantitative analysis. Six main themes related to sexual and gender diversity were identified: 1) national (equal) rights and opportunities, 2) mental and physical health, 3) safety, 4) education reform, 5) citizenship and gender, and 6) international LGBTQ rights.

A seventh category 'other' was used to group less prominent issues. Subsequently, the second author conducted a quantitative analysis to map how much attention parties dedicated to which themes.

This preliminary quantitative analysis formed the backdrop for in-depth qualitative analysis of rhetorical strategies used in broader political communication on sexual and gender diversity, aiming to answer RQ2. Beside party manifestos reflecting the party's collective positions, we also included social media posts and TV programs where individual politicians express their views. This allowed us to capture both the party's formal, collectively endorsed stance and how individual politicians communicate, and at times reinterpret, these positions (see, for example, Schumacher & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2018).

For the social media analysis, we collected posts on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X. Using the Coosto social media tool (see for example, Dijkmans et al., 2020), we gathered posts from the official party accounts, as well as from party leaders, faction leaders, and politicians involved in education, equal opportunities and sexuality. Posts were collected for the four-month pre-election period from 9 February to 9 June 2024, using search terms based on previous research (Van Wichelen et al., 2024): gender*, sex*, children*, LGB*, rainbow*, pride* and woke. In this way, we collected 43 tweets, 71 Facebook posts, 61 Instagram posts, and 26 TikTok videos. Of these 201 social media items, 10 came from PVDA, 33 from Groen, 23 from Vooruit, 55 from Open VLD, 6 from CD&V, 20 from N-VA, and 54 from Vlaams Belang.

We also analysed three political TV programs: *Eerste Keuze*, a program in which secondary school students engage with politicians on political issues; *Het Conclaaf*, which features politicians discussing political topics in a more informal format, and *Terzake*, a current affairs programme featuring political debates and analyses of contemporary events. These programs contained 12 segments prominently addressing sexual and gender diversity.

Following the principles of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), the first author examined the data for recurring themes and rhetorical patterns. Through iterative coding clusters of rhetorical strategies were identified, capturing both explicit messages and implicit beliefs. While this typology was mostly inductive, i.e. emerging largely from the empirical material, it was also partly deductively informed by previous research on discursive mechanisms surrounding LGBTQ issues (Van Wichelen et al., 2024).

Quantitative exploration: Sexual and gender diversity in election manifestos

In the 2024 election manifestos of the seven main Flemish parties, 162 paragraphs address sexual and gender diversity (see Table 1). In absolute terms, the radical-left PVDA and radical-right Vlaams Belang devote most space (i.e. paragraphs) to this topic. The two other left-wing parties also prioritize the topic, while (centrist) right-wing parties take a more reserved stance. Due to the varying formats of the party manifestos (e.g. brochures, web pages, etc.), it is difficult to meaningfully compare the relative importance of sexual and gender diversity across party manifestos. However, we can compare the relative importance of LGBTQ-related subthemes within the different party manifestos.

The more ethically progressive parties formulate clear objectives to advance LGBTQ rights in Flanders and Belgium, focusing on three key themes. First, PVDA (31.9%), Groen (34.8%), and Vooruit (40.7%) each devote a substantial share of their LGBTQ-related paragraphs to national (equal) rights and opportunities, accounting for 55% of all paragraphs on this theme. They advocate for stronger legislation and institutional support to ensure inclusivity regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Second, they prioritize mental and physical health, contributing 78% of paragraphs on this theme. PVDA (31.9%), Groen (30.4%), and Vooruit (25.9%) stress access to quality care, including banning non-consensual surgeries on intersex minors, expanding access to STI testing and PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) for individuals at high risk of contracting HIV, and improving transgender health care. Third, PVDA (31,9%), Groen (17,4%), and Vooruit (25,9%) strongly focus on

safety, including 74% of safety-related paragraphs across parties. They push for stricter laws against hate speech and violence and practical measures like awareness training.

