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Table of Contents

Neither Exceptional nor Moderate: Rethinking Women Populist Leaders
Henriette Müller and Pamela Pansardi

Female Leaders and the Populist Radical Right in the Nordic Countries
Susi Meret, Liv Sunnercrantz, and Ann-Cathrine Jungar

Women Populist MPs, Patriarchal Bargains, and Anti-Gender Politics: Agnė Širinskienė and Marjorie Taylor Greene
Ausra Park and Dovilė Budrytė

Profiling Far-Right Populist Women Leaders: A Trait Analysis of Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel
Henriette Müller and Klara-Josefin Ehrnst

Female Leadership, Gender Neutralization, and the Populist Radical Right: The Case of Giorgia Meloni
Elisabetta De Giorgi and Mattia Zulianello

Visual Self-Presentation of Radical Right Leaders on Social Media: Platform and Gender Differences
Ofra Klein

"We Are Not as They Portray Us": Women Populist Leaders' Re-Presentations of Racism-Related Scandals
Katarina Pettersson, Jennifer De Paola, and Gilda Sensales

Skirmishing Femininity: Female Populist Skirmishers and the Gendered Politics of Illiberalism in Hungary and Poland
Karolina Zbytniewska and Andrea Pető

Populist Radical Right Women Leaders and the Framing of LGBTQI+ Issues: Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel
Margherita Bordignon and Pamela Pansardi

Women's Leadership and the Expansion of Populist Radical Right Party Agendas
Rossella Merullo and Ana Catalano Weeks

Populist Parties, Female Populist Leaders, and the Gendered Vote in Germany
Teresa Haußmann, Aiko Wagner, and Jan Philipp Thomeczek

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EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

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).

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At the leadership level, however, it no longer holds. Since Pia Kjærsgaard 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 Kjærsgaard'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 Budrytė (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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ARTICLE

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Female Leaders and the Populist Radical Right in the Nordic Countries

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Abstract

This article examines female leadership in populist radical right (PRR) parties in the Nordic countries, challenging the traditional view of these parties as "Männerparteien." Building upon research on the centrality of gender to the radical right, we analyse biographical material covering the private and professional lives of two generations of female PRR leaders in Denmark (Pia Kjærsgaard), Finland (Riikka Purra), and Norway (Siv Jensen and Sylvi Listhaug). Our findings show that these leaders strategically balance hegemonic masculinity and femininity, drawing on masculine codes to frame themselves as top-down disciplining managers and tough party leaders while simultaneously invoking their private lives to highlight care, empathy, and softer values. The analysis also reveals generational differences tracking broader ideological transformations within the parties, with implications for leadership style and performance. Younger PRR female leaders place greater emphasis on radical and ethnonationalist agendas and appear less concerned about balancing masculine authority with feminine expectations.

Keywords

double bind; gender; leadership; pariah femininity; populism; radical right

1. Introduction

The relationship between the populist radical right (PRR) and gender has warranted increasing scholarly attention (e.g., Blee & Scrinzi, 2026; Meret & Scrinzi, 2024). Recent studies have shown how gender operates as more than a demographic variable or as a matter of gender equality and family politics. Today, gender functions as a structuring force across the PRR, shaping membership, ideology, and leadership style

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(Sauer, 2020). Gender has become a powerful driver of social and political polarisation, as evidenced by intensifying public contestation over sex education, reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ inclusion, and gender-based violence (Eslen-Ziya et al., 2026). Gender has been described as a "symbolic glue" (Grzebalska et al., 2017), a "signifier" that allows the coming together of a broader constellation of anti-gender and anti-feminist actors from different ideological, political backgrounds. In short, the centrality of gendered arguments and policies to the PRR has become increasingly manifest and researched (Donà, 2020). This article examines one dimension of the intersection between gender and the PRR (Meret & Scrinzi, 2024)—namely the construction of female leadership authority in the Nordic context. Prior research has analysed how prominent female leaders, such as Pia Kjærsgaard (Meret, 2015), Marine Le Pen (Geva, 2020), Giorgia Meloni (De Giorgi et al., 2023), and Siv Jensen (Meret et al., 2016), cultivate personal authority and mediate public and private life to mobilize support and project capability as party leaders. These contributions have illuminated the gendered dimensions through which PRR leadership is constituted and voters' support is ensured (Formato & Evolvi, 2026). In the past decade, both this field of study and the number of women leading PRR parties have grown. Politicians including not only Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni but also Alice Weidel, Riikka Purra, and Sylvi Listhaug have demonstrated that women can lead parties traditionally invested in the valorisation of masculine qualities while sustaining support from voters and followers. This raises three central questions that link up with our theoretical framework: (a) How do female PRR leaders position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity and femininity when constructing their leadership in biographical material? (b) How do they navigate the double bind between PRR masculine leadership codes and feminine expectations? (c) How do they manage the risk of negative stigma attached to women who embody traits reserved for masculine male leaders?

These parties have long been described as "Männerparteien" (Mudde, 2007)—parties led and voted for by men. This traditionally masculine character has also informed the PRR organisational cultures and strongly gendered the style and rhetoric of the leaders (Jungar & Jupskås, 2024). Yet, alongside these male leaders, women are no longer exceptions, and recent studies have questioned whether they too are worthy of the "strongmen" attribution (Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). Particularly in the Nordic countries, PRR female leadership is hardly new (Meret et al., 2016), and understanding how women enter and influence these male-dominated political spaces is essential to accounts of the contemporary PRR and gender.

2. The Radical Right Gender Gap

Until around 2010, a consistent marker of PRR support was the overrepresentation of men among its voters (Coffé, 2019). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) capture this with the words "Vox populi or vox masculini?," emphasizing the masculine-coded rhetoric, style, and substance of PRR politics. Givens (2004) introduced the phrase "radical right gender gap" to describe the fact that men are significantly more likely than women to support these parties. These accounts capture the consistent underrepresentation of women in the PRR electorate, a trend that has started to shift (Amengay et al., 2017). Within this context, the election of female leaders in PRR has been interpreted as a strategic response to the gender gap. Research shows that PRR parties are more likely to promote women when facing electoral vulnerability, using female leaders to broaden their electoral appeal while altering neither core nativist nor antifeminist commitments (Weeks et al., 2023). Related work conceptualises women's inclusion as symbolic or instrumental, aimed at image moderation or normalization rather than substantive change (Meguid et al., 2025). Female leaders thus play a part in normalization processes by softening the image of the PRR (see

Amengay et al., 2017). Performance-oriented accounts have further argued that women may serve as effective leaders by embodying hybrid styles combining authority and care, facilitating the communication of exclusionary politics (Casullo, 2025). Other scholars (Bussière-Ladouceur, 2023) have emphasised, however, the lack of clear evidence that the PRR gender gap narrows under female party leadership. Sometimes the gap increases under female leadership, suggesting that the gender of the party leader has little to no effect.

PRR leaders usually spark contrasting reactions of admiration, sympathy, and aversion. Scholars have tried to understand how these performances are structured and why they provoke such feelings (Bjånesøy, 2023). In reflections on PRR mobilisation, Sauer (2020) examines how certain performances of masculinity are not just personal traits carried by male politicians but function as structuring logics informing discourse, institutions, and leadership. The concepts of "hegemonic masculinity" and "hegemonic femininity" (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) help us understand how "gender hegemony" co-structures leadership styles and reconstructs authority. Schippers (2007, p. 91) explains that "idealized features of masculinity and femininity as complementary and hierarchical provide a rationale for social relations at all levels of social organization from the self to interaction, to institutional structures, to global relations of domination." While hegemonic masculinity is expressed in qualities such as authority, physical strength, toughness, and desire for the feminine object, hegemonic femininity is expressed in qualities that support hegemonic masculinity as complementary to and yet hierarchically below it. Femininity markers include qualities such as care, nurturing impulses, attraction to the masculine object, and emotional vulnerability.

