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# Strategic Inclusion Without Transformation: How Populist Radical Right Parties Engage With Women's Interests

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## Abstract

Despite their *Männerparteien* reputation, populist radical right (PRR) parties have recently expanded their agendas to include women's interests. When do they embrace these interests, and what shapes their stance? We propose a theory of strategic window dressing: electorally struggling PRR parties, seeking to gain voters, showcase women's interests superficially without shifting core gender ideologies. Using original text analysis of PRR party manifestos across 30 European countries (1984–2022), we find that parties emphasize gender-related rights when electorally vulnerable—but avoid adopting more gender-egalitarian positions. Instead, they promote risk-averse, femonationalist stances. While having a woman leader increases attention to gender-based violence, a higher share of women MPs has no impact on either the salience of or position on women's interests. These findings

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suggest that the PRR's nod to women's interests is largely a tactical move, not a genuine commitment to substantive representation of women's interests.

**Keywords**
European politics, gender, sexuality and politics, political parties, elections, populist radical right, party manifestos, voting behavior

## Introduction

Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties have seen significant electoral gains across Europe in recent decades. Traditionally, these parties are defined by a core issue profile centered on *nativism*—a combination of anti-immigration stances and nationalism (Mudde, 2007). However, many PRR parties have increasingly addressed issues beyond immigration, broadening their political platforms (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Bergman & Flatt, 2020; Spoon & Williams, 2023). Notably, some have begun discussing gender roles and women's status in society (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Akkerman, 2015; Campbell & Childs, 2015; Porzycki et al., 2025). For example, following a major drop in vote share in 2007, France's *National Rally* repositioned itself as a party "defending women's rights" (Farris, 2017) in a strategic effort to attract women voters. As Mayer (2015) and Murray and Sénac (2014) highlight, under Marine Le Pen's leadership, the party advocated for a mix of egalitarian and traditional gender-related policies—supporting women's economic independence, professional careers, and abortion rights, alongside pronatalist measures and family benefits. Similarly, Italy's *Northern League* shifted its approach to gender following its weak performance in the 2013 election. Gender issues played a marginal role in its ideological message in 2013, yet by the 2018 campaign under Matteo Salvini, the party emphasized the defense of the "traditional" family—defined as a married heterosexual couple with children—opposed abortion, and promoted conventional gender roles as a "core position" in its political agenda (Donà, 2021: 304). Donà describes this as "the result of a deliberate populist strategy aimed at (re)politicizing gender issues" (Donà, 2021: 304).

This evolving engagement with gender-related issues (of a feminist as well as a gender-conservative bent) raises an important and unresolved question: under what conditions are PRR parties more likely to incorporate women's interests in their manifestos, and what determines their position on those issues? We develop a new theory of *strategic window dressing* which argues that PRR parties turn their attention to women's interests when struggling electorally as a tactic to attract new voters. Women tend to be underrepresented among the PRR electorate (e.g., 2019; Gidengil et al., 2005; Givens, 2004; Harteveld et al., 2015; Immerzeel et al., 2015; Oshri et al., 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015). By incorporating

women's interests into their agendas, PRR parties aim to engage this substantial, untapped pool of potential women voters. We argue that this increased attention to women's interests is mostly a display for show rather than representative of real ideological change. Hence, it is not accompanied by shifts in the position of PRR parties on women's interests. Instead, we expect an increase in attention to women's interests to be accompanied by the advocacy of risk-averse positions: deliberately neutral, mixed or femonationalist positions. Femonationalist positions use gendered rhetoric to promote the PRR parties' core nativist and xenophobic issues (Farris, 2017). By taking risk-averse positions, PRR parties highlight issues that may appeal to under-tapped (largely women) voters without taking new or controversial policy stances that will alienate the core (men) constituency.

To test our argument, we examine 30 PRR parties in 25 European countries between 1984 and 2022. In the absence of existing manifesto data on women's interests, we construct an original dataset and analyze PRR party attention to and positions on women's interests over time.[1] We focus on how party vote change (our key explanatory variable) relates to five interests that are fundamental to women's life chances and their options for action: gender rights, gender-based violence, work-life balance, reproductive rights, and sexuality and gender identity. Given our goal of understanding when parties emphasize women's interests, our attention measures capture *all mentions* of these topics in manifestos, regardless of the position taken. We also systematically code the positions parties take—ranging from traditional to egalitarian, as well as neutral, mixed, or femonationalist—enabling us to test the expectation that struggling parties are more likely to adopt low-risk or ambiguous stances rather than make meaningful shifts away from their historically gender-traditional orientations.

We draw on the most comprehensive data to date on women as MPs and leaders of European PRR parties to examine these dynamics and provide a test of classic theories of the link between women's descriptive and substantive representation in the context of PRR parties. In line with our theory of strategic window dressing, we find that the inclusion of women's interests in PRR party programs is primarily driven by electoral concerns. Specifically, when PRR parties are losing votes, their focus on gender-based rights increases. Vote loss of 5.5 percentage points - equivalent to one standard deviation in our data - results in a 0.3 percentage point increase in manifesto text devoted to gender-related rights. Given that parties, on average, devote only 0.7% of their manifesto to these issues, this a substantial increase of nearly 50%. Additionally, we find little evidence that PRR parties' increased attention to women's interests translates into more egalitarian positions. Instead, parties facing vote loss tend to adopt pro-nativist femonationalist positions. In doing so, they avoid advancing positions that could alienate their traditional voter base. In contrast to much of the literature on mainstream parties, we find that

the presence of women MPs in PRR parties exerts little influence on the parties' emphasis of women's interests. There is some evidence, however, that having a woman leader is correlated with more attention to gender-based violence in the manifesto.

Our study makes several contributions. First, it advances a new theory of how PRR parties strategically engage with women's interests, framing these issues as tools for political signaling rather than genuine ideological change. Second, it offers the first cross-national classification of both the salience and positions of women's interests in PRR manifestos, filling a noticeable lacuna in the literature. Building on these contributions, our findings reveal important dynamics in how PRR parties incorporate women's interests. In contrast to the claims that descriptive representation leads to substantive representation, we find that numerical increases of women MPs or even the presence of women party leaders in PRR parties do not automatically lead to an increased commitment to the inclusion of women's interests. PRR parties in Europe exemplify the use of *strategic window dressing* – women's interests are deployed for strategic, electoral reasons and to further advance pro-xenophobic and anti-Islamic stances– rather than substantive representation of gender attitudes. Future studies should assess the extent to which strategic window dressing applies as a general party strategy, beyond the context of PRR parties in Europe which we focus on here. Nonetheless, given the rising prominence of PRR parties in parliaments and governments around the world, our findings should signal warning bells. Even as PRR parties include more women in visible roles and ramp up attention to women's interests, their primary concern remains shoring up nativist views – and, when threatened, they exploit the rhetoric of gender to do so.

## Women's Interests, Voters and Parties

In processes of representation, group interests are central. As a group, women hold a variety of interests. There can be no fixed, delimited set of political topics considered "women's." Women are, after all, a heterogeneous group with multiple and overlapping forms of identity and privilege (Brown, 2014; Smooth, 2006). Celis and Childs (2020: 19) point out that "expecting women to speak with one voice in politics would be to hold women to a different democratic standard than we hold men." At the same time, we expect that women's entrance into electoral politics, as voters and party and governmental officials, may raise new issues for the political agenda. And these may be taken up by political parties.

To investigate the substantive representation of women's demands while being sensitive to important intragroup ideological diversity (Celis & Childs, 2012, 2014), we draw upon the terminology advanced by Beckwith (2014) to distinguish women's interests from women's issues and preferences.[2] According to

her framework, *interests* emerge from women's shared life circumstances and from gendered power structures. These are topics that are "specific to women and have fundamental, unique consequences for women that are beyond (or tangential) to men's experience" (Beckwith, 2014: 32). *Issues* are strategic choices that emphasize particular components of these interests that women can organize around. *Preferences*, in turn, refer to the range of positions that actors may adopt regarding a specific issue. For example, women have a collective interest in being free from violence. A specific issue such as rape serves as a vehicle to mobilize around that interest, and there may be a variety of policy preferences raised to address this issue, such as calls to criminalize rape or increase security. While not the only terminological option for conceptualizing women's substantive demands (see Celis & Childs, 2012, 2014; Reingold & Swers, 2011), Beckwith's nested understanding is consistent with others in recognizing both that women's interests are broader than feminist issues, and that women hold a variety of issue positions ranging from more gender-traditional to more progressive.

