Chapter 7
Linguistic Polarization in Minority Representation: Analyzing Parliamentary Speeches in Germany and the UK (1980–2021)

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Abstract Political polarization shapes how minority issues are discussed in public and parliamentary discourse, with implications for representation and policy. We examine the representation of migration and sexual minorities in all parliamentary speeches across Germany and the United Kingdom from 1980 to 2021. In particular, we ask: (1) How parties in both countries contributed to shifts in the overall *salience* of the two minority issues, (2) how language use differs between party groups and the two minority issues (*average linguistic differences*), and (3) how has this evolved over time (*linguistic polarization*). To this end, we employ natural language processing techniques on all political speeches in both parliaments during this period and roughly 143,000 speech parts in total. The results show that speeches on both issues increased notably over time for all parties in both countries. Moreover, relative frequency analyses reveal that linguistic polarization concerning the terminology used by political parties has intensified over the years. In both countries, right-leaning parties emphasized economic and security aspects more when discussing migration, whereas left-leaning parties focused more on normative and rights-based issues. Regarding sexual minorities, the rhetoric of left parties more often included terms relating to equality or discrimination, while right parties more often referred to aspects of marriage and morals. In sum, our research shows that left

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and right parties strongly differ in their language use when debating minorities and that linguistic polarization intensifies over time.

Keywords Migration · Sexuality · Parliament speeches · Political polarization · Linguistic polarization · Text-as-data · Political rhetoric · Minority politics

7.1 Introduction

Political polarization refers to the degree to which opinions on issues are increasingly opposed and how such opposition grows over time (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Rekker 2021). It is a process that is generated between two or more groups in contexts of interaction, whether real or imaginary (Kessler et al. 2020) and has attracted the attention of researchers because its effects are usually closely related to the aspects and actions of individuals and societies. Thus, the ability to assess and quantify shifts in political ideology and polarization holds paramount importance for researchers, stakeholders, and the broader public (Caravaca et al. 2022). An increase in political polarization also polarizes public opinion in the most politically committed groups with strong party identification (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans 2003; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Fiorina et al. 2008). Research on polarization is structured around the questions of whether polarized debates are a social phenomenon produced by elites (Hunter and Wolfe 2006) or also by the public (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) and about the extent of polarization in the mass public (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007).

Political polarization can have an even more significant impact on public opinion, especially on minority issues, which are often emotionally and ideologically charged due to their underrepresentation. Debates surrounding immigration and LGBTQ + rights, for instance, lie at the heart of partisan divides and are particularly vulnerable to polarizing rhetoric (Dijk 1997). When polarization is heightened, the rhetoric of political elites tends to become more charged and divisive (Quirk 2011), which can amplify existing prejudices among the public or, conversely, mobilize support for minority rights. For example, when political elites discuss immigration-related issues, they can shape attitudes toward immigration (Bohman 2011; Flores 2018; Schmidt-Catran and Czymara 2023) and increase far-right voting (May and Czymara 2024). For sexual minorities (i.e., individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer), depending on the prevailing political rhetoric and legislative measures enacted, such laws may serve as a catalyst for heightened persecution of sexual minorities or, conversely, ensure their access to rights as minorities (Thränhardt 1995). In addition, by focusing on specific issues, political parties can express their core identities, which are not necessarily directly related to the issues themselves. Thus, the way political elites discuss minority issues stands as a central concern in the realm of democratic governance, holding profound implications for the political climate in an increasingly diverse society. Studying these issues allows us to trace how political parties differentiate themselves, mobilize their bases, and reinforce distinct ideological positions over time.

This paper analyzes how migrants and sexual minorities issues are discussed and represented in parliamentary debates in two European democracies, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK), spanning the period from 1980 to 2021. We specifically focus on the representation of migrants and sexual minorities, two groups of minorities that are similar in facing marginalization and discrimination, yet differ significantly in the specific challenges and the progression of their rights development. In particular, we explore a specific kind of political polarization in minority representation, which is *linguistic polarization.* In the context of this study, we define linguistic polarization as an increasing difference in the language used by political parties when referring to the minority representation of these two groups. Linguistic polarization can be understood as part of political polarization more broadly, such as affective (Gidron et al. 2020) or attitudinal (Schmidt-Catran and Czymara 2023) polarization. However, linguistic polarization is not equal to these phenomena. That is, linguistic polarization refers specifically to semantic differences rather than differences in sentiment or emotion. While these aspects can overlap, since some words carry more positive or negative valence, they remain distinct. Politicians, for instance, may use different terms for the same concept while holding similar positions on the issue. Analyzing linguistic polarization specifically is important because language shapes public perception and can signal division even in the absence of diverging attitudes.

Our study is based on all parliamentary debates in Germany and the UK. While previous research on elite discourses concerning minority groups based on parliamentary speeches mostly focused on single-country cases (Beese et al. 2022; Card et al. 2022), we aim to advance the understanding by examining the language employed by political elites when discussing minority groups in a comparative framework, focusing on two distinct cases. Our paper examines the entire corpus of more than four decades of parliamentary discourse on migration and sexual minorities in the two countries. In line with theoretical expectations, our results show that *linguistic polarization concerning the terminology used by political parties has intensified over the years, with discussions on migration primarily focusing on economic aspects, whereas those on sexual minorities concentrate on normative issues. This contrast also reflects underlying differences in how these groups are positioned within the political community: immigrants, often perceived as outsiders, are subject to more polarized discourse, while discussions of sexual minorities tend to be framed within debates about rights and values.* Our paper explores the emergence and evolution of political discourses on minorities, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the political representation within contemporary democratic societies.

We begin with a timeline of significant events in the history of minority rights, which is divided into two main areas of interest: migration and sexual minority rights, specifically in Germany and the United Kingdom. Subsequently, the theory and expectations section addresses the conceptual foundations and theoretical expectations. This is followed by the data and methods section, which explains how the data were collected and analyzed. Subsequently, we show the empirical results and discuss them in relation to our theoretical expectations in the discussion. Finally, we present the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

7.2   Timeline of Major Events in Minority Rights History

Minorities are a group of people who are relatively marginalized and disadvantaged in society compared to members of a dominant social group. While there have always been minority groups in every society, the level of recognition and salience has been context-dependent and has changed over time.

7.3   Migration

The end of World War II marked a period of significant labor shortages in many European countries, driven by the need to rebuild economies and infrastructure devastated by the war. Both the United Kingdom and Germany attempted to address this shortage by encouraging international migration for employment purposes. As a result, during the post-war period, there was a notable increase in the number of immigrants in both countries, significantly influencing their demographic compositions and labor markets.

7.3.1   Germany

Immigration to West Germany increased during the 1960s following an agreement between the Federal Republic of Germany and Turkey, which brought in "guest workers" to address temporary labor shortages (Triadafilopoulos and Schönwälder 2006). Over time, this temporary arrangement led to long-term immigration (Ellermann 2015). From the early 1980s until approximately 1988, there was no considerable political interest in immigration and the social integration of immigrants in Germany (Münz 2003a, b). This has changed considerably since 1989. The political debate on the consequences of immigration was primarily a result of the major changes occurring in Central and Eastern Europe, the impact on large migration flows from these territories, the subsequent integration of these countries into the European Union, and the potential implications of this on East–West migration flows (Münz 2003a, b). Despite growing diversity in the country, Germany maintained an exclusionary national identity until the 1990s (Kurthen 1995). During the period 2000–2004, attempts to draft new immigration regulations have dominated the intellectual and political discourse on immigration and immigrant integration. Following four years of intense political debate, the Immigration Act[1] was approved in July 2004, which

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[1] The complete text of the law under the official title "Gesetz zur Steuerung und Begrenzung der Zuwanderung und zur Regelung des Aufenthalts und der Integration von Unionsbürgern und Ausländern" dated July 30, 2004, is available on the website of the Ministry of the Interior: http://www.bmi.bund.de

regulates aspects of asylum and refugee and immigration focused on the labor market (Kleiner 2004a, b).