Other centrist and right-wing parties dedicate fewer paragraphs to sexual and gender diversity in their manifestos. However, in terms of key themes, Open VLD, the centrist-liberal party, aligns closely with progressive parties. Of its LGBTQ-related content, 36.4% focuses on national (equal) rights and opportunities and 45.5% on mental and physical health. Open VLD promotes anti-discrimination, inclusive workplaces, improved gender health care, support for gender teams and funding for interventions like gender-affirming surgeries. The party also highlights citizenship and gender (9.1%), proposing measures such as removing visible gender markers from official documents. In contrast, the centrist-right Christian-democratic CD&V and the right-wing Flemish nationalist N-VA do not take a stance on these themes. Both parties focus on national (equal) rights and opportunities (40.0% and 60.0%, respectively) and safety (40.0% each), emphasizing anti-violence measures and advocating a society where everyone has equal treatment and the opportunity to fully develop. While N-VA supports inclusivity, it takes a cautious stance, promoting 'equal opportunities instead of equal outcomes,' defending freedom of expression but opposing identity politics, advocating shared societal values to guarantee equal rights without mandating specific outcomes.

Diverging from the mostly supportive stance of all other parties, the radical-right Flemish nationalist Vlaams Belang portrays LGBTQ-related themes as threats to traditional values and rejects progressive reforms. Its manifesto emphasizes three themes. First, the party prioritizes citizenship and gender (47.1%), opposing recognition of non-binary gender and insisting on binary gender categories in legislation. Second, Vlaams Belang focuses on national (equal) rights and opportunities (38.2%), rejecting policies aimed at recognizing systemic inequalities. The party criticizes 'woke ideology,' arguing it fractures society by categorizing people into competing identity groups, instead advocating equality based on individual merits. Third, Vlaams Belang focuses on education reform, dedicating 32.4% of its LGBTQ-related paragraphs to this theme. While other parties, except N-VA, emphasize LGBTQ visibility and acceptance in schools, including gender-inclusive language and sex education, Vlaams Belang opposes such measures. Its manifesto calls for a ban on 'gender ideology' in schools and dismisses tools like the 'Genderbread person' as unscientific, framing progressive sex education as leftist indoctrination (Van Wichelen et al., 2024). Instead, the party proposes mandatory 'citizenship courses' on European values and norms. This stance aligns with the broader anti-gender movement (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), as will be further developed in the qualitative analysis.

Table 1. Sexual and gender diversity in the election manifestos of seven Flemish political parties (%) (N=162)

	More left-wing **PVDA**	**Groen**	**Vooruit**	**Open VLD**	**CD&V**	**N-VA**	More right-wing **Vlaams Belang**	**Total**
Paragraphs in election manifesto	n=47	n=23	n=27	n=11	n=10	n=10	n=34	N=162
National (equal) rights and opportunities	31.9	34.8	40.7	36.4	40.0	60.0	38.2	37.7
Mental and physical health	31.9	30.4	25.9	45.5	10.0	0.0	5.9	22.8
Safety	31.9	17.4	25.9	9.1	40.0	40.0	0.0	21.6
Education reform	6.4	17.4	7.4	9.1	20.0	0.0	32.4	14.2
Citizenship and gender	2.1	8.7	3.7	9.1	0.0	0.0	47.1	13.0
International LGBTQ rights	2.1	13.0	14.8	18.2	0.0	9.1	0.0	6.8
Other	23.4	13.0	3.7	0.0	0.0	10.0	2.9	10.5

Note. The seven Flemish political parties are ranked from more left-wing to more right-wing. The percentages indicate the proportion of a theme in relation to the total number of paragraphs dedicated to sexual and gender diversity within each party's election manifesto. Since some paragraphs covered multiple themes related to sexual and gender diversity, column sums exceed 100%.