Schippers also identifies "pariah femininity" (2007, p. 95) as a form of femininity expressed by a person marked as female but with qualities identified as masculine. This person is stigmatised as socially less desirable because they contaminate the putatively natural relation between hegemonic masculinity and femininity. PRR political leadership is frequently associated with stereotypically masculine characteristics. PRR female leaders are thus seen as expressing masculine traits—such as being "controlling," "disciplined," "assertive," and "authoritative," while at the same time being characterized by followers as distinctly feminine (Geva, 2020)—for instance, by emphasising their maternal devotion to children and the family. Having to mediate between "masculine" and "feminine" traits is defined as the "double-bind" in the literature on political leadership and gender (Ås, 1981; Campus, 2013, pp. 54–72). Female leadership includes performances of masculinity, such as being "strong" or showing "strong" leadership. But it also requires displaying stereotypically feminine traits, such as maternal care, caring, and emotional responsiveness. In other words, PRR leaders must perform both hegemonic masculinity and femininity, with hegemonic masculinity being a vital "public" repertoire for both male and female populists. Yet, for PRR female leaders, this also implies facing the stigma of "pariah femininity." The solution is balancing public and private: while hegemonic masculinity is produced and reproduced in the leader's public life, the private becomes the locus of femininity. This strengthens gender hierarchies and legitimises the subordination of women to (white) heterosexual men. We argue that hegemonic masculinity and femininity, together with pariah femininity and the double bind, structure the performative repertoires enacted by Nordic PRR female leaders.

3. Case Selection and Data

State-feminism and gender equality are often seen as being part of national identity narratives in the Nordic region (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). The Nordic PRR parties have adapted and support public policies enabling the balancing of parenthood with working life and women's rights, while simultaneously reproducing anti-gender

and anti-feminist repertoires (Jungar & Jupskås, 2024). Despite not having formal gender quotas, women's political representation in the Nordics is among the highest internationally (Bergqvist, 1999). All Nordic countries have been governed by female prime ministers, and most parties have had a female leader (with the notable exceptions of the Swedish PRR party, the Sweden Democrats, and the Finnish conservative party Kansallinen Kokoomus). The Nordic PRR parties selectively incorporate gender equality and gay-rights through femo- and homo-nationalist appeals (Edenborg & Jungar, 2024; Jungar & Jupskås, 2024).

Against this backdrop, we analyse four female party leaders of three Nordic PRR parties: Dansk Folkeparti (DF, Danish People's Party, Denmark), Fremskrittspartiet (FRP, the Progress Party, Norway), and Perussuomalaiset (PS, Finns Party, Finland). They represent all cases of female PRR-party leadership in the Nordics, as the Sweden Democrats have not had a female party leader. These parties represent comparable cases of electorally successful PRR parties within broadly similar institutional, cultural, and historical contexts. Emerging in the early 1970s, they first appeared either as mobilisations against welfare-state bureaucracy and taxation (Denmark and Norway) or as agrarian populism critical of rapid urbanisation and modernisation (Finland). The Sweden Democrats originated from extreme right milieus in the late 1980s (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). Comparatively, the parties and their voters, as well as their effects on party competition and parliamentary behaviour, have been analysed (Jungar, 2024). However, studies on party leadership have been few, despite the fact that women have frequently held this position. The Nordic experience complicates conventional images of PRR leadership and invites closer analysis of how gendered norms and expectations are negotiated.

Female PRR party leadership has been far from exceptional. DF and PS have each had one female leader (Pia Kjærsgaard and Rikka Purra, respectively), while the Norwegian FRP has had two (Siv Jensen and Sylvi Listhaug). All of these leaders are included in our analysis (see Table 1 in the Supplementary File). They represent different generations, ranging from Kjærsgaard's and Jensen's long-term party leaderships to the more recent leaderships of Listhaug and Purra. Pia Kjærsgaard is the oldest of the four, with a 40-year parliamentary career. Siv Jensen's career is also long, lasting until her decision to retire from politics in 2021 and culminating in her appointment as Minister of Finance between 2013 and 2020. Sylvi Listhaug held ministerial posts between 2015 and 2020 before becoming party leader. Riikka Purra rose rapidly through the Finns Party, becoming leader in 2021 and Minister of Finance in the centre-right government from 2023.

The data for this article comes from political biographies (see Table 1 in the Supplementary File) published between 2013 and 2026 by and on the four party leaders. The material interweaves their personal lives with those of their political parties and covers different stages of both. The texts are of particular interest since they document each leader's efforts to construct a unified self, merging personal elements and experiences with the external events each identifies as having shaped them as a politician. These self-representations matter because they expose both the content and form of self-disclosure: what they deem worth telling of their private and public story as well as how they convey it to a broad readership. Historically, the biographical genre has been implicitly bound up with gender. Most canonical biographies have focused on the lives of men. As Linda Anderson argues: "autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of the masculine and….Western and middle-class modes of subjectivity" (Anderson, 2001, p. 3). Women are historically underrepresented in (auto-)biographical writing, not because they did not write about themselves, but because their lives were long deemed to fall short of the importance associated with historical male figures. The biographical genre (including political memoirs) has thus become

conflated with the narrative and style of the masculine subject. Later critical strands—particularly feminist ones—have emphasized that self-representation is constituted not only by gender but also by other categories tied to individual histories, contexts, and conditions. For PRR female leaders, political biographies are thus especially revealing, as they offer not only a site for observing how these politicians describe political events and experiences but also how they negotiate gender, authority, and authenticity within a political tradition long associated with masculine male leaders (Egerton, 1992).

We structure our analysis around three dimensions of the PRR female leaders' biographies: (a) personal origin, (b) political awakening, and (c) political self-branding. These are constitutive moments through which the female leaders portray themselves. Each dimension captures how party leadership performance and gender intersect. Starting with the justifications for political engagement and retrospective authenticity constructions, origin stories draw on modes of socialisation such as upbringing, class, family, and childhood, while political awakening highlights formative events and factors that retrospectively justify political engagement. Political self-branding concerns accounts of political leadership: leadership style; relationship with peers, supporters, and opponents; and public and private personas. These dimensions emerge from our analysis as codes and nested subcodes (using qualitative data coding aided by text-analysis software): (a) Origins (family, class, childhood, territory); (b) political awakening (wake-up moments, main sources of inspiration); and (c) political self-branding (public career, private life, critical moments). This approach lets us uncover and interpret shared patterns and variations across the cases. In doing so, we focus upon two analytical aspects introduced above: the double bind, whereby female leaders must reconcile masculinised norms of political authority with gendered expectations; and pariah femininity, highlighting how the party leaders negotiate hegemonic masculinity and femininity. The Nordic context intensifies these tensions. While female leadership is generally normalised, it is also subjected to heightened scrutiny. PRR female leaders face cross-pressure from societal norms and public expectations of gender equality, on the one hand, and masculinised party organisations and party ideology, on the other. This renders the double bind for female populist leaders in Nordic PPRs an interesting comparative case, as they navigate between the expectations of populist leadership in a context where the national self-understanding centres on (gender) equality. The analysis closely examines how female PRR leaders navigate this tension through curated forms of self-presentation that both draw on and reconfigure Nordic gender-equality norms.

4. Analysis

4.1. Origins

Across the four biographical accounts, narratives of personal background establish class- and gender-based senses of respectability, coupled with elements of care, independence, and morality. All the female leaders, to varying degrees, highlight their female forebears as role models of work ethic or perseverance. Identity-forming events and experiences function both to justify and counterbalance subsequent political leadership-ethos. All four ethos-constructions include degrees of authoritativeness, discipline, combativeness, and control—in short, masculine-coded characteristics.

Born in 1947, Pia Kjærsgaard presents an understated portrait of her young self as a "plain girl," mostly "preoccupied with [her] appearance" (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 14):

> I was what you might call a proper girl….I was also a bit quiet. I took care of my things, was active in class, but I wasn't the one getting top marks, and I didn't make much fuss about myself. (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 14)

Kjærsgaard's most recent biography recounts a middle-class upbringing within which her father owns a paint shop, and her mother acts as a housewife. Her first memories centre upon the man who later becomes her husband and lifelong support. She recalls collecting "things for [her] future home," which she then kept in her "bridal chest." As she elaborates: "I would bring home brochures of different dinnerware sets so I could tick off what I wanted" (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 14). Such details cast Kjærsgaard as traditional, prepared for an orderly life as a practical housewife. She retrospectively juxtaposed this respectable domesticity with crisis and a "broken home," as her parents divorced when she was thirteen. She describes this disruption both as a formative rupture (p. 95) and as a deep life crisis and a great embarrassment, as she was "the only one in [the] class who came from a divorced family" (p. 89). Closely tied to this is the fate of the family dog, Skipper: "one day my father shot him with his hunting rifle" (p. 20). Kjærsgaard's family idyll shatters, and her father nearly succumbs "to bitterness and drink." All this compels her to take responsibility "for holding everyday life together," "to harden herself" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, pp. 16, 37–38), and to "conceal her feelings" (p. 29). Kjærsgaard's origin story thus serves to justify traits of her persona (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 39):

> My upbringing is a significant part of the explanation for why order and security mean so much to me. I am a security junkie. A control freak. I prefer to have structure and things under control, because I have experienced what it feels like when, all of a sudden, nothing is under control at all.