Our aim is to critically examine PRR parties' claims to represent women by assessing whether - and how - they move beyond their traditionally narrow focus on immigration to acknowledge and give greater attention to women's interests. We focus on the *salience of women's interests* and, given those interests, the policy *preferences* parties express in relation to them. To this end, we highlight five dimensions of women's interests: gender rights, gender-based violence, work-family balance, reproductive rights, and sexuality and gender identity. While this set is not exhaustive, these five interests are fundamental to women's life chances and their options for action (Beckwith, 2011). Within each of these women's interests, parties articulate different preferences over specific issues – from feminist to gender-traditional.

First, *gender rights* reflect concerns about women's rights and women's shared experiences of discrimination on the basis of gender. As Baldez (2011) points out, women share an interest in not being discriminated against, and this common agenda is continuously constructed as part of an international effort in the United Nation's Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) treaty. Although not universal, women are more likely to perceive gender inequalities compared with men (Campbell et al., 2010), and they are also more likely to attribute gender inequality to unfair treatment or differences in opportunities than men (Swim et al., 1995). However, there is variation in the issues that women highlight and the positions they take. For instance, some women argue that equal gender rights requires positive discrimination (e.g., De Koster et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2018), whereas others contend that equal rights have already been achieved so no action is necessary and/or they call for the dismantling of state involvement in gender relations (e.g., Campbell & Erzeel, 2018; Celis & Childs, 2014).

Second, eradicating *gender-based violence* is an interest especially pertinent to women. Structural inequities and gender roles make women more

vulnerable to violence, and often this violence has been considered individual and private. Gender differences have also been found between women's and men's attitudes towards violence against women (Nayak et al., 2003). That said, among women, issues and preferences over these interests vary. For example, the "Me Too" movement reflects a particular issue position within this interest category, whereby the reaction to sexual assault was to call out sexual predators. For others, the Me Too movement overstated the incidence rate of assaults to the point of being used to unfairly vilify men.

Third, *work-family balance* represents a key area where women have advanced political claims. This interest emerges from broader societal shifts in women's roles in society and economies, including the rise in women's employment outside the home, the decline in marriage rates, and changing attitudes towards gender roles in society (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010). As a result, issues surrounding the intersection of motherhood, child rearing, family and the labor market have become more central to the public and policy realms (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). While women from across the political spectrum tend to hold more progressive views than men across a range of women's issues, including whether mothers of young children should work (Barnes & Cassese, 2017; Lodders & Weldon, 2019; Weeks, 2022), there are differences in how women reconcile their roles in the private and public spheres and their preferences for related state support (Celis et al., 2014). Some women may favor investment in public childcare as a way of easing work-family pressures, while others may favor state subsidies to stay at home parents (Celis et al., 2014: 169).

Fourth, *reproductive rights* is a central dimension of women's interests, as it directly concerns women's role as child bearers. Women have organized around the specific issues of contraception and abortion, albeit with different framings and, in turn, issue positions (Osborne et al., 2022). Some view access to contraception and abortion as essential components of medical care, bodily autonomy and gender equality (Patel & Johns, 2009). Others - often grounded in religious or moral beliefs with an emphasis on women as mothers (Piscopo, 2011) - oppose abortion, framing it as the taking of human life, which begins at conception.

Fifth, *sexuality and gender identity* is a more recently recognized women's interest, stemming from concerns over what it means to be a woman and questions of sexuality, especially within heteronormative societies. Women are particularly affected by how gender norms shape expectations around femininity, sexuality, and family roles. Political actors have mobilized around issues relating to the nature of marriage, the existence of and rights for members of the LGBTQI + community and questions of transgender individuals' access to public spaces including bathrooms and women's sports. While heterosexual women are generally more supportive than men of various rights for gay individuals (e.g. Brumbaugh et al., 2008; Herek, 2002; Powell et al., 2010), their preferences are not uniform. Some women support

traditional definitions of gender and sexuality, including opposition to same-sex marriage, support for transgender athlete bans, and the belief that there are only two genders. Others push for more inclusive and expansive policies, including same-sex marriage, transgender rights, and recognition of non-binary genders. As with other areas of women's interests, shared concerns do not always translate into shared positions.

## A Theory of Strategic Window Dressing Among PRR Parties

To understand the substantive representation of women's interests, existing literature on mainstream parties emphasizes the role of women within parties. Drawing on the politics of presence theory (Phillips, 1995), scholars have argued that when women attain positions of power, they bring with them perspectives shaped by their life experiences as women. Empirical studies have confirmed that the presence of women MPs is often associated with increased party *attention* to women's interests (Campbell et al., 2010; Greene & O'Brien, 2016; Kittilson, 2008, 2011; Kroeber, 2022; Plutzer & Zipp, 1996; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005; Wängnerud, 2009; Weeks, 2019).

Findings on the impact of women party leaders are more mixed. For example, O'Brien (2021) concludes that women-led organizations do not devote more attention to left-leaning or social policy issues than those led by men. However, studies employing a more fine-grained approach suggest that women leaders are more likely to emphasize green, alternative, and libertarian issues, such as human rights and environmental protection (Kroeber, 2022), and contribute to greater issue diversity within party agendas (Greene & O'Brien, 2016).

Beyond the incorporation of new interests, the *positions* that parties adopt on women's interests have also been found to be driven by women's presence in mainstream parties. Given their life experiences as women and their position as women working outside of the home, women MPs and leaders may take more gender egalitarian positions and adopt more policies and legislation that promotes equality (Campbell et al., 2010; Clayton et al., 2019; Espírito-Santo et al., 2020; Kittilson, 2008; Kroeber, 2022; Mansbridge, 2005; Morgan, 2013; O'Brien 2019; Reyes-Housholder, 2017; Wängnerud, 2000). However, some studies have failed to find a significant link between women's descriptive and substantive representation (e.g., Dingler et al., 2018), while others suggest that the effect depends on the specific policy areas under consideration (e.g., Kläy et al., 2025).

Notably, most research on the link between women's descriptive and substantive representation has focused on mainstream parties. We posit that women's presence is likely to have limited impact on the representation of

women's interests in the context of PRR parties. This claim follows, in part, from both the organizational structure of PRR parties and their current approach to gender diversity. The PRR party family has been characterized by a persistent gender gap in support (e.g. Coffé, 2019; Givens, 2004; Harteveld et al., 2015; Immerzeel et al., 2015; Oshri et al., 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015; Weeks et al., 2023) as well as a (hyper)masculine leadership (e.g., Meret, 2015; Messner, 2007) where having a man as leader is not only typical, but often desirable (Linders et al., 2023).

Accompanying this patriarchal and masculine party identity, and perhaps contributing to it, is their embrace of an authoritarian, hierarchical party structure (Mudde, 2007). The presence of women as members of parliament or even leaders is not part of an organic bottom-up promotion of women through the ranks. These parties, for instance, typically lack women's sections and have systematically opposed party-level gender quotas (Weeks, 2022). Moreover, Weeks et al. (2023) have shown that when PRR have increased their percentage of women MPs, this action neither reflected a desire to match the gender egalitarian norms of the broader political system, nor was it driven by the existence of the (rare) woman party leader. Instead, they find that PRR parties selected women MPs to attract untapped women voters when the party was electorally struggling. Research by Ben-Shitrit et al. (2022) and Snipes and Mudde (2020) point to similarly strategic decisions to attract women voters behind the elevation of women to head PRR parties.

