

Neither Exceptional nor Moderate: Rethinking Women Populist Leaders

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Abstract

Women now lead populist parties across Europe and beyond, an empirical reality that seemed implausible only a few decades ago. Yet populist leadership research remains predominantly male-centered and unevenly attentive to gender; studies of women populist leaders are growing but remain fragmented, while gender-and-leadership scholarship focuses largely on mainstream and gender-progressive contexts. This editorial reviews the state of research on women populist leaders along four axes—pathways and party context, the gendered demand side, the gendered performance of leadership, and agendas in office—and introduces the ten contributions to this thematic issue. It closes by identifying avenues for further research, among them ideological and geographical breadth, intersectionality, and the reception of gendered populist performance.

Keywords

anti-gender politics; comparative analysis; double bind; gender and populism; political leadership; populist radical right; women populist leaders

1. Introduction: Women at the Helm of Populist Parties

Historically, the populist radical right (PRR) was described, with good reason, as a family of *Männerparteien*—men’s parties, male-dominated in membership, candidacy, and office, and programmatically committed to authoritarian, ethnonationalist, and patriarchal ideologies that privilege heterosexual (white) men while relegating women to caregiving and maternal roles (Pettersson, 2017; Snipes & Mudde, 2020).

At the leadership level, however, it no longer holds. Since Pia Kjaersgaard assumed the chairmanship of the Danish People's Party in 1995, more than a dozen women have led PRR parties across Europe (Caiani & Stefanutto Rosa, 2024), including Susanne Riess-Passer, who became federal chair of the Freedom Party of Austria in 2000 and the first woman to chair an Austrian federal party. Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy) has governed Italy since 2022; Marine Le Pen (National Rally) twice reached the French presidential run-off; Riikka Purra (Finns Party) serves as Finland's deputy prime minister and finance minister; and Alice Weidel (Alternative for Germany) contested the 2025 German federal election as her party's chancellor candidate. Nor is the phenomenon confined to the right, or to party leadership: Sahra Wagenknecht's founding and leadership of the left-populist Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, and the prominence of populist women legislators from Lithuania to the United States, extend it across the ideological spectrum and down the party hierarchy.

The puzzle this poses is familiar yet unresolved: women have reached the top of organizations whose ideologies sustain gender hierarchy, largely without fundamentally moderating those commitments. More than three decades after Kjaersgaard's rise, the analytical response has grown but remains partial. Scholarship on populist leadership identifies a repertoire in which leaders claim to speak directly for "the people" against established elites (Mudde, 2004), while showing that such leadership is framed, implicitly or explicitly, in strongly masculine terms (Meret, 2015). Although the wider literature has historically centered on male leaders, a growing body of work now examines women populist leaders' charisma, self-presentation, media framing, and gendered performances (see, e.g., Bast et al., 2022; Casullo, 2025; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Geva, 2020; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026; Snipes & Mudde, 2020). Together, these studies offer insights across cases and approaches, while a cumulative research stream is beginning to emerge. The broader scholarship on gender and political leadership, in turn, has developed primarily in mainstream or comparatively gender-progressive contexts, especially in research on the double bind, while leaving women who lead ideologically radical parties less systematically examined (Bast et al., 2022; Müller & Tömmel, 2022). Women's populist leadership is therefore a developing field within the rapidly expanding scholarship on gender and populism (Abi-Hassan, 2017; Dietze & Roth, 2020).

Building on this momentum, the thematic issue brings these emerging lines of inquiry into closer comparative dialogue. Its 10 contributions span 19 countries, the ideological spectrum, and multiple political arenas—from party leadership to government and electorates—while examining both women's pathways to and performance in populist leadership. All but one are explicitly comparative. Section 2 reviews the state of research along four axes; Section 3 introduces the contributions in three thematic clusters; and Section 4 identifies avenues for further work.

2. Researching Women Populist Leaders

Research on gender and political leadership is conventionally organized around *positional* leadership—the presence of women in positions of power and their conditions of access—and *behavioral* leadership—the exercise and evaluation of leadership once attained (Müller & Tömmel, 2022, p. 20). Applying this distinction to the literature on populism yields four axes of inquiry.