This narrative strives to establish a respectable femininity, achieved despite adverse conditions, which serves as justification for Kjærsgaard's overcontrolling personality and counterbalances the masculine-coded leadership practices.

Kjærsgaard's relationship with her mother is strained, particularly after the divorce and her mother's new marriage with "Uncle Poul" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 30). Kjærsgaard describes her mother as a conspicuous "femme fatale, who wore hats and feather boas," was "beautiful, striking, charismatic," "reckless," and "very self-centred" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 30, 2025, pp. 181–182)—a hyper-feminine, eccentric woman who "partied through the night, and slept late next day" (p. 183). This contrasts with Kjærsgaard's preferred relative, the "tidy and meticulous" grandmother who "behaved normally" (p. 26). Her mother features primarily as a negative counter-model to what Kjærsgaard aspires to as a wife, mother, and woman. She nevertheless recalls her mother urging her "never to bow her head" (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 182)—a phrase she later repeats in accounts of her political challenges. While Kjærsgaard rejects elements of improper femininity in the domestic sphere, she later draws on this charisma and eccentricity as useful qualities in public political life, such as engagement, enthusiasm, and overcommitment.

Siv Jensen, born in 1969, also recounts her parents' divorce but emphasizes her extended-family constellation as "entirely positive" (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 89). In contrast to Kjærsgaard's narrative of crisis and control, Jensen presents her mother's post-divorce struggle as a formative example of self-reliance and entrepreneurial resolve:

> We learnt early on that money doesn't fall from the sky. It comes from hard work.....Mum's attitude is that you must never give up....No matter how bleak things may seem....She managed to set up a small one-woman business that earned enough money to pay the bills and put food on the table for a whole family. (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 99–102)

Jensen's memoir otherwise portrays an emotionally secure childhood in a petit-bourgeois environment. Raised in a flat above her parents' shoe-shop at a busy Oslo intersection, Jensen depicts herself as both a "mummy's girl" and an independent "city girl." Commerce and urbanity affect her early socialization. Family life intersects with labour relations, and Jensen earns increased inclusion in work tasks within a naturalized hierarchy. Childhood aspirations "to stand behind the counter and serve customers" (pos. 49) position Jensen's family among "hard-working shopkeepers" and far from political elites. Jensen anchors her later political engagement in experiential knowledge, having "felt it firsthand":

> [Y]ou learn to live within your means. You must create value before you can spend it. From a very early age, Mum and Dad taught me the importance of a strong work ethic and responsibility. This has shaped me and my political work. You get nothing for free. You must get up in the morning. You must go to work. There is no such thing as "I can't be bothered." (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 112–117).

Work ethic and responsibility are central components in Jensen's self-construction and economic-political engagement. Her origin story reinforces a duty-oriented ethos embedded within existing socio-economic frameworks. Jensen's schooling in economics entails both moral and intellectual fostering. She describes herself as an apolitical student, yet she sees the student council as a "natural arena," suggesting that ideological conviction comes second to organisational ability. Jensen's narrative relates to order, justice, and institutional engagement rather than to anti-establishment rebellion.

In contrast, Sylvi Listhaug's origin story stands out as a construction of authenticity rooted in a seemingly picturesque, homogeneous, and unchanging Norwegian farming community. Born in 1977 and raised in semi-rural Norway to Christian traditions, Listhaug presents herself as a farmer's daughter of humble origins and ambitions, staying at home to "take care of grandma" (Listhaug & Akerhaug, 2018, p. 9) rather than studying in the big city. Listhaug revisits this *heartland* throughout her autobiography when presenting her motivation for political engagement. The autobiography recounts a childhood resolve to avoid dependence on men, family, or anyone else (p. 16). Anecdotes such as how Listhaug walks by herself to her first day of school contribute to constructing an ethos of self-reliance that supports her combative and stubborn persona and maverick style in politics. Like Kjærsgaard and Jensen, she foregrounds her professional legitimacy in a personal story of care, hard work, and ordinariness, although here presented along more Christian-conservative lines. Listhaug works in a nursing home while studying teacher education at the local college, and she teaches briefly before becoming political adviser to the Progress Party in 2001. In tracing her beginnings, she repeatedly highlights her experience of care work, and, like Kjærsgaard (1998, pp. 103–113), she expresses immense joy at meeting and helping the sick and elderly as a politician.

Riikka Purra, also born in 1977, describes a lower-middle-class upbringing in Tampere—an area historically associated with industries and the labour movement. Like Kjærsgaard, Purra recounts her parents' divorce, which left its mark on her, and living with her single mother, who was a secretary at the public broadcasting company YLE. Purra is notoriously protective of her private life, which is marked by grief and loss. As a girl, she

accompanies her mother to the pub. "Adult talk in general—and especially the talk of adults who are drinking, is not something a small child should have to listen to," she says (Kari & Nurmi, 2026, p. 26). The roles of parent and child are reversed, and Purra recalls taking care of her mother and worrying about the future. Aged 12, she wakes one morning to find her mother dead in bed beside her. Feeling lonely and unsafe, Purra avoids openly showing grief but retrospectively recognizes that "kids should not be left alone in such a terrible situation as I was" (pp. 26–28). She frames her loss as formative, making her strong, determined, and able to take control over her life. Reacting against her mother's poor lifestyle and health, Purra adopts vegetarianism and takes schoolwork seriously. Beyond her mother's death, Purra explains how divorce and the loss of three unborn children both hardened her, gave her strength, and shaped her belief that family is the most important thing in life. Like Kjærsgaard and Listhaug, hardness and discipline in character and political practice are justified through accounts of a background of feminised responsibility, care, and injury—ruptures that create the need for control and self-reliance as well as distance from perceived societal deviance and weakness.

4.2. Political Awakening

While these biographies establish respectable femininity as a precondition for later authority, they also recount political awakenings through formative experiences, including attraction to transgression and charismatic (male) leaders. Mogens Glistrup, a flamboyant tax lawyer who entered Danish politics in the early 1970s, triggers Kjærsgaard's (1998, p. 59) political awakening. Glistrup founded the Danish Progress Party (FrP) and gained widespread public attention and furore. Kjærsgaard (1998, p. 59) describes him as "provocative, infuriating, charming," as well as "intelligent," "genuine," "wild," "rebellious," and "in many ways touched by madness" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 55; see also Kjærsgaard, 2025, pp. 26–27). Kjærsgaard writes that she "fell for" him (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 27), ascribing this attraction to his transgressive style:

> I had a soft spot for people who cross the line in a good way. He caught my interest, and little by little I began to take notice of what he stood for politically….I was fascinated by Glistrup. (Kjærsgaard, 2025, pp. 27–28)

It is this charismatic male leader more so than the party's political stances that first intrigues Kjærsgaard. Her biographies disclose political ambivalence and disinterest early on, describing a political awakening that is more affective than ideological: "I had not formed my own political views yet, but I followed the debate and became more and more provoked by those who sponged off the state" (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 30). In 1973, Kjærsgaard votes for the FrP and subsequently participates in party meetings and political activities. As her husband puts it: "She caught the political bug" (p. 35). But to this she adds: "I did not do this to be elected to Parliament. It was not on my mind at all as a possibility" (p. 49). Indeed, she tells of tough political beginnings in a context of anarchy and ungratefulness.

Similarly, Jensen's turn to politics appears accidental rather than ideologically driven. Since adverse financial conditions impede her entrepreneurial aspirations, she instead enters party politics in 1987. Her mother participates in the local branch of the Progress Party, whose members, coincidentally, recruit Jensen, seeing that she has "far too much passion and too many opinions not to get involved in politics" (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 136). Jensen joins but does not divulge her ideological convictions at this stage. She becomes properly active in 1992 as a nominee for the local party board. She describes a decisive moment speaking in front of idolized party figures, including long-serving leader Carl I. Hagen. Just as

Glistrup is crucial to Kjærsgaard's political engagement, Hagen is a strong source of inspiration and a mentor for Jensen: "Carl I. Hagen was a politician I really looked up to; I thought he was unrivalled in his ability. Just being in the same room as him was really something back then" (pos. 185). Jensen highlights how Hagen warned that "inflammatory rhetoric on immigration" (pos. 294) could damage the party, while conveniently disregarding his earlier controversies and anti-Islamic "Mustafa letter" of 1987. Jensen describes her subsequent election and new responsibilities as transformative in terms of training and as a personal discovery of rhetorical authority, more so than as an ideological awakening. In the context of tough economic times, the party offers Jensen work as group secretary in 1994. While charismatic male party leaders play a significant role for both Kjærsgaard's and Jensen's turn to politics, Jensen is more so increasingly integrated into a masculinised party milieu rather than attracted to transgression.

