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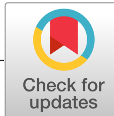

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Societal religiosity and the gender gap in political interest, 1990–2014

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Abstract

This manuscript examines the structural causes of the gender gap in political interest. In many countries, men are more interested in politics than women. Yet, in others, men and women prove equally interested. We explain this cross-national variation by focusing on the effects of societal religiosity. Since religion sustains the traditional gender order, contexts where societal religiosity is low undermine the taken-for-grantedness of this order, subjecting it to debate. Men then become especially interested in politics to try to reassert their traditional gender dominance, or to compensate for their increasingly uncertain social status. A secular environment thus increases political interest more among men than among women, expanding this gender gap. Using the World and European Values Survey, we estimate three-level regression models and test our religiosity-based approach in 96 countries. The results are consistent with our hypothesis.

KEYWORDS
gender, political interest, religion, social values, quantitative analysis

1 | INTRODUCTION

Political interest is a stable disposition that guides individual political practices (Wass & Blaiss, 2017). As prior (2010, p. 747) notes, political interest stands out as "typically the most powerful predictor of political behaviors that make democracy work." Citizens interested in politics are more likely to vote (Smets & van Ham, 2013), be politically

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informed (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), engage in informal political action (Marien, Hooghe, & Quintelier, 2010), and practice civic voluntarism (Burns, Scholzman, & Verba, 2001). Yet, at the same time, existing scholarship documents a substantial gender gap in political interest. Across multiple countries, men tend to be more interested in politics than women (Burns et al., 2001; Campbell & Winters, 2008; Coffé, 2013; Inglehart & Norris, 2005; Paxton, Kunovich, & Hughes, 2007). This gender gap in political interest is potentially highly consequential for political behavior and policy outcomes. Because interest covaries with political engagement, a gender gap in political interest may affect the gender gap in voting and informal political participation. And since women are also more supportive of redistribution than men (Jaime-Castillo, Fernández, Valiente, & Mayrl, 2016), countries with a larger gender gap in political interest may also face fewer pressures to pursue progressive fiscal and social policies.

While an *overall* gender gap in political interest has been observed in many settings, the *strength* of this gap differs across countries (Hayes & Bean, 1993; Mayer & Schmidt, 2004). This paper contributes to the literature on gender and political behavior by focusing on this puzzling cross-national variation. We specifically examine the scope conditions of this gap by considering the influence of the average levels of religiosity in the country—that is, the level of societal religiosity. The study thus addresses the following important question: is the gender gap in political interest influenced by the level of societal religiosity? To answer, we examine the gender gap in political interest in 96 countries between 1990 and 2014 and use the Integrated Values Survey (IVS), which offers the broadest geographical scope of all comparative survey programs. The IVS allows us to consider countries with diverse cultural, economic, political, and social circumstances, overcoming limitations of previous comparative studies on the gender gap in political interest that examine only democratic nations (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012) or European countries (Fraile & Gómez, 2017). We use three-level logit models that include 245 country-year surveys. By conducting the first quasi-global analysis of the extent and causes of the gender gap in political interest, our study fills an important void in the literature on gender and politics.

Existing studies of the gender gap in political engagement suggest four structural features that may contribute to cross-national variation in the political interest gender gap: (a) economic development, (b) the prominence of women in political institutions, (c) predominant religious tradition, and (d) the extent of emancipative values among the population. We test these explanations alongside an alternative that emphasizes the role of *societal religiosity*—that is, the overall intensity of religiosity in the population. Religion is known to be deeply implicated in the gender order (Adamczyk, 2013; Bartkowski & Shah, 2014; McGuire, 2002; Peek, Lowe, & Williams, 1991; Woodhead, 2001, 2005) , and to exert its influence in large part through its collective force (Berger, 1967; Stark, 1996). We therefore hypothesize that the overall strength of religion in a society could shape the gender gap in political interests. Our evidence indicates that, although the modernization of nonreligious values also matters, the level of societal religiosity is the best predictor of the gender gap in political interest. Those countries in which a smaller proportion of their population considers God to be important in their lives display significantly larger gaps in political interest between men and women.

2 | PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The fact that women are less interested in politics than men is well documented (Burns et al., 2001; Campbell & Winters, 2008; Inglehart & Norris, 2005). As Coffé (2013, p. 324) summarizes, “time and again, research in a variety of countries … has shown that women are less interested in politics than men.” The literature, moreover, shows that the magnitude of this gender gap varies significantly across countries; for example, postindustrial societies reveal smaller gaps than agrarian societies (Inglehart & Norris, 2005, p. 108). Existing research on gender politics offers four broad explanations for these variations, which we term sociodemographic, economic, political, and cultural. These approaches will serve as alternatives to the theoretical model we present in the next Section.

Most *sociodemographic analyses* focus on individual-level features. In particular, higher education and labor force participation are thought to be critical “resources” governing political attitudes and behavior. Paid employment,

higher education, and higher income increase the opportunity cost of political disengagement and provide either the cognitive resources or the necessary connections to have meaningful involvement in politics. Since men control more of these resources than women, their average political participation is higher. Other socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, marital status, or family size also appear to condition women's political interest (Bennett & Bennett, 1989; Burns et al., 2001; Coffé, 2013; Inglehart, 1981; van Deth, 2000). Campbell and Winters (2008) show that women usually identify family responsibilities such as child-rearing and household chores as barriers to keeping up with politics—although these barriers can be reduced by gender equality policies (Fraile & Gómez, 2017). Since most works in this approach stress the role of women's economic autonomy, we hypothesize that *countries with higher female labor force participation display smaller gender gaps in political interest* (*H1*).

A second set of explanations emphasizes *macro-economic conditions*. According to Inglehart and Norris (2005), economic modernization creates a context of prosperity, which is favorable to more gender-egalitarian political participation. In industrialized and postindustrial societies, citizens have higher existential security and, therefore, can prioritize non-materialist value orientations, including self-expression. As principles of equality and autonomy gain normative salience, women's political engagement is increasingly accepted. Supporting this approach, Sundström and colleagues (2017) show that economic development is one of the best predictors of women's political empowerment in 173 countries between 1900 and 2012. This approach suggests that *more prosperous countries display smaller gender gaps in political interest (H2).*

A third set of explanations emphasizes *macro-political factors*. Two such factors have received particular attention: the feminization of political elites, and gender quotas. Several scholars predict that a greater presence of women in political decision-making positions undermines the gender gap in political interest. This is because the increased visibility of women in top political positions sends a clear signal to society that politics is not exclusively a men's game, fostering women's perception of their political efficacy and men's acceptance of women's political participation (Barnes & Burchard, 2013; Burns et al., 2001).

