

Language as Battleground

Gender-Fair Language in Brazil's Legislative Arena (2000–2024)

Background

Increasing politization, symbolic struggles over identity, authority, and social change.

Debate over gender-neutral language divides Germany

Efforts to create gender-neutral forms have sparked a heated debate.

Como disputa sobre linguagem neutra virou guerra cultural no Brasil

Le combat de l'écriture inclusive est une impasse

Pronombres, la nueva batalla del lenguaje inclusivo

Una tendencia fuerte en el mundo se extiende también en la Argentina. A favor: inclusión y cambios en la teoría lingüística.

En contra: ideología en las aulas y palabras vacías que maquillan la verdadera discriminación.

HEADLINES

Italy bans gender-neutral symbols in schools in latest culture clash

(Brazilian) Portuguese

Grammatical gender agreement required between nouns and all their modifiers.

Innovations: elu/elus, ilu/ilus, éle/éles, etc. , and use of -x, -@, and -e (e.g., todxs, tod@s and todes, 'all' when referring to people) (Carvalho, 2024; Silva & Carvalho, 2024; Schwindt, 2020).

Todos ('all' men, also used as generic)

Todas ('all' only women)

Todos e todas ('all', men and women)

Todas as pessoas ('all', independent of gender)

Todes ('all', gender neutral or non-binary)

Todas, todes e todos ('all', including binary and non-binary)

Earlier research

- Focus on how arguments mobilized (mainly) in Europe and North America
(e.g. Baran, 2022; Bogetić, 2023; Bonnin & Coronel, 2021; Burnett & Pozniak, 2021; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Hergenhan et al., 2020; Pfalzgraf, 2024)
- Brazilian studies focus on ideological dimensions of oppositional discourse
(e.g. Barbosa Filho, 2022; Borba, 2022; Brevilheri et al., 2022; Butturi Junior et al., 2022; Frank & Coelho, 2024; Freitag, 2023; Gonçalves & Tumelero, 2023; Melo & Paraíso, 2024; Noronha, 2023; De Souza Júnior, 2022; Vellasco, 2024)

This study systematically addresses:

- How legislative proposals *justify both support and opposition*
- How these justifications *shift over time and across policy domains*
- How justifications *relate to existing research findings*

Data

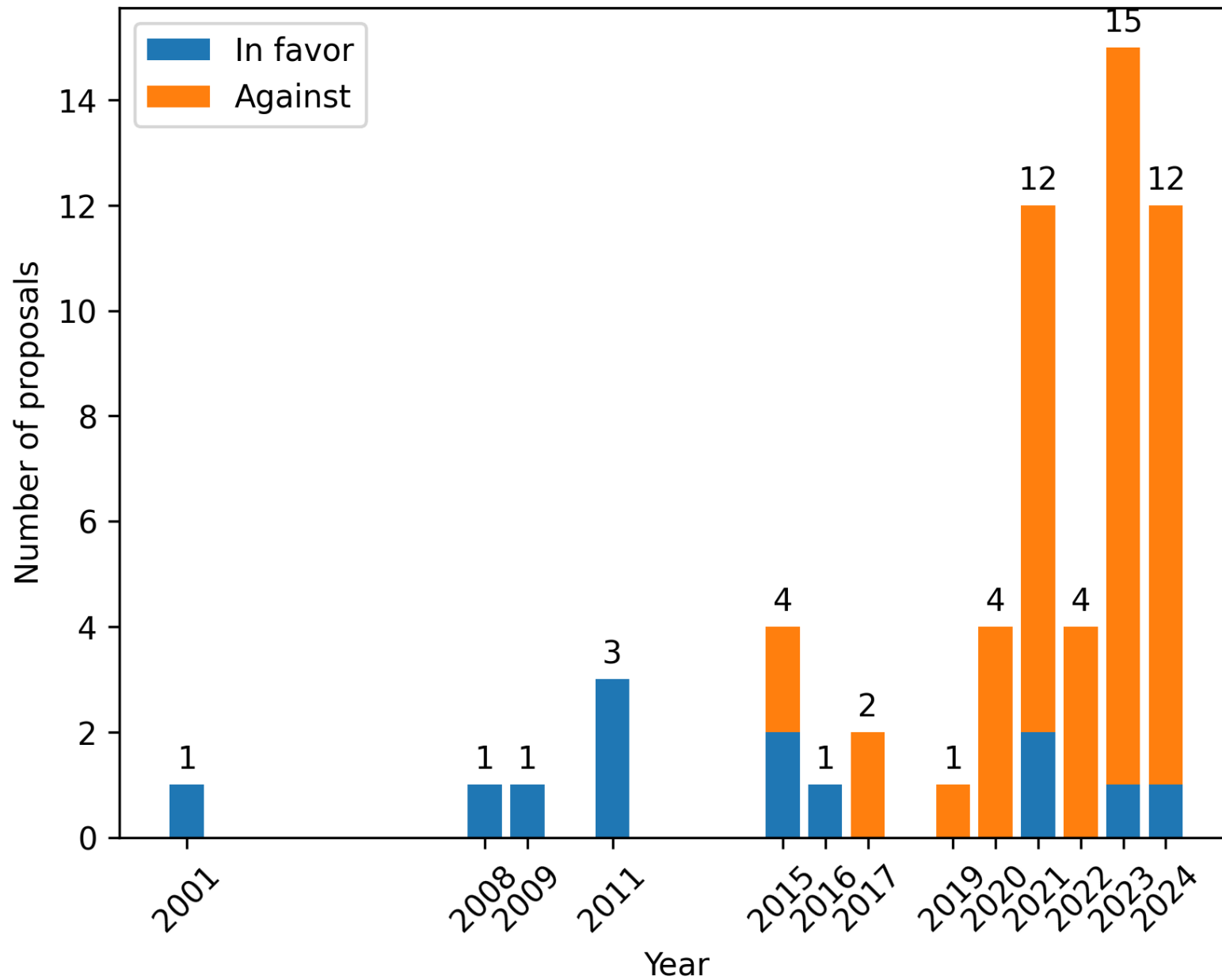
Corpus of **61 federal legislative proposals** (2000–2024)

