

Herbut Nadiia Anatoliivna

Gendered Electoral Campaign Strategies in the European Union

UDC 324:316.346.2

DOI <https://doi.org/10.24195/2414-9616>.

2026-1.4



Стаття поширюється на умовах відкритої ліцензії CC BY 4.0

Herbut Nadiia Anatoliivna

PhD in Political Science,

Associate Professor at the Department

of Political Science and History

Kyiv National University of Construction and Architecture

Povitrianykh Syl Ave., 31, Kyiv, Ukraine

ORCID: 0000-0001-9776-3386

The study focuses on the analysis of gendered electoral campaign strategies in the EU, covering both European Parliament and national elections in member states. Despite significant progress in women's political representation driven by quota legislation and shifting public attitudes, the 2024 European Parliament elections registered the first decline in women's representation since the institution's establishment, dropping from 40.7% to approximately 38.7%. This signals that formal access to candidacy does not automatically translate into electoral success. The aim of this research is to systematize the existing body of scholarly literature on gendered electoral campaign strategies in the EU, identify the dominant theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, and delineate research gaps for future investigation. The theoretical framework draws on role congruity theory and the double bind concept, which explain the structural constraints women candidates face when constructing campaign messages. The review identifies three dominant strategic models available to women candidates: stereotypic, counterstereotypic, and dual strategies. The analysis reveals that negative campaigning produces asymmetric effects: voter backlash against women's attack messaging is conditional on the level of descriptive representation in a given polity, attenuating significantly where women's representation has reached higher thresholds. In digital campaigning, national political culture appears to be a stronger determinant of online campaign communication patterns than gender. A critical finding concerns campaign financing: gender quotas, while increasing women's candidacies, initially widen the campaign spending gap by introducing structurally disadvantaged candidates who lack established fundraising networks. These findings demonstrate that access-oriented reforms without resource equalization mechanisms produce formally present but materially constrained women candidates. The results are particularly relevant for Ukraine as an EU candidate country whose 40% gender quota for party lists has not yet been tested in parliamentary elections, highlighting the need for complementary campaign finance mechanisms.

Key words: gendered campaign strategies, elections, parliament, the European Union, electoral gender gap, campaign financing.

Introduction. The question of how gender shapes electoral campaign strategies has become one of the most dynamic areas of contemporary political science research. Despite significant progress in women's political representation across European Union member states—driven by quota legislation, party commitments, and shifting public attitudes—substantive disparities persist in how women and men candidates construct, communicate, and finance their campaigns. The 2024 European Parliament elections registered the first decline in women's representation since the institution's establishment, dropping from 40.7% to approximately 38.7% [7], signaling that formal access to candidacy does not automatically translate into electoral success.

Understanding the mechanisms through which gender influences campaign strategy is essential for both scholarly analysis and practical efforts to advance gender equality in political representation. Campaign strategies—encompassing messaging, issue framing, negative advertising, digital communication, and resource mobilization—constitute the primary interface between candidates and voters. When these strategies are shaped by gender stereotypes, they produce systematic advantages for men and structural constraints for women, irrespective of formal institutional guarantees. The EU context, with its diversity of electoral systems, political cultures, and gender equality regimes, offers a particularly rich analytical

terrain for examining how gendered campaign dynamics operate across different institutional environments.

The scholarly discourse on gendered campaign strategies draws on several intersecting research traditions: role congruity theory [5] and the double bind concept [11] provide the foundational theoretical framework; large-scale empirical studies have examined visual campaign communication [13], negative campaigning dynamics [3; 19], and digital strategies [29]; and comparative analyses have documented persistent gender gaps in campaign financing [25; 17]. Despite this extensive body of research, three significant gaps persist: no systematic comparative study of women's campaign messaging in European Parliament elections, no investigation of the interaction between campaign finance disparities and digital strategy adaptation, and a near-complete absence of research on gendered campaign dynamics in Central and Eastern European EU member states. The novelty of this review lies in: first, the systematic integration of four analytically distinct dimensions of gendered campaigning—messaging strategies, negative campaigning, digital communication, and campaign financing—within a unified comparative framework; and second, the derivation of policy implications specifically relevant to Ukraine as an EU candidate country preparing to implement its gender quota legislation in parliamentary elections.

