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Partisanship and the Gender Pay Gap in Local Government

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ABSTRACT

Partisanship may play a part in shaping gender equality within public organizations, especially in local governments, which are often subject to direct political control. Using a Regression Discontinuity (RD) Design, we examine the influence of partisanship on gender equality within government by analyzing whether right-wing party control is related to the gender pay gap among all employees in English local governments. We also investigate whether it is related to gender representation among the senior managers in those governments. Our RD estimates reveal that right-wing controlled local governments have a larger gender pay gap and fewer women in senior management than in governments controlled by other political parties.

1 | Introduction

Gender equality is one of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Esquivel and Sweetman 2016) and is a major focus of public policy and political debate in countries across the globe (England et al. 2020; Grown and Valodia 2010). However, meaningful progress on gender equality within society, politics and the economy remains elusive (UN Women 2022). In particular, international institutions have raised the alarm about the persistent gap between male and female rates of pay, which is deemed to cost the global economy huge amounts of lost productivity and additional welfare payments every year (International Labour Organization 2019). A desire to reap the "gender dividend" by equalizing men and women's pay has thus given rise to an array of policies for narrowing the gender pay gap (GPG) in the public, private and nonprofit organizations in which most people are employed (OECD 2022). Within this context, government is often held to an especially high standard because of its purported status as a "model employer" expected to lead the way in addressing issues relating to employment equity (Villadsen and Wulff 2018). However, given the partisan nature of much of the debate around gender equality and gender pay gaps (see Lang et al. 2022; Verloo 2018), surprisingly little scholarly attention has so far been paid to partisanship and pay within government.

Political scientists have long been interested in the representation of women in government (see Bishu and Kennedy 2020; Hooker and Guy 2022), and there is now growing interest in the politics of gender equality within government (Alberti et al. 2022; Curtin et al. 2023; Meier and Funk 2017). There is growing evidence of partisan effects on an array of different policy outcomes (see Marshall 2024), including the implementation of policies advancing women's interests (Carozzi and Gago 2023) and the GPG within the wider economy served by governments (Kuk and Hajnal 2021). However, comparatively little is known about the impact of partisanship on gendered outcomes within government (though see Ribeiro et al. forthcoming). In this paper, we use archival data from multiple sources to analyze the relationship between right-wing party control and the GPG and the representation of women among the senior echelons of management in a large sample of democratically-elected local governments in England. Our main contribution is thus to identify how partisanship can potentially shape the implementation of gender equality policies within government.

The influence of partisanship on local policy has long been studied by political scientists in the US (Anzia 2021) and in Western Europe (Bel and Fageda 2017). A growing literature utilizing quasi-experimental research designs (e.g. Ferreira and Gyourko 2009; Gerber and Hopkins 2011; Gouvêa and

Girardi 2021), now reveals an ever more nuanced pattern of partisan influence on the size of municipal government, local spending priorities and taxation policies. However, to date, this literature has largely focused on the relationship between partisanship and fiscal policies related to the traditional economic interests of different social groups. We seek to build on the emerging quasi-experimental research dealing with partisanship and social policies (e.g. de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2025; Schmutz and Verdugo 2023) by addressing the gendered policy issue of pay equity among female and male government employees. Specifically, we employ a RDD approach to estimate the GPG among all employees and the presence of senior female managers in a large sample of English local governments between 2017 and 2021.

Because political parties at the local level in the UK largely mirror those found at the national level, we can identify ruling parties with distinctive partisan commitments that might influence relevant policy outcomes (Anzia 2021). Hence, to analyze the potential for partisanship to affect gender equality within government, we apply a RD approach that focuses on local governments controlled by the Conservative Party (the main right-wing political party in the UK). We evaluate the impact of Conservative party control on gender equality by analyzing variations in the mean and median GPG for all the people employed by local governments and the percentage of women within the upper salary quartile within each local government. Our analysis suggests that there is a larger GPG among employees in right-wing controlled local governments than within those controlled by other political parties, and that there is also a lower proportion of women in the upper salary quartile. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of our findings.

2 | Partisanship and Gender Equality Policies

In the wake of feminist political action to assert women's rights from the 1960s onwards, most countries have observed improvements on some measures of gender equality (Dilli et al. 2019). These developments have been, in part, the product of gender policy changes and have also been accompanied by a liberalization of popular attitudes towards women's rights among many people (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Kaplan 2012). However, government attention to gender equality issues continues to vary considerably across and within countries, often along partisan lines. Indeed, partisan theorists now point towards gender equality as one of the most important emerging cleavages associated with the partisan realignment taking place in Western democracies (Beramendi et al. 2015; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

As attitudes towards gender equality within different segments of society continue to evolve, so too have partisan preferences for policies which can influence gender outcomes. In particular, while there is growing recognition that gender regimes, such as the male breadwinner/female carer model, affect gender equality (Aisenbrey and Fasang 2017; Chanfreau 2023), some conservative and right-wing commentators still contend that women's less advantaged position within the workforce reflects their personal

choices, rather than systematic discrimination or exclusion (Baumann 2017; Hakim 2004). As such, gender equality represents a critical case for assessing the apparent partisan realignment of right-wing parties around laissez-faire economics and conservative social values (Häusermann et al. 2013).

2.1 | Partisan Theory and Party Realignment

According to partisan theory, political parties are "representatives of [certain] social constituencies" and their ideological commitments are tailored to the perceived interests and values of those constituencies (Häusermann et al. 2013, 220). From this perspective, ruling parties implement policies intended to advance the goals of key stakeholder groups within their social constituencies. Traditionally, ruling parties introduced policies that favor the economic interests of their main stakeholders, such as trade unions in the case of left-wing parties, and businesses in the case of right-wing parties (Hibbs 1992). In recent years, however, large-scale party realignment has meant that partisan politics now encompasses the social concerns of new constituent groups, as well as the economic interests associated with the core voter base for right and left-wing parties (Häusermann et al. 2013).