Instead of the traditional idea linking women's descriptive and substantive representation, we offer a new theory specifying the tactical conditions under which PRR parties will improve women's substantive representation and turn their focus to women's interests. We build on a rich literature in gender and politics which highlights the strategic incentives of political actors to address women's concerns. When faced with heightened levels of political competition, parties find good reason to think carefully about how to attract women voters. For example, (Teele, 2018a, 2018b) finds robust evidence that competition is linked to stronger support for women's suffrage, particularly among those parties that believed they could win women's votes. Weeks (2019) shows that male party leaders are more likely to adopt gender quota laws – a policy that necessitates replacing some men MPs with women – when they are threatened by more progressive competitors to the left. We extend these strategic arguments to the case of the substantive representation of women's interests among PRR parties in Europe.

We argue that the inclusion of women's interests in PRR parties' agendas is driven by electoral needs. PRR parties facing electoral loss increase attention to women's interests to appeal to women voters. Meanwhile, their positions on such interests are consciously dictated by the strategic electoral need to keep existing, mainly men, voters from defecting. This *politics of strategic window dressing* is a calculated attempt by PRR parties to blur their position on the

secondary issue of gender (Rovny, 2013), attracting a broader coalition of voters to support their primary issue of immigration. As we elaborate below, this is manifested by the adoption of risk-averse stances such as neutral, mixed or femonationalist positions.

## *The Strategic Representation of Women's Interests in PRR Election Manifestos*

Why would historically men-dominated PRR parties increase attention to women's interests? Our argument brings together insights from party competition and gender and politics literature to make the case that PRR parties wield attention to women's interests as a tool to improve the electoral security of the party by attracting previously untapped women voters. There is a long history to the claim that political parties expand their issue offerings to appeal to voters, as work from Downs (1957) to De Sio and Weber (2014) shows. For example, research finds that under certain conditions, mainstream parties adopt new issues or increase the salience of issues emphasized by single-issue parties to retain or win back voters (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Bale et al., 2010; Carmines & Stimson, 1989, 1993; Han, 2015; Meguid, 2008).

Growing evidence suggests that niche parties engage in a similar issue diversification strategy (e.g., Hobolt & De Vries, 2015; Rovny & Polk, 2020; Wagner & Meyer, 2014, but see Wagner & Meyer, 2017). Meguid (2023) finds that regionalist parties emphasize new issues when their core policy goal is met and thus their continued *raison d'être* - and their electoral support - is in question. Spoon and Williams (2021) show that this conclusion extends to green parties that are losing votes and have access to a new electoral constituency. While there is a fear among niche parties that they will lose supporters by adding a new issue to their agenda, Bergman and Flatt (2020) find that radical right niche parties actually gain support from such a strategy.

In line with the view of parties as rational, vote-seeking actors, we argue that PRR parties will emphasize *women's interests* as a reaction to vote loss, in an effort to expand their electoral base among women. Appealing to women voters on the basis of women's interests seems a fruitful strategy for PRR parties in particular. Research from gender and politics finds that conservative women incorporate gender-conscious, although typically not feminist, perspectives into their decision-making (Schreiber, 2002, 2018). This pattern extends to the voting booth, where women on the right (including those who support radical right parties) are more likely than men to prioritize women's interests and to factor these concerns into their voting decisions (Lodders & Weldon, 2019; Paolino, 1995). Evidence suggests that PRR parties behave strategically towards women voters, electing women MPs in an effort to win over women voters (Weeks et al., 2023).

PRR parties, however, have limited *existing* substantive, policy-based appeals to attract women voters. PRR parties cannot rely solely on their traditional platforms of immigration, which have limited appeals for women voters. While women are as likely as men to hold anti-immigrant views, women are more driven to avoid perceptions of prejudice and therefore less likely to support PRR parties (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018). PRR parties therefore need to emphasize a different issue to gain women voters. Following a strategy that has proven effective for mainstream parties (Conover, 1988; Dolan, 1998; Kaufmann 2022; Paolino, 1995), including those on the right (Campbell & Erzeel, 2018), PRR parties may turn to women's interests as a tactical move when facing electoral decline. The target of this instrumentalization of gender, as summarized by Farris (2017: 54), is the "female vote." Evidence from Sweden (Off, 2023) further supports this logic, showing that when gender issues become salient in public debate, PRR parties can attract new voters by responding to those concerns. In sum then, our first hypothesis reads:

**H1:** PRR parties will increase their focus on women's interests when they are losing electorally.

## *The Adoption of Risk-Averse Positions on Women's Interests in PRR Manifestos*

The addition of any new issue to the PRR parties' agendas, however, entails risks: the inclusion of women's interests could possibly drive away patriarchal men voters (Lodders & Weldon, 2019). Because of this, we expect PRR parties' attention to women's interests to consist of symbolic references and to remain of secondary importance in the party's issue agenda, with little impact on men's likelihood of supporting PRR parties.[3] Just as authoritarian leaders employ cosmetic gender equality – so-called "genderwashing" – as a substitute for true democratic reform (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022; Noh et al., 2024), we expect the gender rhetoric of PRR parties to be superficial. This reflects a risk-averse strategy aimed at attracting new, predominantly women voters without going so far as to undermine the party's core programmatic identity or alienate its primarily men base. As Spierings (2020) argues, gender serves as a powerful but ultimately instrumental tool for PRR parties—pivotal in messaging, yet trivial to their ideological core ("trivotal")—allowing them to perform modernity and morality without real programmatic change.

The goal to expand the electorate without alienating existing voters has implications for the policy stance that the party offers on women's interests. Simply put: PRR parties will not change the nature of their positions on these interests. We expect that PRR parties will pursue risk-averse positional strategies such as adopting the general party tactics of "position blurring"

(neutral or mixed positions) as well as the tokenistic promotion of women's equality, femonationalism.

"Position blurring" refers to the practice of advocating neutral or deliberately mixed positions on a given issue (Han, 2015; Jordan, 2022; Rovny, 2013; Somer-Topcu, 2013). With regard to women's interests, this can take several forms - for example: (1) vague statements about work-family balance without a clear position, or (2) conflicting or mixed policy stances, such as simultaneously advocating for expanded access to child care (a more gender egalitarian stance appealing to women working outside the home) and increased support for stay-at-home mothers (a more gender traditional stance). In the latter example, the resulting manifesto yields an intentionally mixed message. As Somer-Tocpu (2015, 845) notes with regard to "broad-appeals strategies," the goal of the party is "winning more votes by keeping its supporters attached and gaining/stealing new voters."

Research suggests that position blurring - particularly on women's interests - may be a successful strategy for PRR parties. Rovny (2013) and Rovny and Polk (2019) find that radical right parties, which overwhelmingly attract support based on their stance on immigration, face fewer constraints than mainstream parties when blurring on dimensions beyond immigration. Additionally, Adams et al. (2006) find that niche parties are more likely than mainstream competitors to be punished for explicitly shifting policy positions. Hence, maintaining purposeful vagueness or positional neutrality offers a low-cost, low-risk strategy for PRR parties seeking to broaden their appeal without alienating core supporters.

Similarly, advocating mixed messages might allow a PRR party to straddle two distinct camps of voters. First, they can maintain the gender traditional and sexist voters (men and some women) who continue to compose the majority of PRR voters (Cassese & Holman, 2019; Coffé et al., 2023; Ratliff et al., 2019; Schaffner et al., 2018). Second, they can appeal to the increasing set of right-wing voters who hold more progressive stances on gender and sexuality norms, a disproportionate share of whom are women (Barnes & Cassese, 2017; Lancaster, 2020; Lodders & Weldon, 2019; Weeks, 2022). The key to a successful strategy is to be "everything to everyone" (Somer-Topcu, 2015), or at least not lose existing voters. This leads to Hypotheses 2 and 3:

**H2:** PRR parties will take risk-averse positions on women's interests through neutral positions when they are losing electorally.
**H3:** PRR parties will take risk-averse positions on women's interests through mixed positions when they are losing electorally.