Aim and Objectives. The aim of this article is to systematize and critically analyze the existing body of scholarly literature on gendered electoral campaign strategies in the European Union, identify the dominant theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, and delineate research gaps for future investigation. The specific objectives are: first, to examine the theoretical foundations of gendered campaign strategy, centering on role congruity theory and the double bind; second, to analyze empirical findings on gendered messaging strategies, negative campaigning, and digital communication in EU elections; third, to assess the impact of electoral systems and campaign financing on women's campaign strategies; and fourth, to identify gaps in the existing literature requiring further research.

Methods. The study employs a structured literature review. The analysis integrates scholarly publications and institutional reports, with the theoretical framework drawing on role congruity theory and the double bind concept as analytical lenses across four thematic dimensions: campaign messaging strategies, negative campaigning dynamics, digital campaign communication, and campaign financing. The comparative scope encompasses both European Parliament elections and national elections across EU member states.

Results. The dominant theoretical lens for analyzing gendered campaign strategies remains role congruity theory [5], which posits that women face prejudice in leadership contexts because the communal attributes associated with femininity (warmth, empathy, cooperation) conflict with the agentic attributes associated with leadership (assertiveness, decisiveness, ambition). This framework explains why women candidates confront a structural dilemma regardless of the strategic path they choose: conforming to feminine stereotypes signals insufficient leadership capacity, while demonstrating agentic traits triggers backlash for violating gender role expectations.

Schneider and Bos [24] refined this framework by demonstrating that masculinity functions as an implicit “backdrop” in political contexts, such that political leadership is coded masculine by default. The implication for campaign strategy is profound: women candidates must actively negotiate their relationship to masculinity in every aspect of their campaign communication, while men candidates benefit from automatic congruity between their gender identity and the default political prototype. Empirically, the persistence of this dynamic is confirmed by Eagly et al.'s [6] longitudinal meta-analysis, which found no evidence that the double bind has weakened over time.

The empirical literature identifies three principal strategic models available to women candidates: stereotypic strategy (emphasizing communal traits and “feminine” policy issues), counterstereotypic strategy (foregrounding agentic traits and “masculine” policy issues), and dual strategy (combining

both approaches simultaneously). In the EU context, the visual dimension of campaign strategy has been analyzed by Jungblut and Haim [13], whose large-scale analysis of the 2019 European Parliament elections (79,500 candidate images across 28 member states) revealed that women candidates displayed more communal visual cues while men displayed more agentic visual traits. Crucially, conservative women exhibited highly stereotypic visual self-presentation, suggesting that ideological context interacts with gender to shape strategic choices. Bast et al. [1] demonstrated that a dual strategy—combining feminine visual cues with verbally agentic messaging—could successfully mitigate the double bind for right-wing populist women politicians.

A distinct but related phenomenon concerns the strategic instrumentalization of women's candidacies by parties. Weeks et al. [30] found that populist radical right parties strategically increase women's candidacies when electorally vulnerable, using descriptive representation as an electoral tool rather than a normative commitment. Meguid et al. [18], analyzing party manifestos across 30 countries from 1984 to 2022, demonstrated that such parties emphasize gender rights as “strategic window dressing” without adopting genuinely egalitarian positions.

The relationship between gender and negative campaigning represents one of the most consequential areas. Coffé et al. [3], analyzing data from the Finnish Parliamentary Candidates Survey of 2019, found that even in one of the world's most gender-egalitarian political environments, women candidates campaigned more positively while men relied more heavily on negative messaging. A key theoretical advance is the reconceptualization of backlash as conditional rather than universal. Nai et al. [19] demonstrated, through a comprehensive cross-national dataset (over 700 candidates, 159 elections, 94 countries), that women receive lower voter support when engaging in negative campaigning only in countries with low levels of descriptive representation. In polities where women's representation has reached higher thresholds, the backlash effect attenuates significantly. This finding suggests that representational progress creates self-reinforcing feedback loops in which higher numbers of women in office expand the strategic repertoire available to subsequent women candidates.