Relatedly, some scholars have proposed that gender quotas in parliamentary representation may have an important influence on women's political interest. These policies seek to increase the presence of women in top political positions and thereby foster greater gender equality in the political field. Gender quotas could affect the political interest gender gap, either because they boost women's presence in the political elite (Dahlerup, 2006), or because they institutionalize a rejection of a form of gender discrimination in political behavior. Yet, empirical research testing these macro-political explanations has produced mixed results, with some studies producing supportive findings (Barnes & Burchard, 2013; Burns et al., 2001; Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012), and others not (Dolan, 2006; Zetterberg, 2009). Given the prominence of these predictions in the literature, we hypothesize that *countries with more women in Parliament (H3)* or *that adopted gender quotas in parliamentary representation (H4) display smaller gender gaps in political interest*.

Finally, although *cultural accounts* are rare in the literature on gender and political interest, two cultural dimensions have been persuasively discussed. One is the role of the predominant religious tradition in a country. In addition to being a fulcrum for the collective definition of the proper roles of women in family, employment and politics, religious doctrines also deeply shape the predominant culture of a given society. In thus shaping national cultures, religious doctrines affect gender-specific political attitudes and behavior (Inglehart & Norris, 2005). Margaret Inglehart (1981) has stated this point most forcefully by noting that Protestant and Catholic principles imply widely different consequences for political gender equality. Although both Protestantism and Catholicism historically endorsed women's subordination, Protestantism also encouraged literacy, which provided room for women's political empowerment. These conditions could have kick-started women political rights earlier in Protestant countries, leading to smaller gender gaps in political interest than in Catholic countries. From these insights, we infer that a country's dominant religious heritage could affect the political gender gap, and hypothesize that *Protestant countries display smaller gender gaps in political interest (H5).*

Still, religious traditions constitute only one influence on national value systems. A large literature shows that dominant long-term orientations in a society can have an independent effect on multiple forms of political

attitudes and behavior. Referring specifically to values associated with modernity, Welzel (2013) argues that macro-historical value change mainly involves the expansion of "emancipative values." In societies with more material, educational, and relational resources, individuals can benefit from acting autonomously and expressing their personal opinions, which gradually transforms their practices and worldviews. Citizens then adopt individual autonomy, self-expression, and gender equality as core values. This should affect the political engagement of historically subordinated groups like women. Even if gender-role attitudes are multidimensional (Knight & Brinton, 2017), in a context of generalized emancipative values and normative gender equality, men should become more accepting of women's political engagement, while women themselves seize the opportunity to become more politically active. As a result, we hypothesize that *countries with more emancipative values display smaller gender gaps in political interest (H6).*

3 | SOCIETAL RELIGIOSITY

Most existing cultural approaches focus on how different religious traditions and secular value systems, broadly construed, affect the overall national culture of a society. In so doing, they tend to overlook that the power of religious values is strongest when embedded in a "moral community" of fellow believers (Stark, 1996). We believe this is an important oversight. In contrast to the existing approaches listed above, we argue that there are important reasons to attend to how the declining *collective force* of religiosity might affect political interest—particularly *men's interest* in politics—and thereby shape cross-national variations in the gender gap in political interest.

3.1 | Religion and the gender order

It is well known that one of religion's most important roles has traditionally been to uphold, justify, and naturalize the social order (Berger, 1967). One of the central aspects of the social order that religion has historically supported is the gender order (Bourdieu, 2001; Connell, 1987). Religious beliefs play an important role in reinforcing gender roles (Bartkowski & Shah, 2014; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999) and reproducing masculine privilege (Sumerau, 2012). Most major religions give disproportionate interpretive authority to men, who read religious doctrines in terms that reinforce their dominance (Bush, 2010). While different religious traditions and denominations vary in terms of how they conceive of gender relations (Bush, 2010), and there remains ample opportunity for resistance and gender-related creativity within religious organizations (Avishai, 2008), overall the major religious traditions tend to support the androcentric gender order (Adamczyk, 2013; McGuire, 2002; Peek et al., 1991; Woodhead, 2001, 2005). As a result, in terms of their relationship to gender equality, the major religious traditions differ far less from one another than they do from nonreligious worldviews, which tend to be more supportive of gender equality (Schnabel, 2015).

While religious beliefs reinforce the gender order directly for individuals, the collective power of those beliefs, when held by the larger community, reinforces those beliefs by acting as a plausibility structure (Berger, 1967; cf. Stark, 1996). Studies have shown that the extent to which religious beliefs are collectively held can affect a wide variety of social and political attitudes (Jaime-Castillo et al., 2016; Moore & Vanneman, 2003; VanHeuvelen, 2014). As a result, when religion loses its collective force, its ability to sustain the gender order may be particularly undermined.

Why should this decline affect political interest? An answer to this question lies in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1991, and 2001) and his concept of "doxa," or "that which is beyond question" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 169). Doxa refers to those aspects of the social world which appear self-evident, where societal consensus prevents any discussion about them. For Bourdieu, doxa primarily benefits those dominant groups who benefit from the status quo. Social change only becomes possible when those things that have gone unstated and unquestioned become

stated, and a new realm of opinion—and hence politics—becomes possible (Bourdieu, 1991). As doxa disappears, therefore, the scope of debate expands, creating more opportunities and pressure for political engagement, and thus, an opportunity for greater interest in politics, not least among those who benefit from doxic arrangements.

Extending this line of reasoning, since highly religious contexts sustain the gender order and allow it to be taken for granted, we argue that declines in the power of religion allow the gender order to escape the realm of doxa, subjecting it to conscious articulation and contestation, and unleashing new political dynamics and political interest. The weakening of religion's collective power, therefore, should produce new political impulses that promote greater political engagement.

