Gender and LGBTQ Issues in Election Processes

Global and Local Contexts

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Chapter 1

Gender of electoral defeat in the narrative of political parties in Poland, Belgium, and the United Kingdom

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Anna Pacześniak

Introduction

Whenever a party performs below expectations in an election, the aftermath is the time to analyse the reasons for the unsatisfactory result. The starting point for such a reflection is the determination of whether the outcome was in fact a defeat. This can be problematic because electoral defeat appears, firstly, as a contextual category and, secondly, to a certain extent, a discretionary one (Pacześniak & Bachryj-Krzywaźnia, 2019, p. 125). The question is: what outcome should actually be considered a defeat – performing worse than opponents, performing worse in comparison to a preceding election, or performing below what opinion polls suggested or party leaders expected? Once political parties, the public opinion, voters, media, and experts define who has achieved electoral success and who has failed, the narrative about the reasons for electoral defeat begins to be constructed.

For any political party an electoral defeat is a situation that must be communicated to its voters and opponents as well as internally, to party members, grassroots activists, and volunteers. To this end, representatives of political parties construct narratives through which they attribute meaning to individual events, processes, or objects. Due to the fact that each defeat is a dissonant experience, party leadership and prominent politicians tend to look for reasons behind the loss outside the party – they put the blame on unfavourable attitudes on the part of mass media, vagaries of the electoral system, the specific nature of the domestic partisan scene, or some global trends and processes. This is a typical example of a defensive attribution – that is, a false interpretation of reality whereby one takes exclusive credit for one's successes but blames other people, processes, or external factors for one's failures.

After an electoral defeat, political parties look for the reasons also within the organisation, although less frequently. Certain individuals (typically party leaders or top-spot candidates with the highest media exposure) or groups (e.g. collective leadership, party headquarters, or political committees) can be identified as culprits. Surprisingly, in the narratives of some political parties, female politicians often emerged as those on whom the

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blame is put. This is all the more astounding given the fact that, in most parties, women constitute a clear minority (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993), are less likely to occupy top spots on the slates, and are underrepresented in decision-making bodies that design and manage election campaigns. Paradoxically, the fact that there are noticeably fewer women in politics seems to actually facilitate the construction of narratives whereby defeats are attributed to women's insufficient experience or alleged mistakes that supposedly, somehow hamper the entire party's performance. Such narratives, employing stereotypes and *clichés* according to which female politicians perform worse than their male counterparts, can be considered an evidence of institutional sexism within party structures (Kittilson, 2013), their formal and informal rules and norms. It may be claimed they reinforce the power of dominant (traditionally male) players in politics (Lovenduski, 2005) and, possibly, are a symptom of violence against women in politics (Druciarek & Niżyńska, 2020).

Women's presence in electoral roles as voters and candidates is a fairly frequent research subject for gender scholars and political scientists (Carroll & Fox, 2018; Waylen et al., 2013). The focus of such efforts varies and covers, for instance, the gendered outcomes of electoral systems (e.g. Matland & Brown, 1992; Moser, 2001; Schmidt, 2008), measures (particularly sex quotas) to enhance or guarantee gender-balanced representation (Franceschet et al., 2012; Gendźwiłł & Żółtak, 2019; Krook, 2009), analyses of recruitment and candidate selection processes within political parties (Kenny, 2013; Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Valdini, 2012), gender gaps in voting (Campbell, 2006; Golder et al., 2017), or gendered aspects of political campaigns (Dittmar, 2020). The following analysis of post-electoral narratives introduces parallel strands to these discussions and can lead to questions about deeper interactions between gender and party politics, the ways in which gender affects parties as organisations and political actors, as well as the persistence of gender stereotypes in politics (e.g. Bauer, 2019).

Party system is one of the important factors that determine the implications of an electoral defeat for political actors. In a two-party system, the entity that lost a parliamentary election is deprived not only of a certain number of mandates but also of public offices held previously. Even a slight shift in electoral support can lead to the losing party entirely relinquishing control over the country's policies. The situation is markedly different in multiparty systems with a long tradition of coalition governments, where a decrease in electoral support does not necessarily exclude the defeated party from the process of running the country. From this perspective, strategies adopted by political parties after a poor result are, indirectly, a consequence of the party system. Exactly how much access to public offices the party loses is not necessarily proportionate to the decrease in the number of parliamentary seats it holds. In fact, these two parameters (i.e. access to public offices and the number of MPs) might be, to some extent, unconnected in a multiparty system. If the system is constructed so that it

decreases the cost of electoral defeat by sustaining, at least to some extent, the losing party's access to public offices, the consequences triggered by the loss are likely to be less severe. Hence, in multiparty systems, the narratives about the reasons behind the defeat may be less strident and the search for culprits less intense.