In contrast to the previous two, Listhaug's political awakening starts at an early age. She credits watching news broadcasts with her grandmother as politically formative and inspiring. Listhaug highlights, for instance, seeing a debate, at the age of eight, between Reagan and Gorbachev. She engages in youth politics amid the EU-membership debate in the early 1990s. This issue bridges the left–right divide, as youth parties on both the left and the right join the "no" side. While there is no singular moment of political awakening, Listhaug mentions familiar events, like September 11, as significant for her political convictions. The autobiography anchors Listhaug's political persona to the homestead, which is set against urban and intellectual "elites" characterized by liberal values, higher education, and disdain for the "common people" (Listhaug & Akerhaug, 2018, pp. 35–36). The emphasis on rurality effectively underscores her formative distance from "the elite" and counterbalances her political career in the capital among those very same elites. By grounding her political engagement in moral conventionalism and respectable "rural" femininity, Listhaug's self-presentation provides a down-to-earth anchoring. She justifies her controversial, often hyperbolic statements by saying that they "came from the heart" as natural and common-sensical reactions. Here, pariah femininity appears through the ethos of the independent maverick, coupled with a seemingly authentic expression of emotion and anti-elite confrontation. Her desire to intervene in mediatized political discourse stands out in relation to Kjærsgaard and Jensen. Intriguingly, while Jensen and Kjærsgaard both pay homage to previous party leaders, Listhaug only briefly mentions Jensen and Hagen.

Neither Listhaug nor Purra seem triggered by charismatic party profiles. Purra's political socialisation starts at home, in discussions with her mother, who sympathized with the Finnish radical left. Purra's way into the radical right is far from linear. Like Listhaug, Purra presents herself as intuitively drawn to politics, albeit with greater academic interest. As a teenager, Purra engages with environmental and existential issues: "In upper-secondary school I already used every opportunity available to explore and bring attention to environmental issues. The presentations were very personal: indifference and the world filling up with filth were deeply distressing" (Kari & Nurmi, 2026, p. 47). She furthers this engagement through a non-materialist and vegetarian lifestyle, as well as through studies in political science, economics, and environmental sciences, graduating from the University of Turku in 2004, having written a master's thesis on NGOs and intergovernmental environmental policy. Having previously voted green, social-democratic, and conservative, she turns to ethnonationalism in the early 2000s. She develops an anti-immigration and anti-Islam stance while engaging in far-right discourses on the Finnish Hommaforum and in frequent posts on Jussi Halla-aho's blog *Kirjoituksia uppoavasta lännestä* (Writings from the Sinking West). At this time, Halla-aho (PS party leader, 2017–2020) was neither yet a member nor a public supporter of the Finns Party but was driven by his resistance to what he calls "the Islamization of the Western world." Purra's posts at the

time are femonationalist (Farris, 2017) in that they combine general and personal accounts of fear of migrant men with claims that immigrant values and cultures threaten Finland's existing gender equality.

Emerging far-right social-media environments and mobilisations seem to affect Purra's entrance into politics to a much greater degree than for Listhaug (who is of the same age), and in contrast to the older generation of Kjærsgaard and Jensen. Purra enters organised politics in her 30s, a comparatively late development that interrupts her academic career before she completes her PhD. Through male-dominated radical-right ethnonationalist communities, she meets people who will later recruit her to the Finns Party—first through the party think-tank *Suomen Perusta* and subsequently in the party office. Purra later connects her turn towards radical-right nationalism to her personal adolescent experiences of sexual harassment by migrant men while growing up in Tampere:

> When we were biking around in the city as adolescents we had problems with men from refugee-countries that spent their days in [a shopping mall]. The men harassed us sexually, followed us, and made different sounds—and we ran away. (Koivisto, 2021)

Here, the past radicalises Purra's persona rather than softens it. Radicalized by Halla-aho's beliefs and male-dominated far-right milieus, she moves towards a hardened politics of exclusion, showing little concern for mitigating an image of extremism.

4.3. Political Self-Branding

While narratives of origin and political awakening establish morally legible femininities that emerge from accounts of early political engagement, self-branding explains how they balance leadership styles with presented personal qualities in male-dominated milieus—authority with care, hardness with softness, and control with emotional recognisability.

Kjærsgaard frames her political apprenticeship in the FrP as formative, particularly in having taught her what to avoid when founding and leading the DF after the FrP's collapse in 1995. She describes the FrP's 1995 annual meeting as emblematic of an organisation lacking leadership, authority and discipline (Kjærsgaard, 2025, pp. 73–76). Kjærsgaard concludes that "DF had to be run in a completely different way," with "top-down" leadership being a "necessity" (p. 139). Accordingly, "[i]n….DF, there was never any disagreement about anything whatsoever, neither on the political line nor on the role distribution" (p. 83). Her biographies highlight her ability "to cut through" and make party members "fall in line" (p. 142), and Margaret Thatcher is invoked as an inspiration. She describes herself as a "control freak," involved "in even the smallest details," including "how people in the group dressed" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 43, 47, 2025, pp. 142–146). Yet, Kjærsgaard balances this authoritative image with a putative maternal, caring ethos. She accepts the nickname *Mama Pia* and describes the party as an extended family, both strategically and vocationally:

> I have followed my fellow party members' lives closely. It is easier to bring people along if you also take an interest in their families, what children they have, or how they get through a divorce….But that wasn't the only reason I did it. I did it out of genuine interest. Because DF became my new family. (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 146)

Compared to Kjærsgaard, Jensen's populist appeal is more discreet, evident in her accounts of personal economic hardship, choice of dress, emphasis on humour, and her appeal to women voters. To broaden its voter base, Jensen argues, the party "must appeal to the entire population, not just half of it" (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 1319). She invokes her great-grandmother Betzy's life of poverty and first-wave women's activism to formulate the demand "equal pay for equal work," despite it being at odds with her party's platform. She frames this as a response to the party's stigma of being a "men's party." Jensen's self-branding is, like her political career, marked by repeated internal party scandals, beginning with the notorious 1994 party congress, where "populist anti-immigration figures" and "Christian conservatives" clashed with the party's liberal wing (pos. 159). Retrospectively, Jensen aligns with the liberals against what she blatantly describes as xenophobic elements, aware of the implications this has for her leadership image.

Jensen's narrative emphasises organisational leadership over ideology, centring on inter-party relations and management of internal discord and scandals. She also highlights achievements in fiscal policy, electoral successes, and government collaboration with the Conservative Party. Her relationship with the conservative Prime Minister Erna Solberg is significant, but it relies on political pragmatism and careful balancing, as party loyalty, integrity, and ideological purity are weighed against influence and legitimacy. Like Glistrup is for Kjærsgaard, the incumbent party leader is crucial to Jensen's political career, as he handpicks her for everything from youth-party leader in Oslo, to televised debates, the Finance Committee and, eventually, party leadership. Yet their relationship deteriorates after she succeeds him. Jensen recounts this with surprise and dismay, attributing it to Hagen's inability to accept retirement. As with Kjærsgaard, Jensen recognises her predecessor as inspirational and motivational but presents herself as having surpassed him in leadership style and party development. She reframes her own leadership as "loyally supporting majority decisions" (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 178) despite conflicting personal convictions and contrasts this to Hagen's more authoritative style. Like Kjærsgaard, Jensen maintains organizational control, keeping party members and successors close; yet, in contrast to Kjærsgaard's top-down leadership, Jensen explains how:

> It doesn't work well to impose decisions on members from above. We have an almost statutory freedom of expression. I believe that any organisation will die over time if its members are not given the opportunity to express themselves in appropriate fora. (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 1040–1041)

Jensen thus appears as soft but resilient, repeatedly presenting herself as "hands-on," media-savvy and composed under moments of pressure when "[p]ause is a foreign concept" (pos. 1082). Her balancing act combines firmness, composure, and organisational control with inclusiveness and traditionally feminine-coded mediation and pragmatic diplomacy.

Listhaug, by contrast, balances composure with confrontation. Her autobiography reinforces a long-standing ethos, juxtaposing a polemic public image—"no matter what I do, it creates attention" (Listhaug & Akerhaug, 2018, p. 7)—with a more conservative self-presentation, oriented towards private morals, motherhood, and religion. Her autobiography presents a politician apart—resilient, principled, and self-sacrificial. Compared to Jensen and Kjærsgaard, Listhaug relies less on organisational caretaking and more on personal qualities. Listhaug also emphasises a conservative family ideal and traditionalist values, far from those of the divorce-children of the 1970s.