3.2 | Societal religiosity and differences in political interest by gender

In short, we argue that societal religiosity—that is, the collective power of religion at the country level—is an important factor that may influence the gap in political interest between men and women. In more religious societies, religion more effectively sustains the gender order, enhancing hegemonic masculinity's ability to be taken-for-granted, and thus, removed from the realm of politics. In more secular societies, by contrast, religion's ability to buttress the gender order weakens, making it easier for the gender order to be subjected to politics. While contexts of low societal religiosity should foster political interest in general by subjecting the gender order to overt contestation, it is less clear whether we should expect this increased interest to increase or decrease the gender gap in political interest.

One possibility is that growing contestation over the gender order should be primarily focused among women, who perceive the emancipatory possibilities of contesting and transforming it. Religion (particularly conservative religion) has been shown to have demobilizing political effects on women (Cassese & Holman, 2016). Declines in societal religiosity, therefore, by reducing this suppressing effect, may act as a "gendered opportunity structure" (McCammon, Campbell, Granberg, & Mowery, 2001) that can draw women further into political life. Indeed, the growth of feminist movements demonstrates that women's interest in politics has been on the rise in recent years, especially in the West. If men's interest in politics surpasses women's in highly religious societies, this may lead women's interest in politics to "catch up" as societal religiosity decreases, leading to a decrease in the gender gap. We therefore hypothesize that *countries with lower societal religiosity display smaller gender gaps in political interests (H7a)*.

On the contrary, there are reasons to believe that declines in societal religiosity should have equal, or even more profound, effects on men than on women. Under the traditional gender order, men tend to have higher status than women; consequently, men have more to lose from secularization than women (Connell, 1987; Munsch & Willer, 2012; Willer, Conlon, Rogalin, & Wojnowicz, 2013). This fact has noticeable political consequences, for there is strong evidence that individuals react more swiftly and fiercely to losses than to gains (Jervis, 1992; Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). This suggests that men should have a stronger reaction than women to the destabilization of the gender order produced by a weakened religious order.

For some men, politics may also provide an avenue to restitute men's past prerogatives. From this perspective, as the traditional gender order becomes subject to overt contestation, men are likely to respond politically to counter this threat to their social privilege. In a form of "backlash politics," men may respond to the experience of a loss of power and privilege by attempting to regain that power (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). At the individual level, studies have shown that men (but not women) respond to perceived threats to masculinity by endorsing traditionalist gender views (Weaver & Vescio, 2015; Willer et al., 2013). Men may also act collectively to regain their lost status; over the last three decades, several countries have observed the rise of masculinist movements, which mobilize to defend male privilege and curb the influence of feminism (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Boyd & Sheehy, 2016). Men may, thus, counter the weakening of the old gender doxa instrumentally with political action aimed at reclaiming their old privileges.

For other men, however, a turn to politics may be less an overt effort to recapture their privileges, and more a subtle attempt to reassert their masculinity. Because politics has traditionally been seen as men's realm (Bourdieu, 1991; Fox & Lawless, 2005, 2014; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997), men may see in politics an opportunity to redefine and validate their masculinity, and increase their interest in it accordingly. Politics is not only a site of confrontation, but also one of self-expression (Hillman, 2010; Schuessler, 2000) and social learning (Habermas, 1989); and political participation has been shown to increase life satisfaction (Pacheco & Lange, 2010). Applying these principles to gender relations in less-religious countries, we argue that political participation can help men compensate for the declining certainty about their place in the social order. Because the legitimacy of the gender order is undermined in contexts of low religiosity, men should therefore be particularly likely to develop an interest in politics as a forum in which to voice their emotions and opinions, build personal relationships and reassert their identity—all of which will provide them emotional satisfaction even if they do not regain their traditional gender privileges.

At the same time, women's growing interest in politics may be partially counteracted by tendencies toward system justification among women. According to system-justification theory, a general psychological disposition exists—among the dominated as well as the dominant—to explain and justify the existing state of affairs simply because it exists (Jost & Banaji, 1994). This tendency toward system justification works powerfully through stereotypes, and has been shown to reduce outrage and willingness to protest, even among the politically engaged (Jost et al., 2012). Accordingly, while living in a secular country may encourage some women to develop a stronger interest in politics, we expect this effect to be stronger among men than among women, both because men have incentives to react more strongly to changes to the gender order than women, and because women's interest in politics will continue to be tempered by broader dynamics of system justification. In brief, even if declining societal religiosity increases women's interest in politics, it may increase men's interest in politics to an even greater extent, thereby leading to an increase in the gender gap in political interest. We therefore hypothesize that *countries with lower societal religiosity display stronger gender gaps in political interests (H7b).*

Our theoretical model also has longitudinal implications, because by weakening the gender order within-country decreases in societal religiosity may also shape the gender gap in political interest. A test of this additional expectation has unavoidable limitations because the process of secularization is a truly long-term and multi-century one and longitudinal survey data on levels of religiosity and political interest cover a relatively brief timespan of this process (1990–2014). Yet, as a partial test of the role of secularization in this process, we formulate the hypothesis that *countries with faster decreases in societal religiosity display stronger increases in the gender gap in political interest* (H8).

4 | DATA AND METHODS

4.1 | Data

Our choice of data was governed by two criteria: (a) maximizing geographic scope by including all possible developing countries, and (b) using a reliable indicator of societal religiosity. The Integrated Values Survey (IVS), which combines the European Values Survey and World Values Survey longitudinal files, offers the best compromise to meet these two principles (EVS, 2015; WVS, 2015).[1] This source covers a wider array of developed and developing countries than most other comparative survey programs and includes key variables to measure the religiosity and value orientation of the population. Since this source includes two or more annual surveys for many countries, it provides more country-year data points and leads to a broader generalization less influenced by outlier cases than other sources with only cross-sectional—and not longitudinal—data. The longitudinal aspect of the IVS also allows us to test the prediction that within-country increases in societal religiosity reduce the gender gap in political interest. Our final sample includes about 287,000 individuals, five periods (1990–1993, 1994–1998, 1999–2004, 2005–2008, and 2009–2014), 96 countries, and 245 country-years.