Immigration again peaked in late 2015 when Germany received an unprecedented number of asylum applications, surpassing all other EU countries (Burmann and Valeyatheepillay 2017). Debates about Germany's handling of the refugee influx intensified further after refugees were linked to sexual assaults in Germany on New Year's Eve in 2015/16 (Czymara and Schmidt-Catran 2017). These events were also accompanied by an increase in anti-refugee violence (Jäckle and König 2019) and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a right-wing party advocating for stricter immigration laws, emerged as the third-largest party in the 2017 federal election and has maintained a presence in the parliament since then (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Mushaben 2020).

In 2020, Germany was the second most significant international migration destination, hosting nearly 16 million international migrants, representing 17% of its total population (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). This influx included a diverse group of newcomers, comprising both refugees and highly skilled workers, each contributing to the country's demographic and economic landscape. According to a recent report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) between 2015 and 2020 the number of immigrants in the country increased by almost 5 million (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). The most numerous groups came from Poland, Turkey, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, and the Syrian Arab Republic (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). Furthermore, in 2020, Germany continued to harbor the largest population of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe, ranking fifth among the world's leading refugee-hosting nations. Notably, there was a considerable arrival of refugees from Ukraine, initially driven by Russia's attack in 2014 and intensified significantly after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, leading to a sharp increase in refugee numbers (Weber et al. 2023).

Simultaneously, Germany has actively recruited highly skilled workers to address labor and skill shortages within its economy. According to the German Federal Employment Agency, the country reported 1.73 million vacant jobs, prompting the implementation of the new Skilled Immigration Act aimed at simplifying the entry and integration of skilled workers from abroad (Romaniec 2024). This underscores Germany's complex approach to managing both humanitarian responsibilities and economic necessities, marking it as a focal point of migration-related issues in Europe.

7.3.2 United Kingdom

The election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 marked the beginning of an era of severe immigration restrictions and measures against irregular migration (Layton-Henry and Wilpert 2003). From 1980 onwards, intense workplace raids were conducted to detect irregular workers, and they began to be excluded from social and medical benefits (Social Security Act, 1980; Couper and Santamaria

1984). Additionally, in 1981, with the passage of the British Nationality Act, rules for acquiring nationality were changed for children of foreigners born in the UK, and visas were established for nationals of countries exporting the highest number of irregular migrants and asylum seekers. In 1987, the Immigration (Carriers' Liability) Act introduced fines for airlines transporting individuals without proper documentation. This law received considerable criticism as it significantly affected refugees' right to seek asylum and allowed the UK to effectively restrict or evade its international obligations. In 1988, a new immigration law came into effect, which amended some parts of the 1971 law while still adhering to its overall framework. The Immigration Act of 1988 removed benefits that citizens of the New Commonwealth still retained.[2]

In 1993, the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act came into force, revising the asylum procedure and granting extensive powers to the government to administer it to prevent fraudulent applications and, therefore, irregular immigration by these individuals. For example, it reduced the government's obligations to provide housing for asylum seekers and established transit visas. In 1996, the Asylum and Immigration Act established significant measures to control irregular migration. This legislation, for the first time, classified the employment of irregular workers and imposed severe punishment fines. It also facilitated the arrest without a court order of suspects of irregular migrants and increased penalties for irregular entry and assistance in remaining irregularly in the country.

In 2004, nationals of the A8 countries (Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic) were granted free movement, and a worker registration scheme was introduced. The entry and work rights for immigrants from the European Community (EC), which had been in effect since the United Kingdom's accession to the EC in 1973, underwent modification on December 31, 2020, when free movement between the United Kingdom and the European Union ended with the completion of Brexit. On January 1, 2021, the United Kingdom implemented a points-based immigration system, which places emphasis on skills and talent rather than the country of origin of individuals.

Similar to Germany, the United Kingdom stands as one of the primary international immigration destinations. According to recent data from the IOM, in 2020, it held the fourth position among the main destination countries, hosting 9 million international migrants, accounting for 13.1% of its total population (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). Notably, immigrant populations from India, Poland, and Pakistan are among the largest in the country. Additionally, in 2020, the United Kingdom ranked fourth among European countries with the highest total number of refugees and asylum seekers (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). The issue of immigrants and refugees remains salient, with tens of thousands of refugees having crossed

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[2] For example, the right to residency was exclusively granted to citizens of the United Kingdom and those from former colonies who had resided in the country for five or more years. All other foreigners were required to apply for special permits to live, work, or settle, which did not authorize permanent residency or family reunification.

the English Channel in small boats. The situation has polarized the government on how to address the dangerous crossing and combat human trafficking effectively.

7.4 Sexual Minorities

The majority of reforms about the decriminalization of homosexuality were enacted through legislative measures in Germany and the United Kingdom. An important moment occurred with the issuance of the Wolfenden Committee report in 1957, which led England and Wales to adopt its recommendations by amending the Sexual Offenses Act in 1967, thereby decriminalizing consensual homosexual practices between adults in private settings. On June 25, 1969, the West German parliament also took significant action by amending the penal code two years later to decriminalize homosexuality for adults aged 21 and above. It is important to note, however, that both countries maintained a higher age of consent for homosexual acts in comparison to heterosexual acts during this period.

7.4.1 Germany

During the 1980s and 1990s, Germany witnessed notable advancements in legal recognition and rights for sexual minorities. In 1987, the East German Supreme Court declared that "homosexual individuals are not excluded from the socialist community, and their civil rights are guaranteed to them as to all others". This ruling prompted a relaxation of the provisions outlined in the Penal Code and a harmonization of the age of consent for homosexual and heterosexual activities less than a year before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The reunification of East and West Germany on October 3, 1990, marked an important moment in the nation's history, leading to the harmonization of laws regarding homosexuality. In 1990, several of the newly established federal states, including Brandenburg and Saxony, formulated constitutions that explicitly prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. On May 31, 1994, after 123 years in force, Article 175 of the German Penal Code was repealed, thereby equalizing the age of sexual consent for both homosexual and heterosexual individuals at 16 years. Concurrently, in the same year, the prohibition on military service for homosexual individuals was lifted.

Germany continued to progress in sexual minority rights with the introduction of registered partnerships for same-sex couples on August 1, 2001. This legal change granted same-sex couples some of the rights and obligations of marriage, including inheritance, alimony, and health insurance benefits. Further advancements occurred on January 1, 2005, when adoption rights were granted to same-sex couples, allowing them to become parents legally. On June 30 2017, same-sex couples were granted full marital and adoption rights. Just a few months later, on October 1, 2017, same-sex

marriage was officially legalized, ensuring equal marriage rights for all. Finally, on May 7, 2020, Germany took steps to protect minors by initiating a ban on conversion therapy, a practice aimed at changing an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity.