Listhaug presents motherhood as a cathartic turning point, softening the image of the buttoned-up career politician. Similarly, low-brow cultural references and self-description as a "blond mother of young children from Sunnmøre" (Listhaug & Akerhaug, 2018, p. 75) portray Listhaug as an "ordinary woman." In utilising the trope of the young blond girl stepping into politics, she echoes Jensen's self-presentation. Hard work, dedication, and local grounding structure Listhaug's account of her parliamentary induction—a dream-come-true that shapes her personally and politically. Yet she also presents herself as a natural talent, intuitive, and quick to master new issues. Role models such as Reagan and Thatcher position Listhaug politically, as does a brief mention of Jensen as "an important role model for all of us young ladies in the party" (p. 45). More central, however, is the lesser-known John Alvheim's moral conservatism. The autobiography also speaks to conservative Christians, although Listhaug describes religious practices as representative of tradition rather than conviction (including in her seemingly off-hand references to her cross necklace featured on the cover). She positions herself as conventional rather than evangelical and reframes her opposition to same-sex marriage as an anti-establishment defence of clerical freedom rather than deriving from moral disapproval. This contrasts with Jensen's more gay-friendly agenda and single, child-free lifestyle. An emotional account of miscarriage—described as "child loss"—underscores Listhaug's "Christian humanity" and fatalistic belief "that everything happens for a reason" (p. 12). Even her greatest blunder—a hyperbolic comment on asylum policies that forces her to resign after only two months as Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Immigration—is deflected accordingly: "[I]f I hadn't posted that Facebook post that made me resign, I would have lost out on some of the best years of my life so far" (p. 12). She thus reframes this would-be personal scandal as loyalty to the party and government, ideological authenticity, and ultimate personal gain.

Purra's career is the least mature of the four, and perhaps the most fragile. When she becomes Finance Minister in 2023, Purra's earlier comments on Hommaforum resurface, including allusions to violence against immigrants. Purra initially denies connection to her online alias but later admits authorship, blaming her youth and inexperience while arguing that her political views have changed radically. In the documentary series *Hated Women* (Akimof & Rokosa, 2026–present), Purra reflects on her public image as "a stereotypical person who is always angry, in a bad mood, and grumpy" (Purra, cited in Akimof & Rokosa, 2026–present). She rejects this media-produced image and stresses that a certain distance is necessary for all leading politicians. "But that doesn't mean that nothing affects or hurts," she adds. She argues that she is punished more harshly than women from other parties, saying that if they receive threats:

> We practically have a national state of emergency—but in my case, this does not happen. When public graffiti depicts me being killed—which is clearly a form of incitement to violence—it does not necessarily raise concern. When this came out publicly, it was entirely my own problem. (Purra, cited in Akimof & Rokosa, 2026–present)

Here Purra justifies her "cold" public persona as a necessary tool for dealing with external factors and criticism. Where Kjærsgaard materialises control, Jensen fosters relations, and Listhaug domesticates provocation, Purra is defensive. She justifies distance and detachment as attributes of leadership rather than (merely) balancing them with warmth and care.

5. Discussion

While the female leaders counteract their double bind, sometimes pre-emptively, through self-presentations that balance emotionality/unemotionality, softness/hardness, professionalism/passion, care/competence, etc., pariah femininity emerges when masculine-coded authority, transgression, rationality, etc., are incorporated into their ethos as charismatic or strategic assets that contrast with the gendered ideals attached to their political beliefs.

Kjærsgaard learns to inhabit visibility, rhetorical boldness, and charismatic disruption—in short, how to enact a pariah femininity—via Glistrup. Ahead of a campaign event in 1981, Glistrup advised her "to look good and keep her mouth shut" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 57). Her retrospective account, however, presents herself as a natural public performer: "I liked, and still like, the spotlight," "I am at my best when I speak straight from the heart," and "I was quick on my feet and could talk my way out of most things" (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 55). She underscores a natural leadership ability to "speak in a way that people can understand," as she asserts "[f]rom the day I entered politics, I have made it a virtue to meet the voters" (p. 57). Kjærsgaard admires similar characteristics in Glistrup, who she claims had "a care for the weak, for the outcasts. He…could speak with everyone" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 54) and did not "look down on people" despite being a "rich and well-known lawyer." Kjærsgaard converts her fascination with Glistrup's masculine style into her own repertoire of transgression. Compared with the more transgressive trajectories of Kjærsgaard, Listhaug, and Purra, Jensen instead stresses responsibility, accountability, and institutional competence rather than rule-breaking or personal hardships.

Similarly, Jensen and Purra learn from Hagen and Halla-aho, respectively, as both male former party leaders function as role models and mentors for their female successors. Yet, while Jensen and Hagen differ in many aspects of their leadership, Purra and Halla-aho share a disposition towards coldness and rationality. Purra is repeatedly confronted with that image of herself in the media—an image she then counters by drawing upon her experiences as a woman and mother. Despite being the least experienced leader, Purra's public persona is the hardest to read. The biography, *The Finnish Iron Lady* (2026)—an obvious allusion to Thatcher—testifies to this. The title reflects the widespread image of Purra as emotionally cold and politically hard. She advocates for restrictive immigration and integration policies, austerity, lower taxes, authoritarian law-and-order measures, and stricter order in schools. She promotes welfare chauvinism by presenting Islam as a threat to Finnish identity and gender equality to justify reduced benefits for migrants and non-citizens. She describes her politics as "rational" and "realist." Purra also radically repositions the Finns Party to the socio-economic right, thereby estranging pro-welfare voters. In a 2023 interview (Vasantola, 2023), she states that "empathy is not suitable as a guiding principle for politics," implicitly critiquing stereotypically emotion-driven, feminine political rhetoric among left-liberal "humanitarians." Rather than invoking a populist "common sense," Purra appeals to "hard facts," pragmatism, and realism. This captures her in a double bind where she is deemed too cold and rational.

Purra's style contrasts sharply with Listhaug's impromptu speech and attention-grabbing stunts, but these differing styles are used to promote similar political measures. Listhaug repeatedly adopts an anti-elitist position, signals rural belonging, and constructs a maternal femininity that counterbalances her image as a confrontational and harsh politician. In contrast to Jensen, she portrays herself as more of an ideologue than an administrator. After assuming party leadership in 2021, Listhaug further softens both her own and the

party's image. Her personal "glow up" attracts media attention and receives questions of authenticity. Listhaug explains that although she has little interest in fashion, she felt forced to "pull herself together" (Listhaug in Tjeldflåt & Bringslid, 2025). Like Jensen before her, she also exposes the media's one-sided focus on female politicians' appearances. Today, both Listhaug's biographical narrative and visual self-presentation converge to offset her aggressive political style with a softer, morally legible conservative femininity.

In contrast to Kjærsgaard's controlled charisma, Jensen's managerial composure, and Purra's rationality and emotional distance, Listhaug converts provocation into political capital and turns personal vices into moral virtues. Jensen does not embrace transgression as charisma, like Kjærsgaard and Listhaug. Instead, she domesticates the masculinised, scandal-prone legacy of the Progress Party through organisational competence, pragmatism, and a striving for respectability. Listhaug is perhaps our clearest case of pariah femininity as self-branding: a female leader who turns masculine-coded political practices and uncontrollable emotions into charisma, while retroactively downplaying scandals and stigma. While Listhaug adopts a style of masculine affective provocation akin to that of earlier generations of male leaders, Purra works through masculine restraint, exhibiting hardness, rationalism, and emotional distance. This becomes both a political method and a source of stigma. Purra's narrative thus comes closest to Schippers' notion of pariah femininity as a female-marked subject whose authority is saturated with masculine-coded hardness and who is accordingly cast as both disturbing and punishable.

6. Conclusions

The four female leaders represent different generations and stages in the trajectories of PRR parties from marginal to legitimate political forces. While all navigate male-dominated political environments, they perform gender differently. Kjærsgaard performs hegemonic masculinity through top-down control, discipline, and an unquestionable chain of command, while emphasising hegemonic femininity in the private sphere as a traditional and emotional woman toughened by personal adversity. Jensen articulates gender more implicitly, domesticating the Progress Party's masculinised, scandal-prone legacy through softer registers of organisational competence, pragmatism and a striving for respectability rather than charismatic transgression. Listhaug and Purra frame their leadership through gendered threat narratives, casting themselves as defenders of Norwegian and Finnish women against migrant values and violence, and as leaders willing to tackle harsh realities, thereby invoking more masculine-coded traits. Purra pushes this even further, presenting masculine-coded coldness and pariah femininity as intrinsic to political leadership.