In the wake of realignment, an emphasis on conservative values has proven a particularly effective way for right-wing parties to attract support from working-class voters, especially older, less-educated white men. By contrast, an emphasis on liberal values has become an important strategy for left-wing and centrist parties aiming to garner middle-class votes, especially those of more-educated professional women (Beramendi et al. 2015; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Given the nationalization of local party systems in many countries (Morgenstern 2017) and the frequent similarities in partisan splits at different levels of government in relation to nationally salient issues (N. Lee et al. 2023), the assumption that partisanship matters thus seems likely to apply to gender equality policies and practices within local government.

For employment policies in general, the preferences of entrepreneurs and businesses averse to state interference in the labor market are likely to be prioritized by right-wing governments, whereas left-wing governments may enact interventionist labor market reforms that appeal to professions and trade unions (Hibbs 1987). For gender equality policies, the economic interests of core constituencies are increasingly likely to be supplemented by the social values of new constituencies. In particular, political scientists increasingly draw attention to the "gender partisan gap" that has emerged in advanced industrial democracies between men with conservative social attitudes who support right-wing political parties and women with more progressive liberal attitudes who support centrist and left-wing parties (Abendschön and Steinmetz 2014; Inglehart and Norris 2000). This gap has in part been driven by increasing party polarization during recent decades (Gillion et al. 2020), but is also reflected in weaker support for feminism among supporters of right-wing political parties when compared with supporters of left-wing and centrist parties (Banaszak and Plutzer 1993; Reingold and Foust 1998). For all of the above reasons, it seems

reasonable to assume that local governments controlled by right-wing political parties will lag behind those controlled by left-wing or centrist parties on issues relating to gender equality.

Left-wing parties are assumed to be in favor of government intervention to address gender equality, especially in terms of class-based equality issues relating to the position of poorer women within the workforce, such as subsidized childcare and equal pension benefits (Htun and Weldon 2010). However, as they have sought to represent the interests of the professional classes within Western democracies, left-wing parties have increasingly demonstrated greater commitment to addressing the status-based issues relating to women's position within society, such as reproductive rights and gender-based violence, previously associated with centrist and liberal parties (Engeli et al. 2012). Alongside these developments, right-wing and conservative political parties appear to trail other parties in their concern for gender equality, deploying both libertarian economic arguments against intervention in the labor market and cultural arguments about the subordinate role of women within society that are antithetical to feminist policies (Verloo 2018). Inevitably, these opposing perspectives on women's rights and status have found voice in partisan debates about the role of the state in addressing gender equality issues.

2.2 | The Partisan Politics of Gender Equality Policies

Scholarship focused on women's rights has identified a connection between the ideological commitments of political parties and the degree to which their policy agendas are responsive to feminism (Wolbrecht 2000). During the past decade or so, this research has begun to tease out the complicated connections between partisanship and substantive representation in more depth. In the US, several studies point towards the overwhelming significance of partisanship at the national level on controversial issues pertaining to women's representation, such as anti-abortion policies (Reingold et al. 2021; Rolfes-Haase and Swers 2022). At the same time, others have suggested that partisanship and the gender of legislators are both important determinants of their support for women's health bills (Pearson and Dancey 2011; Swers 2016).

Research comparing gender equality issue attention in European national governments offers a complex picture of partisanship and substantive representation. Annesley et al. (2015) find that class-based issues garner more support from left-wing than right-wing national political parties in five countries, but that partisanship is unrelated to status-based equality issues. Erzeel and Celis (2016) find that legislators from left-wing political parties in 14 European countries are more likely to speak on behalf of feminist policies at meetings of their national parliamentary political group, but only when their parties are committed to status-based equality issues. Wiß and Wohlgemuth (2023) find that secular right-wing national governments in 16 European countries invest less in family-friendly policies.

At the subnational level, research on partisanship and the substantive representation of women offers consistent evidence of the salience of partisanship for gender equality policy. In Germany, Andronescu and Carnes (2015) and Busemeyer and Seitzl (2018) find that left-wing regional governments are more committed to state-funded early-years childcare than right-wing governments. In Spain, Pérez et al. (2023) find a positive association between left-wing political parties and commitment to an array of gender equality policies at the regional level, while Carozzi and Gago (2023) suggest that Spanish local governments led by center-right mayors are less likely to implement gender-sensitive policies. In Austria, Walenta-Bergmann (2023) finds that right-wing municipalities offer less publicly-funded childcare.

Despite the valuable insights into partisanship and gender equality policy provided by extant studies, there is comparatively little evidence of the role that partisan commitments play in the substantive representation of women's interests on gendered policy outcomes *within* government. Such commitments may be especially salient within English local governments because elections to lead those governments are nearly always contested between national political parties with recognizably different left-wing, right-wing and centrist ideologies: the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, respectively (Copus 2004). Variations in local government control between these different parties have been shown to have important effects on personnel policies (Boyne et al. 2010), including how gender equality policies are interpreted and managed (Conley and Page 2018). Given the nationalization of local party systems and the scope for partisan influence on local public policy (in England and many other countries), research detailing the impact of partisanship on wage differentials within local government can provide much-needed information on the salience of political parties for the prospects of gender equality.

3 | Gender Pay Equality Within Local Government

Western democracies have a long history of introducing organizational-level social and employment policies aimed at re-ordering gender regimes (Figart et al. 2002; Walby 2004). For example, in recent years, gender quotas for elected office, senior public service and for corporate boards have been implemented in many countries (Hughes et al. 2017). These initiatives have increasingly been supplemented with an emphasis on the changes required to reduce pay disparities between men and women (OECD 2022). Within this context, gender pay reporting has become one of the most popular policy tools used to promote gender equality within the workplace (OECD 2023).