7.4.2   United Kingdom

The pioneers of sexual minority rights in the United Kingdom were England and Wales, which legalized homosexuality in 1967 under the Sexual Offences Act 1967. Subsequently, in Scotland, homosexual acts were decriminalized by the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980, which took effect on February 1, 1981. A year later, Northern Ireland also legalized homosexuality. However, a setback in sexual minority rights occurred during the 1980s. Protests and campaigns were organized to advocate for more restrictive legislation, prompted by controversy surrounding a book available in public school libraries in London, which some argued promoted homosexuality among teenagers. Consequently, in 1988, the British Parliament introduced an amendment to Section 28 of the Local Government Act, prohibiting the deliberate promotion of homosexuality by any local government authority and the endorsement of homosexuality acceptance in any publicly funded school.

In line with the German case, the onset of the twenty-first century saw the implementation of several legislative measures aimed at ensuring equal rights within British law. In 2000, legislation was enacted to establish an equal age of consent for both homosexual and heterosexual relationships. Subsequently, in 2004, the Sexual Offences Act 2003 came into force, removing all references to homosexuality from the 1967 law, thereby eliminating the requirement for strict privacy and no longer delineating differences in the sexual orientation of participants in any given activity. Additionally, the Criminal Justice Act 2003 designated hostility based on sexual orientation as an aggravating factor in any offense. In November 2004, legislation regarding civil unions for same-sex couples was ratified. In October 2007, the English government announced plans for the introduction of an amendment to the penal code to criminalize hate speech based on sexual orientation. Furthermore, in 2008, rights pertaining to same-sex parenting were formally recognized. Same-sex marriage was introduced in England and Wales in July 2013 and in Scotland in December 2014, marking a significant milestone in the pursuit of equal rights. This legislation also facilitated the recognition of same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland in 2020, following an extensive process of advocacy and political deliberation.

Although both Germany and the United Kingdom experienced developments in migration and sexual minority rights, key differences lie in their institutional and historical contexts. On the one hand, the institutional gap between Germany's multi-party system and the UK's (mainly) two-party structure. On the other hand, Germany's history is strongly shaped by labor migration and post-war integration policies, while the UK's colonial legacy influences how diversity, citizenship, and identity are discussed. Similarly, recent legal changes regarding sexual minority

rights in Germany were influenced by the reunification and the repeal of Section 175 in 1994. Whereas in the UK, political debates continue to reflect the historical impact of Section 28 in 1988. These differences help contextualize how minority issues entered political agendas and set the stage for understanding country-specific dynamics in political discourse.

7.5 Theory and Expectations

As demonstrated in the previous section, minority rights have been expanded gradually, often sparking major debates between majority and minority groups, as well as among political camps. In this section, we aim to place our study in the literature of minority rights and party politics, focusing on ideological differences in how left- and right-leaning parties frame these issues and how these differences intensify over time.

Minority rights are closely tied to liberalism (Will Kymlicka and Rubio Marín 1999), and their political prominence has evolved alongside human rights advancements promoted by international organizations (Kymlicka 2007). The issues of minority rights started to receive more attention in the political arena, particularly from 1980 to 1990s with the multiculturalism debates and the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union (Pejic 1997), which created large migration streams to Western Europe as well as an increasing number of declarations, resolutions, reports, and treaties to strengthen the international legal protection of minorities (Wippman 1997). We conceptualize salience not merely as an outcome but as a precursor to partisan engagement and polarization. As minority issues become more visible in political discourse, parties are compelled to respond—often in divergent ways. Thus, understanding this trend is foundational to explaining the patterns that follow. As a result of these transformations, we expect that:

- Expectation 1: Minority issues are addressed more frequently over time in parliamentary debates in both countries.

7.5.1 Partisan Differences in Framing Minority Issues

As minority issues have become increasingly prominent in political debates, parties have had to engage with them more frequently. However, rather than fostering consensus, this growing salience has reinforced partisan divides in how these issues are framed. Political parties do not simply differ in how often they address minority rights; they also employ distinct rhetorical strategies, reflecting ideological divisions over issues of inclusion, national identity, and economic impact. These differences in framing are especially pronounced between left- and right-wing parties. Broadly, left-wing and liberal parties have historically been the primary advocates for expanding minority rights, aligning with ideological commitments to individual liberty, equality

and diversity (Magni and Reynolds 2023). Accordingly, we expect left-wing parties to be more responsive to minority views and identities, framing them through normative appeals to inclusion and rights.

In contrast, right-wing parties are, by nature, more interested in preserving the status quo, which, arguably, can go hand in hand with the interest of the majority. Right-wing political parties have been stricter on immigration than their leftist opponents, tending to emphasize issues such as national security, cultural cohesion, and economic burden (Shehaj et al. 2021), while left-wing parties tend to become "the defender of immigration and multiculturalism" (Dancygier and Margalit 2020). This implies that conservative parties will focus more on the majority perspective when addressing minority-related issues. Relevant to our study, we expect that rhetoric revolving around economic aspects is more likely used by the political right, while the political left should use normative aspects more often. Due to the politicization of both issues, we expect that the difference between parties in both aspects should increase over time.

- Expectation 2a: Parties on the right use more terms related to traditional norms when discussing minorities.
- Expectation 2b: Parties on the left use more terms related to inclusion when discussing minorities.

7.5.2 Differences Between Migration and Sexual Minority Issues

While both migrants and sexual minorities are framed as "minorities" in political discourse, their political potential differs due to their divergent access to electoral participation and institutional representation. They differ in two key aspects: (1) how their rights were dealt with in society and (2) their status as native citizens. These distinctions should also shape how political parties engage with the two groups and influence the degree of politicization and polarization surrounding each issue.

First, political representation and party responsiveness differ significantly between these groups. Democracy induces governments to be responsive to the preferences of the voters and the goal of political parties is to represent these people (Stokes 1999). Political parties are rooted in social cleavages and their goals are to translate the demands of the populace into policy and aggregate the demands of their voters (Ford and Jennings 2020; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Past research shows that the increasing visibility and legal recognition of LGBT families has prompted institutional changes and greater social legitimacy, particularly through the recognition of parenting rights and family diversity (Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013). In parallel, cross-national studies show that public attitudes and policy responsiveness toward LGBTQ issues have evolved as these groups gained visibility, legal recognition, and political voice through democratic channels (Adamczyk and Liao 2019).

In addition, groups with voting rights and established civil society networks—such as sexual minorities—are more likely to be addressed in inclusive rhetoric (Brown et al. 2024), whereas non-citizen migrants are often politically disregarded. Unlike sexual minorities who usually have voting rights, the lack of political rights and formal representation mechanisms often renders non-citizen migrants less visible within political agendas compared to enfranchised minorities. This puts the two minorities differently in the political landscape. While sexual minorities are voters in national politics, immigrants do not have voting rights unless they are naturalized. In that sense, sexual minorities are situated within the political community, whereas immigrants are outside of the community.

Second, the historical framing and public perception of these two groups differ. As we mentioned in the previous section, both Germany and the UK have begun to adopt immigrants to overcome the shortage of labor after World War II. While the rights of immigrants have been expanded over time with the development of human rights, the immigration issue was mainly driven by "realistic" reasons, to solve some of the economic challenges the countries were facing. In addition, adopting immigrants is closely related to their welfare policy and taxation, which leads countries to approach the issue more realistically. This is different from sexual minority rights where the issue of sexual minority rights is more related to adopting values that some view as incompatible with the existing social norms. In addition, the issue of migration is often more securitized beyond everyday politics, whereas sexual minority issues are more related to ideological and political struggles (Unlu and Kotonen 2024).