In order to explore the impact of electoral defeats on political actors and their post-electoral narratives, this analysis encompasses parties functioning in three different party systems observed in various European countries (Sartori, 1976): a moderately polarised multiparty system (such as in Poland), a two-party system (with the British parliamentary arena), and an extremely polarised multiparty system (Belgium). The aim of the chapter is to compare the narratives on the reasons behind electoral defeats constructed by 11 political parties, and to find whether gender-based regularities exist.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we describe how electoral defeat has been defined and conceptualised. We also present data and methods. In the second section, we present the parties from Belgium, Poland, and the United Kingdom that have been selected for analysis. Then, we provide the result of our research and identify whether there are gender-based regularities in party narratives after electoral defeat. Finally, we propose conclusions and implications of our findings for the functioning of women in politics.

Data and methods

In order to select political parties for the analysis of post-defeat narratives, it was necessary to adopt an operational definition of an electoral defeat. Two criteria were taken into account: the level of electoral support connected with the number of seats in the parliament and the political status of the party after the election. Hence, an electoral defeat is defined as a situation where a party's electoral support decreases or the party wins fewer seats in the parliament compared to the previous election. However, if the party in question gains or retains presence in the government, a decline in its support or a decrease in the number of mandates held is not considered an electoral defeat. This approach is based on the observation that neither political parties nor the environment (voters, media, experts, or other parties) label a decline in support as a defeat, as long as the actor in question gains or maintains presence in the executive branch of the government. In such cases, political parties do not construct post-defeat narratives.

Taking into account the above-mentioned criteria, 11 political parties from Belgium, Poland, and the United Kingdom were selected for analysis. As can be seen in Table 1.1, the chosen parties differ widely in terms of the scale of their defeat. However, one element common to all of them is an objectively worse post-election situation. Most of the selected parties

Table 1.1 Political parties included in the study with their electoral results and political status

	Party	*Year of the lost election*	*Percentage of votes (loss)*	*Seats (loss)*	*Status before election*	*Status after election*
Belgium	Flemish Interest (VB – Vlaams Belang)	2014	3.67 (–4.09)	3 (–9)	Opposition	Opposition
	Socialist Party (PS – Parti socialiste)	2014	11.67 (–2.03)	23 (–3)	Co-ruling party	Opposition
	Socialist Party – Other (Sp.a – Socialistische partij.anders)	2014	8.83 (–0.41)	13 (–0)	Co-ruling party	Opposition
	Ecologists (Ecolo)	2014	3.30 (–1.50)	6 (–2)	Opposition	Opposition
Poland	Civic Platform (PO – Platforma Obywatelska)	2015	24.09 (–15.09)	138 (–69)	Co-ruling party	Opposition
	Polish People's Party (PSL – Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe)	2015	5.13 (–3.23)	16 (–12)	Co-ruling party	Opposition
	Democratic Left Alliance (SLD – Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej)	2015	7.55[a] (–0.79)	0 (–27)	Opposition	Non-parliamentarian opposition
United Kingdom	Liberal Democrats (LibDem)	2015	7.37 (–0.53)	8 (–49)	Co-ruling party	Opposition
	Labour Party (LP)	2015	30.40 (+1.40)	232 (–26)	Opposition	Opposition
	Scottish National Party (SNP)	2017	3.04 (–1.66)	35 (–21)	Opposition	Opposition
	UK Independence Party (UKIP)	2017	1.84 (–10.76)	0 (–1)	Opposition	non-parliamentarian opposition

Source: Authors' own study based on official election results.

Notes:
[a] SLD formed a pre-election coalition – a decision which meant its electoral threshold rose to 8%.

belong to the socialist/social democratic family: two from Belgium (Parti socialiste [PS] and Socialistische partij.anders [Sp.a]), two from the United Kingdom (Labour Party [LP] and Scottish National Party [SNP]), and one from Poland (Democratic Left Alliance). We have also examined one green (Ecolo from Belgium) and one liberal (Liberal Democrats [LibDem] from the United Kingdom) party. The two Polish parties are both members of the European People's Party (Civic Platform and Polish People's Party), even though one of them is a liberal-conservative formation and the other one is agrarian. Finally, two of the parties are situated on the far right of the political spectrum: Vlaams Belang (VB) from Belgium and the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

The key point of the perspective adopted here is the claim that perceptions matter. This is why we focus on critical actors' beliefs and opinions regarding an event which we have objectively recognised as an electoral defeat. The goal, therefore, is not to find out how things are, but rather how they are being seen and communicated. One of the ways in which a given actor's perspective is revealed and becomes empirically accessible is the narrative. Studying political narratives is a way to understand the meaning political actors attribute to particular processes or objects. To achieve this goal, we carried out 42 individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) with prominent figures from selected parties: mostly parliamentarians (Members of the European Parliament [MEP] and Members of Parliament [MP]) but also party leaders and members of decision-making bodies (Table 1.2 in appendix). Anyone conducting research among party elites faces barriers, as politicians open and willing to cooperate with scholars are in short supply, particularly in younger democracies such as Poland. The inclusion of MPs and MEPs was therefore dictated by convenience in selecting the research sample. Interviews were conducted from December 2018 to April 2021, in numbers sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation. All quotations are drawn from these interviews, which were anonymised. They are marked with the abbreviations of the respective parties and numbers assigned to each interview. For instance, the third interviewee from the Vlaams Belang is marked as "VB_3."