Qualitative findings: Rhetoric strategies to de(legitimize) sexual and gender diversity

Following the quantitative exploration demonstrating differences in which themes related to sexual and gender Flemish party manifestos for the 2024 elections emphasize, our qualitative analysis shifts focus to how they discuss such topics in broader political communication, also including social media and TV programs. The six thematic categories identified in the quantitative analysis served as an analytical starting point, but rather than mapping rhetorical strategies one-to-one onto these themes, we identified discursive patterns across categories. As shown in Figure 1, we identified ten recurring rhetorical strategies used by Flemish political parties and politicians, ranging from active defence of LGBTQ rights to resistance and opposition. We position these strategies along a continuum based on how they either reinforce or question traditional gender and sexuality norms. Additionally, these rhetorical strategies are presented as analytical categories rather than ranked by prevalence. While some were more explicitly articulated by particular parties and politicians, our qualitative approach prioritizes interpretive depth over frequency-based comparisons.

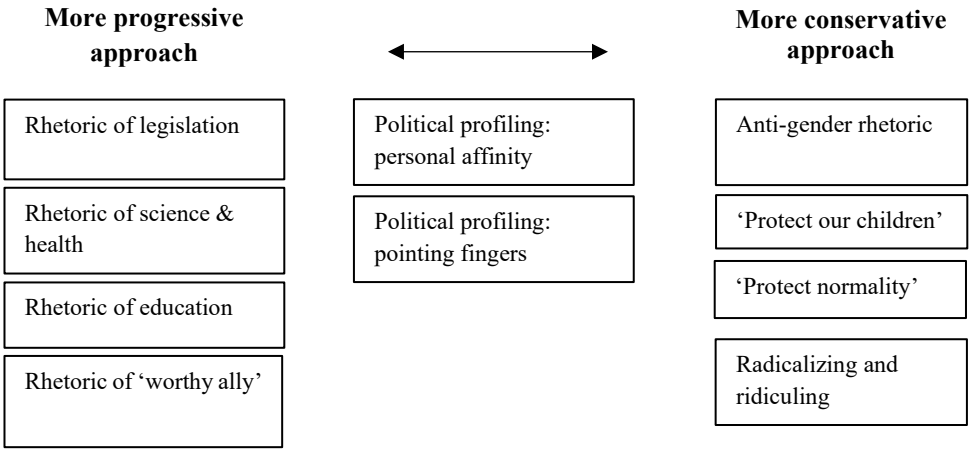

Figure 1. Rhetoric strategies to de(legitimize) sexual diversity, gender diversity and LGBTQ rights.

Rhetoric strategies to validate and protect acquired LGBTQ rights

The first thematic cluster of arguments, which we named 'rhetoric of legislation', is premised on protecting LGBTQ individuals, framing their acquired rights as integral to Belgium's legal framework. These arguments often highlight Belgium's reputation as 'pioneer in LGBTQI+ legislation' (Vooruit, election manifesto, p. 224) and emphasize the constitutional protection of marginalized communities. Moreover, these objectives state that punishments against discrimination should not merely be symbolic but legally enforceable. Notions of 'constitution' and 'legal protection' are central to this rhetoric:

> Everyone has the right to be themselves. (...) We want LGBTQI+ people to be able to fully participate in every conceivable aspect of society. And that any discrimination against them is dealt with severely. (Vooruit, election manifesto, p. 224)[1]

[1] All quotes are translated from Dutch by the authors.