Moreover, political parties in Europe have become increasingly responsive to public opinion on immigration (Dassonneville et al. 2024), making it a highly politicized and electorally salient issue (Alonso and Fonseca 2012; Grande et al. 2019). By contrast, advances in sexual minority rights have typically resulted from long-term normative shifts, rather than direct voter pressure. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that migration issues are more frequently discussed in parliament due to their centrality to economic, demographic, and political concerns. In addition to partisan divisions, we consider how the nature of the minority group—citizen-based or not—shapes party rhetoric. We therefore expect that:

- Expectation 3: Migration is a more salient issue than sexual minorities in parliamentary debates in both countries.

7.5.3 *The Dynamics of Language Use Over Time: Linguistic Polarization*

However, the increased salience of these issues can also lead to increasingly different rhetoric between the political camps and their view of these issues. Given the ideological differences between left/liberal and right/conservative parties, it is likely that these two groups also differ in their language use, and that this difference in language gets stronger over time (Card et al. 2022). That is, left and right parties

are likely to increasingly use different terms when talking about the same issues (Jensen et al. 2012). We refer to this tendency as *linguistic polarization.* Generally, linguistic polarization may stem from two mechanisms, which are different but not mutually exclusive. First, it can reflect increasing distance in political party positions, with language mirroring deeper divides along party lines. Second, language itself may become a strategic tool and, thus, language use can become more polarized over time as a strategic process reinforcing group boundaries and signaling differentiation, even when underlying positions remain stable, manifesting more in rhetorical style than in actual policy stances or actions. While we acknowledge that this relationship can be reciprocal, we emphasize salience as a primary driver that compels parties to respond and differentiate rhetorically. Moreover, linguistic polarization may not only be a consequence of issue salience but may also contribute to it: differences in how parties frame and discuss an issue can increase public attention and perceived controversy, thereby reinforcing its salience and potentially deepening polarization. In any case, the increasing importance of minority issues should likely be reflected in the terms left and right parties use when discussing these issues. This should be a pattern that generalizes across contexts and should thus be the case for both Germany and the UK.

- Expectation 4a: Linguistic polarization of minority issues in political speeches increases over time.

While linguistic polarization is expected to rise across all minority issues, we also anticipate variation in its intensity depending on the particular issue. Specifically, migration debates are likely to generate more pronounced polarization than those concerning sexual minority rights. As discussed above, migration is more frequently framed in exclusionary, securitized, and strategic terms, particularly by right-wing and populist parties. These actors emphasize threats to cultural identity, economic burden, and national sovereignty, while left-wing parties tend to adopt normative, rights-based, and inclusionary language. The fact that two groups have different political statuses implies that political parties have different approaches to the groups. The issues of sexual minorities were more related to them being discriminated against and underrepresented in politics (Magni and Reynolds 2021, 2023) and to their limited rights and to expanding the rights. On the contrary, immigrants do not have voting rights and are hardly considered ingroup members or "us" in terms of national identity, which is an important part of defining a political community. Even though immigrants raise their voices, political parties often do not have enough incentives to take their demands into account. Instead, the debates on immigration can be more politicized when political elites use the issue to attract voters, whether through anti-immigration rhetorics or through granting more rights to minority groups including immigrants. The recent success of anti-immigrant populist parties has been attributed to the idea of us versus them, as a form of identity politics, to explicitly exclude immigrants from the political community (Mudde 2007; Noury and Roland 2020). The populist parties have argued that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people, which excludes immigrants. This shows that, unlike sexual minorities, the issue of immigrants was mobilized by political elites. Thus, at the elite level, we

could assume that immigration is a more politicized issue than sexual minorities. The result is a sharper linguistic divide between party camps.

In contrast, while sexual minority rights also provoke disagreement, they are less frequently tied to national security or existential threat narratives, and are less often used as a central mobilizing issue by parties—especially on the right. Thus, we expect the linguistic divergence between left and right to be more muted in discussions of sexual minorities compared to migration.

- Expectation 4b: Linguistic polarization between left and right parties is higher for migration than for sexual minorities issues.

7.6 Data and Methods

7.6.1 Data

We use a data set of all parliamentary speeches in Germany and the UK. For Germany, we draw upon data from the PolMine Project (version 2.0.0) provided by Blaette (2023). For the UK, the data comes from the Hansard Speeches (version 3.1.0) corpus provided by Odell (2021). Both sources provide all speeches given in the respective parliament, the *Bundestag* and the *House of Commons*, from January 1980 to September 2021. We used the data from each parliament and used Python and R to perform the analysis. All code is available at https://github.com/czymara/min-rep-parl-speech.

To identify relevant speeches, we used four sets of keywords (one for each issue and country) taken from prior research, web searches, and ChatGPT. To have a meaningful comparison, we decided to keep the migration and sexual minorities keywords as similar as possible between Germany and the UK. The full list of keywords can be found in Appendix A. We ensured the reliability of these keyword sets through manual annotation of random samples. The manual validation also revealed that using full speeches as the unit of analysis is too broad. This issue was particularly pronounced with longer speeches,[3] where keywords were present but the overarching speech content diverged significantly from the targeted issues. To address this, we split each speech into tri-sentence segments, enabling a more granular analysis by examining keyword presence within these concise units. We refer to this unit of analysis as *speech parts*. This refined method allowed for the precise tuning of our keywords with minimal adjustments—for instance, isolating "gay" as a standalone term—resulting in a reduction of false positives to below 10 percent in each case. This keyword-driven strategy, thus, proved highly effective, consistently isolating relevant segments of speeches across both countries. This worked particularly well for the sexual minorities issues, where almost all selected texts were relevant in both

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[3] The average speech length (in characters) of the random samples is: Migration Germany: 6,059, Migration UK: 3,238, Sexual minorities DE: 5,033, Sexual minorities UK: 3,018.

countries.[4] For immigration-related issues, this approach resulted in 63,558 speech parts for Germany and 67,939 speech parts for the UK. For issues relating to sexual minorities, the keywords yielded 4,592 speech parts for Germany and 6,988 speech parts for the UK. These speech parts are the basis of all following analyses and treated as four data sets. Figures 7.5, 7.6, 7.7 and 7.8 in the appendix show the trends in the total number of speech parts about migration and sexual minorities by party in Germany and the UK, respectively.

7.6.2   Method

The main goals of this research are to examine (1) the *salience* of minority-related issues, (2), the *average linguistic differences* in word use between parties, and (3) their *linguistic polarization* over time. The salience is measured by the frequency of speech parts that contain issues-related keywords. The level of linguistic differences and of linguistic polarization are measured by applying relative frequency analysis. For the salience analysis, we present the frequency of the extracted tri-sentence segments about a specific issue per date and party.[5] The relative frequency analysis, in contrast, depicts words that are relatively more often used by one group compared to another group, in our case left- and right-leaning parties (see below). This analysis is conducted using the *quanteda R* package (Benoit et al. 2018) and follows a bag-of-words approach. To explore how language use differs between political parties, we analyze the frequency of individual words across party groups. For each word, we calculate a Chi-squared statistics, also known as *keyness*, which indicates how strongly a word is associated with either political side. Words with higher values are used significantly more often by one group than would be expected by chance. This is calculated by comparing the observed frequency of each word in one party group to its expected frequency under the assumption of equal usage across groups. The greater the difference between observed and expected counts, the higher the keyness score. To capture how these linguistic patterns evolve over time, we conduct the relative frequency analysis separately for each year, allowing us to track changes in language use across the observed time span. We use the signed version of the Chi-squared statistic to indicate the direction of association. If a word is more frequent in the left-leaning group than overall expected, the score is positive; if it is relatively more frequent in the right-leaning group, the score is negative. Before performing the relative frequency analysis, we used the following pre-processing steps: lemmatization, removal of numbers, symbols, and stop-words.