While not discussed in the general literature on party positional competition, the adoption of femonationalist stances on women's interests is another

risk-averse strategy that PRR parties in particular can employ to expand their electorate. Coined by Farris (2017), femonationalism, short for "feminist and femocratic nationalism," is both "the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals" in anti-immigration and anti-Islam campaigns, and "the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality" (p. 4). It is the tactical deployment of attention to the rights of typically white, non-immigrant women (but *not* migrant women) for the purpose of promoting nativist agendas.

Femonationalism is an ideal low-cost positional tactic for PRR parties: it adds a new gendered dimension to their existing core issues of anti-immigration and anti-Islam. Because it reinforces rather than challenges the parties' foundational positions, it is unlikely to alienate existing PRR voters who, as Ivarsflaten (2008) and Lancaster (2020) show, tend to be united on immigration but more diverse in their preferences on other issues. Moreover, femonationalism serves as an inclusive position for both existing and potential new anti-immigrant voters. When applied to issues such as violence, gender rights or work and family, a femonationalist rhetoric avoids taking a clear gender egalitarian or gender traditional stance. Women and men voters with more gender egalitarian positions might be drawn to messages that emphasize women's bodily autonomy against patriarchal religious or cultural practices. At the same time, more gender traditional voters who prioritize a benevolent sexist view of women as needing protection may be attracted to portrayals of Islamic immigrants as threats to the preservation of the existing (largely Christian) family values.

Femonationalist tactics, including campaigns against cultural practices often associated with Islam or immigrants such as forced marriage, head-scarves and honor killings as threats to women's rights, have been employed by multiple PRR parties, as cases from Germany (Fangen & Lichtenberg, 2021), Sweden (Towns et al., 2014), Switzerland (Eskandari & Banfi, 2017), Norway (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Lawall ND) and France (Scrinzi, 2017; Lawall (N.D.)), show. Femonationalism allows PRR parties to "mainstream" themselves and to legitimize extremist, xenophobic stances (Betz & Meret, 2009; Fekete, 2006; Mondon & Winter, 2019; Dancygier, 2020). Emerging research highlights the attractiveness of this tactic to women voters. Harteveld et al. (2019) suggest that gender-migration messages help draw women voters, who tend to be more hesitant to support socially unacceptable political views. Survey experiments find that framing anti-immigration views in terms of women's rights increases their acceptability among all voters in Norway, and particularly among women in Germany (Lawall ND). Similarly, survey evidence from Sweden reports that voters with conservative gender values are more likely to support the Sweden Democrats when gender issues, including violence against women and femonationalist narratives, are prominent in public debate. In contrast, voters with progressive

gender attitudes neither increase nor decrease their support for the PRR party under these conditions (Off, 2023).

In other words, taking a femonationalist position is a growing technique among PRR parties to attract new (women) voters while keeping existing (mostly men) voters. This tactic appears to be successful, as growing research (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007; Bartlett et al., 2013; Farris, 2017; Mayer, 2013; Towns et al., 2014) attributes the use of femonationalist appeals to the increased electoral success of PRR parties. Our final hypothesis reads:

> **H4:** PRR parties will take risk-averse positions on women's interests through femonationalist positions when they are losing electorally.

## Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses on the determinants of the representation of women's interests in PRR parties, we develop a new, hand-coded dataset of PRR parties' attention to and positions on women's interests as presented in their manifestos. Manifestos set out party agendas and positions in the party's own words, and studies find that party behavior in office correlates with manifesto promises (Naurin, 2014; Thomson et al., 2017). Yet, existing cross-national datasets do not code for attention to women's interests. The Comparative Manifesto Project and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, the largest datasets measuring party attention and positions, do not include distinct categories for attention to gender rights, work-family balance, gender-based violence, reproductive rights or sexuality (Jolly et al., 2022; Lehmann et al., 2024).[4] Our approach has the advantage of directly measuring party emphasis on specific dimensions of women's interests as articulated by parties themselves over time, rather than relying on perceptions of parties' reputations on topics including gender coded from expert surveys (e.g., Campbell & Erzeel, 2018; Chueri & Damerow, 2023) or on manifesto coding categories that are also not tailored specifically to women's interests.

Our datafile includes 30 PRR parties across 25 European countries from 1984 to 2022. To classify PRR parties, we take an inclusive approach, employing categorizations by Norris (2005), Mudde (2007), Buštíková (2014), and Norris and Inglehart (2019), which highlight nativism, authoritarianism and populism as three core characteristics of contemporary PRR parties. As a robustness check, we also rerun our main analyses excluding those parties that are not listed in the PopuList 3.0 data set (https://popu-list.org) as PRR or far right parties.[5] Appendix Table A3 contains a list of all PRR parties and election-years included in analysis.

## Dependent Variables

Our analysis examines both party focus on women's interests and party positions on women's interests. To determine *parties' focus* on women's interests, we constructed an original dataset of PRR party attention to five topics likely to appeal to women: 1) gender rights; 2) gender-based violence; 3) work-family balance; 4) reproductive rights; and 5) sexuality and gender identity. We downloaded all PRR parties' election manifestos available from The Manifesto Project (Manifesto Research on Political Representation, MARPOR, version 2024a), the largest collection of electoral manifestos (Lehmann et al., 2024). Our empirical analyses include only those PRR parties with three consecutive elections available in MARPOR version 2024a - three being necessary to construct lagged vote change, a key explanatory variable. Manifestos requiring translation were translated into English using Google Translate API via Python. This approach allows researchers to communicate findings to an English-speaking audience, and English is a common ("bridge") language used in machine translation systems (De Vries et al., 2018; Lucas et al., 2015).

We created five dictionaries of "tokens" listing the most relevant words, word stems, and short phrases indicative of women's interests. These dictionaries were compiled from close readings of relevant out-of-sample texts, including PRR party manifestos, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) A-Z Index, and O'Brien (2012) (dictionaries can be found in Appendix Table A1). The set of terms reflects both more gender-traditional and more gender-egalitarian issues and positions within these five women's interests. Using Python, we searched the manifesto corpus applying these dictionaries, gathering all quasi-sentences that include dictionary tokens, as well as total quasi-sentence counts. We manually checked each quasi-sentence to ensure that it is relevant and is coded in the correct interest category, dropping those which do not relate to the five interests (e.g., "mother tongue,"). We excluded broad phrases (e.g., "men and women") to ensure the dictionaries capture a representative—though not exhaustive—measure of party attention to gendered topics. Each of the five variables (gender rights; gender-based violence; work-family balance; reproductive rights; sexuality and gender identity), thus measures the share of party attention to the issue (sum of relevant quasi-sentences divided by total quasi-sentences in the manifesto).

Figure 1 shows the mean attention given to each of the five women's interests in PRR manifestos over time.[6] Overall, parties in our sample devote 2.4% of their manifesto quasi-sentences to women's interests, which corresponds to 17 to 24 quasi-sentences on average (depending on whether we use the median or mean number of quasi-sentences). Work-family balance is the most commonly mentioned topic, with 1.3% of quasi-sentences in PRR manifestos focused on this interest. Gender rights make up the next-largest

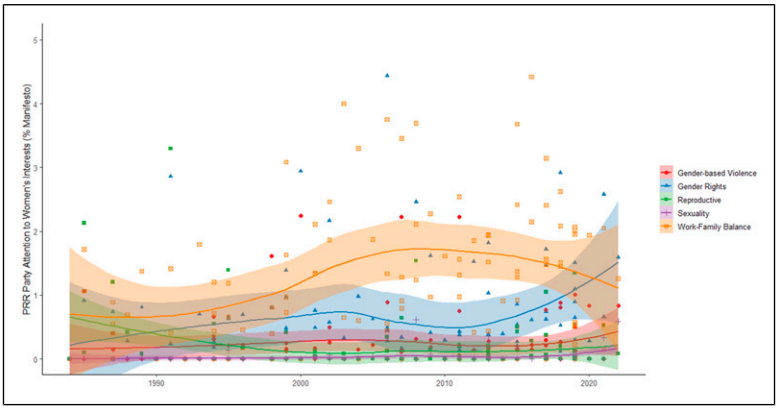


**Figure 1.** Populist radical right parties' attention to women's interests over time, Loess smoothing.

share of manifesto quasi-sentences at 0.7%, followed by gender-based violence and reproductive rights which are observed very rarely (0.2% each). We observe almost no attention to sexuality and gender identity (0.03%). Importantly, beyond these general patterns, there is substantial cross-party variation in how much attention these women's interests receive, as reflected in the confidence intervals.