Our dependent variable, interest in politics, comes from a measure which asked, "How interested would you say you are in politics?" Respondents could choose from a standard ordinal scale reading "Very interested," "Somewhat interested," "Not very interested," and "Not at all interested." To facilitate interpretation and ease the computational burden of our models, we collapse these categories and distinguish individuals "very" or "somewhat" interested in politics (coded 1) from those "not very" and "not at all" interested in politics (coded 0). This item has been frequently used in comparative research as a dependent variable (Lee, Lin, & Stevenson, 2015; Prior, 2010; van Deth & Elff, 2004).

Our primary independent variable is a country-level indicator of *societal religiosity*, constructed from individual-level survey data on *the importance of God* in respondents' lives.

we draw on the individual-level IVS questionnaire item that asks "How important is God in your life?", with a response range from 1 ("not important at all") to 10 ("very important"). Based on that indicator, *societal religiosity* represents specifically the average country-year value in this continuous variable, with higher values representing countries with a more religious population. This is a common indicator in the sociology of religion and cultural sociology (Jaime-Castillo et al., 2016; Fischer & Schwartz, 2011; Stark, 2001; Xiao, 2000); it has been available in all IVS considered in this study; and, unlike other factors (such as attendance rates), it is less affected by differences in practice across religious traditions.

Nine other country-level variables address alternative approaches discussed in the literature and provide a set of controls. The role of women's economic autonomy is measured through *female labor force participation*, defined as the percentage of women who are either working or looking for work, and obtained from the IVS itself. Three indicators capture the political approach. *Women in parliament* measures the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women (Coppedge et al., 2016). *Gender quota* is a dichotomous variable that indicates the existence of a statutory obligation to reserve some seats for women in all political parties with representation in the lower chamber in that given country-year (Coppedge et al., 2016). Countries with higher levels of *democratization* also expand opportunities for mobilization to culturally or economically subordinated groups like women (Beer, 2009). We measure democratization using the V-DEM *polyarchy index* that combines freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected officials, and suffrage (Coppedge et al., 2016). To rule out the possibility of spurious causation in the role of societal religiosity, the models control for two dimensions that have proven related to a country's level of religiosity: economic prosperity and the value system (Inglehart & Norris, 2005). Economic prosperity is measured through *GDP* per capita in constant US dollars (World Bank, 2016). *Emancipative values* cover an emphasis on individual autonomy, choice, gender equality and use of voice,[2] and are measured using the index designed by Welzel (2013). Finally, we include variables with the per cent of *Catholic*, *Muslim*, and *Protestant population*, which capture the effects of dominant religious traditions. Due to its right-hand skew, *GDP* per capita has been logged.

We include eleven individual-level variables to minimize the risk that the *female* variable absorbs the effect of socio-structural conditions. Specifically, the multilevel models control for variables that have proven significant in previous research on political engagement or that include substantial gender stratification: *age*, *age*^{2}, *age completed formal education*, *active* in the labor market (employed or unemployed), and *married or cohabitating* (Burns et al., 2001; Coffé, 2013; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman 1997). *Individual religiosity* and *individual emancipative values* represent the individual-level value of the questionnaire item "importance of God" and the index of emancipative values, respectively. These two latter variables ensure that *societal religiosity* and *emancipative values* do not simply capture the compounded individual-level effect of these two dimensions. We also control for individuals' religious denomination (*Catholic*, *Muslim*¸ and *Protestant*, while *Other* is the reference category). Table A1 in the online Appendix includes descriptive statistics of all variables.

4.2 | Methods

Since we have a multi-wave and cross-national dataset, our data are nested in three levels. At the first level, we have individuals; at the second, country-years; and at the third, countries. Given this multilevel structure

and the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, we use logistic multilevel models with three-level nesting. The main advantage of using multilevel models in comparative research is that they account for variance in the response across different levels of analysis and enable us to estimate the effect of aggregate-level variables on individual responses without underestimating the standard errors (Kreft & De Leeuw, 1998; Snijders & Bosker, 2011). We estimate random-slopes models (Snijders & Bosker, 2011) by interacting the gender variable *female* with all relevant country-year variables. To facilitate the interpretation of interaction effects, all continuous country-level variables have been grand-centered (i.e., centered on the average value for the whole sample). We include a random-intercept and a random slope for *female* at the country and country-year levels. This allows us to model variation in the effect of gender as a function of country-year characteristics. The other 11 individual-level variables have fixed effects on the dependent variable. All models include a linear time trend as a fixed effect to rule out the possibility of significant effects that are due merely to common trending between dependent and independent variables.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Cross-national variation in the political interest gender gap

Figure 1 depicts the absolute difference between women and men in political interest in 96 countries. The values were estimated through 245 single-level logit models (each including 10 individual-level control variables) for each country-year. Since values represent the absolute difference between women and men, a negative value indicates that men are on average more likely to be interested in politics than women. For instance, the predicted probabilities of being interested in politics in Brazil in wave 5 are .551 for men and .465 for women. In the United Kingdom, the corresponding probabilities are .500 and .353. Thus, as depicted in Figure 1, the (absolute) gender gaps in that wave in these two countries are −.086 and −.147. Consistent with prior work, men display greater interest in politics in most country-years. The gender gap is negative and significant in 84.49% of all country-years. Moreover, countries differ substantially in the extent of the gender gap. Although regional clustering is not strong, European countries display the largest gender gaps followed in order by Eastern and Southern Asian, African and Latin American countries.

5.2 | Societal religiosity and the political interest gender gap

Can we identify a simple bivariate relationship between societal religiosity and the gender gap in interest in politics, as we predicted above? If that expectation is correct, *societal religiosity* and the absolute *gender gap* (depicted in Figure 1) should have a clear, positive relationship. The first subplot in Figure 2 allows us to assess this. Consistent with *H7b* and contrary to *H7a*, the correlation between *societal religiosity* and the gender gap in political interest is positive and highly significant ($r = .334$, $p < .001$). More secularized countries tend to have bigger gender divides in political interest. To examine the robustness of this finding, we now consider multilevel and multivariate models.