Pay transparency policies are guided by the idea that the publication of gendered salary information will motivate employers to improve pay differentials to prove their credentials as a good employer (Cullen and Perez-Truglia 2022). For example, empirical evidence indicates that gender pay reporting may lead to a narrowing of the gap between men's and women's wages (see Bennedsen et al. 2023). Within government, pay disparities have gradually becoming less substantial (Hunt et al. 2020; Lewis et al. 2018), as efforts to manage diversity have been institutionalized (Riccucci 2021) and union membership has

become more important (Kerrissey and Meyers 2022). Furthermore, representative bureaucracy research highlights the connections between female leadership of public services and smaller GPGs (Andrews 2023). In the context of local government, Funk and Molina (2022) show that female mayors are associated with a smaller GPG among Brazilian municipal workers, while Meier and Funk (2017) find that such mayors appoint more senior female managers.

Despite growing evidence of the circumstances that reduce pay inequality in government, concerns continue to be raised about the persistence of significant pay gaps and the "glass ceiling" effects preventing women from progressing to senior public leadership roles (Alkadry and Tower 2006; Bishu and Alkadry 2017; European Public Service Union 2021). Prior research highlights that organizational barriers, such as a reluctance to delegate authority to women (Alkadry and Tower 2011) or gendered perceptions of government work (Choi 2018), may be responsible for persistent gender pay disparities. However, to date, little attention has been paid to the role that partisanship might play in shaping pay inequality within government. Moreover, partisan influences on gender equality within government have not been systematically investigated using the types of quasi-experimental methods typically applied by scholars of partisanship. Since the wider salience of partisanship for gender equality policy and for municipal policy is increasingly being confirmed by political scientists, there is an urgent need to evaluate gendered policy outcomes within government. Local government in England represents an especially apt setting for such a study for several important reasons.

First, English local governments employ a wide-range of professional staff providing services in education, social care, social housing, waste management, land use planning, libraries and culture, as well as an array of administrative support services to the organization as a whole.[1] As such, these employees shape what it means to be a citizen through their interactions with clients and service users, playing a key role in representing societal needs and demands fairly and equitably (Vinzant and Crothers 1998). Second, along with all other public bodies, local governments in England have a statutory duty to "have due regard to" equality of opportunity between women and men—the Public Sector Equality Duty (Fredman 2011)—and are expected to incorporate this within their strategic and operational human resource management (Government Equalities Office (GEO) 2011). Third, UK employers are required by law to ensure that there is equal pay for equal work that is that men and women in the same employment performing equal work must receive equal pay (Hepple 2010), with national policymakers particularly keen to encourage organizational-level practices that can reduce the GPG (GEO 2017).

Despite the comprehensiveness of the legislative and policy architecture surrounding gender equality in England, equal pay discrimination cases have been brought against multiple local governments across the country (Rudgewick 2023). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that interpretation and implementation of gender equality policies varies considerably across local governments (Conley and Page 2018). Given that English local governments have a mixed record on managing gender equality and that partisan effects have been identified in other dimensions of local public policy in the country (Alonso and Andrews 2020), it seems reasonable to anticipate that party control will be related to variations in gender pay inequality. In particular, given the on-going realignment of the Conservative Party around cultural issues (Schonfeld and Winter-Levy 2021), English local governments controlled by the party may be likely to adopt a right-wing posture of hostility towards feminist issues that results in worse outcomes for women. We therefore propose, and test, the following:

Hypothesis 1. *Conservative Party control will be positively related to the gender pay gap in English local governments.*

Hypothesis 2. *Conservative Party control will be negatively related to the proportion of women among the top earners in English local governments.*

4 | Data and Methods

To estimate the potential effect of partisanship on the gender pay gap (GPG) in English local governments, we collected local government-level GPG data using the UK GPG Reporting Data (https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/viewing/download) for the period 2017/2018 to 2021/2022. In the UK, the government requires organizations with 250 or more employees to report their GPG data annually, though organizations with less than 250 employees may report GPG data voluntarily.[2] This initiative was introduced in 2017 to increase transparency and address gender inequality in the workplace (Jones and Kaya 2022).

Some local governments did not report GPG data for the 2019/2020 period because the UK government temporarily suspended the enforcement of reporting deadlines due to the impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, in 2020, England underwent a minor local government reorganization involving the consolidation of four district councils (Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks, and Wycombe) and Buckinghamshire County Council into one single-tier unitary authority, Buckinghamshire Council.[3] This means that we could not get GPG data for the consolidated local governments for the entire period under scrutiny. Hence, after removing missing values for any of the years under study, we gathered information on 249 English local governments for the period 2017/2018 to 2021/2022.

Our sample of local governments serves 81.77% of the English population according to the UK Census (2011). Furthermore, the sample governments were representative of the entire population of English local governments on background characteristics. For instance, independent sample *t*-tests using data from 2017 reveal little difference between the sample and population of governments for: administrative capacity—the resources per capita spent on central services (e.g., finance, internal audit) and management and support services (e.g., human resources, IT); Conservative political control, population density; and, the age, ethnicity and social class diversity of the populations served by the governments (*t*-test results available on request).

4.1 | Dependent Variables

The analysis that we present draws on three GPG measures, namely the mean and median GPG for hourly pay, and the percentage of women in the upper pay quartile in each local government. The GPG in the UK is calculated as the difference between average hourly earnings (excluding overtime) of men and women as a proportion of men's average hourly earnings (excluding overtime). A positive figure indicates a GPG in favor of men, and a negative figure a GPG in favor of women (see https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/ for detailed information on the UK's GPG data).

Table 1 reports summary statistics for the dependent variables of interest for our full sample of English local governments, and also split by "treatment" status, that is if the government is controlled or not by the Conservative Party.

These summary statistics suggest that during the study period the mean and median GPG for our sample of local governments favored men by about 5.66 and 3.77% points respectively, which is a lower GPG than in the wider UK economy (Office for National Statistics 2023). The average percentage of women in the upper pay quartile is about 55.7%, a figure that partly reflects the larger number of women employed in local government than men. Interestingly, these descriptive statistics already point in the direction of our theoretical expectations, with both the mean and median GPG substantially higher in those governments under Conservative political control.[4] Similarly, the percentage of women in the upper pay quartile is slightly lower in Conservative controlled governments.