Figure 1 further shows important trends over time, with a sharp increase in attention to gender rights from 2010 onward, while attention to work-family balance declined over the same period. Although the relative attention to women's interests via quasi-sentence share is small, studies using MARPOR data find that the mean party attention to all equality issues (including gender but also class, race, sexuality, disability and any mention of social justice; code 503) is not much higher at 5% (Weeks, 2022). In addition, the majority of PRR manifestos we code include some mention of work-family balance (82%) and gender rights (68%). Manifestos less commonly include text related to gendered violence (50%), reproductive rights (36%) or sexuality (16%).

Next, we manually coded each quasi-sentence addressing a women's interest into one of four mutually exclusive *positions*: (1) Gender traditional, (2) Gender egalitarian, (3) Femonationalist, or (4) Neutral. The first two positions reflect the common distinction between gender-conservative and progressive discourse (e.g., Porzycki et al., 2025; Weeks et al., 2024). Coding as "traditional" or "egalitarian" is based on both explicit references to gender roles and rights, and the gendered implications of specific policies. For example, while long maternity-only leaves and child benefits break mothers' ties to the labor market and thus, are consistent with gender traditional positions, parental-leave policies which encourage fathers to participate in the leave and

child care investment increase gender equality at work and home (Jaumotte, 2003; Moss & Deven, 2019) - consistent with a gender-egalitarian position.

Building on the literature on blurring strategies (e.g., Rovny, 2013; Somer-Topcu, 2013), we additionally introduce femonationalist and neutral categories to assess the strategic ambiguity employed by PRR parties. The femonationalism category includes gendered rhetoric deployed to further nativist, often anti-Islamic, policy stances (Farris, 2017), setting it apart from more general gender-traditional or gender-egalitarian appeals. Finally, some quasi-sentences could not be categorized into a single position, including those that describe a situation or another party's position but do not take a clear stance on it. We code these as neutral.

To ensure consistency in coding, the authors met regularly to discuss uncertainties, consulting additional sources when needed. Inspired by feminist methodologies in social science research (Ackerly & True, 2019), we engaged in an iterative process of reflection and dialogue, attentive to both context and positionality. Table 1 summarizes the position coding guidelines, with applications to the most salient and recurring themes in the PRR manifestos we examined. Table A4 in the Appendix gives examples of quasi-sentences coded in each of the four position categories.

Figure 2 shows the average percentage of the four different positions on women's interests over time, across PRR parties. The figure reveals that PRR parties lack a single, clear gender traditional or egalitarian position on women's interests, consistent with our window dressing argument about the adoption of risk-averse positions. On average, across this time period, manifesto content includes both gender-egalitarian (34%) and gender-traditional (43%) positions, suggesting the use of mixed strategies. Figure 2 additionally shows that there is a substantial amount of neutral text (18%) and 5% femonationalist text. In addition to the overarching patterns, the data highlight meaningful cross-party variation in the degree of attention to women's interests, as evidenced by the confidence intervals.

Figure 2 also highlights an important time trend (which we control for in our model specifications), with PRR parties embracing more femonationalist positions over time, consistent with existing research (Betz & Meret, 2009; Farris, 2017; Fekete, 2006; Siim & Skjeie, 2008). While femonationalist positions are uncommon early in our dataset, by the final five years of our dataset, femonationalism makes up 10% of PRR party positions.

Based on these position codings, we construct four dependent variables. First, to capture overall *gender position*, we calculate the difference between the share of egalitarian and traditional quasi-sentences — higher (positive) values indicate more egalitarian positions. Second, to test our risk-avoidance hypotheses (H2–H4), we include: (1) the share of neutral text, indicating a lack of gender positioning; (2) the share of femonationalist-coded text; and (3) the share of mixed text, which captures the degree to which a party presents an

**Table 1.** Position Coding of Populist Radical Right Party Manifestos.

| Gender traditional | Gender egalitarian | Femonationalist | Neutral |
|---|---|---|---|
| Support for women staying at home and women's value as mothers/ Jobs priority for men | Support for gender equality (including LGBTQIA+) in home, work, and politics | Support for the rights of some (native) women but not immigrant or non-western women | Describe issue related to women's interest, but do not take clear position |
| Support for traditional families | Support for all families, including single parents and same-sex couples | Mentions of gender equality of native country vs non-equality of others | Describe policy of another party |
| Downplaying or rolling back legislation on violence against women | Fighting violence against women | Linking gender violence to Islam or immigrants/ Framing women as victims of Islam or non-Western cultures/Othering Muslim or immigrant men as oppressors of women | Mention of both gender egalitarian and gender traditional positions within the same quasi-sentence. |
| Work-family policies which do not encourage gender equality (maternity-only leave; cash transfers for children, including child benefits, family allowances, baby bonuses) | Work-family policies which encourage gender equality (shared parental and paternity leave; child care services/ early childhood education, including subsidies for; flexible working/right to part-time working or time for breastfeeding) | Work-family or pronatalist policies for natives only | |
| Anti-reproductive rights or LGBTQ + rights | Support for reproductive rights and women's health; support for LGBTQ + rights | | |
| Anti-affirmative action | Pro-affirmative action | | |
| Maternity pensions | Individualized pensions | | |

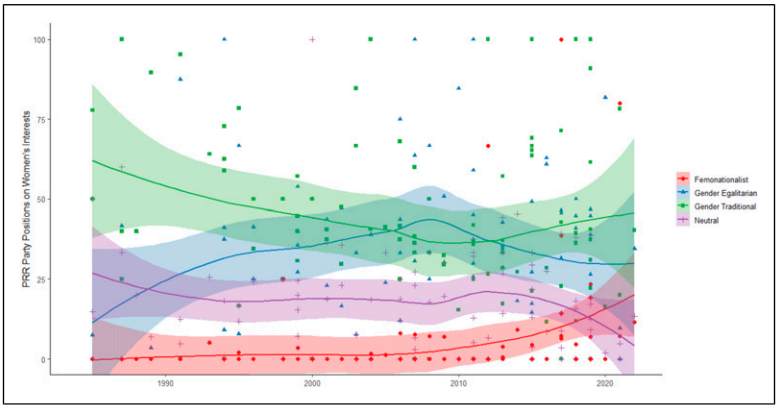


**Figure 2.** Populist radical right parties' positions on women's interests over time.

equal percentage of quasi-sentences with gender traditional and gender egalitarian positions. It is constructed as follows:

$$1 - \frac{|gender\ egalitarian - gender\ traditional|}{gender\ egalitarian + gender\ traditional}$$

This continuous variable ranges from 0 (purely traditional or purely egalitarian) to 1 (evenly mixed positions). In our data, 77% of manifestos contain both egalitarian and traditional messages, while only 23% reflect a one-sided stance (score of 0).

## *Explanatory Variables*

Our main explanatory variable is *electoral security*. We assess a party's electoral security by examining its change in vote share since the last election lagged (Lehmann et al., 2024); a positive value refers to an increase in vote share, and a negative value indicates vote loss.[7]

We control for several factors that may influence manifesto content. To capture women's descriptive representation, we use comprehensive data on the share of *women MPs in the party* from the previous term and the presence of a *woman party leader* (Weeks et al., 2023).[8] We also control for the presence of a national gender *quota law*, which may increase party focus on gender issues (Clayton & Zetterberg, 2018; Weeks, 2022), and for whether the party was in *government* during the prior term, as governing parties tend to broaden their issue agendas (Greene, 2016). We include a *time trend* and a regional variable distinguishing Eastern from *Western Europe* to capture ideological and cultural differences. Finally, to address variation in text

length—which may correlate with attention to less salient issues or position extremity—we control for the total number of quasi-sentences in the manifesto in attention models, and the number of women-related quasi-sentences in position models. Summary statistics are in Appendix Table A2.