The IDIs were unstructured, so as to give the interviewees ample opportunity to speak freely and elaborate on whatever points they touched on (Oppenheim, 1992). Such a choice makes particularly strong sense in political science research which encompasses party leaders and parliamentarians – individuals who subscribe to a clearly defined, cohesive group identity (Hertz & Imber, 1995). Interviewers did not float any suggestions or patterns for interpreting electoral losses and their causes. Moreover, at the beginning of each conversation, the interviewees gave their individual assessments of their respective parties' results and a subjective opinion on whether it should be considered a defeat.

Characteristic of parties selected for analysis

Before moving on to analysing the results of the research on post-electoral narratives, a few words should be written about each examined party to clarify the context of its defeat.

The federal structure of the state, with broad autonomy granted to regions and community governments, as well as the extremely polarised multi-party system mean that identifying the defeated in Belgian parliamentary elections is somewhat harder than in other countries. Even if the objective criteria we adopted for our research clearly show which parties lost electoral support, seats in the Chamber of Representatives, or the status of co-governing formations, the subjective perceptions of election results are often very different than the picture that emerges from hard facts. Established sociopolitical divisions make significant shifts in electoral support a rarity. Given the multi-tiered structure of the state, parties can often make up for any losses at the federal level by performing better at the regional/community level. Furthermore, a party's prospects for participating in governing coalitions depend more on the outcome of inter-partisan negotiations than directly on the number of votes garnered. Nonetheless, we have decided to consistently apply the operational definition of an electoral loss mentioned earlier. As a result, we have looked at four parties which fell under the category of losers in the 2014 general election: VB, the French-speaking PS, the Dutch-speaking Sp.a, and the French-speaking Ecolo.

VB suffered the biggest loss in terms of parliamentary seats and was reduced to 5.9% of the Flemish vote. The party is commonly recognised as being populist and extreme right-wing (van Haute & Pauwels, 2016). It supports the notion of an independent Flemish state and opposes the marginalisation of Flanders by the Walloons. Its nativism, combined with exclusionism and ethnopluralist worldview, is related to the issue of migration (De Cleen, 2016; Bachryj-Krzywaźnia & Pacześniak, 2021, p. 160). Vlaams Belang is a rebrand of Vlaams Blok. Even though the new entity distanced itself from the rhetoric of its predecessor and sought to change its image (from radical to merely conservative), most other parties continued to apply the *cordon sanitaire* which had been implemented against Vlaams Blok, effectively blocking Vlaams Belang from participating in government at any level.

Two Belgian socialist parties – the PS and the Sp.a – were founded as a result of the 1978 split in the unitary Belgian Socialist Party. The Dutch and French Socialists parted ways and formed two separate political parties. Both experienced a difficult decade in the 1990s. Since then, their fates have taken different directions (Delwit, 2013, p. 51). The PS has recovered a significant electoral and political importance, achieving victory in the June 2010 federal election, securing the position of Prime Minister for its chairman and guaranteeing a place in the federal government for the Socialists from Flanders. In contrast, the Sp.a has suffered consistently

poorer election results for many years. Following the 2014 parliamentary election, the Socialists from Wallonia and Flanders both ended up in the opposition, although the loss of votes and seats in the Chamber of Representatives was not dramatic.

The French-speaking political party Ecolo was founded in 1980. Its agenda is based largely on ecological causes. The formation's electoral history is made up of alternating successes and defeats. The setback in the 2014 general election was not the biggest one in Ecolo's history, although the loss of two (out of eight) seats in the Chamber of Representatives was perceived within the party as a relative failure, especially as the result also affected the regional parliament, for which election were held on the same day.

In contrast to Belgium, identifying the defeated parties in the 2015 general election in Poland was not difficult. Specifying whose loss was the heaviest proved to be a little more challenging. The two co-ruling formations (Platforma Obywatelska [PO] and Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe [PSL]) lost electoral support and ability to form the cabinet. The third loser, Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (SLD), failed to reach the electoral threshold and found itself outside the parliament. We shall first describe PO, for which the 2015 result proved most costly, given that its representatives had previously occupied the office of the Prime Minister for two full terms. This moderate, centre-right party combines economic neoliberalism with social conservatism. In an effort to attract more support and broaden its electorate base, it has tried to appeal to more and more circles and social groups, gradually incorporating a "leftist sensibility." The party has been in power twice: from 2007 until 2011 and later, between 2011 and 2015, acting as a senior partner in a coalition with PSL.