In the domain of digital campaigning, Sandberg and Öhberg [23] found that women candidates in the 2014 Swedish European Parliament election valued social media more highly than male candidates but used platforms primarily for partisan promotion rather than personal advertising. Tschla et al. [26] documented that Greek women candidates employed more personalization, dialogic communication, and visual expressiveness. Ruiloba-Núñez and Goenaga Ruiz de Zuazu [22], analyzing 2,196 posts from Andalusian elections in Spain, found that women can-

didates used more inclusive language and adopted more emotional tones. However, a particularly important finding came from Wallaschek et al. [29], who compared German and Spanish Instagram campaigns during the 2024 European Parliament elections and concluded that online campaigns are less gender-specific than country-specific. This redirects analytical attention to national political culture as the primary moderator of campaign communication patterns.

The digital environment has simultaneously created new forms of vulnerability for women candidates. The Global Disinformation Index [10] found that during the 2024 European Parliament elections, women candidates received substantially more hateful and discriminatory comments on TikTok across France, Germany, and Hungary. Van Sant et al. [28] documented that Finnish women ministers received ten times the volume of abuse compared to male ministers. Krook [15; 16] conceptualized these patterns as part of a structural continuum of violence against women in politics, functioning as a deterrent to women's political participation.

Regarding electoral systems and institutional context, Van der Pas and Aaldering [27], in a meta-analysis of 90 studies encompassing over 25,000 politicians, found that women legislators in proportional representation systems—the predominant model in EU member states—receive less media attention than their counterparts in majoritarian systems. Jankowski and Marcinkiewicz [12] demonstrated that gender quotas in Poland's open-list PR system increased women's candidacies but led parties to place women lower on ballots, effectively undermining the reform's intent. Devroe et al. [4] found that Belgium's quarter-century experience with quotas improved numerical representation but left power distribution uneven. The European Parliament [8] identified closed-list PR systems with zipper placement as the most effective institutional configuration for women's representation.

Country-specific studies reveal how national gender opportunity structures shape campaign strategies. Reinhardt et al. [21] compared social media campaigns of right-wing parties in Germany, Italy, and Sweden during the 2019 European Parliament elections, finding that national contexts determined whether parties adopted femonationalist or anti-genderist framing. Kantola and Lombardo [14] documented how radical right populist parties in the European Parliament employed both direct opposition to gender equality and indirect opposition embedded in Eurosceptic discourse.

Campaign financing represents a critically important dimension. Sudulich et al. [25] conducted a comprehensive comparative analysis covering 28 elections across 16 countries, and found that women's average campaign budgets were €3,110 lower than men's (€5,170 vs. €8,280). Notably, voluntary party

quotas actually widened the gender spending gap from €2,716 to €4,618, because quotas increased the number of women candidates without providing corresponding financial support. Maddens et al. [17] provided longitudinal evidence from Belgian Flemish elections (1999–2019), showing that the gender spending gap appeared only after the introduction of strict quotas and was concentrated among non-incumbent candidates. It took 16 years before the gap began to narrow. Buckley and Mariani [2] documented a similar dynamic in Ireland following the 2012 quota reform. Feo et al. [9] found that Italian women candidates relied on more diversified but smaller-scale donation networks, with incumbency serving as the primary gateway to corporate donations.

International IDEA [20] identified approximately 30 countries with gender-targeted public funding provisions, finding these effective only when combined with substantial penalties for non-compliance. France's parity legislation with financial sanctions produced a highly effective model, increasing women's candidacy from 25% in 1997 to 42% in 2017. However, EIGE [7] noted that despite quotas in 10 EU member states, only Spain, France, and Croatia achieved women's MEP representation at or above quota thresholds in the 2024 elections.