As mentioned above, to predict political interest, we estimate three-level multilevel models with *female* as the only individual-level, random variable, and 10 individual controls as fixed effects. The results are reported in Table 1. Model 1 includes all 11 individual-level covariates. Model 2 adds an interaction term between *female* and *societal religiosity*. Model 3 adds an interaction term between *female* and all 10 country-year variables. After controlling for individual religiosity, emancipative values, age, working status, income, education, marital status, and religious affiliation, Model 1 indicates that, on average, women tend to be less interested in politics than men. In addition, gender has a substantial effect. The probability of being interested in politics is .55 for men to .42 for women. Controlling for multiple socio-structural factors, women are, thus, 33.09% less likely to declare being

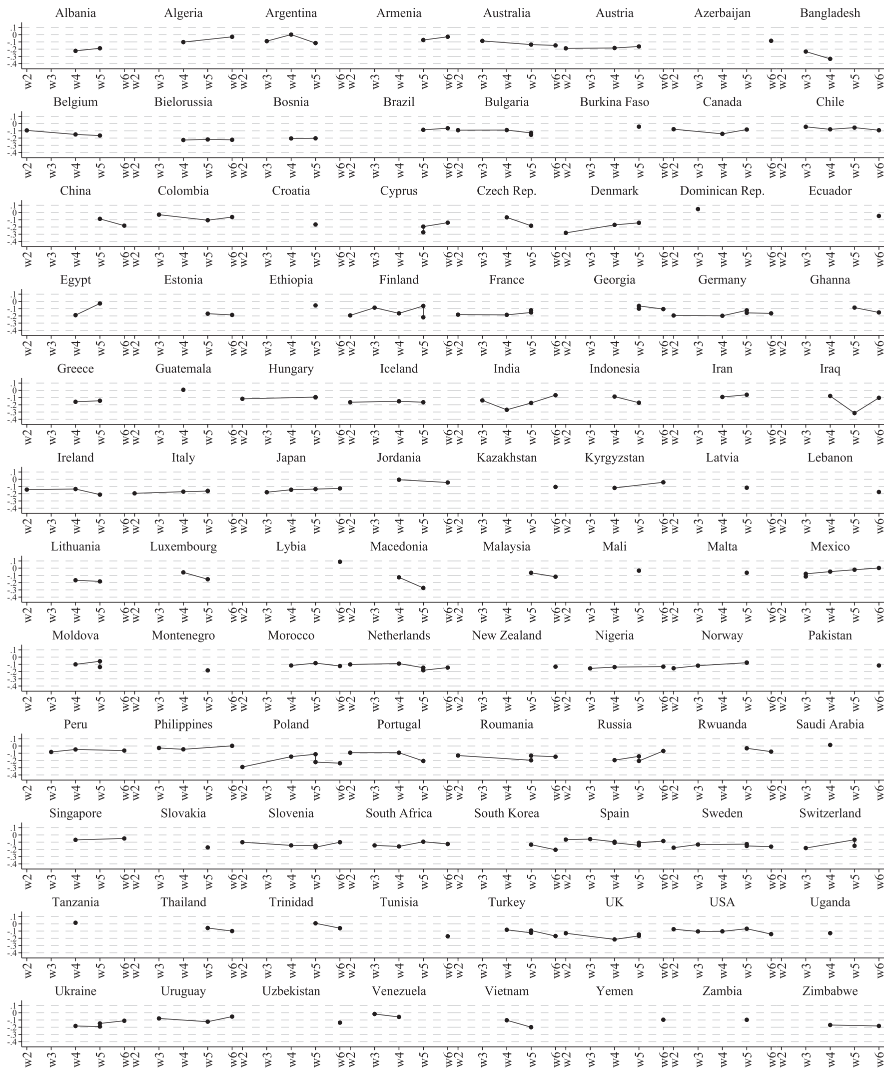

FIGURE 1 Absolute gender gap (women-men) in the average interest in politics in 96 countries, 1990–2014. w2 = 1990–1994, w3 = 1995–1998, w4 = 1999–2004, w5 = 2005–2009, w6 = 2010–2014. A few countries conducted two surveys in the same wave

interested in politics than men. The variance of the *female* effect is also significant, indicating the presence of substantial differences across country-years.

How do levels of societal religiosity shape the effect of gender? Model 2 provides initial indications by interacting *female* with *societal religiosity*. First, *societal religiosity* is negative but only significant at $p < .10$ for men. More importantly, and in line with *H7b* and contrary to *H7a*, the effect of *female* remains negative, and the interaction term *female* × *societal religiosity* is positive and highly significant ($p < .001$). The gender gap, therefore, is related to the country level of religiosity. A close examination of the interaction *female* × *societal religiosity* allows us to ascertain the moderating influence of societal religiosity on the gender gap. Given the interaction term *female* × *societal religiosity* and the negative effect of *societal religiosity*, we can conclude that secularized contexts increase interest in politics among men. In fact, the coefficient of *female* × *societal religiosity* is positive but slightly smaller in absolute terms than that of *societal religiosity*, which indicates that a context of low religiosity increases

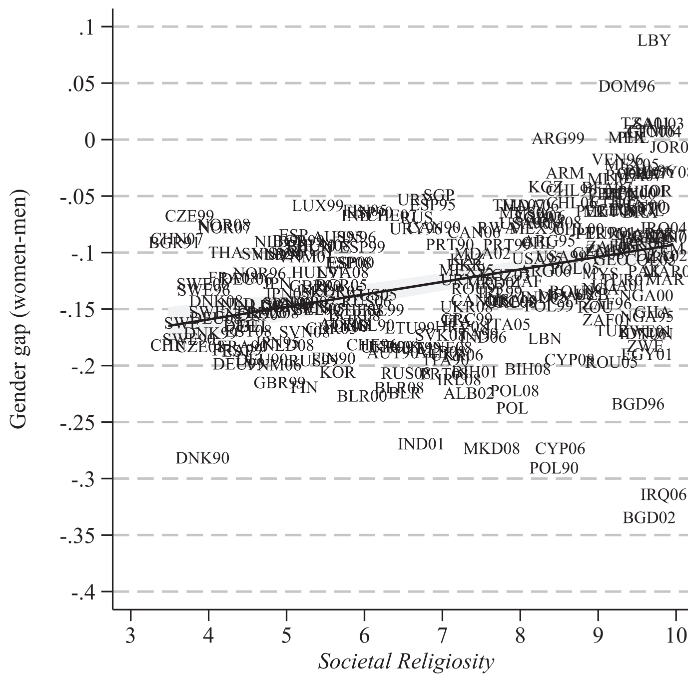

FIGURE 2 Relationship between the gender gap (women-men) in political interest and *societal religiosity*, 1990–2014

political interest among both genders, but less intensely among women than men. The finding that more intensely secularized countries display a larger gender gap in political interest is consistent with our theoretical prediction.