PSL also changed its political status after the 2015 general election, moving into opposition after eight years of co-governing the country. PSL maintains that agriculture is one of the key sectors of Polish economy and aspires to represent the rural electorate and farmers. However, it is aware of the fact that its traditional, natural voter base has been shrinking (Jacuński et al., 2021, p. 19). Hence, it has recently been trying to revamp itself as a Christian-Democratic formation open also to citizens from outside rural areas. PSL is a pivot party with high-coalition potential. It has been involved in cabinets on numerous occasions as a junior partner.

The last Polish party selected for analysis is SLD, which was created as a separate political party in 1999. Previously, that name was used by a coalition of left-wing formations led by the Social Democracy of Poland – a successor party to the communist Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). SLD emphasises humanist values, including the protection of minority rights, equality of men and women as well as legalisation of same-sex marriages. It calls for a strict separation of the Catholic Church and the state. Almost right from the beginning of the democratic transition and all throughout the 1990s, the party retained a strong position on Polish political scene.

Its representatives held the post of Prime Minister on four occasions. In the aftermath of several scandals, it experienced a series of secessions and systematically lost electoral support. In fact, its decline went so far that in the 2015 election it failed to reach the 8% threshold established for electoral coalitions – a fact which meant it lost its parliamentary representation altogether.

In the United Kingdom, the consequence of the first-past-the-post voting system is that even a small percentage change in electoral support can result in a loss of a disproportionate number of parliamentary seats. Therefore, the leading criterion for selecting parties to be analysed was a decline in the number of seats in the House of Commons, rather than the percentage of electoral support which, in the British variant of the majority electoral system, is of secondary importance. Based on our criteria, we considered four parties to have suffered electoral defeat in one or both general elections under consideration. In 2015, there were the LP and LibDems, and in 2017, the SNP and UKIP.

LP was founded in 1900, having grown out of the trade union movement and socialist parties of the 19th century. Its first governmental experience began in 1929. Each period it spent in government ended with tensions between the parliamentary leadership and its grassroots (Faucher, 2013, p. 373). In 1997, after 18 years in opposition, the LP under Tony Blair's leadership won, in a stunning style, the first of three successive general elections. In the 2010 general election, LP came second in terms of numbers of seats won and was forced to relinquish power to the coalition of the Conservatives and LibDems. Five years later, the 2015 general election resulted in a net loss of seats, *inter alia* as a result of the success of SNP in Scotland, where Labour lost almost all seats.

LibDems are positioned in the centre of British politics. Ideologically, the party draws upon both liberalism and social democracy. LibDems grew during the 1990s and 2000s, becoming the third-largest party in the House of Commons. Between 2010 and 2015, under Nick Clegg's leadership, the party was a junior partner in Cameron's coalition government. The coalition damaged the LibDems' electoral prospects, leading to a defeat in the 2015 general election that relegated them to the status of the fourth-largest party in the House of Commons.

The SNP aims to achieve independent statehood for Scotland and promote the interests of the Scottish people. In the 21st century, the SNP has enjoyed extraordinary electoral success and long-term governing status in Scotland. At the same time, it has been an effective opposition actor in the United Kingdom. It constitutes a rare example of a formation with solid traditions of participating in government which, in another context, operates as an anti-establishment entity (Bennie & McAngus, 2020, p. 278). SNP is social-democratic party which belongs to a family of West European nationalist and regionalist parties, standing among the most successful formations of its type (Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). In 2015, following

the 2014 independence referendum, the SNP attracted 50% of the vote in Scotland and benefited from the disproportional electoral system, returning 95% of Scottish MPs (Bennie & McAngus, 2020, p. 279). It was the best result in the party's history. In the 2017 general election, SNP lost 21 seats but remained by far the largest Scottish party at Westminster.

The last British party selected for analysis of post-defeat narrative is UKIP. Since its very inception, UKIP campaigned to take Britain out of the European Union. The pressure UKIP exerted on the Conservative government contributed to the decision to organise the 2016 referendum which led to the UK's commitment to withdraw from the European Union. Ideologically positioned on the right-wing, UKIP is characterised as a populist party (Clarke et al., 2016). UKIP reached its greatest level of success in the mid-2010s, when it became the largest party representing the United Kingdom in the European Parliament after the 2014 European election, and then gained 12.6% of vote in the 2015 general election. The first-past-the-post voting system for electing MPs to the House of Commons was a significant barrier to UKIP's ambitions, since its support was distributed across different areas rather than strongly focused in particular constituencies (Ford & Goodwin, 2014, p. 220). In the 2017 general election, UKIP received fewer than 600,000 votes and won no seats.

The face of electoral defeat – feminine or gender-neutral?