### *Empirical Strategy*

Our empirical strategy employs multilevel random intercept models, which measure the links between our main explanatory and dependent variables. These models account for the nested structure of the data, recognizing that some countries have multiple PRR parties, with parties nested within national contexts. In addition, multilevel random intercept models take into consideration within-level as well as between-level variation in the dependent variable (Gelman & Hill, 2007). This approach allows us to include and control for the party- and country-level variables discussed in the previous section that are central to existing theories of women's substantive representation. As an additional step to validate our model choice, we conducted Hausman tests, which assess whether a random effects specification is consistent and efficient compared with fixed effects. The tests produced mixed results, supporting random effects for some models but favoring fixed effects for others. In light of this, we present random effects models in the main text, consistent with our theoretical framework, and include fixed effects estimates for all models in Appendix Tables B2 and B3 for comparison and transparency.

## Multilevel Analyses

### *Populist Radical Right Parties' Attention to Women's Interests*

Under what conditions do PRR parties incorporate women's interests? Table 2 presents multilevel models of the share of PRR party manifestos dedicated to the five women's interests (gender rights, gender-based violence, work-family balance, reproductive rights, sexuality and gender identity). In line with our first hypothesis, we find that PRR parties' attention to gender rights is motivated by electoral incentives. As seen in Model 1 of Table 2, vote change has a negative and statistically significant impact on PRR parties' attention to gender rights. However, changes in vote share do not significantly relate to any of the other interests investigated.

In order to translate our results into meaningful quantities of interest (King et al., 2000), we plot the predicted values of the dependent variable for which we found a significant effect of electoral loss - attention to gender rights - by PRR party vote change.[9] As Figure 3 shows, the topic of gender-related rights enters the manifestos of most PRR parties, but electorally vulnerable PRR parties highlight the topic significantly more than those who are electorally

**Table 2.** Determinants of Women's Interests in Populist Radical Right Manifestos.

| | Gender rights | Work-family balance | Gender-based violence | Reproductive rights | Sexuality & gender identity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| Vote Change(t-1) | −**0.04*** (0.02) | −0.0003 (0.02) | −0.002 (0.01) | −0.003 (0.01) | 0.001 (0.002) |
| Women in Party(t-1) | −0.01 (0.01) | −**0.02*** (0.01) | −**0.01*** (0.004) | −0.01 (0.004) | −0.0004 (0.001) |
| Woman leader | −0.28 (0.38) | 0.09 (0.38) | **0.53***** (0.15) | 0.07 (0.15) | −0.02 (0.03) |
| Cabinet Party(t-1) | 0.11 (0.26) | 0.13 (0.26) | −0.03 (0.10) | −0.09 (0.10) | −0.03 (0.02) |
| Quota law | −0.36 (0.30) | −0.27 (0.31) | −0.07 (0.12) | −0.10 (0.12) | −0.03 (0.02) |
| Western Europe | **0.81*** (0.34) | −0.36 (0.37) | −0.13 (0.15) | 0.14 (0.14) | 0.04 (0.02) |
| Time | 0.02 (0.01) | **0.03*** (0.01) | 0.002 (0.005) | 0.001 (0.005) | **0.002*** (0.001) |
| Log manifesto length | −0.15 (0.08) | 0.08 (0.09) | 0.002 (0.03) | 0.003 (0.03) | 0.01 (0.01) |
| Constant | −34.38 (21.59) | −**53.13*** (21.73) | −3.83 (9.41) | −1.03 (9.36) | −**4.38*** (2.00) |
| N | 106 | 106 | 106 | 106 | 106 |
| AIC | 322.86 | 325.68 | 126.50 | 125.73 | −180.29 |
| BIC | 354.82 | 357.64 | 158.47 | 157.69 | −148.33 |

***$p < .001$.
**$p < .01$.
*$p < .05$.
*Notes*: Results are based on multilevel random-intercept models estimated using the lmer() package in R. Dependent variables are the share of the manifesto devoted to women's interests. Standard errors in parentheses.

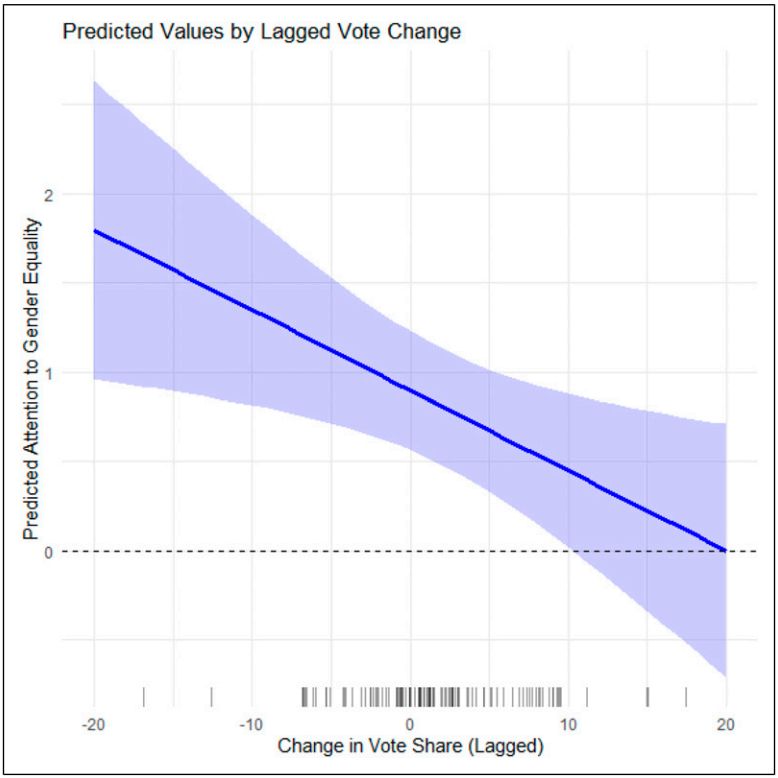


**Figure 3.** Predicted attention to gender rights for populist radical right parties by vote change. *Notes*: 95% confidence intervals are shown along with a rug plot along the x-axis.

secure. A party with a vote loss of 3.9% (or one standard deviation below the mean of 1.5) is predicted to increase gender equality emphasis to 1.1% of its manifesto, whereas a party facing a vote gain of 7% (or one standard deviation above the mean) is estimated to devote 0.6% of its manifesto to the same topic. This difference in manifesto percentages translates into an additional 5 to 7 quasi-sentences related to gender rights in the manifesto (depending on whether we use mean or median manifesto length for the calculation) -- a sizable increase in attention to gender equality, given its relative scarcity.

While the analysis presented here is descriptive due to the observational nature of the data collected, a closer look at party trajectories and manifestos suggests that a causal interpretation of the findings, whereby electoral threat spurs strategic window dressing, is plausible. In addition to the cases of Italy's Northern League and France's National Rally, highlighted in the Introduction, the trajectory of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), further illustrates this

dynamic. After gaining votes in the election preceding 1995, the SVP notably reduced its attention to gender rights in its 1995 manifesto. References to laws guaranteeing equal rights for women and men, and rejections of gender discrimination—prominent in the 1991 manifesto—were removed. This declining emphasis on gender rights continued across the 1999 and 2003 manifestos, as the SVP's electoral support steadily increased. However, in the run-up to the 2015 election, following a period of vote loss, the SVP's manifesto once again boosted attention to gender rights, emphasizing equal rights as well as rejecting gender-based affirmative action practices including gender quotas. These shifts in attention suggest a pattern in which the party's representation of women's interests aligns with electoral incentives, increasing emphasis when facing electoral pressure and downplaying it in times of strength.