These results could, nevertheless, be affected by considering alternative explanations for the gender gap. Hence, Model 3 in Table 1 includes all 10 country-level variables and their interaction terms with *female*. Regarding individual covariates, Model 3 reveals no substantial differences with respect to Model 2. Women are still significantly less likely to be interested in politics, as are young and older, economically inactive and unemployed, less educated, and less religious individuals, and those who do not hold emancipative values. With respect to the non-interacted country-year level covariates, several findings emerge. In countries with less emancipative values, higher percentage of women in parliament and democratization, lower GDP per capita and lower percentages of Catholics men display stronger interest in politics. More important, once controlling for the other country-level variables, low societal religiosity strongly increases men's political interest.

Regarding the cross-level interactions in Model 3, which address the central objective of our paper—that is, identifying the determinants of the gender gap in political interest—after controlling for all other factors, *female × societal religiosity* remains positive and highly significant ($p < .001$). This is consistent with *H7b*. In addition, *female × emancipative values* at country-year level is positive and highly significant. Yet, as we show below, the moderating impact of emancipative values on male and female political interest is incompatible with Welzel's (2013) theory. Moreover, contrary to *H1*, *H2*, *H3*, *H4*, and *H5*, the level of female labor force participation, prosperity, percentage of women in Parliament, presence of political gender quotas and the percentage of Protestant population do not affect the gender gap in political interest, whereas these factors were found significant in previous work and turn nonsignificant in our study, this could be due to the fact that (unlike some previous work) our dependent variable measures political interest specifically and our study covers a larger number of countries and time points than previous research.

Although Model 3 clearly indicates that the gender gap increases under conditions of lower societal religiosity and average emancipative values, it does not in itself help identify how substantive the effects of emancipative

TABLE 1 Multilevel logit models predicting interest in politics in 96 countries, 1990–2014

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Individual level variables						
Female	−.555***	(.026)	−.569***	(.024)	−.815***	(.226)
Age	.024***	(.001)	.024***	(.001)	.024***	(.001)
Age^2	−.000***	(.000)	−.000***	(.000)	−.000***	(.000)
Age finished formal education	.033***	(.001)	.033***	(.001)	.033***	(.001)
Married or cohabitating	.104***	(.009)	.104***	(.009)	.104***	(.009)
Active (empl. or unemp.)	.035***	(.010)	.036***	(.010)	.036***	(.010)
Individual religiosity	.018***	(.002)	.019***	(.002)	.019***	(.002)
Emancipative values	1.497***	(.027)	1.496***	(.027)	1.502***	(.027)
Catholic	.005	(.014)	.005	(.014)	.009	(.014)
Protestant	.044**	(.016)	.044**	(.016)	.047**	(.016)
Muslim	.075***	(.022)	.077***	(.022)	.072**	(.022)
Year	−.006†	(.004)	−.006†	(.004)	−.010*	(.004)
Constant	−1.945***	(.110)	−1.935***	(.110)	−.521	(.472)
Country-year level variables						
Societal religiosity			−.054†	(.027)	−.122***	(.033)
Emancipative values					−1.214*	(.594)
Female labor force					−.020	(.293)
Women in parliament					.011*	(.005)
Gender quota parliament					−.088	(.086)
Democratization					−.181	(.254)
GDP per capita log					−.126*	(.051)
Percent Catholic					−.005**	(.002)
Per cent Protestant					−.003†	(.002)
Per cent Muslim					.000	(.002)
Cross-level interactions						
Female × Societal religiosity			.051***	(.012)	.075***	(.016)
Female × Emancipative values					.885**	(.331)
Female × Female labor force					−.278†	(.154)
Female × Women parliament					−.001	(.002)
Female × Gender quota parl.					.052	(.047)
Female × Democratization					−.359**	(.128)
Female × GDP per capita log					.029	(.024)
Female × Per cent Catholic					−.000	(.001)
Female × Per cent Protestant					.001	(.001)
Female × Per cent Muslim					−.002*	(.001)
Random effects - level 3						

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Variance (Female)	.206	(.024)	.186	(.023)	.162	(.023)
Variance (Constant)	.539	(.047)	.535	(.047)	.423	(.041)
Random effects—Level 2						
Variance (Female)	.150	(.015)	.147	(.015)	.147	(.015)
Variance (Constant)	.311	(.020)	.310	(.020)	.300	(.019)
Observations	287,072		287,072		287,072	
Country-years	245		245		245	
Countries	96		96		96	
Log-likelihood	−181730.11		−181719.68		−181686.03	

Notes: Standard errors are in brackets.
$^{\dagger}p < .1$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

values and societal religiosity are on the political interest of men and women. To clarify, we estimate predicted probabilities for each gender at different levels of societal religiosity and average emancipative values with average values in all other country-level variables. Figure 3 depicts the results of this exercise. Societal religiosity reduces the gender gap, because it makes men's political interest decrease faster than that of women. Based on Model 3, the probability of being interested in politics for men goes from .66 at two standard deviations below the average level of societal religiosity to .43 at two standard deviations above the average, while the probabilities of women decrease far less intensely with the level of societal religiosity; considering the same reference points of men, it goes from .45 to .36. In other words, contexts of weaker societal religiosity foster men's interest in politics more than women.