By reconstructing stories told by party representatives, we sought to find out whom they blamed for their electoral defeats and whether gender-based patterns in the narratives existed. When we started the project's research among Polish political parties, we were struck by the fact that responsibility for poor results in the 2015 election was attributed to female politicians. We asked ourselves whether this was only specific to Polish politics or whether similar patterns could be found in the narratives told by Belgian and British parties.

One of the striking features in the stories told by PO's leading figures is that they mostly refuse to admit that their result in the 2015 parliamentary election was actually a defeat. PO's official narrative maintained that being relegated to the status of the opposition is a natural course of a political life cycle, given that the party had spent the previous eight years as the leading entity in the cabinet. However, our interviewees did specify where they saw reasons behind the loss of support. They focused primarily on external processes and events, thus conforming to the pattern of refusing to incriminate the organisation itself. The only personal attribution of blame was directed at Ewa Kopacz, PO's chairwoman at that time. One of our respondents pointed to her very directly: *When you lose, you always look for the culprits. The main responsible was the leader, Ewa Kopacz* (PO_6). Another interviewee added: *Ewa Kopacz was singled out by the party as the person who led us to electoral defeat* (PO_3). Thus, the party

itself was exorcised from collective blame, which was instead shifted onto one person. Our interviewees did not usually point to her specific failings, preferring to invoke the allegedly natural process of blaming the leader for failures, regardless of that person's gender.

Some interviewees referred to the chairwoman's age: (…) *had there been a younger Prime Minister in place of Mrs Kopacz, maybe it would have also turned out differently* (PO_2). Another interviewee signalled the need and expectation for new faces to replace the chairwoman: *The fact we lost it so badly then – it just shows that we should have put a completely new person in charge of the campaign* (PO_1). However, some interlocutors seemed to defend Ewa Kopacz, stressing there was little she could have done, as she *did not have a chance to change anything* (PO_4). Others highlighted her diligence during the election campaign: *She did a tremendous job and I have great respect for how she worked during that very difficult 2015 campaign* (PO_1), or: *This result of 25% was rather accepted as a satisfactory outcome – we came second in the electoral race and it was the effect of a titanic work done by the Prime Minister* (PO_5).

It is worth mentioning that Kopacz, as the leader of her party's slate in Warsaw constituency, garnered the single highest number of votes among all individual candidates in the entire country. In the aftermath of the election, PO MPs rejected Kopacz's bid to lead the party's parliamentary caucus. Kopacz chose not to run for another term as PO chairwoman and relinquished the position early in 2016.

Similarly to what happened in PO, the ranks of PSL also blamed their leader Janusz Piechociński for a poor electoral result in 2015. The party chairman was depicted as weak and inefficient. Numerous comments leave no doubts about how negatively he was evaluated and how obvious his culpability was to the respondents. *Personally, I blame our then-chairman* (…) *the way he ran the business, it simply brought us down* (PSL_1). Supposedly, his failure stemmed from both a lack of leadership skills and character faults. In this context, he was seen as a narcissist and, simultaneously, a submissive personality: *(he's) a person who speaks a lot but, unfortunately, is definitely not a decision-maker* (PSL_5). Inability to maintain discipline in the party, along with tendency to seek personal gains, were the perceived markers of his failed leadership.

While much of the blame was attributed to PSL's leader, one other name came up during the interviews. The party's campaign manager and senator, Andżelika Możdżanowska, was singled out for criticism. Within two years of the election, Możdżanowska left PSL and joined the ranks of the newly-elected ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS). One of our interviewees was adamant he did not mean to accuse her of disloyalty, yet said: *I'm under the impression that, given what happened later, well …, I'm not quite sure she actually did all she could for us, since she is now in PiS* (PSL_4). As far as her individual performance in the election is concerned, Możdżanowska

won the highest number of votes among all PSL candidates elected to the lower chamber of the parliament.

In the case of SLD, the narrative emerging from the interviews refers not only to the 2015 parliamentary election held in October but also to the presidential campaign that took place earlier that year. The two elections were depicted as inseparable elements of the same story. The respondents from SLD tended to personalise blame. First, they pointed out the faults and errors of the leading female candidates in both elections. Curiously, the formation's presidential candidate, Magdalena Ogórek, was seen as the reason behind the party's painfully poor performance in the parliamentary election, even though she did not even run for an MP seat. The paradox was expressed by one of our respondents as follows: *I had not expected that the debacle with her nomination* [as a presidential candidate] *would have such far-reaching consequences that extended well beyond 2015* (SLD_6).