4.2 | Empirical Strategy

For this study, our identification strategy draws on a distinctive characteristic of the UK's local government electoral system, which is that party control changes discontinuously at 50% of the number of council seats won in the most recent election, giving us the opportunity to implement a Regression Discontinuity (RD) design. The RD design is an empirical method used to estimate potential effects by exploiting a discontinuity in the assignment of "treatment". It is commonly applied in situations where a specific threshold (or cut-off point) determines whether individuals receive the treatment or not; in our case whether a local government is controlled by the Conservative Party or not.

RD designs exploit the availability of precise knowledge about "treatment" eligibility criteria relating to whether an observed

variable (also called the running variable) falls above or below a certain threshold or cut-off point (D. S. Lee and Lemieux 2010). Assuming that the relationship between the running variable (i.e. the percentage of local government seats held by the Conservative Party) and potential confounders varies smoothly at the threshold, the effect of a "treatment" can be approximated by comparing units just below the threshold with those just above the cut-off point.

The English local government context is particularly suitable for implementing a RD approach given the extent to which the local party system is nationalized (Morgenstern 2017). Most local governments are controlled by the two main national-level political parties, the right-wing Conservative Party and the left-wing Labour Party, with a smaller number controlled by the third-largest national political party, the centrist Liberal Democrats. In accordance with the emerging partisan realignment around social values as well as economic interests (Häusermann et al. 2013), we anticipate that the Conservative Party will diverge from both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats on gender equality issues.

Whereas social democratic and centrist political parties share a similar commitment to equal pay legislation and initiatives to promote gender equality in the workplace, conservative parties may be more reluctant to intervene in labor markets to address gender inequalities (Annesley et al. 2015). The embrace of populist patriarchal attitudes towards family values (Norris and Inglehart 2019) and antipathy to the public services in which many women work, and on which many depend, has left the Conservative Party less receptive to gender equality issues than the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats (Milner 2019).

To investigate partisanship and gender equality in local government, formally, we estimate Equation (1). where y_{it} refers to our three GPG dependent measures, that is the mean GPG, median GPG, and percentage of women in the upper pay quartile.

$$Log(y_{it}) = \alpha + \beta T_{it} + \tau(X_{it} - \bar{x}) + \gamma T_{it}(X_{it} - \bar{x}) + \varepsilon_{it} \qquad (1)$$

The estimate of β is our coefficient of interest, which approximates the effect of partisanship on gender equality. Governments are assigned to the treatment status, that is Conservative Party control, if the running variable (X_{it}) is equal to or greater than the cut-off point. In this analysis, the percentage of the seats held by the Conservative Party is the assignment variable, and the "treatment" cut-off is at 50% of the number of seats ($\bar{x} = 50$), hence $T_{it} = 1(X_{it} \geq \bar{x})$. To estimate the RD proposed in

TABLE 1 | Summary statistics: GPG in English local governments.

	All sample			Conservative party control			Non-conservative party control		
	Obs	Mean	S.D.	Obs	Mean	S.D.	Obs	Mean	S.D.
Mean GPG	1245	5.66	7.12	545	7.49	7.06	700	4.24	6.85
Median GPG	1245	3.77	10.99	545	5.55	11.58	700	2.38	10.31
% of women in the upper pay quartile	1244	55.7	9.96	544	54.94	10.35	700	56.29	9.62

Note: S.D. stands for standard deviation. Data retrieved from https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/viewing/download.

Equation (1), we use a non-parametric local linear polynomial approach with a triangular kernel, optimal bandwidth selection and robust confidence intervals as described in Calonico et al. (2014).[5]

Identification in RD approaches relies on the assumption that individuals cannot manipulate the treatment assignment variable or running variable (D. S. Lee and Lemieux 2010). In our context, assignment manipulation is unlikely to happen given the nature of democratic electoral systems where politicians should not be able to directly manipulate voters' choices. To add confidence in our approach, we formally evaluate the assumption of absence of manipulation using Cattaneo et al. 's (2018) test of the null hypothesis of continuity of the running variable around the threshold by means of a local polynomial distribution regression approach. The result of this test indicates that there is no evidence of discontinuity around the threshold (p-value equal to 0.163). Nevertheless, the recent literature on RD designs using close elections as the cut-off point highlights the need to invoke stronger assumptions besides the "continuity assumption"; more specifically, Marshall (2024) argues that to get credible estimates when using a political RD approach, one should assume that "voters would need to be oblivious to, or not vote on the basis of, the characteristic's expected impact on the outcome of interest" (17).

In our case, the assumption that an average voter does not vote based on the pay conditions of the women who provide local public services, is supported by the Theory of Rational Ignorance in voting behavior (Downs 1957). Downs argued that since the likelihood of one vote altering an election outcome is extremely low, voters have little incentive to become fully informed on every issue, leading them to remain ignorant on complex topics like public sector compensation.[6] While local civil servants might be more aware of the GPG within the organizations that they work for, the proportion of the local electorate that they comprise in England is quite small.[7] Furthermore, the Bureau Voting Model indicates that public servants are typically left-wing in political orientation and support increased government spending (Garand et al. 1991). So, even though local civil servants may know about the GPG in their local government, their vote will not be conditioned solely by the GPG, but by their wider ideological beliefs regarding the role of government. Hence, although we cannot formally test whether the assumptions of rational ignorance and bureau voting hold, based on the available theory and evidence, it seems unlikely that the choices of the average voter in England would be related to the GPG in their local government.

4.3 | Control Covariates

The inclusion of control covariates, though not necessary for identification purposes, may help to increase the precision of the RD estimates and might eliminate some of the small sample bias in cases where the number of observations close to the threshold is small (Imbens and Lemieux 2008). To evaluate the robustness of our RD approach when incorporating control covariates, we add the following variables to our "baseline" models: the percentage of women in employment in the area served by each local government (as a share of the female population between 16 and 65 years old); the percentage of women with higher educational levels (3 and above[8]); and the percentage of women in top jobs (managers, professionals, and associate professionals). These data control for the possibility that gender pay inequality reflects the gender composition of the labor market in the areas served by local governments and were taken from the 2011 UK Census. Just pre-treatment characteristics are used because including covariates that might be affected by the treatment may bias RD estimates (Pettersson-Lidbom 2008).