> Today I was present at #brusselspride to defend the acquired rights of the rainbow community. (…) We liberals have always been pioneers in defending LGBTQ rights and therefore have a clear message: anchor these rights in the constitution. It is the only way to continuously guarantee our freedom. (...) Love is love. (Tom Ongena of centrist-liberal party Open VLD on Facebook, 18 May 2024)

Building on these statements, the 'rhetoric of science and health' draws on scientific research and medical advancements to legitimize sexual and gender diversity. This rhetoric evokes the credibility of science and factual evidence to advocate for LGBTQ rights, particularly in response to the anti-gender rhetoric employed by the far-right (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017; Gustin, 2024). Left-wing politicians like De Sutter (Groen) actively counter arguments seeking to invalidate the concept of gender. For instance, in the election debate on current affairs program *Terzake* (1994 –), she asserts that 'gender is not a matter of "belief" (...) but is grounded in science and medicine', challenging the claims of her political opponents. She compares such denial to 'claiming the earth is flat,' reinforcing the credibility of science while discrediting right-wing rhetoric. As seen in the quantitative exploration, other progressive parties call for improved psychological care and medical advancements for LGBTQ individuals, including better training for medical employees and reimbursement for gender-affirming procedures.

Closely interwoven with these arguments, the 'rhetoric of education' shifts the focus to education and pedagogy. It is grounded in the belief that inclusivity starts with early education. Political parties emphasize the 'pivotal role of schools in societal acceptance of LGBTQI+' (Open VLD, election manifesto, p. 123), shaping the values of a new generation of Flemish citizens. Accordingly, this rhetoric contrasts with conservative arguments focusing on preserving 'childhood innocence' (Robinson, 2008). Both left-wing and centrist parties argue that true protection lies in providing children with knowledge from an early age, thereby advocating for new sex education curricula and inclusive school environments:

> Education plays a crucial role in fostering social acceptance of LGBTQI+ individuals. (...) In preschool, curricula will incorporate themes of sexual and gender diversity. Sex education courses will be taught accurately and impartially, acknowledging various forms of sexual orientation and experiences of sexuality. (Open VLD, election manifesto, p. 123)

> In collaboration with expert civil society organizations, Groen (...) will strive to create a safe and inclusive school environment by implementing gender-inclusive toilets and using gender-inclusive language in official communications. (Groen, manifesto 'Diversity and equal chances', p. 12)

Building on the preceding discourses, the 'rhetoric of worthy ally' centres on solidarity and alliance as essential to an inclusive society. Rooted in Grundmann and colleagues' (2020) interpretation of 'allyship', it frames LGBTQ rights as part of broader values of freedom and equality, calling upon the responsibility of all members of society. Mainly left-wing politicians use this rhetoric by referring to collective risk, arguing that far-right extremism threatens not only LGBTQ individuals but society as a whole. By presenting the threat of the far-right as 'extending beyond trans people, to people of colour (…) women, and ultimately all of us – a fight we must stand together in' (Vaneeckhout of Groen on X, 5 June 2024), these politicians draw on a sense of shared vulnerability and collective responsibility. This rhetoric is also employed by centrist-liberal party Open VLD:

> The fight against discrimination is a matter for all of us. Therefore: don't let it happen. Speak up. Start conversations, file complaints, stand up for each other. To

> protect our freedom from extremists and conservatives, we want to anchor LGBT rights in the constitution. (Open VLD, Facebook post, 14 May 2024)

The strategic use of deictic expressions such as 'we' and 'our society' reinforces this notion of allyship, encouraging individuals to actively defend 'our' acquired rights. On social media, far-right movements are publicly condemned: 'look at Italy, where Meloni has removed LGBTQI+ parents from official birth certificates' (Depraetere of Vooruit on Facebook, 18 May 2024). In doing so, they highlight the importance of international initiatives and legal frameworks as critical tools for countering these threats.