The candidate was depicted as a cynical person: *a know-all, this is how I would describe her (…), who promoted herself and did not care about the rest of us* (SLD_04). Respondents said she ran for office *to gain publicity for herself, for other purposes* (SLD_5). While she was also complimented [*In fairness, she looked fine and was highly presentable* (SLD_1)], any praise tended to focus on her appearance and was instantly accompanied by criticism and depiction of more serious shortcomings: *Our electorate was used to statesmen who knew how to speak and had proper knowledge. And that was just lacking here* (SLD_1). Claims that link beauty with incompetence and combine compliments regarding one's appearance with scathing assessments of one's intellect are a common instrument of violence against women in Polish politics (Druciarek & Niżyńska, 2020).

The narrative about direct reasons behind SLD's very poor performance in the parliamentary election was focused on the alleged mistakes of its campaign manager, also a woman: Barbara Nowacka. While in this case there were no comments on her appearance and looks, there was plenty of criticism regarding her competence: *I was surprised that her knowledge of many topics was very superficial* (SLD_3). Our interviewees were convinced that the root cause of the defeat was a single TV debate where, in their opinion, the party's leading candidate performed very poorly:

> This was a dismal appearance on the part of Mrs Nowacka and the first time when it occurred to me that we might not reach the 8% threshold. Our representative performed poorly, while our main competitor [Adam Zandberg who represented the other left-wing formation] did very well.
>
> (SLD_2)

Another respondent had an original theory as to why the candidate in question struggled during the debate, referring to her personal life: *I don't*

want to go off on a tangent here, Nowacka and Zandberg were a couple once. I don't care about that but, as it turns out, it did affect things. She didn't do well at all (SLD_1). Suggesting that female politicians are driven primarily by feelings taps into the stereotype about women's sentimentality which, supposedly, makes them unfit for the rational game of politics (Druciarek & Niżyńska, 2020).

In all three examined Polish parties which experienced defeats in the 2015 election, the culpability of female politicians was a noticeable and, sometimes (as in the case of SLD), dominant theme in the post-election narrative. The situation was markedly different in Belgium and the United Kingdom.

VB's own narrative about its loss in 2014 was focused on causes outside the party itself. Our respondents pointed first and foremost to the emergence of VB's direct competitor, the New Flemish Alliance, and limited access to the media which, by and large, kept a wide berth from the controversial nationalist formation. The party's leaders and parliamentarians whom we interviewed emphasised the external character of the reasons for defeat. Only a few suggested personal responsibility of specific individuals but none blamed female politicians. One caveat here is that VB is dominated by men. Women were not part of party leadership or campaign management staff at that time. There were also no female candidates in top spots on the VB's slate. Therefore, blaming women for the party's unsatisfactory result would hardly bear any credibility.

The post-electoral narrative of the French-speaking PS cannot really be seen as a justification of defeat, since none of PS's representatives publicly acknowledged the 2014 result was, indeed, a loss. Upon learning what we wanted to discuss with them, many potential interviewees declined to take part, arguing that the subject did not really apply to them. Some PS members "learnt from us" that compared to the preceding election, their formation lost over 100,000 votes and three seats in the Chamber of Representatives. Their reactions were sometimes incredulous, as reflected in the following example: *Did we really lose anything back then? We were quite happy with the result. Still, if you're saying we got less votes, that's probably how it was. However, I would label this as a flattening of the support curve rather than a decline* (PS_1). Since what was objectively a loss was not seen as such by party members, nobody was blamed for the defeat. One interviewee confronted with hard facts said:

> Given that we had been a co-governing party at many levels of Belgium's political system for nearly 30 years, achieving the kind of result we had in 2014 is genuinely difficult. It's natural that the voters held us accountable. Still, their verdict was not all that harsh.
>
> (PS_3)

Being more accustomed to the realities of Polish politics, we were somewhat confused by such statements. Hence, we acknowledged that we could

have initially had misinterpreted the post-election situation of the French-speaking Socialists. However, one of the female representatives of the party admitted:

> As a formation, we put a lot of effort into convincing everybody around us that all is well, and it seems that some of my colleagues genuinely believe that. It's hard to reflect on the root causes behind declining support if our members consider this positive narrative aimed at our environment to be the whole truth.
>
> (PS_2)

Although her words do not change PS's official story about the 2014 election, they provide some explanation for the dissonance between the result and its perception within the party.

A similar refusal to look within occurred in PS's sister socialist formation, Sp.a. One of the party's representatives told us:

> For us, a real electoral catastrophe came in 2007, when our support plummeted from 24% down to just 15%. This is the date we mourn and see as our downfall, because we didn't manage to make up all these losses. The result from 2014 was more like a continuation of a status quo rather than a defeat.
>
> (Sp.a_1)

As is customary in the entire European family of ecology-focused parties, the Belgian Greens are led by a male-and-female duet. In 2014, the positions were held by Emily Hoyos and Olivier Deleuze. Hence, they were the ones who could potentially be blamed. All members of the party unanimously agreed that despite the frustration brought on by the result, the rank-and-file did not seek an immediate dismissal of the leadership, although:

> everybody knew that their mission was over. (…) There was no Night of the Long Knives, but the leaders realised their time was up. The cadres, on their part, agreed it was a good idea to let the leaders carry on for a while and guide the party through the transition stage, after which they would simply leave.
>
> (Ecolo_4)

Our interviewees emphasised that in Ecolo's organisational culture there is a right time and an appropriate procedure for everything:

> In our party, we don't necessarily remove the leadership every time we underperform in an election. After the 2014 defeat the leaders' mandate expired and it was obvious that we had to either renew it or introduce new people. The election result didn't make us rush with the

> verdict in this matter – we took our time and nine months later, we changed the leadership.
>
> (Ecolo_2)

One of our interviewees touched on an interesting gender theme with regard to how electoral defeats are communicated externally: *As a general rule in Belgium, we don't acknowledge defeats. (…) And yet, after the 2014 election our co-leader admitted on TV that it was a defeat. She said that to TV and radio pundits, to journalists from newspapers. She did. Olivier did not* (Ecolo_1). It is hard to say whether party members attributed that difference in approach to gender, or rather to individual characteristics of a particular person.

The analysis of narratives adopted by the British parties after the 2015 and 2017 elections shows that, with the exception of UKIP, they did not blame women for their unsatisfactory performance at the polls. LibDem members we interviewed stressed there were no doubts as to the reasons for the 2015 defeat: *Really it was a shock, a surprise. The feeling was that we were being punished because of this joining with the Conservatives and many people felt let down* (LibDem_1). The verdict delivered by the voters was, to a certain extent, unsurprising, albeit its severity might have been a cold shower: *Well, we expected to do badly, but not as badly as it turned out* (LibDem_2). Our respondents admitted that both within the party and, especially, in its immediate surroundings the blame was put squarely on the leader, Nick Clegg. Hence, even though the defeat was attributed to an individual, there was no gender element to it.

Among all the parties we examined, LP constructed the most elaborate narrative regarding its 2015 loss. On the one hand, the interviewed Labour representatives told complex stories about global trends unfavourable to left-wing formations all over the world. On the other hand, they referred to historic cycles in British politics and recalled Labour's earlier failures to argue that 2015 was not so bad after all. More than once, we were under the impression that for the politicians in question telling such tales was a way to cope with the cognitive dissonance they experienced. Nonetheless, they did not try to entirely deny reality, which one of our interviewees described as follows: *a catastrophic result. It was very much like a bereavement, a death in a family and people were stunned, I'd say, with the scale of the defeat* (LP_1). None of the respondents specifically mentioned women's responsibility for the result, which may be partly down to the fact that women are far less present in the highest tier of the British left.

Two years later, after the 2017 election, the respondents from SNP claimed that some of the votes they lost went to LP: *it was due to Labour and Jeremy Corbyn – he certainly ran a very good campaign and had attracted a lot of people who left it under the Keith Brown years* (SNP_1). However, all the interviewees stressed that the 2017 results was not seen as a defeat: *We certainly didn't feel as a defeat, no.* (SNP_1). Another respondent was adamant in his claim: *the result in 2017 was the second ever, the*

second best ever result in the history of the party since 1936. (SNP_2). The same angle emerged from the words of another SNP representative, who further stressed the hierarchy of the party's electoral objectives:

> So, losing seats in 2017 didn't come as a huge surprise. Winning Westminster seats was never something that we're really able to do, because of the different voting system for Westminster compared to the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament elections are always the most important ones.
>
> (SNP_3)

Since the result of the general election was not considered a defeat, there was no reason to try apportioning any blame. When asked if after the 2017 result there was no impulse to question party leadership, SNP members answered in a manner that left no room for doubt: *No, there wasn't! I would certainly say there wasn't! Everyone recognises her as an incredible leader and we are very, very lucky to have her* (SNP_1).

Undoubtedly, the greatest loser of the 2017 election was UKIP which ran into trouble after the 2016 Brexit referendum, primarily due to the resignation of its leader, Nigel Farage – a fact that many of our interviewees alluded to. Following Farage's resignation, Diane James became the first female UKIP president, winning 46.2% of votes in the leadership contest. In October 2016, just 18 days after being elected leader, James issued a statement saying that she had decided not to take the position, as it had become clear to her that she did not have full support within the party to implement necessary changes upon which she had based her campaign. However, James' brief presence at the top of UKIP was not pointed to as a reason behind declining support. Another woman was blamed instead: Conservative leader, Theresa May:

> Our supporters were being taken in by Theresa May saying she was going to deliver the Brexit that we all dreamed of. So, we could understand why people got taken in for that. (…) So, when the result came in, I don't think we were very surprised. I guess the biggest surprise was the fact that we all got duped. We all got taken in like the Prime Minister, we all believed in what she said, and of course none of this was true.
>
> (UKIP_1)

This was not an isolated opinion. Blaming Mrs May became a permanent feature of UKIP's official narrative:

> She has stolen our votes. She's pretending to be Eurosceptic. And in effect a lot of people believed that UKIP job was already done, we won the referendum and many people were back to the Conservatives because they thought the Conservatives, to being precisive, the job that UKIP used to do.
>
> (UKIP_2)

In short, Theresa May became the black character of UKIP's story: a thief of votes and a liar.