A brief look at the control variables shows that PRR parties pay greater attention to gender-related rights in Western versus Eastern Europe. We also observe an increased focus on both work-family balance and sexuality and gender identity in PRR manifestos over time. Turning to the role of women in the party, having a woman leader is associated with greater levels of attention to gender-based violence. While this finding might suggest limits to the notion that the representation of women's interests is merely window dressing, it is important to note that there are only twelve observations of PRR women party leaders in the models, over half of them from the long-serving leader Pia Kjærsgaard of the Danish Progress Party.[10] Given the small number of women leaders, these results should be interpreted with caution. Future studies should continue to assess the link between leader gender and women's interests as more women– such as Giorgia Meloni in Italy – serve as leaders of PRR parties. We note that while the share of women MPs is negatively associated with attention to work-family balance and gender-based violence—contrary to expectations in the literature—these relationships do not hold in bivariate regressions, suggesting that they may be confounded by other factors (see Appendix Tables B1–B4).

For PRR parties, then, we find little evidence that increased gender diversity within their ranks leads to greater inclusion of women's interests – but our findings do suggest that women's leadership matters. Thus, while PRR parties both elect more women (Weeks et al., 2023) and discuss gender equality issues more often when struggling, the share of women MPs does not itself determine party attention to such issues. Together, these findings could be taken as evidence that the direct link between the descriptive representation of women in parliaments and the substantive representation of women's interests commonly found in mainstream parties does not hold within the PRR party family.

**Table 3.** Determinants of Populist Radical Right Parties' Positions on Women's Interests.

| | Percent neutral | Percent mixed | Percent femonationalist | Gender position |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
| Vote Change(t-1) | −**0.64*** (0.29) | −0.0001 (0.01) | −**0.23*** (0.09) | 0.26 (0.86) |
| Women in Party(t-1) | −0.11 (0.16) | 0.003 (0.003) | **0.13*** (0.06) | −0.44 (0.48) |
| Woman leader | 0.56 (5.99) | 0.06 (0.13) | 0.26 (2.16) | **38.52*** (18.23) |
| Cabinet Party(t-1) | −6.09 (4.07) | −0.06 (0.09) | −0.80 (1.43) | 13.62 (12.32) |
| Quota law | −0.34 (4.68) | −0.14 (0.10) | 0.05 (1.86) | 2.91 (14.26) |
| Western Europe | −2.02 (4.48) | −0.20 (0.11) | 10.86 (6.80) | −13.43 (14.12) |
| Time | −0.11 (0.19) | −0.004 (0.004) | **0.19**** (0.06) | 0.30 (0.57) |
| Log length Women's sentences | 2.30 (1.58) | **0.15***** (0.04) | −0.68 (0.63) | 4.12 (4.82) |
| Constant | 246.09 (374.14) | 8.91 (8.15) | −**382.52**** (128.89) | −619.74 (1129.21) |
| N | 94 | 92 | 94 | 94 |
| AIC | 798.50 | 75.41 | 648.23 | 1005.67 |
| BIC | 829.02 | 105.67 | 678.75 | 1036.19 |

***$p < .001$.
**$p < .01$.
*$p < .05$.
*Notes*: Results are based on multilevel random-intercept models estimated using the lmer() package in R. Dependent variables are the position of the manifesto on women's interests. Standard errors in parentheses.

### *Populist Radical Right Parties' Positions on Women's Interests*

Thus far, the analysis suggests that PRR parties use attention to gender rights to respond to electoral losses; however, it does not tell us about party *positions* on these interests. Table 3 presents multilevel models of the PRR party position: our three operationalizations of risk-averse positions - neutral messages, mixed messages and femonationalism - and the party's gender position (gender egalitarian minus traditional).[11] The results offer support for a strategic window dressing logic of risk-averse position-taking. As expected, Model 4 of Table 3 shows little evidence that change in vote share is linked to the party's egalitarian-traditional position on women's interests. Instead, and supporting H2 and H4, Table 3 demonstrates that electoral loss is a strong predictor of a PRR party's advocacy of both neutral (Model 1) and femonationalist (Model 3) positions. We note that the impact of vote loss on neutral sentences, however, loses statistical significance in a fixed effects specification (further discussed in robustness checks). Table 3 reports no evidence supporting H3, that change in vote share is linked to mixed (or contradictory) positions.

An example of the strategic use of gender in the form of femonationalism comes from the Norwegian Progress Party. Following a poor result in 2013, when the party vote share declined by more than 6 percent, the share of femonationalist text grew from 3.8% in 2013 to 6.3% in 2017. This included a new pledge to introduce a ban on the hijab in primary schools and a ban on the use of full-coverage garments (the burqa and niqab) in all educational institutions, a rejection of gender-segregated education (associated with Islamic schools), and new rhetoric connecting the asylum system to human trafficking. In an election focused on immigration (Aardal & Bergh, 2018 :1211), these femonationalist manifesto references, like those in the Progress Party's broader 2017 campaign,[12] were a relatively risk-averse tactic to turn around the party's declining popularity by appealing to new voters while not alienating existing nativist ones.

The results also provide new evidence about the relationship between descriptive representation and gender positions for PRR parties. In line with our expectation and recent work on the PRR (e.g., Rashkova, 2021; Rashkova & Zankina, 2017; Xydias, 2020), but in contrast to the findings for mainstream parties (e.g. Kittilson, 2008; Kittilson, 2011; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005), Model 4 of Table 3 shows no significant link among PRR parties between their share of women MPs and their gender position on women's interests. Having more women MPs does not shift the party position in a more gender-egalitarian direction. A higher share of women in the party is positively associated with femonationalist positions, but this relationship is not robust to alternative specifications, particularly the inclusion of party fixed effects. The relationship may thus reflect differences

across parties, rather than changes attributable to the presence of women MPs. Model 4 also suggests that having a woman party leader is correlated with a more gender-egalitarian position. However, this relationship is not robust to alternative specifications. The last notable pattern in Table 3 is the positive and statistically significant time trend for femonationalist positions, mirroring the increase in such rhetoric shown in Figure 2.

## Robustness and Validity Checks

To ensure that our key findings are robust, we estimate a series of additional specifications. First, we run models without control variables to investigate whether results depend on the particular control variables included (Lenz & Sahn, 2021). Second, we estimate models with party fixed effects, which control for any party-specific omitted variables - observable or unobservable - that are constant over time. This helps address a potentially large source of omitted variable bias, such as the date of party founding and, because the linear combination of party fixed effects equals country fixed effects, broader contextual influences like a country's history of religiosity or gender norms. Third, we specify models including a dummy for the timing of the "Me Too" Movement against sexual assault, which rose dramatically in popularity in 2017 following a Twitter post by American actress Alyssa Milano. Fourth, we estimate models that include a lagged dependent variable, which allows us to evaluate whether our independent variables predict current levels of attention or position on women's interests, net of prior party stances.

Reassuringly, the main findings related to the influence of lagged vote change on gender rights and femonationalist positions are robust across all of these alternative specifications (see Appendix Tables B1 – B7). Additionally, having a woman leader remains correlated with greater attention to gender-based violence in PRR party manifestos across alternative models. However, lagged vote change no longer reaches statistical significance in the fixed effects model of neutral position, suggesting that the tendency to use neutral positions could be more strongly driven by stable party characteristics rather than short-term electoral shifts. The link between women's leadership and gender position is also not robust to models with no controls or fixed effects. And as previously mentioned, our findings on the link between the share of women MPs and attention/position also fail to replicate consistently in these alternative specifications.

In light of the relatively small number of PRR parties and thus manifesto observations in our sample, we also investigate the sensitivity of our key findings to influential observations. We follow recent best practices in model-based outlier detection by using Cook's distance (via the {performance} R package) to identify influential observations (Thériault et al., 2024). This approach offers a principled method for evaluating the impact of leverage points on model estimates, flagging

cases that exceed the standard influence threshold for further inspection. We focus on the link between lagged vote change in models of gender rights (Table 2 Model 1) and femonationalism (Table 3 Model 3), as well as the influence of women's leadership on attention to gender-based violence (Table 2 Model 3). Our analysis identifies a small number of influential observations in each model (see Appendix for associated discussion). However, excluding these cases does not affect the substantive conclusions of our models. As shown in Table B8, the results remain consistent with our main findings: electoral insecurity continues to be positively associated with attention to gender equality ($p < .05$) and femonationalist positions ($p < .1$), among PRR parties. This supports the robustness of our results and suggests that our conclusions are not driven by a small number of atypical cases.