Discussion. The findings of this review point to several important interpretive conclusions. First, the persistence of the double bind across diverse EU political systems confirms that role congruity theory [5] retains strong explanatory power. However, the success of dual strategies [1] in mitigating this constraint suggests that the bind is not immutable—it can be navigated, though not eliminated, through strategic communication choices.

Second, the conditionality of backlash against women's negative campaigning [19] reveals a positive feedback mechanism: as more women enter politics, strategic constraints on subsequent women candidates progressively loosen, potentially accelerating further representational gains. This dynamic has not been sufficiently theorized and warrants dedicated longitudinal investigation.

Third, the finding that national political culture appears to be a stronger determinant than gender in shaping digital campaign communication patterns [29] challenges the assumption that gender-sensitive campaign support programs can be designed universally. Instead, such programs should be tailored to specific national contexts.

Fourth, the paradoxical effect of gender quotas on campaign financing represents one of the most policy-relevant findings of this review. The Belgian case [17] – where 16 years elapsed before the spending gap began to narrow—offers a cautionary timeline: complementary financing mechanisms should be introduced simultaneously with quota requirements rather than expected to develop organically.

Fifth, online violence against women in politics [10; 15; 28; 16] functions not only as a direct deterrent to women's political participation but also as a constraint on campaign strategy, potentially limiting the platforms, tone, and messaging approaches available to women candidates.

For Ukraine as an EU candidate country, these findings carry particular significance. The 2019 electoral legislation establishing a 40% gender quota for party lists has not yet been tested in parliamentary elections due to martial law. The European experience analyzed here suggests that quota-driven increases in women's candidacies will need to be accompanied by campaign finance equalization mechanisms. The absence of research on Central and Eastern European gendered campaign strategies makes Ukraine's future electoral experience particularly important for both scholarly analysis and policy design.

Conclusions. This structured review yields four principal conclusions. First, the double bind remains the defining structural constraint for women candidates, though dual strategies combining feminine and masculine cues offer a viable, if partial, mitigation path [1]. Second, backlash against women's negative campaigning is conditional rather than universal, attenuating in contexts of higher descriptive representation and creating a positive feedback loop for subsequent cohorts of women candidates [19]. Third, in the reviewed studies, national political culture appears to outweigh gender as a determinant of digital campaign communication patterns, suggesting the need for context-specific rather than universal approaches to campaign support [29]. Fourth, gender quotas without complementary financing mechanisms produce formally present but materially constrained women candidates [25; 17].

Future research should address three identified gaps: systematic cross-national analysis of women's campaign messaging strategies in European Parliament elections; investigation of the interaction between campaign finance disparities and women's digital strategy adaptation; and analysis of gendered campaign strategies in Central and Eastern European EU member states, where anti-gender movements, religious conservatism, and post-communist legacies create distinctive conditions that remain empirically unexplored.

REFERENCES:

1. Bast, J., Oschatz, C., & Renner, A.-M. (2022). Successfully overcoming the "Double Bind"? A mixed-method analysis of the self-presentation of female right-wing populists on Instagram and the impact on voter attitudes. *Political Communication*, 39, 358–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.2007190>
2. Buckley, F., & Mariani, M. (2023). Gender quotas, campaign spending, and electoral outcomes in Ireland. *Electoral Studies*, 82, 102578. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102578>