Rhetorics of strategic profiling

Beyond arguments explicitly defending LGBTQ rights, our analysis identified two rhetorical clusters situated between progressive and conservative positions. These clusters do not advance substantive policy proposals but rather serve to shape political profiles or distinguish politicians from their opponents. The first profiling strategy, which we call 'rhetoric of personal affinity', is rooted in one's personal affinity as an LGBTQ person. As Gidengil and Vengroff (1997) discuss in relation to 'tokenism' in politics, this notion allows politicians to position themselves as insiders who speak on behalf of the community. Since this approach is often rooted in personal narratives rather than policy-based arguments, politicians respond to the tokenist role in diverse ways. For example, De Sutter (Groen) often references the personal toll of far-right attacks on her identity as a transgender woman. While she emphasizes not having asked for the spokesperson role, she channels it into advocacy: 'I never thought gender would become a campaign theme. That hit hard—not only for me, but for hundreds of thousands of Flemish people with me. Groen will always be on the side of human rights.' (*Terzake*, 7 June 2024)

Politicians from the radical-right Flemish nationalist conservative party Vlaams Belang employ a different strategy. For instance, Chris Janssens frequently denies the expectations tied to his identity as a gay man or conversely uses his identity to legitimize normative values that align with restricting LGBTQ rights, prompting other politicians to label him as an 'alibi holebi' (Zuhal Demir of right-wing Flemish nationalist conservative party N-VA on VRT NWS, 3 June 2024). Janssens elevates certain identities (normative, masculine gay men) while delegitimizing others within the community: 'just because you happen to be attracted to someone of the same sex, does not mean you want to be associated with non-binary, genderfluid or other (imaginary) gender-phenomena.' (Janssens on X, 18 May 2024) This is reminiscent of (then) vice-presidential candidate JD Vance's claims that Trump would win the 'normal gay guy vote' (Maher, 2024), and in line with Duggan's (2002) analysis of homonormativity. The following discussion between De Sutter and Janssens in an episode of current affairs program *Terzake* (6 June 2024) illustrates how this strategy of personal discourse can be mobilized in different ways, whereby identity is either embraced as a source of solidarity or rejected as irrelevant to political positioning:

> Petra De Sutter: 'If you change your mind one day and want to start a family (…) I will be there to help you.'
> Chris Janssens: 'You are doing exactly what you have accused others of doing: making it about your personal life. I will not tolerate this, Mrs. De Sutter. You cannot just bring up my personal life in front of cameras (…) because it is none of your business whether or not I choose to have children.'

This discussion also illustrates a second profiling strategy, the 'rhetoric of pointing fingers', where politicians direct their arguments and mutual blame at one another. Like 'negative campaigning' (Geer, 2006), this rhetoric emphasizes the dangers posed by opposing political ideologies rather than addressing specific policy issues. As mentioned by Dhoest and Paulussen (2025), right-wing parties frequently invoke 'dangers of the woke left' to trivialize

progressive stances on LGBTQ rights as disconnected from societal norms or threatening traditional values. Accordingly, anti-wokeism can be described as a counter-discourse aimed at resisting progressive politics gaining political momentum (Gustin, 2024). Left-wing politicians employ a similar tactic to warn against the rise of (far) right extremism. In stating that 'where extremists govern, people's freedoms will decline' (Depraetere of Vooruit on Facebook, 18 May 2024), left-wing politicians equally premise their arguments on invoking fear and pointing blame. In both cases, the debate shifts away from LGBTQ rights and toward a broader ideological battle, casting either the 'woke left' or the 'far right' as the main threat.

Rhetoric strategies to invalidate and delegitimize LGBTQ rights

At the more conservative end of the spectrum, our analysis reveals four rhetoric strategies used to delegitimize LGBTQ rights. While some arguments are more subtly formulated, others explicitly aim to preserve traditional values and resist the recognition of non-normative gender identities. These rhetorics are interconnected and often employed simultaneously to reinforce conservative claims.

