

Still men's parties? Gender and the radical right in comparative perspective

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ABSTRACT

This framing paper introduces the symposium on gender and the radical right. With the exception of a few recent studies, gender issues have received little attention in research on the European radical right. The purpose of this symposium is to address that and examine (1) whether radical right parties are still 'men's parties' – parties led and supported primarily by men and (2) to what extent and how women and women's concerns have been included by these parties. It argues that radical right parties have changed their appeal since their origins in the 1980s. There is now evidence of the fact that radical right parties, at least in some countries, exhibit an active political involvement of women and engage in some representation of women's concerns. This puts them in a more 'standardised' political position vis-à-vis other parties. Given the current lack of focus on this topic, and given the recent gendered changes in radical right parties, this symposium stresses the academic and political importance of studying gender relations in radical right politics.

KEYWORDS Radical right; gender; political parties; European party politics

The debate on the radical right and its effect on domestic, as well as international, politics has drawn large interest both within and outside academic scholarship. With the heightening of the refugee crisis and the worsening demographic crisis with which European states are faced, issues like immigration, nationalism, and the notion of the 'other' – all part of the radical right parties' rhetoric – have become 'hot topics'. As a result, a body of literature studying various aspects of the radical right has proliferated, mainly presenting these parties as men's parties, or *Männerparteien* (see Mudde 2007 for a discussion). With the exception of several recent works (Blee and McGee Deutsch 2012; Spierings *et al.* 2015), however, the question of the role that *gender* plays in radical right politics has received little scholarly attention. The purpose of this

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symposium is to address that question and examine whether radical right parties still remain men's parties.

Combining an ideological core of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007), radical right parties have witnessed electoral successes in various countries in Europe since the 1980s. In addition to their success in West European nations, in the last decade we have also witnessed a growing number of nationalistic parties emerging and being electorally successful in a number of East European democracies. Radical right parties have gained access to elected assemblies and have even become part of governing coalitions at the local, regional or national level, which has resulted in a growing body of scholarship focusing on explaining the electoral rise of radical right parties (e.g. Eatwell 2003; Ignazi 1992), the profile of populist radical right voters (e.g. Mayer 2002), the role of charismatic leaders (e.g. Betz 1994; van der Brug and Mughan 2007), radical right party organisation (e.g. Art 2011), the ideological and policy programmes of radical right parties (e.g. Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Mudde 2000) and their political and policy impact (e.g. Akkerman 2012; Bale *et al.* 2010). Research on the gendered aspects of radical right politics, however, remains largely underdeveloped, despite the increasing interest in conservative gender claims (Celis and Childs 2012; Childs and Webb 2012; see also Kitschelt and McGann 1995).

Certainly, expectations as to how gender plays out in radical right parties exist. Most of these start from the assumption that radical right parties are men's parties, with male charismatic leaders, drawing especially from the support of male voters, and adopting ideological programmes and policies that support women's traditional place in the family. However, because systematic and comparative research is often lacking, knowledge on the topic remains overall fragmented (see Mudde 2007: 90; Spierings *et al.* 2015). Many current studies for instance focus on the gender gap in radical right voting. They find that support for radical right parties often comes from men, but remain inconclusive as to why this gender gap exists. A large number of studies have formulated demand-side explanations, including the fact that the gender gap among voters is linked to differences between men and women in structural resources (income, education), attitudes towards immigration and law and order, and political efficacy or distrust (Gidengil *et al.* 2005; Givens 2004; Harteveld *et al.* 2015; Immerzeel *et al.* 2015; Mudde 2007). More recent studies have witnessed a shift towards supply-side models, proclaiming that political opportunity structures such as party competition and the issue salience of immigration can better explain why some people are drawn to radical right parties. So far, however, the few studies that have tested supply-side explanations have found no strong effect on the gender gap in radical right voting (Immerzeel *et al.* 2015), so questions about the precise factors that render the radical right less attractive for women continue to exist.

Apart from voting, little is known about other aspects of women's involvement in radical right politics, such as the gendered elements of radical right leadership, discourse, and policy-making.