3. Coffé, H., Helimäki, T., & von Schoultz, Å. (2023). How gender affects negative and positive campaigning. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 44(3), 315–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2023.2180610>
4. Devroe, R., Wauters, B., & Gendron, R. (2021). Gender quotas in Belgium: A never-ending story of ups and downs. In E. Bjarnegård & M. L. Krook (Eds.), *Gender quotas and women's representation: New directions in research* (pp. 69–85). Routledge.
5. Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573>
6. Eagly, A. H., Nater, C., Miller, D. I., Kaufmann, M., & Sczesny, S. (2020). Gender stereotypes have changed: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of U.S. public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018. *American Psychologist*, 75(3), 301–315. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000494>
7. EIGE. (2024). Despite hopes for progress, European Parliament elections led to a decline in women's representation. *Vilnius: European Institute for Gender Equality*. <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/data-talks/despite-hopes-progress-european-parliament-elections-led-decline-womens-representation>
8. European Parliament. (2019). Women in the European Parliament (Briefing PE 635.547). *European Parliamentary Research Service*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635547/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635547_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635547/EPRS_BRI(2019)635547_EN.pdf)
9. Feo, F., Ferrara, F. M., & Ferrara, R. (2023). Gendered pathways to campaign finance in Italy, 1996–2018. *Party Politics*, 29(3), 512–524. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221099085>
10. Global Disinformation Index. (2024). Gendered disinformation in the 2024 European Parliament elections. GDI.
11. Jamieson, K. H. (1995). *Beyond the double bind: Women and leadership*. Oxford University Press.
12. Jankowski, M., & Marcinkiewicz, K. (2019). Ineffective and counterproductive? The impact of gender quotas in open-list proportional representation systems. *Politics & Gender*, 15(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X17000538>
13. Jungblut, M., & Haim, M. (2023). Visual gender stereotyping in campaign communication: Evidence on female and male candidate imagery in 28 countries. *Communication Research*, 50(5), 535–564. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502211023333>
14. Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2021). Strategies of right-wing populist parties on gender and EU anti-gender campaigns. *International Political Science Review*, 42(5), 617–631. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120963953>
15. Krook, M. L. (2020). *Violence against women in politics*. Oxford University Press.
16. Krook, M. L. (2022). Understanding violence against women in politics: A reconceptualization. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 5(2), 168–184. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16446685685166>
17. Maddens, B., Put, G.-J., & Vanden Eynde, G. (2025). Legislative quotas and the gender gap in campaign finance: The case of Belgium (1999–2019).

Politics & Gender, 21, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X25000121>

18. Meguid, B. M., Coffé, H., Weeks, A. C., & Kittilson, M. C. (2025). Strategic inclusion without transformation: How populist radical right parties engage with women's interests. *Comparative Political Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140251381760>

19. Nai, A., Valli, C., Maier, J., & Aldering, L. (2025). Gendered backlash depends on the context: Reassessing negative campaigning sanctions against female candidates via large-scale comparative data. *Political Communication*, 42(3), 383–406. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2434930>

20. Ohman, M. (2018). Gender-targeted public funding for political parties: A comparative analysis. *International IDEA*.

21. Reinhardt, G. Y., Hubner, C., & Caiani, M. (2023). Femonationalism and anti-genderism in radical right party social media campaigns for the 2019 European Parliament elections. *Political Research Exchange*, 5(1), 2236726. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2023.2236726>

22. Ruiloba-Núñez, J., & Goenaga Ruiz de Zuazu, M. (2024). Digital political communication through a gender lens: Discourses, themes, and inclusive language. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1457020. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1457020>

23. Sandberg, L., & Öhberg, P. (2017). The role of gender in online campaigning: Swedish candidates' motives and use of social media during the European Parliament election 2014. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 14(4), 314–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2017.1369918>

24. Schneider, M. C., & Bos, A. L. (2019). The application of social role theory to the study of gender in politics. *Political Psychology*, 40(S1), 173–213. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12573>

25. Sudulich, L., Trumm, S., & Makropoulos, I. (2024). Running uphill: A comparative analysis of the gender gap in campaign financing. *European Journal of Political Research*, 64(3), 1371–1393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12741>

26. Tschla, E., Lappas, G., Triantafillidou, A., & Kleftodimos, A. (2023). Gender differences in politicians' Facebook campaigns: Campaign practices, issues and voter engagement. *New Media & Society*, 25(11), 2918–2938. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211036405>