The first cluster of conservative arguments, 'anti-gender rhetoric', relates to the anti-gender movement and the far-right condemnation of gender as a dangerous construct (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017; Gustin, 2024). This rhetoric is closely linked to anti-woke populism: although they have different origins, 'both discourses sometimes overlap and strengthen each other. For each (…) are to be regarded as an attack on (…) women's rights and gender equality' (Gustin, 2024, p. 11) — or, in this context, on the recognition of sexual and gender minorities. Radical-right politicians often invoke pseudoscience to discredit 'queer theory', denouncing it as a 'theory of power' (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017). This is illustrated in the following objective formulated by radical-right party Vlaams Belang:

> Queer theory is currently combatting normality. 'Normal' as a concept has a moral component, which queer theory considers to be intrinsically oppressive. Everything that falls outside the normal is said to be 'abnormal', 'perverse' or 'crazy'. (...) Queer theory ultimately wants to erase what is normal. (Vlaams Belang, manifesto *Cultuurstrijd*, p. 17)

This defence of traditional gender roles as 'the rightful order of things' is closely linked to the second cluster of arguments, 'protect normality'. This rhetoric gained traction among radical-right politicians globally (Stone, 2018; Patrona, 2020; Bower-Brown, 2023). In Flanders, Vlaams Belang's brochure *Cultuurstrijd* ('Culture War') aims to maintain societal coherence and promote the preservation of 'our Flemish culture' – a culture that adheres to traditional values of masculinity, femininity, and family structures.

The latter encompasses arguments particularly focused on children, which signals a third cluster of conservative arguments, 'protect our children'. Echoing the notion of 'childhood innocence' (Robinson, 2008), radical-right politicians reiterate the belief that young children should be protected against premature exposure to topics of sexual and gender diversity. Importantly, children are not merely referenced incidentally in these debates but are strategically mobilized as symbolic figures through which broader anxieties about gender norms and sexuality are articulated. Previous controversies surrounding educational tools such as the 'Genderbread Person' (Van Wichelen et al., 2024) have similarly demonstrated how discussions about gender diversity are frequently reframed as threats to children. This illustrates how childhood functions as a powerful anchor in anti-gender rhetoric, enabling political actors to legitimize exclusionary positions. Moreover, as mentioned by Unal (2024), the 'discursive combination of crisis narrative and (...) politics of fear are among the most typical strategies of boundary making in populist rhetoric when constructing common enemies' (p. 4), which would be left-wing actors in the narrative of radical-right party leader Van Grieken (Vlaams Belang):

> The socialists need to keep their filthy hands off our children. The manifesto of Vooruit mentions including sex education courses from kindergarten onwards. (...) And it gets even crazier: (...) the courses must also include the topic of 'gender'. This transgender ideology is being forced upon three-to four-year-old toddlers. How crazy is that?! Leave our children and grandchildren alone! (Van Grieken on TikTok, 6 April 2024)

Interestingly, this TikTok video also illustrates a stark contrast between the outspoken online communication of right-wing politicians compared to their more carefully articulated positions in election manifestos. In their mediated communication (whether online or in traditional media), radical-right politicians seem to shift towards a different rhetorical strategy: downplaying LGBTQ issues through humour, sarcasm, or trivialization. By referring to sex education courses as 'an ideology through toilets' (Ben Weyts of N-VA on X, 10 May 2024), some right-wing politicians seem to strategically cater to populist one-liners while masking conservative ideals.

This fourth strategy of 'radicalizing and ridiculing' often trivializes questions of gender identity as a personal choice. This is illustrated in an exchange between radical-right party leader Van Grieken (Vlaams Belang) and non-binary student Bie in *Eerste Keuze* (VRT 2024 –), where politicians are invited to answer questions of first-time voters:

> Bie: 'What is your stance on gender neutral toilets (…) as they could make me feel safer as a non-binary student?'
> Tom Van Grieken: 'I think it must be terrible to be emotionally born as a man in a woman's body, or vice versa. I do not deny your feeling. (…) However, I do refuse that we must all adapt ourselves based on your individual feelings. (…) We are not going to make new legislation and new toilets just for you.'
> Bie: (…) 'But what if they make me feel safer against violence and discrimination?'
> Tom Van Grieken: 'I am your ally when (…) people are physically aggressive. (…) Sometimes people laugh when a woman dresses like a man. Not the end of the world (...). We have already laughed at a redhead, a fat man, a white man, ... I will respect you, but I am not going to make legislation for you.'