Furthermore, we include a dummy variable equal to one if the local government had a female political leader to control for substantive representation effects attributable to the presence of a woman in a key position of power that is that female representation at elected levels yields benefits for women in the bureaucracy (Meier and Funk 2017). To identify the gender of local government leaders, an initial coding was carried out based on local leadership data reported by Wikipedia,[9] the BBC and local governments themselves, with further checks to establish that the coding aligned with gender-specific names (e.g. John = male; Mary = female). For leaders with gender-ambiguous names, an internet-based search of media reports was used to identify gender-based pronouns used in association with those leaders. Finally, we include a set of year dummies to adjust for potential time shocks, such as the COVID19 pandemic, which might affect patterns of gender equality (Alon et al. 2020).

5 | Results

In this section, we report the results of our empirical modeling. We first present a visualization of our RD approach in Figure 1, which shows RD plots with local linear fits around the threshold (+−10% seats share) for each dependent variable. These plots suggest that partisanship matters in terms of the GPG. First, the plot depicted in Figure 1A shows an upward discontinuity to the right of the cut-off point, implying that in Conservative controlled local governments the mean GPG is slightly higher. Similarly, the RD plot depicted in Figure 1B suggests a positive association between Conservative Party control and the median GPG. The RD plot depicted in Figure 1C shows a downward discontinuity to the right of the threshold (or cut-off) vertical line, indicating that the percentage of women in the upper pay quartile is slightly lower in Conservative governments.

Table 2 provides baseline estimates of the discontinuities displayed in Figure 1. Each column shows estimates, conventional standard errors, and robust 95% confidence intervals for the local linear polynomial approach described in Equation (1), using four different bandwidth selection procedures.[10] The results presented in Table 2 confirm the discontinuities depicted in the RD plots that Conservative Party control is indeed correlated with both a higher mean GPG and median GPG in favor of men, and negatively correlated with the proportion of women in the upper pay quartile. The RD coefficients indicate that the mean GPG appears to be between 3.25 and 4.17% points (p.p.) higher in Conservative controlled local governments, depending on the bandwidth choice, with the estimated effect higher the smaller the bandwidth. According to the UK's Office
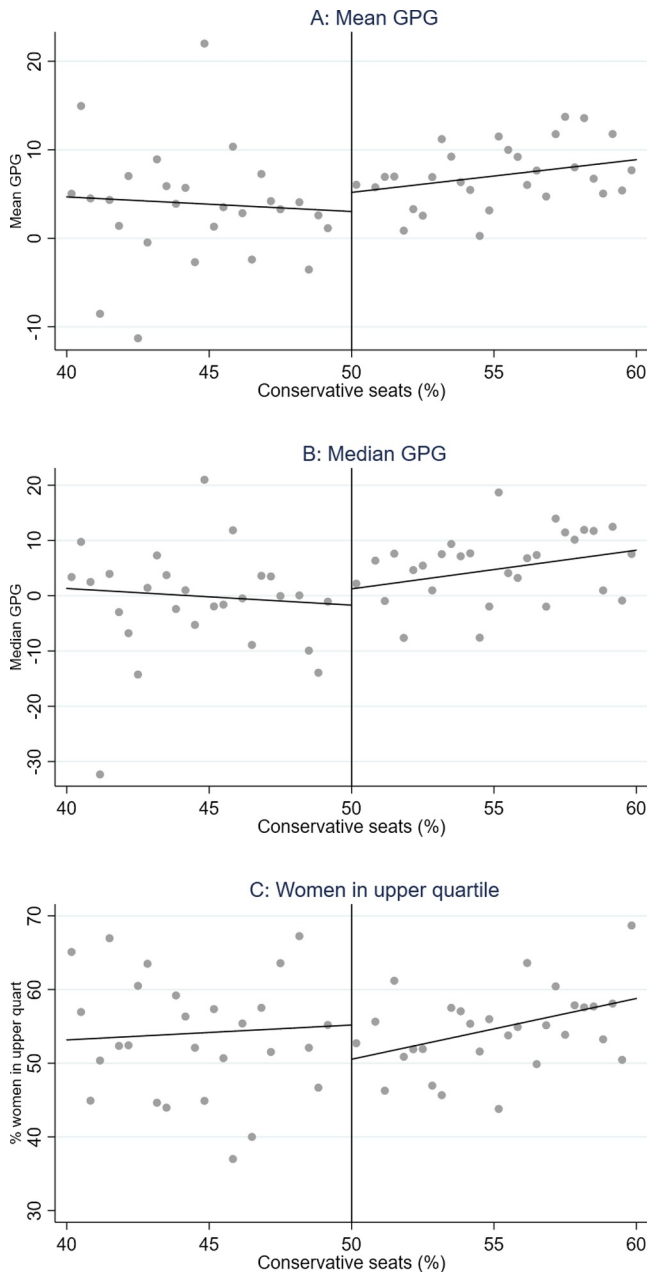
A: Mean GPG

B: Median GPG

C: Women in upper quartile

FIGURE 1 | Regression discontinuity plots. This figure shows standard RD plots for our three GPG measures. Observations are averaged within bins (30). Each plot includes a local linear fit represented by the solid lines. Plots are constructed using the software developed by Calonico et al. (2017).

for National Statistics (Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings), the mean gross weekly earnings of full-time public sector employees in 2021 (end of our study period) was 725.3 British Pounds (BP) per week. Hence, a point estimate of about four pp. would mean an average GPG of about 29 BP per week higher in Conservative controlled governments.