The results of the analysis indicate that the post-election narrative constructed by British and Belgian parties was mostly gender-neutral (with the exception of the UKIP narrative, whose politicians pointed to Prime Minister May as the personal cause of their party's defeat), while Polish parties sought to blame female politicians. The latter conclusion is all the more surprising since it was most clear-cut in the case of a left-wing formation. Our previous research showed, however, that SLD is conservative in its management of gender relations (Pacześniak, 2011), especially with regard to internal relations.

Conclusions and implications

As Andrews (2017) points out, political stories – both personal and communal – are one of the most effective tools that individuals as well as communities have for making sense of themselves and the world around them. The narratives on electoral defeat are built upon a collective memory of party politicians. For constructing the stories about what was and was not working and why, and how this compares to a notion of "how it should be," politicians decide what aspects of social/political/economic/cultural life are and are not relevant to the current problem and its solution.

Parties' narratives can facilitate or hinder women's gains as party elites and members of parliament, as well as voters' perceptions of female politicians. Given that women are increasingly more present in partisan decision-making bodies, electoral competition, or even in leadership positions, it is natural that in case of a defeat they are sometimes attributed with responsibility for their formations' unsatisfactory performance. However, it is natural only if such apportioning of blame is gender-neutral. When a narrative puts the blame on women's shoulders in a manner that is disproportionate to their actual impact on the outcome of election campaigns or processes within the parties in question, female politicians become merely convenient scapegoats. Their victimisation enables partisan decision-makers (typically men) to preserve their self-contentment and ego. As a side effect, such stories serve to discourage other women from taking on political challenges in future elections. If, in addition to all that, such a narrative is based on stereotypes and *cliched* views of female sensitivities, or accuses women politicians of having "typically female" qualities, it may be seen as a manifestation of violence against women in politics. It also strengthens the belief that the area of politics is designed for the "mentally tough," that politics boil down to a brutal struggle to be undertaken mainly by men. In order to take part in it, one has to conform to a certain template of supposedly desirable characteristics and be prepared to compete on harsh terms, with no regard for subtleties.

Appendix

Table 1.2 List of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs)

	No. of interview	*Role of interviewee*	*Date of interview*
Poland	PO_1	MP	January 7, 2019
	PO_2	MP	January 9, 2019
	PO_3	MP	January 28, 2019
	PO_4	Member of party leadership	February 4, 2019
	PO_5	Member of party leadership	March 5, 2019
	PO_6	Member of party leadership	March 7, 2019
	PSL_1	Member of party leadership	January 11, 2019
	PSL_2	MP	January 16, 2019
	PSL_3	Member of party leadership	February 12, 2019
	PSL_4	MP and former chairperson	March 7, 2019
	PSL_5	MP	November 26, 2019
	SLD_1	Former MP	December 1, 2018
	SLD_2	Former chairperson	January 14, 2019
	SLD_3	Member of party leadership	January 22, 2019
	SLD_4	MEP	January 29, 2019
	SLD_5	Former MP	February 1, 2019
	SLD_6	Member of party leadership	February 6, 2019
Belgium	VB_1	MEP and member of former party board	September 24, 2019
	VB_2	MP	September 24, 2019
	VB_3	Member of party leadership	September 24, 2019
	VB_4	Member of party leadership	September 25, 2019
	VB_5	MP	September 26, 2019
	PS_1	Member of party leadership	September 26, 2019
	PS_2	Member of party leadership	April 8, 2020
	PS_3	MEP	April 9, 2020
	Sp.a_1	Member of party leadership	April 18, 2019
	Sp.a_2	Former chairperson	April 23, 2020
	Ecolo_1	Member of party leadership	April 2, 2019
	Ecolo_2	Former chairperson	April 5, 2019
	Ecolo_3	Former member of party leadership	September 26, 2019
	Ecolo_4	Member of party leadership	September 26, 2019
	Ecolo_5	MEP	October 24, 2019
United Kingdom	LP_1	MP	July 13, 2020
	LP_2	MP	March 31, 2021
	LP_3	MP	April 21, 2021
	LD_1	Member of party leadership	July 4, 2020
	LD_2	Former chairperson	April 16, 2021
	SNP_1	MP	July 17, 2020
	SNP_2	MP and member of party leadership	August 3, 2020
	SNP_3	MP	April 6, 2021
	UKIP_1	MEP	September 26, 2019
	UKIP_2	Former member of party leadership	October 28, 2019

Source: Author's own study.

Note

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