2.1. Positional Leadership: Pathways and Party Context

Explanations for women's ascent in male-dominated populist parties have fallen into three main groups. The first is strategic: women leaders serve as reputational assets, softening a party's image and easing its normalization—a dynamic evident in the media framing of Le Pen as “France's (Kinder, Gentler) Extremist” (Snipes & Mudde, 2020, p. 453). The second is organizational: although women remain a minority among PRR party members, those who join tend to be highly active and well embedded in party networks, furnishing organizational resources that may facilitate advancement into party and public office (Ammassari, 2026). The third derives from party-founding and remains under-theorized: established party structures and male-dominated political networks can constrain women's routes to leadership (Müller & Tömmel, 2022, pp. 22–23). By contrast, many of Europe's populist women leaders—from Kjærsgaard, Meloni, and Wagenknecht, to Jana Bobošíková, Inger Støjberg, Pernille Vermund, and Anne Marie Waters—founded or co-founded the parties they have led, thereby acquiring a source of authority independent of male gatekeepers.

2.2. Positional Leadership: The Gendered Demand Side

Against women's visibility at the top stands a persistent populist gender gap across Western and Eastern Europe: women remain, on average, less likely than men to support these parties, especially those on the radical right (Harteveld et al., 2015; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). Whether women leaders narrow that gap—the question of a leader gender effect—remains little tested. Some scholars contend that PRR parties strategically endorse women leaders to attract women voters (Weeks et al., 2023). Yet, the supply-side literature on performance and the demand-side literature on voting have largely proceeded in parallel. Haußmann et al. (2026) and Merullo and Weeks (2026) in this issue begin to bridge this divide from complementary angles.

2.3. Behavioral Leadership: Performing Gender, the Double Bind, and Its Strategic Uses

The best-developed strand of this literature concerns leadership performance. Because populist performances are structured around hegemonic masculinity (Geva, 2020; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026), and leadership continues to be conflated with stereotypically masculine traits such as ambition, assertiveness, and dominance while women are presumed to embody kindness, warmth, and gentleness (Müller & Tömmel, 2022), women in these parties are assumed to face particularly strong gendered barriers to political success (Bast et al., 2022; Pettersson et al., 2023). The point of departure is the “femininity-competence double bind” (Campus, 2013, p. 54): the requirement that women leaders demonstrate strength, decisiveness, and assertiveness while conforming to traditional expectations of femininity rooted in care, nurturing, and maternal responsibility.

However, a consistent finding is that successful women populist leaders do not resolve this tension but exploit it, combining masculine-coded authority with strategically deployed feminine registers: Kjærsgaard's despotic public style alongside the “private Pia” (Meret, 2015, p. 101), Le Pen as a “double-headed hydra” of political masculinity and femininity (Geva, 2026), the alternation of harsh punisher and loving mother (Pettersson et al., 2023), and, more broadly, the figure of the strongwoman (Casullo, 2025; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). A growing body of work reframes the double bind less as constraint than as resource

(Bast et al., 2022; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024), and some studies suggest that in consolidated cases gender ceases to operate as a salient evaluative category (Keeling & Ladini, 2025).

2.4. Behavioral Leadership: Policy Agendas and Substantive Representation

Finally, there is the question of policy agendas. As a “thin-centered ideology,” populism lacks a comprehensive political program and can combine with diverse ideological projects (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). On the radical right, gender operates both as a policy field and as a “meta-language” through which inequality and power are negotiated (Dietze & Roth, 2020, p. 8). PRR agendas combine conservative positions on family and reproduction with selective appeals to women’s rights, especially in anti-immigration politics (Akkerman, 2015). Yet women’s leadership does not necessarily alter these priorities: case-based and cross-national research finds limited or tactical engagement with women’s interests rather than broader gender-egalitarian transformation (De Giorgi et al., 2023; Meguid et al., 2025).