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[4] The false positive rates are: Migration Germany: 9%, Migration UK: 8%, Sex minorities DE: 0%, Sex min UK: 2%.

[5] Salience is measured as the frequency of speech parts (tri-sentence segments) on a given issue. While the share of speech parts on an issue relative to all speech parts would provide a more precise estimate of salience, we rely on raw counts due to the computational demands of segmenting the full corpus of all speeches into tri-sentence segments.

In the German political landscape, the left group includes the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left (Die Linke), and the Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen). On the right side, the spectrum comprises the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) along with its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP). In the UK political landscape, the left group includes the Labour Party, and the Scottish National Party (SNP). On the right side, the spectrum comprises the Conservative Party, and the Liberal Democrats.

7.7   Results

In the following, we first present a descriptive overview of the *total* number of speech parts by party for each issue and country over time. We refer to this as *salience*. This allows us to assess our first expectation on the trends in the overall frequency of the two issues in the parliamentary debates in Germany and the UK.

Next, we inspect *average* differences in language use between parties by employing relative frequency analyses showing which terms were used more often by right vs. left parties to test our Expectations 2a and 2b on the terms related to norms being more frequently featured by right parties and terms related to inclusion more by left parties. This is a measure of *average linguistic difference*. We illustrate these average differences using word clouds.

Finally, we explore the time *trends* in these differences in word usage between the parties, which captures *linguistic polarization*, based on chi-squared values from relative frequency analyses to test our Expectations 4a and 4b, arguing that linguistic polarization generally increased over time, and is higher for migration than for sexual minorities issues.

We follow these three steps (salience, average linguistic difference, linguistic polarization), for each issue-country-combination, first presenting the results of the migration debate in Germany and the UK, followed by the discourse on sexual minorities in Germany and the UK.

(1) *Discourse on Migration in the German Parliament*

As shown in the first plot of Fig. 7.1, migration has significantly increased as an issue in parliamentary speeches since the 2010s in Germany by all the major parties, with some considerable fluctuations. There was a minimal focus on migration before 1990, with three prominent surges in discourse occurring between 1992 and 1993, caused by the war in Yugoslavia and the related "Asylkompromiss", between 2015 and 2016, caused by the war in Syria, and between 2018 and 2019. The upper panel of Fig. 7.1 further indicates that Germany's two major parties, the center-conservative CDU/CSU and the social-democratic SPD, emerged as the primary drivers of migration discussions, with the AfD joining the conversation around 2018. Notably, parties maintained a relatively similar share of the overall number of speech parts on migration in Germany, except during the years 2015/16. The overall trend

shows that immigration issues became more salient over time, with some peaks during the major events.

The second plot of Fig. 7.1 shows the terms that were used in these debates, with larger words being more often used in general, words at the top being more often used by left leaning parties, and words at the bottom more often by right leaning parties. We see that left and right parties differ in the way they refer to fleeing people. While left parties are more likely to use the term "Flüchtlinge" (refugees) or "Geflüchtete" (persons who fled), right parties more often use the word "Asylbewerber" (asylum seekers). Moreover, parties on the right are much more likely to use a security frame when talking about migration, using words such as "illegal" or "problem".

Fig. 7.1 Discourse on migration in political speeches in Germany

They also use language that suggests ingroup and outgroup dynamics, highlighting national identity and outsiders with terms like "Deutschland" (Germany), "Ausländer" (foreigner), and "Deutsch" (German). This language use may thus reinforce divisions between citizens and non-citizens.

The third plot of Fig. 7.1 shows that there is also fluctuation in the polarization in the usage of these words over time. The plot displays the Chi-squared (keyness) values for selected keywords related to migration, showing how strongly each word is associated with either left- or right-leaning parties over time. Positive values indicate that the term was used more frequently by left-leaning parties in a given year, while negative values reflect higher usage by right-leaning parties. We see that the difference in word usage occurs most often during the two peaks in refugee migration, in the early 1990s and after 2015. We also see that the left is more likely to address racism during times of high migration compared to the right. Interestingly, we also observe a shift in language use *within* left parties over time. While they referred to refugees primarily as "Flüchtlinge" (refugees) before 2015, they changed to predominantly use the term "Geflüchtete" (persons who fled) after. While the term "Flüchtlinge" is the traditional word for refugees, "Geflüchtete" is meant to emphasize the action of fleeing and is often used to highlight the agency of the individuals.
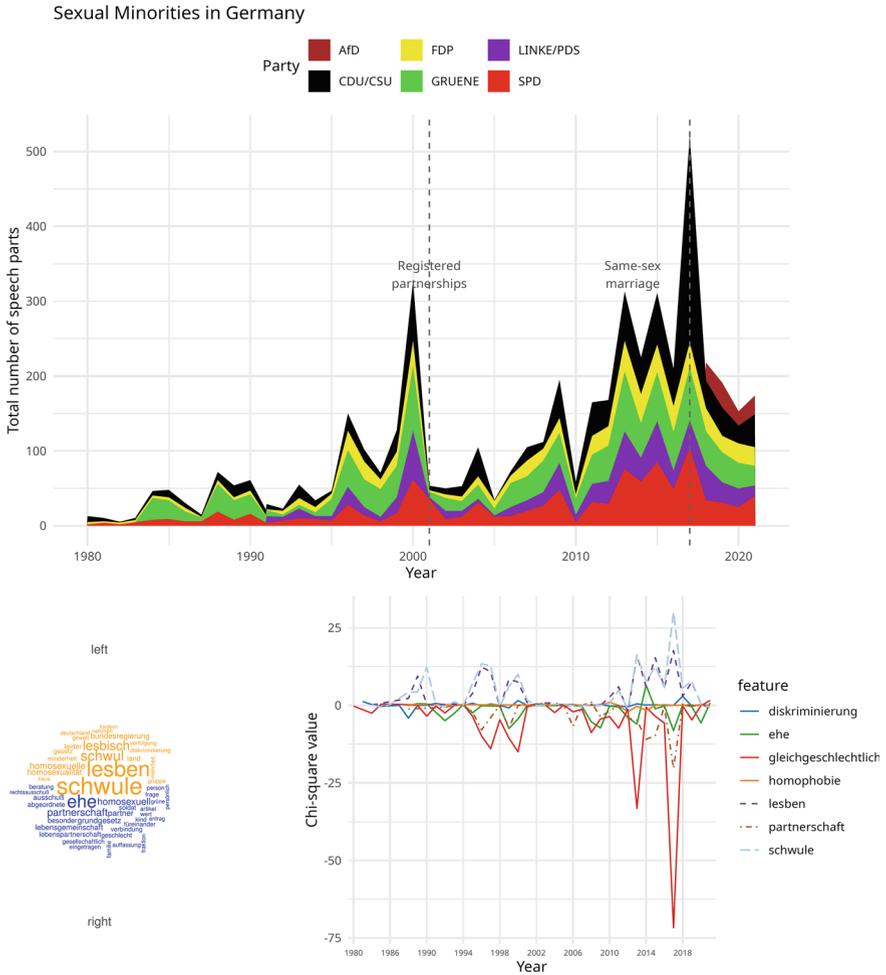
(2) *Discourse on Migration in the UK Parliament*

Turning to the migration discourse in the UK, the first plot of Fig. 7.2 shows that, in contrast to Germany, migration issues have been consistently salient since the 1980s in the UK. Yet, we also observe an increase over time, which confirms our first expectation that the issue of immigration becomes more salient in both countries over time. This trend was predominantly led by the two major parties—the Conservative and the Labour Party, with prominent surges around the refugee inflow of 2015. However, if we look closely at the speeches by party, a clear shift is evident. Between 1999 and 2009, the Labour Party demonstrated a heightened focus on migration issues, surpassing the Conservative Party. This trend reversed since 2010, with the Conservative party taking a more prominent role in discussing migration, while Labour's attention relatively decreased during this period (See Appendix).