A cursory reading of Model 3 may suggest that the effect of *emancipative values* is consistent with the theory of Welzel (2013). Yet, Figure 3 shows that *emancipative values* moderates the gender gap through a similar pattern as societal religiosity: reducing political interest among both genders but more among men than women. These two latter elements are clearly inconsistent with Welzel's theory that predicts a generalized increase of political interest, which is particularly intense among women. *H6* if thus not supported. Also important, a comparison of the two subplots in Figure 3 makes clear that *societal religiosity* has a stronger moderating impact on *female* than average *emancipative values*. This means that *societal religiosity* is the stronger factor shaping the gender gap in political interest.

5.3 | Sensitivity analyses

To assess the robustness of these findings, we conduct a series of additional sensitivity analyses. First, we use different specifications of our models and alternative measure of *societal religiosity* in Table A2 in the online Appendix, yielding estimates consistent with the findings reported so far. Model 1 in Table A2 disentangles the longitudinal and cross-national effects in the previous multilevel models (Fairbrother, 2014) by using two alternative variables: *mean societal religiosity* measures the average level of societal religiosity of each country for the period under study; and *change in societal religiosity* measures changes in societal religiosity within each country by subtracting the country average from each year's value. This Model shows that the gender gap is larger in secular countries but, at the same time, the gender gap declines when *societal religiosity* increases in a given country (although this effect is significant at the 10% level). This evidence is consistent with *H8*. Model 2 replicates the analysis utilizing an alternative indicator of societal religiosity: the country-year proportion of respondents that

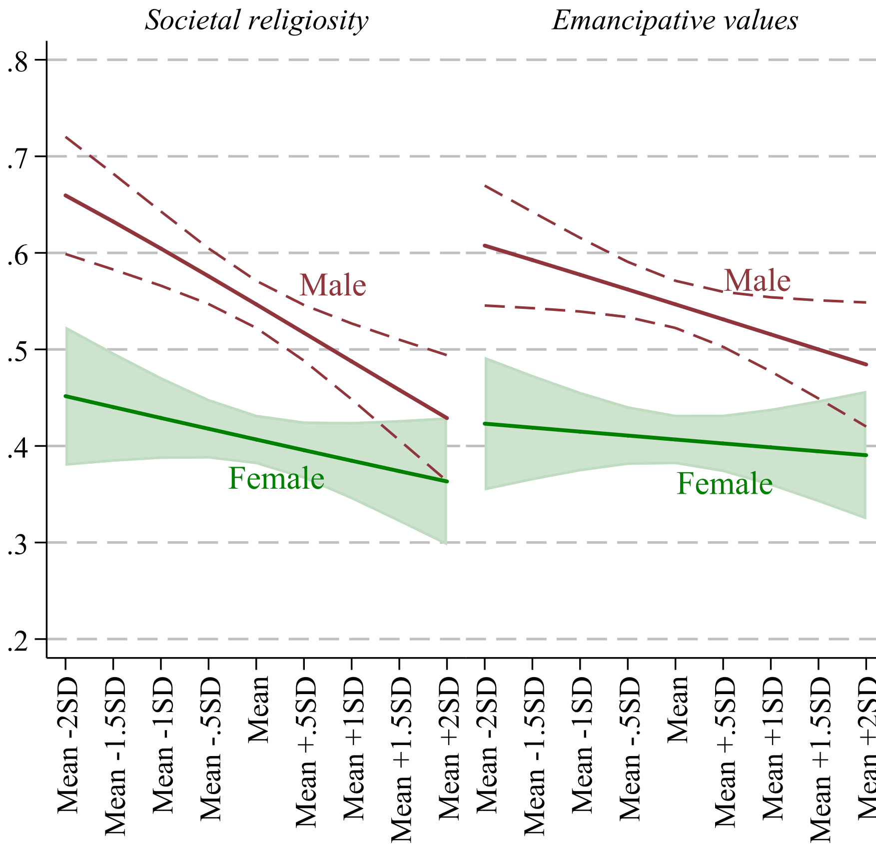

FIGURE 3 Probability of being interested in politics by gender

self-define as a religious person. Using this alternative indicator, the gender gap in political interest also declines with the level of societal religiosity.

Second, Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2012) and Fraile and Gómez (2017) argue that inclusive political institutions and lower general levels of gender inequality reduce the gender gap in political interest, respectively. Following their reasoning, we consider the role of the standard index of electoral systems' relative disproportionality (Gallagher, 2017) and the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) constructed by the World Economic Forum (2014). More proportional electoral systems can be considered more inclusive and "provide incentives for political parties to mobilize women, an 'undertapped market'" (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer, 2012, p. 18). Moreover, the GGGI that is "is one of the best-known measures of national gender inequality" (Stoet & Geary, 2019, p. 1) and covers most countries worldwide. Results are displayed in Models 2 of Tables A3 and A4, which due to data limitations in these latter two variables, only control for the two factors proven to shape the gender gap: societal religiosity and societal emancipative values. Interestingly, neither electoral disproportionality nor the GGGI has a significant effect on political interest for either women or men. More importantly, after introducing these additional controls, the effect of *societal religiosity* on political interest continues to be highly significant and strongly negative for men and significantly less for women.

Third, to ensure our findings are robust to possible variation in how we measure religiosity, we re-estimate our models including a measure of religious practice (percent of individuals who pray) instead of our salience-based measure of societal religiosity. Results, displayed in Models 1 and 2 in Table A5, indicate that the gender gap increases in context of less religious practice, which is consistent with our argument. Further, to ensure our findings

are not being driven by variations across religious denomination, we add to the original model a triple interaction between gender, societal religiosity, and religious denomination. Results shown in Model 3 in Table A5 indicate that there are no differences between religious denomination in the effect of societal religiosity, since the interaction between gender and societal religiosity remains significant and in the expect direction, but none of the triple interactions with religious denomination are significant.

Fourth, to ensure that our indicator of societal religiosity is not simply capturing the effect of institutional religiosity (Dobbelaere, 2003), we replicate the main model (Model 3, Table 1) with an indicator for the degree of church-state integration. This additional variable—*institutional religiosity*—is drawn from Fox's (2013) Religion and State dataset, and represents an index measuring 52 dimensions of state legislation or programs that support religious institutions, laws, or precepts (Table A6). Controlling for *institutional religiosity* does not alter our main findings: *societal religiosity* continues to have a strong negative effect for men and the interaction *female* × *societal religiosity* remains positive and significant.[3]

6 | DISCUSSION

Four main findings emerge from our analysis. First, consistent with previous work, the gender gap proves highly variable across countries and periods. Men are, on average, substantially more likely to be interested in politics, and, in most country-years, this difference is statistically significant. Yet, this gender gap is far from cross-nationally homogeneous. European countries display the largest gap, followed by Asian, African, and Latin American countries. Cross-national variation is, in fact, so intense that in many African and Latin American countries, men are not significantly more interested in politics than women.