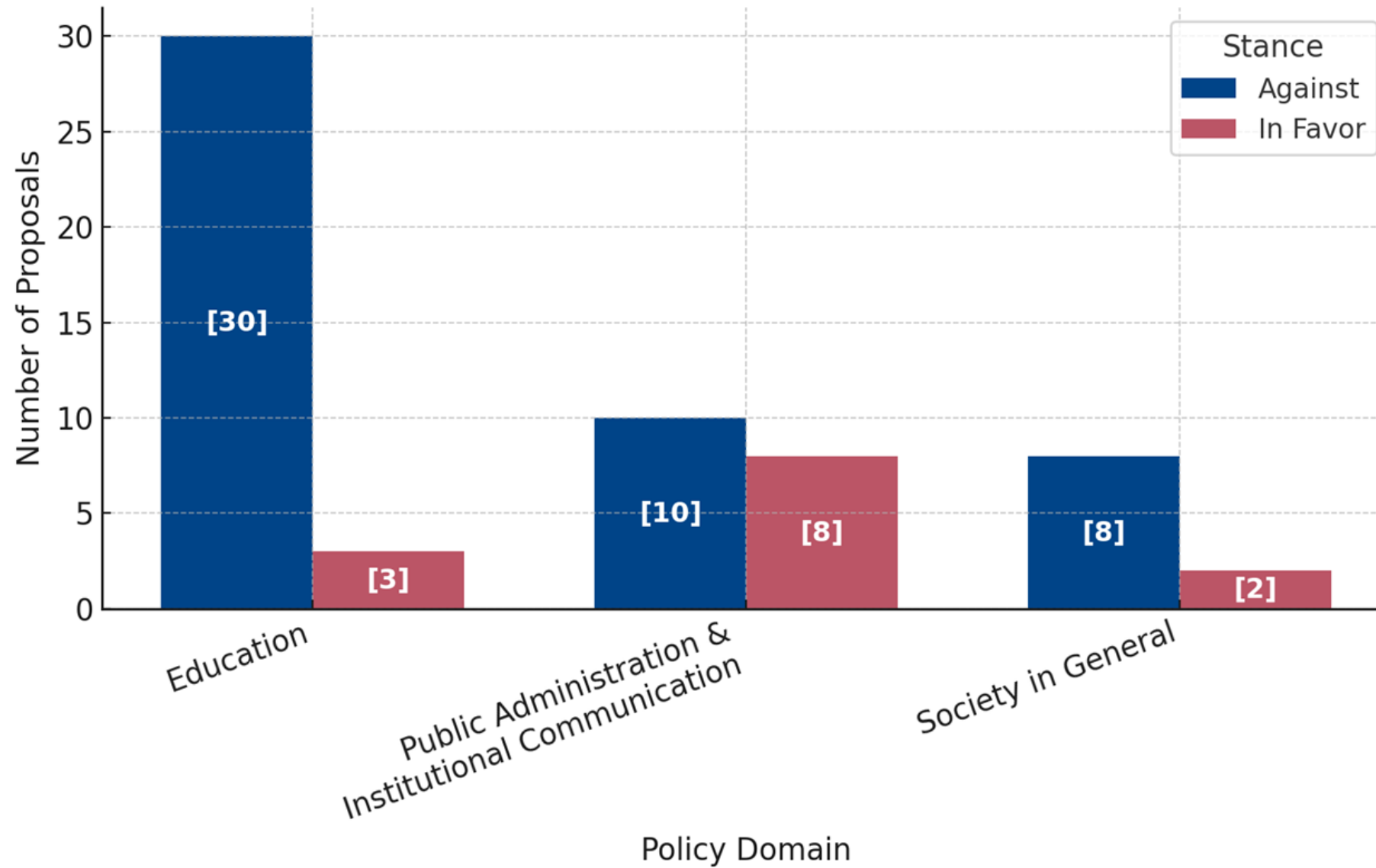
- Proposals mentioning *inclusive or gender-neutral language*
- Submitted by 18 political parties in 24 of 27 states