3. Contributions to This Thematic Issue

3.1. Constructing Leadership

The first group of contributions examines how women’s populist leadership is constructed and performed through the interplay of gender, political norms, and leadership styles. Meret et al. (2026) compare two generations of Nordic PRR leaders—Kjærsgaard, Purra, Siv Jensen, and Sylvi Listhaug. Their biographical analysis shows how they negotiate hegemonic masculinity and femininity by combining professional and political identities with references to family, local ties, and private life. Younger leaders, however, foreground radical and ethnonationalist agendas and appear less concerned with balancing the two. Park and Budryté (2026) compare the Lithuanian MP Agnė Širinskienė and MAGA Republican Marjorie Taylor Greene, using the concept of patriarchal bargain to examine advancement within patriarchal environments alongside vulnerability and political effacement. Müller and Ehrnst (2026) apply Leadership Trait Analysis to Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel, finding leadership profiles characterized by high self-confidence and pronounced distrust of others; differences from male far-right populist counterparts are comparatively small, while those from other women leaders are pronounced. Finally, at the organizational level, De Giorgi and Zulianello (2026), drawing on interviews with Brothers of Italy representatives, identify a process of gender neutralization: The party evaluates Meloni through apparently gender-neutral qualities—coherence, sacrifice, competence, and loyalty—rather than explicitly gendered criteria.

3.2. Performing Leadership

A second set examines leadership performance and strategies for navigating political structures and public visibility. Klein (2026) compares six European PRR leaders—Tom van Grieken, Nigel Farage, Geert Wilders, Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel—across Instagram, Facebook, and X, finding descriptively that women appeared more often and used more agentic cues, with the smallest gender gaps on Instagram; individual style, however, remained the largest source of variation. Pettersson et al. (2026) show that Purra and Meloni responded to racism-related scandals through denial, self-defense, and counterattack, challenging assumptions that right-wing populist women rely on gender-stereotypical repair strategies. Zbytniewska and Pető (2026) develop the concept of *skirmishing femininity* through Poland’s Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik and

Hungary's Dóra Dúró, showing how motherhood and protection combine with confrontational and transgressive communication, allowing femininity to authorize rather than temper performative incivility.

3.3. Gendered Agendas and Electoral Results

The final set examines how gendered leadership shapes agendas and electoral behavior. Bordignon and Pansardi (2026) compare Le Pen's, Meloni's, and Weidel's framing of LGBTQI+ issues, identifying avoidance and homonationalism in Le Pen, traditional-family and child-protection frames in Meloni, and homonationalist and anti-gender discourse in Weidel. All resist further rights expansion, selectively accommodate acceptance of sexual orientation, and marginalize gender identity and transgender rights. Merullo and Weeks (2026) combine manifesto data from 15 Western European countries with a survey experiment, finding broader agendas among women-led PRR parties, but no consistent reduction in perceived extremism or increase in support; communal framing improves favorability and vote likelihood, whereas agentic framing heightens perceived radicalism. Finally, Haußmann et al. (2026) compare support for Weidel's AfD and Wagenknecht's BSW in the 2025 German election, finding that gender effects become nonsignificant once gender-related attitudes are included. Evaluations of both leaders predict support but do not explain the gaps.

4. Future Avenues for the Study of Women Populist Leadership

Five priorities follow from this issue. First, by bringing far-right and left-populist cases, including the BSW and Širinskienė, into a shared comparative frame, this issue shows that women's leadership beyond the populist radical right warrants a dedicated comparative research agenda. Second, the field remains Western-centric, and further systematic work on Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia is needed to establish which gender-leadership mechanisms identified here travel across regions, and which are context-specific. Third, populist women leaders are still routinely treated as a category defined by gender alone, although sexuality, age, class, religion, and race are plainly constitutive of their profiles—e.g., Weidel—and remain scarcely theorized. Fourth, most existing work analyzes the production of gendered populist performance rather than its reception, and the interview-based and experimental designs presented here indicate a way forward. Fifth, moving from performance to policy outputs, including women's substantive representation and the gendered dynamics of democratic backsliding, requires cumulative comparative designs to study the effects of women's populist leadership over time.

Taken together, the contributions to this issue show that women populist leaders are neither exceptional within their parties nor merely moderating them, but central actors in contemporary populist politics. Understanding their role calls for closer and more sustained dialogue between scholarship on populism and gender and leadership—a conversation this collection seeks to advance.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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