## Conclusion

In recent years, many PRR parties have expanded their issue agenda to include women's interests. In this article, we seek to understand the conditions under which PRR parties are more likely to incorporate women's interests in their manifestos, and the factors determining their position on those issues. We offer a new theory of strategic window dressing, arguing that PRR parties' attention to women's interests is driven primarily by electoral motivations, but is mostly "window dressing," with little substantive change in gender position. Drawing upon the first cross-national dataset of both the salience and positions of women's interests in PRR manifestos, our analyses confirm that the key driver behind the PRR's inclusion of women's interests is a rational electoral calculation. PRR parties increase their attention to certain women's interests - particularly gender-related rights - when they are losing electoral support. Moreover, this vote loss tends to steer them toward risk-averse positions, especially neutral and femonationalist positions. The latter aligns closely with the core anti-immigration agenda of many PRR parties. In contrast to the link between descriptive and substantive representation often observed among mainstream parties, the presence of women MPs does not consistently increase attention to women's interests in PRR parties. However, our data suggest that the presence of a woman leader - though still relatively uncommon - is correlated with increased attention to gender-based violence.

The findings in this article advance our understanding of PRR party strategies. While growing evidence suggests that PRR parties are embracing novel issues as part of the tactic of agenda expansion (e.g., Bergman & Flatt, 2020; Hobolt & De Vries, 2015; Spoon & Williams, 2021, 2023), our study highlights how ephemeral those new commitments may be. We find that these new stances are merely tokenism – clouded by neutral and mixing positions or simply new "takes" on old issues. They do not represent bold shifts in party identity towards new types of niche parties (Meguid, 2023) or mainstream party status (Meyer & Wagner, 2013). Indeed, the data suggests that even lip

service towards a new issue like gender rights will be reversed when these parties no longer face electoral threat. While our quantitative analysis sheds light on the question of *when*—that is, under what conditions—PRR parties adopt gendered rhetoric, future research using interviews or other qualitative methods could more directly address the *why*, by uncovering the internal deliberations, motivations, and strategic calculations behind these rhetorical shifts. Another extension of our study is to examine the *so what* question—whether and how electoral competition drives not just rhetorical shifts, but tangible policy outcomes, such as changes in legislation or public spending.[13]

Further, our focus on PRR parties challenges and refines existing work on the determinants of attention to and position on women's interests in party politics. We find little evidence that women representatives facilitate the inclusion of women's interests in PRR party manifestos. On the one hand, the priorities and preferences of men and women MPs in and across PRR parties may be strikingly similar (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019; Meret, 2015; Rashkova, 2021; Xydias, 2020), and further research is needed on gender gaps in preferences of PRR party MPs to test this. On the other hand, women MPs in PRR parties may be constrained in the expression of their substantive representation. Preliminary evidence supports this. Clayton and Zetterberg (2021) link the absence of women's policy interests in legislation to a higher level of discipline amongst women than men parliamentarians, either because women MPs must toe the party line to get ahead or because more loyal women are elected in the first place. Women MPs in PRR parties may be further constrained by the lack of women's sections empowering them within the party structure. The almost universal hierarchical and centralized nature of PRR parties often led by authoritarian men may further contribute to the lack of women's influence. Thus, while the literature is correct to examine the representational effect of women being placed on candidate slates, gaining office, and being named as party leader (e.g., Kroeber, 2022; O'Brien 2019), how women come to these positions of power and the party context may have significant implications for the degree to which their voice is heard (Field, 2021). If women are included simply as part of an electoral strategy, and lack systems of support within the party, their influence over the issue agenda is likely to be circumscribed.

Our study focuses on PRR parties, an electorally growing party family which can be considered a "most likely" case for a test of our theory of strategic window dressing. Indeed, studies of femonationalism highlight that this is a rhetorical tool used especially (but not only) by PRR parties (Farris, 2017). Future research could usefully investigate the extent to which our theory holds among other party families to determine the broader applicability of our findings. For example, some existing case studies offer evidence of the strategic inclusion of women's interests by mainstream parties. Morgan (2013) finds that conservative parties in Europe emphasized childcare, parental leave and working time flexibility to appeal to women voters, although

women actors within the party also played key roles, suggesting such moves might not have been purely strategic. Testing the so-called "gendered leeway" theory (Bergqvist et al., 2018) in the UK, Höhmann and Nugent (2021) find that men MPs are more likely to represent women's interests when under electoral threat. A fruitful direction for future studies is thus to extend data collection on women's interests, which is currently lacking, across party families and countries over time.

Another important direction for future research is to consider whether our results extend beyond gender, to the representation of interests key to the life chances of other historically marginalized groups. For example, many PRR parties have shifted their rhetoric towards supporting LGBTQ + rights to shore up nativist values through "homonationalist" appeals (Dhoest, 2020; Foster & Kirke, 2023; Puar, 2018; Spierings, 2021), and nativist citizens are willing to support these more liberal values when immigrants and their cultures are seen as opposing LGBTQ + values (Turnbull-Dugarte and Lopez-Ortega 2024). Building on our theory, future studies could investigate whether homonationalist appeals occur under similar conditions of electoral threat.

For now, we can conclude that PRR parties across Europe use the tactic of strategic window dressing. This raises some fundamental questions for processes of representation in democratic politics. Substantive representation is central to the quality of democracy, with Mansbridge (1999) identifying it as "the primary function of representative democracy" (630). Strategic window dressing should not be confused with true substantive representation. To the contrary, these risk-averse messages run the risk of normalizing PRR parties' images and increasing the vote share of such parties.

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## Data Availability Statement

The dataset, replication files and codebook are available at Weeks et al. (2025)

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. Replication materials and code can be found at Weeks et al. (2025).
2. While we use Beckwith's classification structure, our analysis incorporates interests raised by other scholars (e.g., Celis & Childs, 2014; Reingold & Haynie, 2014) that go beyond her concern with equality.
3. Indeed, Lodders and Weldon (2019) find that even if PRR men voters are more sexist than their women counterparts, men's decisions to support the PRR are driven by their anti-immigrant sentiment and authoritarian values. Their position on gender equality is not a significant predictor of PRR support once their views on the PRR parties' core issues are controlled for.
4. Both datasets include gender equality as a component of broader categories.
5. Our main findings are robust to dropping these parties (to save space, results available from authors).
6. Summary statistics revealing variation in party attention to these topics can be found in Appendix Table A2.
7. An additional approach would be to examine the impact of loss of women versus men voters. Unfortunately, there is insufficient data on vote change by gender from high quality surveys to assess this metric; this is an avenue for future research when more survey data becomes available over time.
8. *Women in Party* is the percentage of a party's MPs who are women, with parties lacking parliamentary representation coded NA.
9. Predicted values are calculated from Table 2 Model 1 using the effects() package (for Figure 3) and ggeffects() package (for specific values) in R, both of which hold other control variables at their means.

10. The women leaders in our data are: Pia Kjærsgaard (Denmark), Siv Jensen (Norway), Marine Le Pen (France), and Jadranka Kosor (Croatia).
11. Note that the regression of mixed positions drops two observations which include neither gender-egalitarian nor gender-traditional positions.
12. "Meeting between Swedish and Norwegian ministers scrapped following 'no-go zone' claims," Islamist Watch, August 29, 2017. https://www.meforum.org/islamist-watch/meeting-between-swedish-and-norwegian-ministers. accessed June 12, 2025.
13. Evidence of promises turned into policy is seen with the 2023 Italian policy shifts targeting LGBTQI + rights. Prior to this, the Brothers of Italy party leader (and now PM) Giorgia Meloni frequently employed femonationalist rhetoric to support the so-called "natural family" (De Giorgi et al., 2023). See also https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/27/opinion/meloni-italy-washington-visit.html (accessed 29 January 2024).

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