Since gender equality has been integrated, albeit in femonationalist terms, in Nordic PRR conceptions of national identity, female leaders have not had to justify their political careers as such. Instead, despite these parties' opposition to formal and informal quotas, female leaders are part of the institutionalisation and normalisation of PRR parties within Nordic political systems. Yet they still navigate the gendered double bind by combining presentations of strong, disciplined and rational leadership with narratives of care, nurturing qualities and the shared experiences of "ordinary" women, including motherhood and divorce.

Overall, our analysis reveals a generational shift in how PRR female leaders engage with hegemonic masculinity and femininity and the double bind this generates. Kjærsgaard and Jensen balance the two registers by drawing on masculine-coded authority while anchoring femininity as either maternal care or virtues of restraint, discipline, and compromise, respectively. The younger generation of PRR female leaders,

Listhaug and Purra, more openly foreground masculine-coded traits, thereby willingly risking stigmatisation due to pariah femininity. In this sense, they contribute to the (re-)masculinisation of PRR leadership, even as they perform it as women. Hegemonic masculinity here remains constitutive of PRR leadership but is detached from bodies recognised as male and is instead enacted by leaders who renegotiate the boundaries of hegemonic femininity in a manner that effectively ousts it from the register of PRR leadership.

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Women Populist MPs, Patriarchal Bargains, and Anti-Gender Politics: Agnė Širinskienė and Marjorie Taylor Greene

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Abstract

Two women politicians living over 5,000 miles away—Agnė Širinskienė, a populist left member of the Lithuanian Parliament, and Marjorie Taylor Greene (known as MTG), a far-right MAGA Republican from Georgia in the US House of Representatives (2021–2026)—rose to prominence by winning several national elections and becoming among the most recognizable women populist leaders in their countries' politics. Despite their different birthplaces, life experiences, ideological orientations, and political affiliations, they share several commonalities: both are anti-feminist, anti-gender, and/or espouse anti-immigrant views, and both came into national politics while showing no lifelong desire to become MPs. This transnational comparative analysis of the two women MPs, first, examines their motives for getting involved in national politics by reviewing significant biographical events that shaped Širinskienė's and MTG's professional careers; second, applies a "patriarchal bargain" analytical concept to the strategies they used to rise to political prominence within patriarchal environments; and, third, evaluates the anti-gender political agendas that both MPs pursued to influence national political landscapes. This article maps out the similarities and differences in the roles that Širinskienė and MTG have played in their respective political parties to ensure their political survival and notoriety. We find that the patriarchal bargains used by populist women MPs present them with a paradox: career opportunities and fame in politics on the one hand, and vulnerability and "effacement" on the other.

Keywords

Agnė Širinskienė; anti-gender politics; Lithuania; Marjorie Taylor Greene; MPs; patriarchal bargains; populism; women

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1. Introduction

The recent rise of women populist politicians on the right—and, increasingly, on the left—is an intriguing phenomenon, even if the numerical representation of women in politics does not necessarily translate into substantive or symbolic representations. Present-day studies of women populist leaders tend to be Western-centric, examining European women party heads: Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, Alice Weidel, Pia Kjærsgaard, etc. (Akkerman, 2015; Blee, 2021; Celis & Childs, 2018; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Meret et al., 2016). However, existing scholarship has not yet fully engaged with women populist MPs as a distinct category outside the Western European regional context (except for Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Norocel, 2018) and is still testing theoretical explanations of women populist leaders' numerical growth and their effects on national politics.

This study focuses on women MPs who do not formally lead their parties but, nevertheless, have played key roles in advancing party agendas and in shaping public (often anti-gender) discourse in domestic politics. We chose two of the most recognizable populist women politicians: Agnė Širinskienė, a Lithuanian MP (2016–present), and MTG, a Republican congresswoman from Georgia (2021–2026). Since neither of them had a lifelong aspiration to be in politics, our analysis of these two populist women MPs centers on the following questions: Why and under what circumstances did Širinskienė and MTG get involved in politics? What common strategies did they use to achieve prominence and success? And, to what extent did Širinskienė's and MTG's presence in politics have impacted the respective national political landscapes?

After a brief overview of women populist leaders within the broader populism–gender nexus literature and the comparative case methodology used in this study, we examine each MP's personal background, pathways into politics, legislative (anti-gender) agendas, and effects on national politics. We highlight our core findings in the conclusion, asserting that women MPs' "stardom" in national political parties is contingent on "patriarchal bargains" that they voluntarily make with populist male party leaders, and the depth and strength of such bargains condition women populist MPs' political survival and, ultimately, their continuing prominence in national politics.

2. Populism, Gender, and Women's Leadership

Recently published handbooks and encyclopedias on populism always include chapters reviewing populism's relations with gender, noting that this relationship "remains a widely understudied topic" (Abi-Hassan, 2017, p. 426). Although the focus on women political leadership and female populist leaders has burgeoned over the past 15 years, many examinations of populism-gender relations in populism studies continue to center on right-wing populism (Dietze, 2022; Korolczuk, 2026). Why? One explanation is that advances in gender equality, especially in Western Europe, and the radical discourse of right-wing populist parties are in obvious tension, which has led scholars to ask how rising women populist leaders reconcile this tension (Akkerman, 2015); how gender struggles are being reframed, adapted, and challenged in populist politics; and, how the populist–gender relationship is framed and transformed in various sociopolitical contexts.

Another noticeable empirical trend is that women politicians are propelled into leadership positions during economic, political, or financial crises, which also present fertile grounds for populism to flourish. Since crises today are a norm rather than an exception, electorates worldwide seem to prefer outsiders—women, by default, fall into the category of outsiders because political circles are often dominated by men. This

particularly fuels the rise of women leaders on the far-right, with most of them espousing anti-gender, anti-immigration, and anti-LGBTQ+ policies and views (Bennhold, 2025; Givens & Brothers, 2026), because populist dynamics always center on anti-establishment politics and the continuous construction and reinvention of enemies. Yet studies on the gender–populism nexus continue to emphasize a need for more comparative, fine-grain, empirical, micro-dynamics analyses that explore changes and struggles over time in populist politics, non-Western European country cases, and in-depth case studies of women populist MPs who lead from behind and fight for male-led populist parties by adopting and propagating anti-gender ideas (Abi-Hassan, 2017; Korolczuk, 2026).

Our comparative analysis of Širinskienė and MTG not only answers this call but also brings an innovation by testing the utility and explanatory powers of the patriarchal bargain concept, first proposed by Kandiyoti's (1988) pathbreaking work to expose differences between gender ideals and gendered practices in households living in developing, patriarchal-values-based world regions (e.g., the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia). She defined such a bargain as a form of the different strategies that women adopt "within a set of concrete constraints" under the imposed "rules of the game," exploring how women's adopted strategies result in "varying potential for active or passive resistance," and under what conditions such bargains breakdown, get transformed, and with what implications for women (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 274).

For feminist and gender scholars, patriarchy became a concept "too useful to lose" (Bryson, 1999) and, with time, patriarchal bargain evolved into a "patriarchal power" conceptual tool to better understand how various gendered structures and bodies evolve over time (Pierik, 2022). In gender studies, patriarchal bargain is most closely associated with the idea that women (and sometimes men) pursue strategies to maximize status and/or room for maneuver within patriarchal constraints, often by complying with certain norms in exchange for future benefits (e.g., protection, legitimacy, or seniority). Noteworthy, "bargains" with patriarchs vary by the status of the relationship and the context, and can change when conditions—be they social, economic, or political—shift. Additionally, Kandiyoti (1998, p. 145) noted that "gender orders also involve mutually binding constraints" but "the powerful are much better placed to change the rules of the game unilaterally, at which point attempts by subordinates to call their bluff may emerge as rather pitiful and ineffectual forms of rearguard action." Therefore, "bargains" are not equal in gendered power relationships where give-and-take transactions are made, transformed, contested, and/or (de)legitimized.

This has significant implications for women populist MPs who enter into patriarchal bargains, as they subordinate themselves to the powerful (male) leaders and, due to their lower, weaker status and position in the relationship, they tend to accept the shorter end of the bargain. Also, to prove their "worthiness" and determination to uphold the bargain, women often give more than they take/get. Over time, this give-more-than-take/get bargain, which reveals their "devotion" to the relationship, can help women MPs raise their status in the relationship. Once political conditions change and provided that women have achieved greater independence and notoriety during such "critical junctures," they may challenge the initial patriarchal bargain they had struck.