Overall, we know nearly nothing about the role that women play as representatives, as well as party members, in comparative perspective – do these conform or differ in different contexts? In a pioneering study of female activism in the extreme right in the Netherlands in the 1990s, Blee and Linden (2012) show that women join conservative (radical) right movements for different reasons than men. Female activists were 'hardly engaged with politics and were not interested in ideology' (Blee and Linden 2012: 103); they joined the party primarily to support a (male) significant other (husband, relative, good friend) who was already active in the party. Women also described their activism as something that 'just happened to them' (Blee and Linden 2012: 102). Based on these results, right-wing political women first appeared as 'second order' activists, whose political participation was mainly driven by family ties or by coincidence, not by ideological convictions.

More recently, however, scholars have emphasised the very prominent (first order) role that women sometimes play in conservative movements and parties. Consequently, the focus of the scholarship has shifted towards an acknowledgement of women's agency in right-wing movements, showing how women actively engage with the conservative discourse of their parties and/or try to bring about women-friendly change (Piccio 2014; Schreiber 2008; Scrinzi 2014). Within this framework, some attention has been devoted to the position of female leaders in radical right parties (such as Pia Kjaersgaard and Marine Le Pen), and their role in the feminisation of their parties (Mayer 2013; Meret 2015).

The above-mentioned studies excluded, however, we see that scholarship on right-wing women's political activism remains largely underdeveloped and that, as a result, the actual presence of women in radical right parties in Europe remains (severely) underestimated. Already in 2007 Cas Mudde criticised the fact that too many scholars take women's underrepresentation in radical right parties for granted, and that women's presence in these parties is more or less comparable to women's presence in centre-right parties. The composition of the political groups in the most recent European Parliament, presented in Figure 1, still largely confirm these findings. The parties towards the left of the ideological spectrum (including the European United Left–Nordic Green Left, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, and the Greens/European Free Alliance) show a balanced presence of women and men. The representation of women in right-wing party groups tends to be lower, but not exceptionally low for the radical right parties in the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group. In fact, the proportion of female MEPs in the ENF (34%) mirrors the average proportion of women in the European

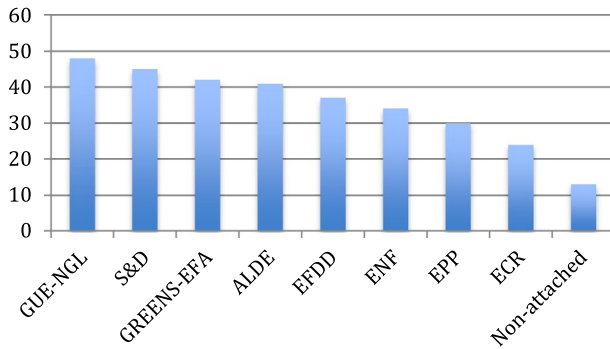


Figure 1. Percentages of women in the European Parliament (2016), by political group.
 Source: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/> (accessed 21 April 2016), own calculations.

Parliament (37%). These findings obviously put in question the traditional depiction of the radical right as ‘women-unfriendly’.

Parties’ attention to gender issues is not only illustrated by the political inclusion of women but also by how gendered interests find their way into political discourse and party programmes. Radical right politics is traditionally associated with a more conservative gender ideology, emphasising traditional gender roles, a conservative view on family relations, and opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Mudde 2007; Norocel 2010). More recent scholarship nevertheless also reveals a more complex picture. At least in some countries, the promotion of women’s autonomy and gender equality has become part of PRRPs’ anti-Islam discourse (Akkerman 2015; de Lange and Mügge 2015; Meret and Siim 2013). A clear contrast seems to emerge between radical right parties’ conservative gender stance in relation to moral issues and their emphasis on gender equality in their anti-immigration discourse.

All this raises several new questions. First, and most important, is the question of how we perceive radical right parties: can we still refer to them as *men’s parties* or has their image and perhaps even their function within the party system changed? Furthermore, how and to what extent have women, and women’s issues, been integrated in the political discourse and representation of radical right parties? Are the men in those parties making any gender equality claims?