27. Van der Pas, D. J., & Aldering, L. (2020). Gender differences in political media coverage: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Communication*, 70(1), 114–143. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz046>

28. Van Sant, L., Morales, L., & Careja, R. (2021). Online abuse of Finnish ministers: Gendered patterns and the role of right-wing populism. *Political Communication*, 38(6), 718–740. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.1891760>

29. Wallaschek, S., Ahlhaus, P., Krug, R., & Vendt, W. (2025). Gendered representation of lead candidates in the 2024 EP election campaign on Instagram. In M. Kaeding, M. Müller, & A. Hoppe (Eds.), *The 2024 European Parliament Elections* (pp. 273–288). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-89455-8_21

30. Weeks, A. C., Meguid, B. M., Kittilson, M. C., & Coffey, E. B. (2023). When do radical right parties use women candidates strategically? *Party Politics*, 29(5), 873–884. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221127494>

Гендерні стратегії виборчих кампаній в Європейському Союзі

Гербут Надія Анатоліївна

кандидатка політичних наук,
доцентка кафедри політичних наук
та історії

Київського національного університету
будівництва і архітектури
просп. Повітряних Сил, 31,
Київ, Україна
ORCID: 0000-0001-9776-3386

Дослідження зосереджене на аналізі гендерних стратегій виборчих кампаній в ЄС, охоплюючи вибори до Європарламенту та національні вибори країн-членів. Незважаючи на значний прогрес у політичному представництві жінок завдяки квотам та зміні суспільних настроїв, вибори до Європарламенту 2024 року зафіксували перше зниження представництва жінок з моменту заснування інституції – з 40,7% до приблизно 38,7%. Це свідчить, що формальний доступ до балотування не гарантує електорального успіху, а динаміка виборчих кампаній відіграє вирішальну роль. Мета дослідження – систематизувати наявний корпус наукової літератури щодо гендерних стратегій виборчих кампаній в ЄС, визначити домінуючі теоретичні рамки й емпіричні знахідки та окреслити дослідницькі лакуни. Теоретичною основою дослідження є теорія роліової конгруентності та концепція подвійного зв'язування, які пояснюють структурні обмеження, з якими стикаються жінки-кандидатки при формуванні передвиборних повідомлень. Виявлено три домінуючі стратегічні моделі, доступні жінкам-кандидаткам: стереотипну, контрстереотипну та дуальну. Аналіз показує, що негативна («атакуюча») виборча риторика створює асиметричні ефекти: виборці негативно сприймають «атакуючі» повідомлення кандидаток лише в країнах з низьким рівнем представництва жінок у політиці, тоді як у країнах із вищим представництвом цей ефект значно послаблюється. У цифрових виборчих кампаніях національна політична культура виявляється вагомим чинником визначення моделей онлайн-комунікації, ніж гендер. Критично важливий висновок стосується фінансування кампаній: гендерні квоти, збільшуючи кількість кандидаток, на початковому етапі можуть посилювати розрив у витратах на кампанію між кандидатками і кандидатами, оскільки до виборчого процесу залучаються жінки зі структурно обмеженим доступом до ресурсів і без усталених мереж залучення коштів. Реформи, що забезпечують доступ, але не супроводжуються механізмами вирівнювання ресурсів, створюють ситуацію формальної присутності кандидаток без реального ресурсного забезпечення. Результати дослідження є особливо актуальними для України як країни-кандидата в ЄС, де передбачена законодавством 40-відсоткова гендерна квота для партійних списків ще не була апробована на парламентських виборах, що робить європейський досвід критично важливим для розробки супутніх механізмів фінансової підтримки кандидаток.
Ключові слова: гендерні стратегії виборчих кампаній, вибори, парламент, Європейський Союз, електоральний гендерний розрив, фінансування кампаній.

Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 16.02.2026

Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 20.03.2026

Дата публікації (оприлюднення) статті: 27.04.2026