The second plot of Fig. 7.2 shows that, similar to Germany, the right-wing parties are more likely to use a security frame when discussing migration, by using terms such as "illegal", "deportation", "offender", or "control". Left-wing parties, on the other hand, were more likely to address issues of family migration, by using words such as "child", "family", or "woman". This is an aspect we did not observe for the German left-leaning parties talking about immigration.

The third plot of Fig. 7.3 displays that the polarization in word usage was again most pronounced during times of high migration in the early 1990s and after 2015. We see that, after 2016, left parties were much more likely to use the term "hostile" compared to right-wing parties, perhaps in the way they describe the discussion and current policies. Another interesting finding is that the use of the term refugee actually flipped over time: while right-wing parties were more likely to use the term refugee in the late 1980s than left parties, this changed completely after 2005, when

Fig. 7.2 Discourse on migration in political speeches in the UK

left parties were much more likely to use the word refugee as compared to right parties.

(3) *Discourse on Sexual Minorities in the German Parliament*

In contrast to speeches on migration, issues relating to sexual minorities received comparatively less attention in political debates in Germany, marked by fluctuations in the number of speech parts in the first plot of Fig. 7.3. The issue gained limited attention until the early 2010s, with an exception at the beginning of the 2000s, when Germany introduced registered partnerships for same-sex couples. Notably, parties generally maintained a similar share of the overall number of speech parts on sexual minorities, except in 2017 when CDU/CSU placed a significantly higher focus on the

Fig. 7.3 Discourse on sexual minorities in political speeches in Germany. *Note* The word "gleichgeschlechtlich" could not be plotted in the word cloud but is among the most frequently used.

issue compared to other major parties. This is when the CDU/CSU remained in the government (forming a coalition with the SPD) after federal elections, and same-sex couples were granted full marital and adoption rights shortly after.

The word cloud in the second plot of Fig. 7.3 shows remarkable differences in the terms used by left and right parties when addressing issues related to sexual minorities. Left parties were more likely to address the identities of sexual minorities, by using the terms "schwul" (gay) or "lesbisch" (lesbian), but also their "Diskriminierung" (discrimination). In contrast, right parties primarily talk about traditional values such as "Familie" (family), "Ehe" (marriage), "Partnerschaft"

or "Lebenspartnerschaft" (both meaning partnership), and "Lebensgemeinschaft" (cohabitation).

The third plot in Fig. 7.3 shows that, somewhat similar to the migration discourse, polarization in word use is strongest when the issue is salient, i.e. in times of big events or policy reforms. This is true for both the left's focus on identities and the right's focus on family values and marriage. Although the spikes in the third plot of Fig. 7.3 are strongest in the 2010s, this pattern was already in place in the 1990s.

(4) **Discourse on Sexual Minorities in the UK Parliament**

Finally, Fig. 7.4 displays the sexual minorities discourse in the UK. Comparing the first plots of Figs. 7.3 and 7.4, the UK and Germany both exhibited a gradual increase in discussions related to sexual minorities. However, the issue of sexual minorities was notably more salient in the UK than in Germany, but there is also somewhat more fluctuation. What is interesting in the UK is that the two major parties consistently held similar shares of speeches since the 1980s, with five distinct instances of heated debates: around the mid-1980s, 2000, mid-2000s, and before and after 2015.

The word cloud in the second plot of Fig. 7.4 shows a remarkably similar pattern to the word cloud for Germany in Fig. 7.3: the left parties mostly address identity terms in the sexual minorities debate, such as "gay", "lesbian", "bisexual", "transsexual", or "transgender" (although the latter aspect did not play a larger role in Germany, even for the left parties). Left parties are also more likely to address "discrimination" and "homophobia". In contrast, the right parties mostly address the traditional values related to "marriage", "couple", or "moral". One unique aspect of the UK is the presence of terms related to the "navy" and the "military", or "armed" forces. This is due to the Merchant Shipping (Homosexual Conduct) Act 2017, which repealed sections of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 that permitted the dismissal of merchant ship crew members for engaging in homosexual acts and was passed on 27 April 2017 (hence the use of the term "merchant" among right parties).

The trends of word use polarization in the third plot in Fig. 7.4 are somewhat less clear. While the spike in the use of words related to the Merchant Shipping Act among the right happened, as expected, in 2017, the polarization in other terms seems to fluctuate. It does appear, however, that word use became more polarized in recent years, during which issues related to sexual minorities were generally more salient in the parliament of the UK.

7.8 Discussion

Our frequency analysis of discourse on minority issues, specifically immigration and sexual minorities, in Germany and the UK have demonstrated a growing salience of these issues over time, aligning with our first expectation. Notably, the issue of immigration was discussed significantly more often than issues relating to sexual minorities, engaging a broader spectrum of political parties (Expectation 3). This
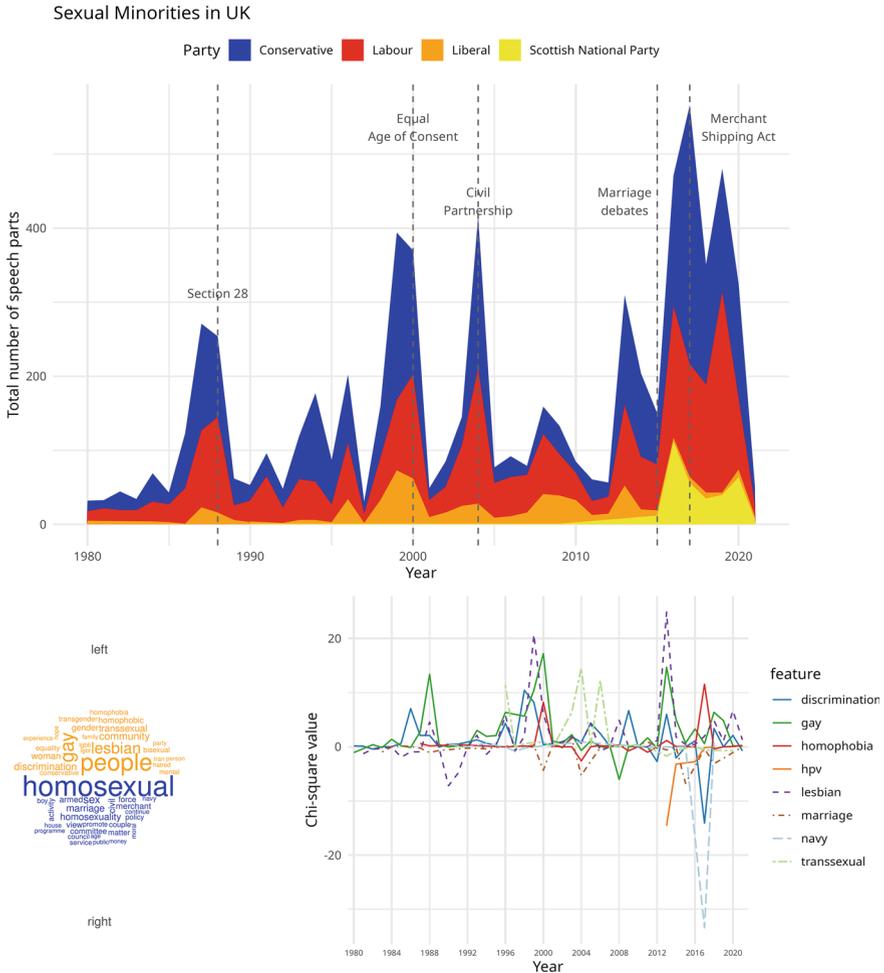
Fig. 7.4 Discourse on sexual minorities in political speeches in the UK

suggests that immigration has been one of the most salient political issues in Europe (Givens and Luedtke 2005; Noury and Roland 2020).