We argue that radical right parties have certainly changed their appeal since their origin in the 1980s, and that today they can be said to follow what we term a ‘standardisation’ strategy, or what Mayer (2013) has labelled a ‘de-demonization’ strategy. While still focusing on issues traditional for the radical right family, their electoral success and participation in government have sometimes pushed radical right parties more towards the centre and in particular more towards the adoption of or compromise on certain issues, such as the – rather untraditional for radical right parties – gender equality discourse

and inclusion of more women. Considering that radical right parties have to compete within the institutional and social framework of the country, just like any other party, it is likely to expect that after their initial entry into the political market, they 'soften' their radical rhetoric and try to appear as a more standard competitor in the party system.

Relying on the median voter theory and assuming that after initial entry in the legislative arena, radical right parties want to remain electorally successful, and even increase the share of their seats, it would be plausible to expect that radical right parties move more towards the centre in order to get as many new voters as they can. The strategies that radical right parties can follow to achieve this is by changing their political discourse, changing their representation, or changing their actions (in public and in government). We argue that one important channel through which these changes can come about is the engagement and inclusion of women.

This symposium contributes to the scholarship of gender and radical right politics, by examining the extent and the type of involvement that women compared to men have in the European radical right. In doing this, it has two goals. The first is to extend existing scholarship on gender equality to the radical right and to answer questions about the relationship between gender and the radical right, which have not been answered thus far. Naturally from this comes the second goal, which is to pave the way for further studies on the questions posed here. The articles that follow show evidence of two things: one that we need to be more cautious when using the term *Männerparteien* when referring to the radical right, since many of these parties exhibit active involvement of women both inside and outside the legislative arena; two, that there is evidence that radical right parties, at least in the countries examined here, have engaged in some representation of women's issues, which puts them in a more 'standardised political position' vis-à-vis all other parties, while they still retain their radical trademark.

This symposium offers four studies on the role of gender in radical right parties in several European democracies. The symposium opens with an article on the most studied issue in relation to radical right parties – the gender gap in voting. With a novel outlook on potential explanations, and using very recent data on voting for the populist left and right in eight European countries, Niels Spierings and Andrej Zaslove ask whether populism – rather than the programmatic right – can explain the persistence of the gender gap. Their results show that men do indeed have stronger populist attitudes than women, and these differences can (partially) explain why more men than women vote for populist radical right parties. At the same time, however, they find that gender differences in populist attitudes do not account for the gender gap in populist *left* voting. They conclude that populism as a thin-centred ideology influences gendered electoral dynamics differently for the left and the right.

The second article, by Ekaterina Rashkova and Emilia Zankina, tackles the question of whether radical right parties are men's parties from the perspective of political representation and delves into the case of Bulgarian politics. In the first such study of a non-Western European democracy, the authors show that while radical right parties are still very much men's parties in terms of their descriptive representation, a look into the parliamentary activity of MPs (i.e. substantive representation) reveals a very different picture. Contrary to expectations, radical right MPs have been most active on women's issues, both compared to female MPs from other parties, as well as to male MPs from inside and outside the radical right. The authors explain this by the fact that the unique ideology of East European radical right parties – emphasising welfare chauvinism and socialist nostalgia – incites them to be more concerned with social policy and consequently also women's issues.

In a third piece, Francesca Scrinzi offers an understanding of the complex ways in which gender influences three aspects of the Lega Nord in Italy: its ideology, policy, and female activism. Looking closely at the issue of migrant care labour, she first lays out a tension between the party's official discourse and its policy orientations: while the party 'officially' supports unpaid care work as the 'natural' mission of women, it diverts from its position by implementing policies that support paid care work for *migrant* women (only). Next, she shows that female activists within the Lega Nord also actively engage with these narratives. These women renegotiate both the parties' official discourse and their own position in the gendered and racialised division of work.

A final piece, by Kimberly Morgan, studies the 'gendering' of integration policies and radical right politics over time in France (1989–2012). Similar to other countries in Western Europe, France has witnessed changes in integration policies, with right-wing parties increasingly linking concerns over migrant integration to concerns about the oppression of minority/Muslim women. However, unlike in other European countries, in France the radical right party, Front National, was not the frontrunner in making gender-based integration claims. Morgan finds that Marine Le Pen has recently devoted more attention to issues such as the Muslim headscarf in an attempt to 'republicanise' the FN but overall references to gender issues in the FN discourse remain scarce. In France, it was the radical right party that imitated the centre-right, and not the other way around.

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