Policy areas

- Education
- Public administration & institutional communication
- Society in general (broader cultural and social regulation)

Stance on gender-fair language in Brazil (2001-2024)





Method

- Qualitative close reading of legislative justifications
- Manual coding of argument types (NVivo)
- Analytical framework informed by previous studies
(Blaubergs, 1980; Bruns and Leiting, 2024; Parks & Roberton, 1998; Vergoossen et al.,2020)

Focus is on types of arguments used to justify proposals

Supportive Arguments

Human rights, equality and institutional legitimacy

'...to ensure linguistic equality in official texts as a means of promoting human rights and fighting the exclusion of women.' *Proposal 438/2008*

Linguistic innovation and norm critique

'Language, as a system of meaning, is not neutral in its use, especially in texts dealing with rights, it conceals gender inequalities.' *Proposal 2317/2011*

Resistance to Authoritarian Language Control

'Topics of great relevance to millions of people, topics that concern their very identities are treated as taboos [in the national Congress]. Words are censored.' *Proposal 2046/2024*



Oppositional arguments

 **Defense of the Linguistic Status Quo**

 **Minimization of the Issue and Its Proponents**

 **GFL as a Hindrance to Education and Communication**

 **Sexism & Cisgenderism**

•• Social Threat and Ideological Subversion

Scientific grounding

Argument

Human rights/ representation

Status quo defense

Hinder in Education

Sexism and cisgenderism

Ideological subversion

Evidence

Strong support

Refuted

Refuted

Refuted

No support

Sources

Gygax et al. (2008, 2021), Kim et al. (2023), Lindqvist et al. (2021), Zacharski & Fersl (2023), among others

Vaahtera (2008), Viennot (2018), among others

Vela Plo & Ortega Andrés (2025), Friedrich & Heise (2019); Pabst & Kollmayer (2023), among others

Blackless et al. (2000), among others

Erdocia (2022), Borba (2022), among others

Paradoxes

Marginal ↔ Existential threat

GFL trivialized → dramatized as threat to social and moral order

Expertise invoked ↔ Expertise dismissed

Used to justify restriction → linguistic research selectively rejected

Rights protected ↔ Rights contested

Constitutional principles and freedom of expression → used both to oppose and support

Ideological language contested ↔ Ideologically justified

Ideological positions → competing visions of democracy and minority inclusion

What the analysis shows

- Arguments on GFL are **not simply about linguistic form**
- Justifications are embedded in broader struggles over **who has the authority to shape language and who has the right to be represented** through language in a democracy

Understanding how claims about language are constructed within parliamentary institutions helps illuminate the political dimensions of language policy and the ways linguistic norms are mobilized in processes of social change.

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