The RD estimates depicted in Table 2, Panel B, also suggest that the median GPG in Conservative controlled governments is higher, with the estimated effect ranging between 5.45 and 7.29 p. p. depending on the specification. Table 2, Panel C, shows the RD estimates for the percentage of women in the upper pay quartile,

which suggests that there are between 4.25 and 5.3 p.p. fewer women in the upper pay quartile in Conservative controlled local governments. There is often a close relationship between political change and managerial turnover in English local government, because a new administration seeks to appoint managers who are more sympathetic to their agenda (Boyne et al. 2010). For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that the proportion of women in the upper pay quartile might vary in local governments controlled by different political parties.

In Table 3, we report RD estimates allowing for covariate adjustment at the local government level. The estimated co-efficients are more pronounced in the models predicting the mean and the median GPG, compared to RD estimates without controls, and the precision of our estimates seems higher. More specifically, the RD estimates now range between 3.8 and 5.2 p. p. for the mean GPG, and between 6.8 and 10.1 p.p. for the median GPG. For the model estimating the effect of partisanship on the percentage of women in the upper pay quartile, the point estimates now range between −4.6 and −4.9 p.p., and the precision of our RD estimates seem to be somewhat higher too.

Finally, it should be noted that, according to the spatial distribution of Conservative seats reported in Figure A1, it seems that there are some regional clusters in terms of support for the Conservative Party. Hence, we have performed an additional robustness test and included regional dummies as adjustment covariates in our RD approaches. These dummies also capture, to some extent, long-standing institutionalized patterns of gender inequality across England (Perrons 1995), which could bias the estimates. The results, reported in Appendix A, Table A1, remain unchanged.

6 | Conclusion

Gender equality is one of the most pressing challenges confronting governments across the world. This challenge is especially important for local governments, which due to their proximity to the citizenry are where issues of representation and democracy are often most keenly felt (Pini and McDonald 2011; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). Our analysis of the ways in which partisanship can impact on the GPG and the representation of women among senior management within English local governments casts valuable light on issues of critical importance for the theory and practice of gender equality.

6.1 | Theoretical Implications

A growing body of scholarship identifies managerial and institutional influences on the potential for the descriptive and substantive representation of women to occur within public organizations (e.g. Grissom et al. 2012; Hooker and Guy 2022; Smith and Monaghan 2013). In particular, representative bureaucracy research has identified the ways in which organizational leaders committed to social equity can improve gender equality outcomes in local governments (Meier and Funk 2017; Funk and Molina 2022). However, comparatively little scholarship addresses the salience of partisan effects for

TABLE 2 | Partisanship and the GPG in English local government: Local polynomial RD estimates.

	Panel A: Mean GPG			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE2}	h_{CER}	h_{CER2}
RD coefficient	3.052*	2.839*	4.155**	4.176**
	(1.454)	(1.503)	(1.813)	(1.828)
Robust 95% CI	[−0.28; 6.64]	[−0.30; 6.38]	[0.34; 8.19]	[0.53; 8.12]
N	1245	1245	1245	1245
N−/N+	168/203	178/170	124/152	127/125
H−/H+	12.26/12.26	12.85/9.96	8.58/8.58	9.00/6.97
	Panel B: Median GPG			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE2}	h_{CER}	h_{CER2}
RD coefficient	5.446*	6.268**	6.859**	7.290**
	(2.798)	(2.723)	(3.427)	(3.393)
Robust 95% CI	[−0.12; 12.89]	[1.00; 13.54]	[0.13; 14.65]	[0.72; 14.95]
N	1245	1245	1245	1245
N−/N+	178/213	168/263	127/164	124/184
H−/H+	12.94/12.94	12.24/15.55	9.06/9.06	8.57/10.89
	Panel C: Women in the upper quartile			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE2}	h_{CER}	h_{CER2}
RD coefficient	−4.910***	−5.300***	−4.258**	−4.295**
	(1.765)	(1.693)	(1.880)	(1.835)
Robust 95% CI	[−9.74; −1.94]	[−10.22; −2.68]	[−8.63; −0.81]	[−8.67; −1.01]
N	1244	1244	1244	1244
N−/N+	136/170	133/208	97/123	88/153
H−/H+	9.80/9.80	9.46/12.61	6.86/6.86	6.62/8.83

Note: RD estimates computed using local linear methods with triangular kernel function. Bias-corrected robust estimators of confidence intervals developed by Calonico et al. (2014). N; Total number of observations. N−/N+; Effective number of observations at both sides of the threshold. H−/H+; Optimal bandwidths at both sides of the threshold. Optimal bandwidth selection relies on two different procedures: mean square error optimal bandwidth selector (h_{MSE} and h_{MSE2}); coverage error rate optimal bandwidth (h_{CER} and h_{CER2}) (see Calonico et al. 2014).

***$p < 0.01$.
**$p < 0.05$.
*$p < 0.10$.

representation within government (though see Ribeiro et al. forthcoming). Recent scholarship utilizing RD designs has suggested that the political ideology of ruling parties matters for social as well as fiscal outcomes at the local level (e.g. de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2025; Schmutz and Verdugo 2023). In this paper, we use a similar design to identify partisan effects on gendered outcomes within government.

Our study reveals that partisan effects within local government may accord with the realignment around conservative social values currently attributed to right-wing political parties (Beramendi et al. 2015; Häusermann et al. 2013). Our results show that Conservative Party run local governments in England pay women less and include fewer women in senior management roles when compared with Labour and Liberal Democrat governments. Given the extent of equality and diversity legislation governing the employment of workers in the public sector in the UK, our analysis represents a particularly stern test of partisan effects. The nontrivial negative political treatment effect on gender disparities in salary that we identify in Conservative Party controlled governments may reflect institutional and societal factors, which are manifested in unconscious bias and perceived

loss of privilege among (some) men (Valian 1999). As such, our study extends theories of partisanship by showing that local elections can generate partisan effects for gender equality within as well as beyond government (Kuk and Hajnal 2021).