2.1. The Comparative Case Study Method

The value of the comparative case method, based on the most different systems design (Lijphart, 1971), guides and justifies the selection of two cases that are different in nearly all aspects but are similar on a particular outcome. In our selected comparative case study, differences abound, with the three core ones being:

1. Political systems: Lithuania is a semi-presidential system with a unicameral legislature and a truly multiparty political system (see Politpro.eu, n.d.). Elected MPs are often, albeit not always, nominated to serve in executive/ministerial posts. Party leaders rather than the president have a final say in which MP belonging to their party will serve in which legislative or executive post. The personalistic nature of politics relies on the strength and depth of personal bonds between an MP and a party leader rather than the president. In the US, the presidential system, with a bicameral legislature and a political system dominated by two parties, means elected legislators or party heads have little to no influence on the president's choices as to who will lead a department (ministry). The primacy of personalist politics in the US is highly dependent on the personal relationship one has with the president.
2. The length and extent of populism in politics: The first time a populist political party (the Labor Party) won the largest number of seats in Lithuania's parliament was in 2004. Since then, new left- and right-wing populist parties have gained and lost seats in the legislature, but no populist party has held a majority in the Lithuanian parliament. Meanwhile, in the US, the Tea Party Caucus (as part of the Republican Party), which espoused populist ideas, was founded in 2010, and only in 2016 did the populist MAGA firmly establish itself in all branches of governance.
3. Selected women populist MPs: Širinskienė and MTG were born in different places, under different political regimes, have different personal characteristics (e.g., physical appearances, speaking styles, work ethics, interests, marital status, etc.), and have experienced different events that have shaped their political views and, ultimately, party affiliation choices. Despite initially showing no interest in politics, they have both reached prominence in national politics through the patriarchal bargains they made with male party leaders and their anti-gender populist positioning—both of which constitute a similar outcome.

Different system design requires the identification and discussion of critical episodes—which, given the focus of this study, necessitates an examination of important biographical trajectories and career pathways to reveal how the two female populist MPs have managed to achieve visibility and political notoriety, how they have navigated patriarchal power structures, what they have achieved once in politics as both populist MPs articulated exclusionary (anti-gender, anti-immigration) narratives and agendas, and what their experiences and entanglement in patriarchal bargains means for patriarchal hierarchy in national politics and other women MPs in different national contexts (i.e., when women politicians eclipse the personalistic politics of a populist male leader).

3. Agnė Širinskienė: From Obscurity to the Most Recognizable Populist Name in Lithuania's Politics

3.1. Biographical Background

Agnė Širinskienė (née Kazėnaitė) was born in Vilnius, but after the divorce of her parents, she and her mother moved to Eastern Lithuania, where she lived for over a decade. She was raised by her grandparents and grew up in a deeply religious family under communism (1970s–80s). Agnė took her first communion in a Catholic church even though her maternal grandfather was a member of the Lithuanian Communist Party, and she herself had joined the school's little Octoberists and communist youth organizations. According to her teachers, she was well-mannered, very polite, and an exceptionally hard-working and smart student, finishing high school with top grades. Since childhood, she was driven by innate curiosity, a sense of duty, an

unstoppable eagerness to learn, and deeply loved school and her teachers. Although active in various clubs, she was nevertheless very shy, showed no leadership ambitions, nor sought to be the center of attention (Šilinskaitė-Puškorė, 2018a, 2018b).

After Agnė completed the Dūkštas secondary school, she left the rural, conservative, Russian-speaking, and minority-dominated part of Lithuania. Her pursuits in higher education took her, first, to Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, where she earned BA degrees in Catholic Theology and English Language and Literature in 1998, then an MA in Pastoral Theology in 2000, followed by a PhD in Humanities in 2005. Subsequently, she earned a BA and an MA in Law at Mykolas Romeris University in Vilnius, completing her studies in 2009. With five degrees in hand, Širinskienė was perhaps the only academic who had exceptionally high and, arguably, unique educational credentials. Her expertise in theology and law is reflected in her scholarship and publications, during the 12 years that she lectured at the Romeris University, reaching the rank of associate professor, until 2016, a pivotal year in her professional career.

3.2. Political Career

As the 2016 parliamentary elections approached, Širinskienė was invited by the agricultural billionaire businessman Ramūnas Karbauskas to join his conservative center-left-leaning party, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS; Politpro.eu, n.d.). In a shocking and surprising result, the LVŽS claimed an unexpected landslide victory, winning the largest number of legislative seats in 20 years and becoming a major player in national politics. Širinskienė, having agreed to join the LVŽS, was unexpectedly propelled into national politics, to the amazement of her childhood friends, students, and academic colleagues. Never showing any political ambitions, Širinskienė remained, for a while, a political unknown and, arguably, would have stayed unknown if not for an unexpected turn of events in the top ranks of the LVŽS.

Given her background in theology and her deep academic and professional interest in public health law, she was nominated and elected by the LVŽS to chair parliament's Committee on Health Affairs. A "critical event" occurred in January 2017, when LVŽS chair Karbauskis lost Greta Kildišienė, his party's vice-chairwoman, alleged lover, and closest political ally, who was forced to resign as MP over an embezzlement scandal, with other three prominent LVŽS MPs also leaving the party. Soon after, Karbauskis chose Širinskienė as his political confidante. Portraying himself and his party as victims of "powerful forces" who relentlessly attacked him and the LVŽS, "Karbauskis became more cautious in publicly promoting his personal views and pet projects" (Gudžinskas, 2025, p. 96). Širinskienė quickly filled this void by performing masculine, tough legislative heavy lifting, while showing feminine, supportive care for the LVŽS and its leader. The media dubbed the two a "duo" who instructed the party's parliamentary caucus on how to vote on every matter and bill. Ostensibly, Širinskienė made a patriarchal bargain voluntarily, becoming not only the gray cardinal of the LVŽS but "Karbauskas's hitwoman," "right hand," and "the chief of the parliament, more powerful than the [Parliament's] Speaker" (Šilinskaitė-Puškorė, 2018b).

During her first legislative term (2016–2020), Širinskienė faithfully and stalwartly defended LVŽS patriarch Karbauskis, denying his alleged "dictatorial inclinations" and suggesting that Karbauskis was rather "too overly democratic," which is what forced the LVŽS leader to make ill-advised decisions (Salynė, 2019). Her influence within the party skyrocketed once she became part of Karbauskis's inner circle, thrusting her into the political spotlight. As the first prominent woman populist MP, she not only endorsed Karbauskis's traditional family

values and anti-gender ideology, but made it her mission to see that progressive and gender rights-affirming bills would be obstructed, discredited, and impossible to pass. In exchange for her commitment and loyalty to the LVŽS and Karbauskis, she was elected, in 2017, chair of one of the most important and influential parliamentary committees: Legislative Affairs.

3.3. Political and Legislative Work

For a newbie MP, her law-making track record (2016–2020) was truly breathtaking: 51 individually submitted draft bills, 113 draft legislative acts submitted in parliamentary members' groups, 83 individually submitted draft proposals for legislation, and 51 draft proposals for legislation submitted in parliamentary members' groups, as well as 39 official media announcements and statements (Širinskienė, 2020). Dedication, servitude, and workaholism given her numerous legislative initiatives defined Širinskienė's political career and also her role in shaping policies.

Advocacy for the traditional family values espoused by Karbauskis particularly resonated with Širinskienė. The anti-gender legislative agenda became her political *raison d'etre* for being, surviving, and thriving in national politics. The LVŽS strongly opposed gender quotas for political parties, with Širinskienė arguing that gender quotas only existed among African countries (it should be noted that Širinskienė was not alone in opposing gender quotas; the first woman president of Lithuania did, too). The LVŽS leadership not only defied but also launched a smear campaign against the Lithuanian Constitutional Court (LCC) and the Court's President, Dainius Žalimas, after the court ruled that a temporary parliamentary inquiry commission led by Širinskienė was unconstitutional, because it was granted investigative powers that were too broad. The LVŽS-led government also decided to stall the timely rotation of the LCC judges (Salynė, 2020). Eventually, Širinskienė turned into a particularly divisive populist politician who used her popularity to block and impede all legislation promoting women's and gender rights, in particular by hindering Lithuania's ratification of the Istanbul Convention and derailing the legislature's voting on same-sex civil union/partnership bills.