Our relative frequency analysis revealed an increasing linguistic polarization concerning these issues over time, with a notable rise in the average values of Chi-square for the four groups under study (Expectation 4a). This polarization suggests that as debates around immigration and sexual minorities become more frequent, the ideological divide in language choice between left- and right-wing parties also intensifies. Specifically, right-wing parties emphasize economic and security aspects, using terms like "provide," "illegal," "offender," and "border" when discussing migration. Meanwhile, left-wing parties focus on normative and rights-based terms such as "rights," "asylum seekers," "refugee," and "child". Regarding

sexual minorities, left-wing rhetoric includes terms like "community," "discrimination," and "equality," while right-wing discussions often revolve around "marriage," "civil service," "money," and "public".

Moreover, in analyzing the language used by different political spectrums, it is evident that left parties consistently employ terminology more supportive of and associated with minority groups (Expectation 2b). For instance, in both Germany and the UK, left-wing discourse frequently includes terms such as "refugees," "child," "family," and "woman," emphasizing a humanitarian perspective focused on individual and familial aspects of immigrants. This highlights a pattern where left-wing parties prioritize minority well-being in their discourse. Conversely, right-wing parties in both countries adopt a lexicon centered around national identity and security concerns. Commonly used terms include "Germany" and "foreigners" in Germany, and "illegal", "deportation", and "control" in the UK, indicating a discourse that frames immigration primarily as a security issue rather than a humanitarian one. This finding is consistent with previous literature that has examined political speeches in the U.S. (Card et al. 2022), demonstrating that this pattern is somewhat common in countries experiencing an increase in immigrant and minority populations (Expectation 2a). We find similar patterns in discourses about sexual minorities. Left-wing parties tend to focus on the rights and issues of minorities, whereas right-wing parties often emphasize traditional values such as "marriage", and "moral". Typically, these discussions avoid direct mentions of sexual minority groups, using terms such as "gays", "lesbians", or "transgender". Linguistic polarization stems from the political values that different party groups care about, regardless of the specific issues, such as immigration and sexual minorities.

Migration, being discussed more frequently than sexual minority issues in both countries, shows stronger patterns of linguistic divergence between parties on average. One possible explanation is that issues with high political attention attract clearer ideological positioning, encouraging parties to differentiate their rhetorical strategies. The relationship between salience and linguistic polarization is illustrated most clearly in the German case. Our results show that major peaks in migration-related parliamentary discourse—particularly in the early 1990s and around 2015—coincide with sharp increases in linguistic polarization. These moments, linked to the Post-Yugoslav and Syrian refugee crises, triggered intensified debates between left and right parties, as evidenced by higher divergence in word use. In the UK, although salience of migration remained more stable over time, peaks in polarization also align with periods of intense debate, such as post-2015. Similarly, in the case of sexual minorities, polarization grew notably during key legislative events, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage in both countries. These findings suggest that polarization tends to rise not merely with overall salience, but during politicized moments that concentrate party attention and emphasize ideological differences. Therefore, the temporal overlap observed in our data supports the theoretical expectations.

While our findings show similar trends in both countries, institutional and historical specificities may help explain variations in the intensity and framing of linguistic polarization. On one hand, the institutional gap between Germany's multi-party

system and the UK's two-party structure may shape the dynamics of political polarization. Coalition governments in Germany often require compromise, which can encourage more moderated discourse. In contrast, the UK's adversarial system tends to produce sharper rhetorical devices. On the other hand, national histories also influence how minorities are represented. Germany's migration debates are rooted in labor migration and economic integration, while the UK's colonial legacy shapes discourses of citizenship and diversity. A similar pattern emerges in the history of sexual minority rights. In Germany, the repeal of Section 175 in 1994 and reunification led to a more institutionalized focus on legal equality, with early inclusion of anti-discrimination clauses in regional constitutions. In the UK, however, the legacy of Section 28 in 1988, which banned the promotion of homosexuality in schools, still resonates in political discourse, especially among Conservative voices. These distinctions may help explain cross-national differences in language use and suggest that both institutional design and historical legacies are relevant factors in the evolution of linguistic polarization.

7.9 Conclusion

Based on all political speeches held in the parliaments of Germany and the United Kingdom in the period from 1980 to 2021, our study explored the differences in language use between left and right parties when debating issues related to immigration and sexual minorities. Using natural language processing, we show that both issues became much more salient over our investigated period. Deeper analyses reveal that left and right parties strongly differed in the terms they used when talking about the two issues. In parliamentary discussions on migration, right-leaning parties in both countries prioritize economic and security issues, while their left-leaning counterparts emphasize human rights and ethical considerations more often. Regarding sexual minorities, the discourse from the left often centered on issues of equality and discrimination, whereas the right was more concerned with moral and marital values. Importantly, the tendencies in the differences in language use clearly increased over time. Thus, linguistic polarization, which we defined as an increase in the differences in the usage of words over time between political parties, intensified over the years.

This study also has some limitations. The method we employed to analyze the parliamentary debate makes use of the so-called bag-of-words approach, while counting the occurrence of the words, we are not capturing the deeper semantic meanings of the sentences or the context in which these words are used. Additionally, the focus on keywords might miss less frequent but potentially significant expressions that signal emerging trends or shifts in attitude that are not yet predominant in the discourse. Given these constraints, future research could benefit from incorporating more advanced linguistic analyses that consider the context. Expanding the scope to include media representations or public opinion surveys could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these issues are discussed and perceived in society. Moreover, while our paper focuses on language, future research could

explore how linguistic and other types of political polarization relate to each other. For example, it is likely that certain words carry a particular valence. For example, the German "Geflüchtete" (person who fled) has a more positive connotation than "Asylbewerber" (asylum seeker). Future research may want to examine these patterns more systematically to explore whether linguistic polarization aligns with shifts in policy positions or is a more autonomous dynamic. Finally, we focused on minority representation in Germany and the UK in the past 40 years, but future research may want to explore linguistic polarization with respect to other issues, contexts, or even larger time frames. While we do think minority representation with respect to immigration and sexual minorities is particularly relevant in the current political discourse, the concept of linguistic polarization is likely to apply to other political issues as well. Moreover, one might also go beyond the political sphere and examine linguistic polarization, for example, in newspaper articles or social media posts (Bail et al. 2018; Czymara and Gorodzeisky 2024). The increasing availability of such data sources to computational social scientists will increasingly allow us to explore such research questions.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study shows that language use in political speeches has polarized between left and right parties when discussing minority representations in both Germany and the UK. Given that political rhetoric can have a significant impact on public opinion, understanding how political elites refer to issues of minority representation is particularly important. This is particularly true for both immigration and the rights of sexual minorities, which are likely to be highly salient and vividly discussed issues in the coming years.