6.2 | Policy Implications

In addition to building knowledge about partisanship in government, our evidence of the effects of partisanship on gender-related outcomes has important implications for policy-makers. The finding that right-wing local governments appear to be hostile to gender equality, even when they are aware of the legal and financial risks of this stance points towards strong commitment on their part. Ultimately, the results suggest that additional support or pressure may need to be brought to bear on right-wing governments, if a commitment to gender equality among government employees is to be fully honored.

At the national level, regulatory bodies could pay increased attention to the levels of pay equality and gender representation in more conservative governments and require them to make

TABLE 3 | Partisanship and the GPG in English local government: Local polynomial RD estimates with covariates.

	Panel A: Mean GPG			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}
RD coefficient	3.809***	3.590**	4.686***	5.164***
	(1.398)	(1.468)	(1.704)	(1.810)
Robust 95% CI	[1.03; 7.56]	[0.54; 7.16]	[1.32; 8.60]	[1.57; 9.10]
N	1245	1245	1245	1245
N−/N+	178/210	168/186	125/153	117/136
H−/H+	12.75/12.75	11.97/11.07	8.93/8.93	8.38/7.75
	Panel B: Median GPG			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}
RD coefficient	6.804**	8.298***	9.424***	10.17***
	(2.784)	(2.637)	(3.314)	(3.228)
Robust 95% CI	[1.72; 14.23]	[3.47; 15.66]	[3.18; 16.94]	[4.07; 17.59]
N	1245	1245	1245	1245
N−/N+	168/203	156/291	124/152	110/197
H−/H+	12.28/12.28	11.21/17.05	8.60/8.60	7.85/11.94
	Panel C: Women in the upper quartile			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}
RD coefficient	−4.581***	−4.946***	−4.625***	−4.715***
	(1.728)	(1.673)	(1.793)	(1.782)
Robust 95% CI	[−9.45; −1.75]	[−9.92; −2.41]	[−8.92; −1.40]	[−9.08; −1.58]
N	1244	1244	1244	1244
N−/N+	141/180	136/216	106/128	102/164
H−/H+	10.35/10.35	9.94/12.98	7.25/7.25	6.96/9.09

Note: RD estimates computed using local linear methods with triangular kernel function. Bias-corrected robust estimators of confidence intervals developed by Calonico et al. (2014). N; Total number of observations. N_-/N_+; Effective number of observations at both sides of the threshold. H_-/H_+; Optimal bandwidths at both sides of the threshold. Optimal bandwidth selection relies on four different procedures mean square error optimal bandwidth selector (h_{MSE} and h_{MSE2}); coverage error rate optimal bandwidth (h_{CER} and h_{CER2}) (see Calonico et al. 2014).

***$p < 0.01$.
**$p < 0.05$.

greater investments in "gender-sensitive" management education and training (European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) 2016). Political and bureaucratic leaders within right-wing governments could also be encouraged to access additional support from managers with "gender expertise" (Hoard 2015). More generally, knowledge about how to address pay inequality in local government could be shared via relevant professional networks co-ordinated by municipal representative bodies, such as the Local Government Association in England.

6.3 | Limitations and Future Research

Despite the strengths of its RD design, our study has some limitations, which could be addressed in subsequent studies. In particular, our current dataset does not span sufficient years to analyze temporal trends in salary disparities comprehensively. While we partially adjust for potential time effects by including year dummies in some of our RD models, these adjustment dummies essentially refine the precision of our estimates, and do not allow us to extract any meaningful conclusions about long-term temporal patterns. With more years of data, scholars

could extend our approach by investigating the extent to which changes in the GPG reflect historical trends within different localities. In addition, since most local elections in England occur every 4 years, we do not have enough time periods to analyze whether there were substantial changes in the GPG in-between political cycles. The durability of changes in pay inequality associated with long periods of right-wing political control would be an especially valuable avenue for future research. Our RD approach is local in nature (i.e. estimates partisanship effects around the 50% threshold) focused on majorities in marginal elections rather than the large majorities associated with long-run control of local governments. Difference-in-difference style analyses of Conservative political control with larger panels of data therefore represent a potentially fruitful direction for understanding the long-term trajectory of right-wing partisan effects on gender equality.

As well as addressing long-run effects, future research should also examine whether partisanship affects the pay gap and representation among senior management, for other relevant groups of government employees, such as people of color, people identifying as LGBTQ+ or people with registered disabilities. Studies could also systematically investigate partisan

effects on the connection between descriptive and substantive representation. For example, evidence on the connection between female leaders and employees, and gendered policy outcomes in centrist and left-wing versus right-wing governments would provide vital insights into degree to which ideological commitments are responsible for reproducing or challenging existing gender regimes. Likewise, partisanship and representation research pertaining to the other social groupings listed above could deepen understanding of the extent to which politics influences public service outcomes.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] According to data published by the Local Government Association (*Local government workforce data*), the majority of council employees (74%) are women and there are substantial gender differences in the number of employees in different professional sectors, with women especially prominent in education (76%) and adult social care (79%).

[2] There were just five local authorities with less than 250 employees that reported data for some years. However, since none of them reported data for the entire period under study, they are not included in our sample.

[3] Before consolidation, the reorganized authorities were similar to other two-tier authorities across Southern England, and afterward the new authority was similar to other rural unitary authorities in that part of the country.

[4] In addition to the descriptive statistics, we report in Appendix A, Figure A1 the spatial distribution of the percentage of conservative seats for those English single and lower-tier local authorities included in our sample at the beginning and at the end of our study period (years 2017 and 2021).

[5] A non-parametric approach has a number of advantages over alternatives, such as local parametric polynomial methods. In particular, in the non-parametric approach, the optimal bandwidth selection is based on data driven approximations, avoiding arbitrary bandwidth selections as is the case for parametric approaches. A comprehensive explanation of the advantages of non-parametric over parametric approaches in RDs is found in Cattaneo et al. (2017). See also: Gelman and Imbens (2018).