Second, this gender gap proves unrelated to central dimensions of the economic and political context. Women–men differences in political interest are not consistently larger in more developed countries or in countries with higher female labor force participation. This latter finding is particularly relevant because it challenges the common expectation in feminist theory that women's employment and having an autonomous income contributes to female interest in politics by fostering their economic empowerment and decision-making autonomy. Further, the presence of women in legislative positions, the existence of gender quotas in Parliament, and the level of democratization do not significantly reduce the gap in interest in politics between men and women.

The dominant religious tradition in the country—another factor commonly stressed in the literature—does not predict this political gender gap, either. Contrary to the expectation of Inglehart and Norris that "the *type* of religion matters for beliefs about gender equality far more than the *strength* of religion" (2005, pp. 67–68; see also Inglehart, 1981), women and men do not differ significantly more in political interest in Catholic- or Muslim-majority countries. This suggests that, although the type of religion may matter for other kinds of attitudinal gender gaps, it does not appear to affect the gap in political interest.

Third, unlike economic, political, and religious-tradition factors, the national value structure does affect the gender gap in political interest. Countries with more emancipative value structures have smaller gender gaps. This robust effect holds even when we disentangle the cross-national and longitudinal dimensions of changes in this set of values. Countries that prioritize individual autonomy, choice, and self-expression display smaller differences between men and women in political interest. Yet, the concrete mechanism leading to this diminishing gap is inconsistent with central tenets of Inglehart and Welzel's theory of value modernization (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2013). Rather than reducing the gap by *spurring women's interest* in politics, as their theory predicts, generalized emancipative values actually appear to reduce the gap by *diminishing men's interest* in politics. This unexpected result may be related to the fact that, in many countries, engagement in formal politics and information gathering regarding policy debates is a low priority for most individuals.

Fourth, another cultural dimension—the overall level of religiosity—both has a robust impact on the political interest gender gap and produces the expected pattern for each gender. In less religious societies, women and men diverge

more in their level of political interest. This divergence occurs, moreover, because men's interest in politics grows substantially more than women's interest. Additional analyses discussed above indicate the robustness of this finding.

Several caveats apply. As in any other macro-level analysis, omitted variable biases may affect the results. Hence, we cannot state categorically that societal religiosity has causal effects. In addition, this study reports several unexpected findings. Contrary to Welzel's (2013) theoretical model, the gender gap in political interest declines with emancipative values mainly because of changes in men's political interest. One possible explanation is that in more gender-egalitarian normative contexts, men do not perceive the political arena as a site of masculine privilege anymore and withdraw from political engagement. Also contrary to previous work, higher rates of female labor force participation do not reduce the gender gap in political interest, although previous work has considered mostly developed countries, and we need more research on the meaning women attach to paid employment in developing countries.

That being said, these results are consistent with our theoretical model, which posits that in less religious contexts, religion is less capable of sustaining the taken-for-grantedness of the social world, and in particular the gender order. According to our theory, this weakened role of religion, therefore, opens social structures to contestation, spurring interest in politics. Men's interest in politics, however, grows faster than women's, for two reasons. First, because in secular societies the religious order cannot uphold hegemonic masculinity, men will be inclined to turn to the traditionally masculine arena of politics as a space where they can express their views and reassert their masculinity. Second, in less religious societies, the political realm provides men with a transformative institutional site to regain their lost privileges. Through this process, consequently, living in a country with weakened religiosity elicits a stronger political response from men than women.

Future research could build on the findings documented in this study by continuing to explore the cultural and political impact of societal religiosity. In this paper, we argue that in secular societies hegemonic masculinity faces mounting challenges, disproportionately increasing men's interest in politics and expanding the preexisting gender gap in political interest. Additional research could test the mechanisms implicit in the theoretical model presented above. The argument of this study could also be extended to the relationship between other persistent relations of domination commonly sustained by orthodox religious doctrines and differences in political behavior. The income hierarchy is one of them. As it does with hegemonic masculinity, religious orthodoxy has also been used to legitimate some degree of income inequality, reducing high-income groups' need to validate and justify their prosperity. But once religiosity has lost part of its cultural influence, and its doctrine does not suffice to legitimate economic inequalities, higher- and lower-income groups may differ more intensely in their support for redistributive policies. This suggests that a systematic focus on levels of societal religiosity provides a promising avenue to account for other persistent comparative puzzles like the substantial cross-national variation on how individual income structures political attitudes and behavior. Further research could also examine if institutional and societal religiosity influence attitudinal and behavioral gaps similarly.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in WVS (2015) and EVS (2015) at https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/previous-surveys-1981-2008/integrated-values-surveys-1981-2014/.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Emancipative orientations more validly approximate collective and individual value systems than self-expression orientations (Welzel, 2013).

[2] The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in WVS (2015) and EVS (2015) at https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/methodology-data-documentation/previous-surveys-1981-2008/integrated-values-surveys-1981-2014/.

[3] Table A6 reports that for men the degree of state-church integration measured through *institutional religiosity* does not affect interest in politics. It also shows that the gender gap in political interest increases with the level of *institutional religiosity*. In line with prior research that has demonstrated an inconsistent relationship between societal and institutional religiosity (cf. Fox & Tabory, 2008; Stolz, 2018; Stolz & Chaves, 2017), in the database constructed for this study *institutional religiosity* and *societal religiosity* are only loosely related (r = .22, p < .05). This may reflect the fact that governments that preserve state–church integration do not mechanically codify the precepts of the dominant religious doctrine into law, but instead only institutionalize a few of those precepts. In so doing, they may paradoxically undermine cultural pressures stemming from the religious moral community (Stopler, 2017).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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