While this interaction primarily illustrates the rhetorical claim of 'feeling entitled' to delegitimize individuals who do not conform to the gender binary, it underscores the interconnectedness of the four conservative rhetorical strategies. They are used interchangeably, ranging from dismissive rhetoric about gender identity to narratives about protecting 'our' society and traditional values. This far-right discourse primarily undermines LGBTQ rights, while at the same time bolstering conservative claims.

Discussion and conclusion

This article examined the political communication regarding sexual and gender diversity among the seven main Flemish political parties during the 2024 elections in Belgium. Our first research question asks to what extent their manifestos address themes related to sexual and gender diversity. Our quantitative exploration disclosed absolute differences in the amount of space dedicated to LGBTQ themes across party manifestos as well as relative differences in the attention to specific sub-themes within those manifestos. Left-wing parties (PVDA, Groen, and Vooruit) treat LGBTQ rights as integral to broader struggles for equality, grounding them in values of freedom, solidarity, and social justice. The centrist-liberal Open VLD similarly aligns itself with progressive stances, emphasizing individual freedom and inclusivity, reflecting their liberal values and their tendency to lean leftwards in relation to ethical issues (Eeckhout & Paternotte, 2011).

More conservative parties like the Christian-democratic CD&V and right-wing nationalist N-VA are more reserved. For CD&V, this may reflect a deliberate choice to avoid

taking strong positions on LGBTQ issues, likely due to their traditional Christian-democratic values. From the perspective of morality politics, such strategic caution is consistent with the way parties navigate issues that are highly symbolic and value-laden, signalling ideological identity while balancing diverse constituencies (Engeli, Green-Pedersen & Larsen, 2012). Nonetheless, CD&V does not partake in the international anti-gender movement, and it transformed its ethical stance in line with the liberalized consensus on LGBTQ rights in Flanders (Bracke, Dupont & Paternotte 2017). N-VA adopts a measured and cautious approach to LGBTQ issues while addressing progressive positions. The party emphasizes the importance of public security, advocating for stricter penalties for violence and hate crimes against the LGBTQ community, illustrating how strongly LGBTQ rights have become part of the Flemish national imaginary, betraying homonationalism (Verhoeven et al., 2023). However, they do not put much emphasis on broader expansions of LGBTQ rights and their criticism of 'identity politics' betrays a strong opposition to 'the woke movement' (Dhoest & Paulussen, 2025).

In stark contrast to the other parties, the radical-right Flemish nationalist conservative party Vlaams Belang strongly opposes sexual and gender diversity, framing these themes as a direct threat to traditional values, particularly within education and family structures, and actively rejects progressive reforms. While the party has traditionally opposed equal rights for sexual and gender minorities, in the last years these themes occupy a more prominent position on its political agenda, as part of their broader anti-woke stance (Gustin, 2024). This is evidenced among other things by the 40-page brochure *Cultuurstrijd* ('Culture War'), a relentless attack on woke, cultural Marxism, intersectionality, identity politics and 'gender craziness' published in the run-up to the elections. This also aligns with the European trend of far-right parties adopting anti-gender rhetoric as part of their nationalist agendas (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Our second research question asked about the rhetorical strategies Flemish political actors use to (de)legitimize sexual diversity, gender diversity, and LGBTQ rights. Our more in-depth qualitative analysis of party manifestos and broader political communication in social media and on television revealed ten rhetorical strategies to either legitimize or delegitimize sexual and gender diversity. On the more progressive end of the continuum, particularly left-wing politicians advocate for LGBTQ rights by referencing legislation, science and health care, education, and allyship. They not only propose concrete actions, such as legal reforms, but also emphasize the collective responsibility of all individuals (regardless of gender or sexual orientation) to contribute to an inclusive society. While right-wing nationalist N-VA supports LGBTQ rights, the party does not develop substantial arguments on these themes in its election manifestos and broader communication. For instance, N-VA formulates objectives for equality and inclusion but fail to translate these in concrete policy proposals, sticking to generic formulations such as 'we guarantee equality of rights for everyone, regardless of origin, religion, belief, disability, sex or sexual orientation' (N-VA, election manifesto, p.88).