[6] Substantial empirical evidence demonstrates that voters often lack knowledge about basic policy positions, government functions, and candidate behavior (see, e.g., Bartels 1996; Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lopez de Leon and Rizzi 2014, among others).

[7] According to the Local Government Association, the total local government workforce in England is around 1 million (*Local government workforce data*), while the population over 18 who are eligible to vote in local elections is about 45 million (2021 UK census). Hence, the percentage of potential voters that are employed by local governments is relatively low (2.2%).

[8] According to the UK Census definitions, Level 3 equals to two or more A Levels or equivalent qualifications, while Level 4 or above equals to Higher National Certificate, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor's degree, or post-graduate qualifications.

[9] See Brown (2011) for a discussion of the accuracy and reliability of electoral data published on Wikipedia.

[10] The selection of bandwidths in RD non-parametric analyses is a crucial step, as those bandwidths determine the weight assigned to each observation. To check our results' robustness to alternative bandwidth choices, we report a variety of RD estimates using mean square error (MSE) optimal bandwidths, both one-sided (hMSE) and two-sided (hMSE2), and one-sided and two-sided coverage error rate (CER) optimal bandwidths (hCER and hCER2, respectively). For a detailed explanation of bandwidth selection alternatives see Calonico et al. (2017).

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Appendix A: Supplementary Materials

TABLE A1 | Partisanship and the GPG in English local government: Local polynomial RD estimates including regional dummy variables.

	Panel A: Mean GPG			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}
RD coefficient	3.355**	2.993**	3.967**	4.139**
	(1.336)	(1.395)	(1.595)	(1.651)
Robust 95% CI	[0.57; 6.81]	[0.04; 6.22]	[0.72; 7.58]	[0.82; 7.68]
N	1245	1245	1245	1245
N−/N+	178/212	181/180	125/153	132/125
H−/H+	12.79/12.79	13.01/10.14	8.96/8.96	9.11/7.10
	Panel B: Median GPG			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}
RD coefficient	6.090**	6.848***	7.155**	7.499***
	(2.485)	(2.416)	(2.881)	(2.821)
Robust 95% CI	[1.30; 12.55]	[1.90; 13.14]	[1.53; 13.59]	[1.85; 13.79]
N	1245	1245	1245	1245
N−/N+	181/216	174/263	132/164	124/184
H−/H+	13.00/13.00	12.56/15.51	9.10/9.10	8.79/10.86
	Panel C: Women in the upper quartile			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}
RD coefficient	−5.165***	−5.749***	−5.261***	−4.816**
	(1.793)	(1.786)	(1.886)	(1.883)

(Continues)

	Panel C: Women in the upper quartile			
	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}	h_{MSE}
Robust 95% CI	[−10.19; −2.31]	[−11.04; −2.95]	[−9.78; −1.98]	[−9.47; −1.52]
N	1244	1244	1244	1244
N−/N+	149/184	138/194	108/133	102/142
H−/H+	10.92/10.92	10.14/11.56	7.64/7.64	7.10/8.09

Note: RD estimates computed using local linear methods with triangular kernel function. Bias-corrected robust estimators of confidence intervals developed by Calonico et al. (2014). N; Total number of observations. N_-/N_+; Effective number of observations at both sides of the threshold. H_-/H_+; Optimal bandwidths at both sides of the threshold. Optimal bandwidth selection relies on four different procedures mean square error optimal bandwidth selector (h_{MSE} and h_{MSE2}); coverage error rate optimal bandwidth (h_{CER} and h_{CER2}) (see Calonico et al. 2014).
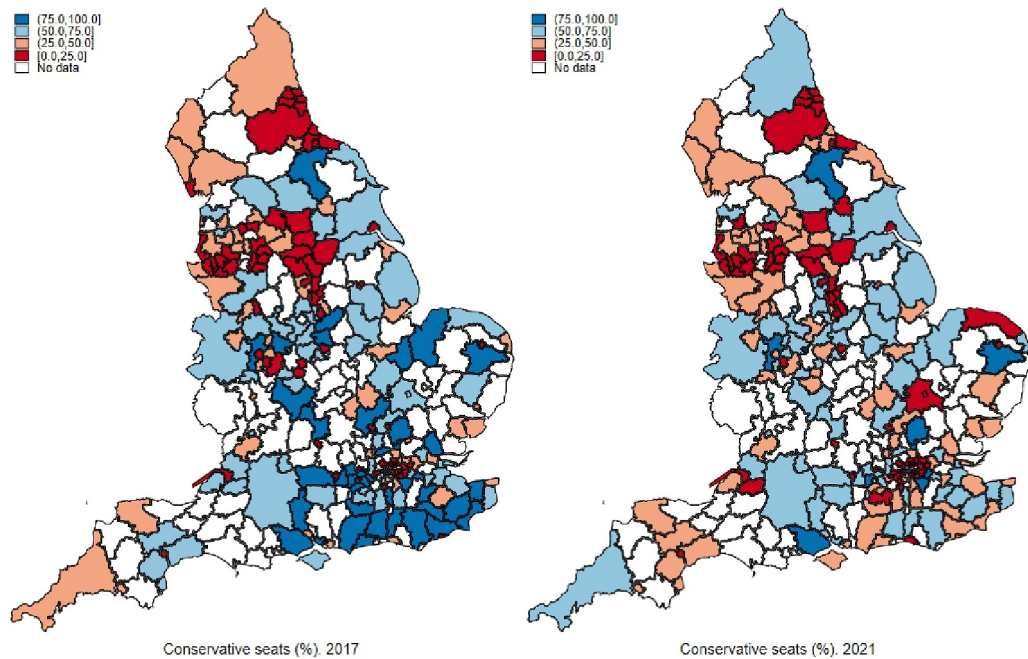***$p < 0.01$.
**$p < 0.05$.

FIGURE A1 | Conservative seats. This figure shows the spatial distribution of conservative seats (in percentage points) for our sample of English single and lower-tier local authorities at the beginning and end of our study period (years 2017 and 2021). Authorities not included in our sample are unshaded.