Appendix

(A) **Keywords**

- Migration (German): "Einwander", "Zuwander", "Migrant", "Migration", "Ausländer", "Flüchtling", "Geflüchtete", "Asyl", "Visum", "Abschieb", "Einbürgerung", "Aufenthaltsgenehmigung"
- Migration (English): "migrant", "migration", "foreigner", "refugee", "asylum", r"\bvisa\b", "deport", "naturalization", "residence permit"
- Sexuality (German): "schwul", "lesbisch", "homosexuell", "bisexuell", "Männer, die Sex mit Männern haben", "transgender", "transsex", "queer", "lgbt", "homophob", "gleichgeschlechtlich", "ehe für alle"
- Sexuality (English): r"\bgay\b", "lesbian", "homosexual", "bisexual", "men who have sex with men", "transgender", "transsex", "queer", "LGBT", "homophob", "same sex".
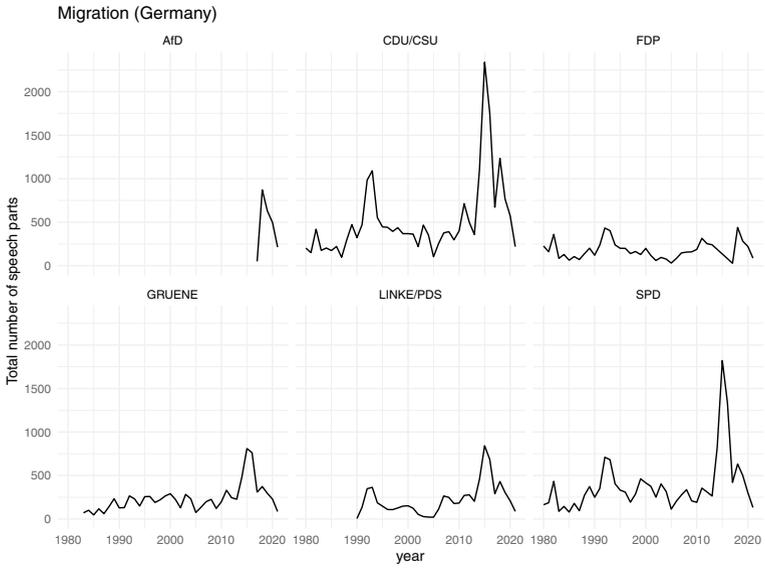
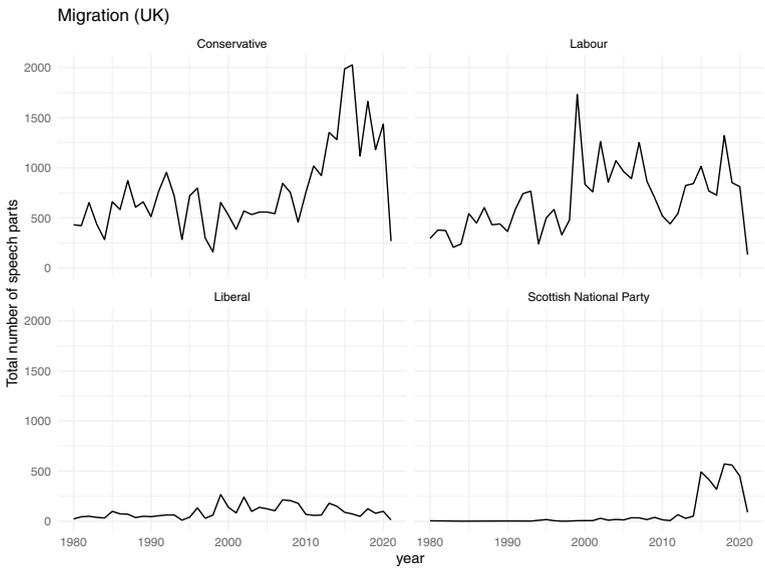**Number of Speech Parts on Migration by Party**

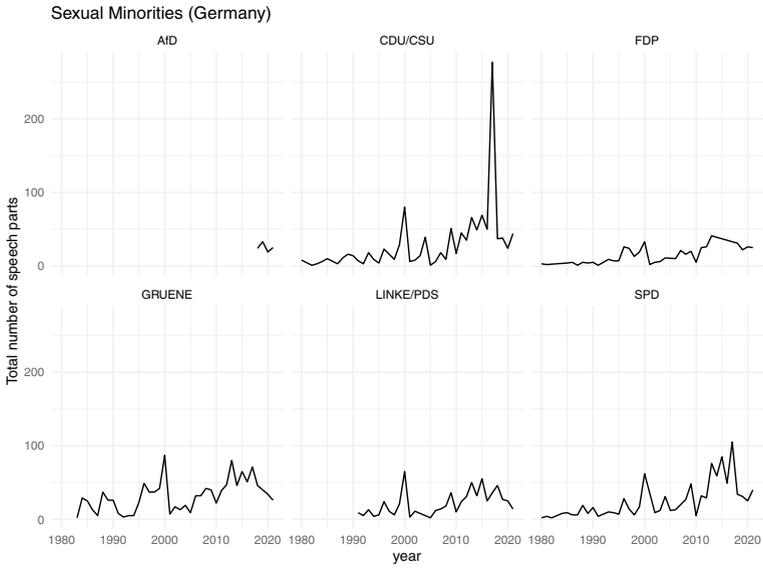**Fig. 7.5** Migration (Germany)

Fig. 7.6 Migration (UK)

Fig. 7.7 Sexual minorities (Germany)

Number of Speech Parts on Sexual Minorities by Party

Sexual Minorities (UK)
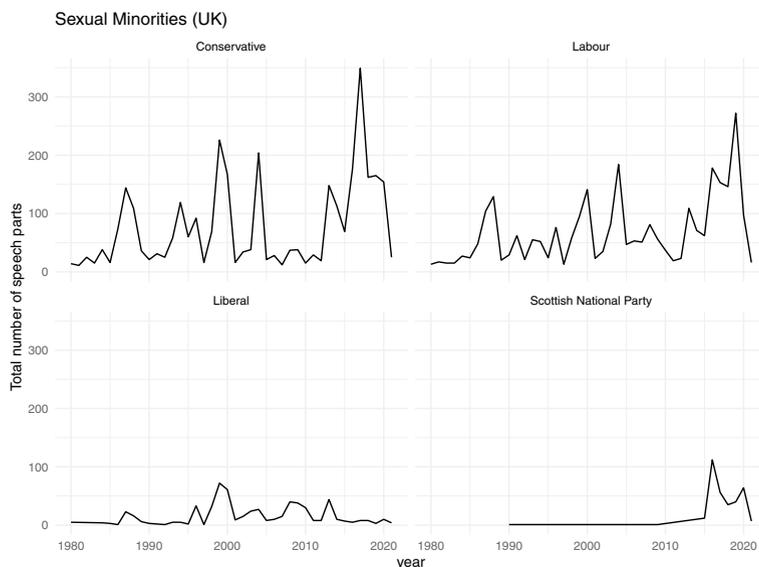
Fig. 7.8 Sexual minorities (UK)

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