In contrast to these more progressive arguments, conservative rhetorical strategies emerged in four distinct yet interconnected forms, often used interchangeably by radical-right party Vlaams Belang. Radical-right politicians focus on spreading anti-gender rhetoric (Gustin, 2024), promoting radicalization whilst ridiculing LGBTQ issues, and emphasizing the protection of children and 'normality'. By combing these four rhetorical strategies, conservative arguments become more resilient and harder to contest. Particularly on social media, Vlaams Belang harshly attacks and ridicules LGBTQ people and rights, in line with the international tendency for the media-savvy New Right to exploit the potential of online media, bypassing the editorial control of legacy media (Maly, 2018).

What is more surprising is its openly anti-LGBTQ language on television, as Vlaams Belang chose to be more moderate in the past. The party current's openly anti-LGBTQ positions testify to the mainstreaming of far right and anti-gender discourse in Flanders (Verlooy, 2024), in line with international tendencies (Wodak, 2022). Looking beyond both

ends of the continuum, our data indicate that some political parties converge in mutual accusations, either criticizing 'the woke left' or warning of 'the dangers of the far right'. In this sense, political profiling shifts the focus to the ideological conflict between left and right, diverting attention from the specific rights and needs of LGBTQ individuals. These rhetorics of political profiling, employed on both ends of the political spectrum, cultivate political polarization that overshadows meaningful discussions on equality and LGBTQ rights, in line with broader tendencies of affective polarization which are particularly prominent in American politics (Iyengar et al. 2019), fuelled by social media (Oden & Porter, 2023). Particularly in relation to sexual and gender minorities, far-right parties seem to play a central role in this process by actively waging a 'war on woke' (Cammaerts, 2022). They showcase an 'obsession with gender', presenting feminists and LGBTQI activists as enemies within the nation (Dietze & Roth, 2020), in turn prompting reactions from left-wing parties, as illustrated in the introduction.

Although it encompasses a broad range of political communication, this research has some limitations. First, our analysis was temporally limited to the four-month pre-election period. Future research could benefit from a longer temporal scope to capture the evolving nature of political discourse on LGBTQ rights, potentially also including past election cycles. Second, it is important to recognize that politicians within the same party may hold diverse viewpoints on the issues at hand. While we mostly framed our findings in terms of party positions, for the sake of clarity and coherence, this might not do justice to the diversity of individual perspectives on these issues. Third, as indicated above, a comparative analysis of Dutch- and French-language political discourses would be useful to get a better sense of the spectrum of Belgian politics. Fourth, it would also be valuable to further examine the variations in the parties' communication across different communication channels, to disclose whether and how they adopt a different approach depending on the channel used.

While acknowledging these limitations, our contribution lies in providing a comprehensive analysis of how LGBTQ issues are politicized within the Flemish political context. We contribute to the existing literature by analysing manifestos as a communication tool (Agarwal & Das, 2025), while also including social media and television. We not only map party positions across the ideological spectrum but also identify and categorize recurring rhetorical strategies structuring political discourse on LGBTQ rights. Our findings complement previous scholarship by offering an empirically grounded typology of rhetorical strategies, which can inform comparative studies across national and regional contexts. As previous scholarship has pointed out, the framing of sexual and gender diversity often serves as a proxy for deeper cultural, political and ideological divisions. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for grasping how LGBTQ issues are represented and contested in political discourse, which we aimed to do in this research.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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