As the LVŽS's popularity declined due to constant internal feuds in the party's leadership, ongoing public scandals, and controversial investigations (Gudžinskas, 2025), the party's leadership began to look for scapegoats, turning against Širinskienė. In 2019, at Karbauskis's request, she left the LVŽS parliamentary group and joined another rising populist newcomer, the Law and Justice (TT) party, then chaired by Remigijus Žemaitaitis, so that the LVŽS in coalition with TT could gain more political weight in the legislature. Širinskienė did as asked by the LVŽS patriarch, but was eventually forced to leave the TT parliamentary group because such switches went against the LCC's decision on parliamentary affiliations (Salynė, 2019). One of the LVŽS's members described Širinskienė's willingness to fulfill Karbauskis' political whims and orders as "political self-pimping" (Jurčenkaitė, 2019).

Overt and covert humiliation continued for the next three years. In several interviews, Širinskienė revealed that she was "clenching her teeth," having suffered indignities from male MPs for a long time. For instance, she was instructed by the LVŽS's leadership not to use the main parliament building entrances and enter through the backdoors to avoid being seen and questioned by the media, not to look at certain colleagues presiding over parliament sessions because they could not stand her stern glance, to stop "successful media performances" and give "worse quality" interviews, to ignore curses directed at her in the legislative chamber,

etc. (Vireliūnaitė, 2021; Žičkus, 2021). Širinskienė later admitted that she frequently cried at night due to the unrelenting psychological pressure, bullying, and unyielding snubbing by MPs. Karbauskis claimed that some of her LVŽS colleagues felt eclipsed by Širinskienė because she appeared to speak on the party's behalf, giving the impression that she actually represented both the party's parliamentary faction and the LVŽS ("A. Širinskienė palieka LVŽS," 2021).

Once Širinskienė outshone Karbauskis, the patriarchal bargain unraveled, and in December 2021 she announced that she was leaving the LVŽS. Her public announcement sent shockwaves through national politics. While the public and a few MPs were caught by surprise by this declaration and supported her decision to quit the party, others blamed her for being the creator and the most ardent supporter of the LVŽS's "patriarchal cult" system. According to Vireliūnaitė (2021), a former LVŽS MP wrote on Facebook: "She herself did everything to make competence, tolerance, democracy and a free mandate [for MPs] despised in the LVŽS faction. She herself created a cult of Bolshevik obedience to the party and the leader," the former LVŽS MP continued by adding: "I tried to resist it and always told [Širinskienė] that sooner or later she would experience the guillotine of the system she was creating."

The most powerful political duo reportedly parted on good terms: Širinskienė thanked LVŽS Chairman Karbauskis and expressed her gratitude to him "for his loyalty to values, dedication and unconditional sacrifice to build Lithuania" and blamed her "difficult character" for frictions in the party, while Karbauskis expressed deep regret that Širinskienė was leaving but reckoned that there was "probably no other way out" ("A. Širinskienė palieka LVŽS," 2021). Starting in early 2022, Širinskienė began political party switching. Starting in early 2022, Širinskienė began to search for a new political home. She wanted to join the center-left Party of the Regions (Politpro.eu, n.d.) but was unsuccessful. Širinskienė eventually became a member of the mixed MPs legislative group, losing some of the public prominence she had previously enjoyed, but retaining political prominence via her ardent public opposition to legislation promoting gender rights, while serving as deputy chair on the Legislative Affairs Committee.

3.4. Three Patriarchal Bargains

With the 2024 parliamentary elections approaching, many political parties tried to convince Širinskienė to join them since her membership was expected to significantly boost their party's chances for victory. Ultimately, she made another patriarchal bargain with the newly created populist national-conservative right-wing political party Nemunas Dawn (NA) led by Žemaitaitis (Politpro.eu, n.d.) and was credited for being "one of the most important architects of the [NA's electoral] victory" (Narbutas, 2025). Širinskienė claimed that the NA's values regarding the family, the state, justice issues, and the individual strongly aligned with hers ("Paaiškėjo A. Širinskienės sprendimas," 2024). Others argued that this was a calculated strategic move by Širinskienė since she was listed at the top of the NA electoral list, guaranteeing her election to the national parliament, while Karbauskis asserted that Širinskienė's "butterflying" between ideologically opposite parties signaled that she had abandoned her espoused values and principle-based decision-making in her pursuit of higher political positions (Pikelytė, 2024).

The NA and Žemaitaitis briefly rode on Širinskienė's coattails, given that she was one of the most visible MPs in the legislature and that the NA needed her political stewardship and legal expertise, particularly in lawmaking. Similarly to Karbauskis's patriarchal bargain, Širinskienė also loyally stood by and defended

Žemaitaitis against accusations that he had broken not only the MP's oath but also violated the Constitution by making anti-Semitic statements. Having won 20 seats in the October 2024 parliamentary elections, the NA was invited to join the ruling coalition.

After the NA's unexpected victory, Žemaitaitis and Širinskienė enjoyed a brief moment in the spotlight. Few believed, however, that the new political duo, given their very different personalities, would be able to work together for a long time. Indeed, the diarchy in the NA and Širinskienė's second patriarchal bargain quickly unraveled: less than three months later, Širinskienė announced her resignation from the NA.

From the start, Širinskienė's second patriarchal bargain was tenuous because it was clear that her political ambitions were much stronger than those she had had when she belonged to the LVŽS. Also, because she had by then achieved notoriety and a higher status—she was not a subordinate but almost an equal to the NA's party leader, Žemaitaitis needed Širinskienė just as much as she needed him, and the bargain was built on the equal proportionality of give-take/get deal. The unravelling of the second patriarchal bargain began after her appointment as the sixth deputy speaker of parliament. Širinskienė criticized the agreement between the parties in the ruling coalition signed by Žemaitaitis and hinted that this agreement may need to be reviewed (Černiauskaitė, 2024). Žemaitaitis did not immediately dismiss her criticism but, when he threatened to pull the NA out of the ruling coalition without consulting the NA parliamentary faction if he were not appointed as the seventh deputy speaker of parliament, Širinskienė harshly criticized him, labeling his actions as political ultimatums. Žemaitaitis fired back, announcing that he was forbidding Širinskienė from commenting publicly about matters related to the ruling coalition, and that she was not allowed to speak on the NA's behalf. Širinskienė was not willing to go through another humiliating ordeal of bullying and denigration and quit the NA, claiming that she did not want to be associated with the party's MPs, who had criminal records (Račkauskaitė, 2025).

Širinskienė soon joined Skvernelis's center-left Democratic Union "For Lithuania" (DSVL; see Politpro.eu, n.d.), striking her third patriarchal bargain—a move that produced another political earthquake with potentially larger implications in national politics (Narbutas, 2025). Arguably, Širinskienė's third patriarchal bargain with the male-led DSVL was the least favorable of the three bargains that she had yet made, because the DSVL had many former members of the LVŽS who had joined the party earlier than Širinskienė. Former party leader Skvernelis and his male successor enjoy and maintain the primary patriarchal leadership position—diarchy in the DSVL is not tolerated—and have no intention of sharing the political spotlight with anybody, including Širinskienė, regardless of her political notoriety. Although Širinskienė significantly strengthened the DSVL's position when this party was part of the ruling coalition, but when it collapsed in the Summer of 2025, she practically vanished from both the political spotlight and the media.

Overall, Širinskienė's career trajectory, her rise to prominence in national politics, and place in the political hierarchy were possible thanks to patriarchal bargains that she voluntarily made with, thus far, three parties situated on both sides of the ideological spectrum. She built political capital due to her work ethic, impressive legislative track record, loyalty to male leaders, and dedication to, and support for, gendered hierarchies. However, at critical points when she either eclipsed or threatened to outshine male party leaders, her patriarchal bargains unraveled, leading her to compromise on values and make U-turns (Vireliūnaitė, 2021).

The defining features of Širinskienė's political opportunism are her frequent switching of political party affiliation, her willingness to make and then break patriarchal bargains, and her flip-flopping between espoused political and personal values. These features could potentially undermine her political notoriety and even past legislative successes. The predictions of some analysts that Širinskienė may sink in the DSVL are becoming a reality (Narbutas, 2025). Ultimately, she may need to revive her gendered populist repertoire, which would involve challenging the DSVL party manifesto and even the personalistic politics of male DSVL leaders, to return to the political spotlight and notoriety she had enjoyed for nearly a decade and perhaps strike a fourth patriarchal bargain in the future.

4. Marjorie Taylor Greene: From MAGA Loyalist to a Populist Fighter for the People?

4.1. Biographical Background

MTG was raised in the very affluent Northeastern, white-dominated suburbs of Atlanta (Kruse, 2021). At South Forsyth High School, she was seen as an ordinary, well-liked student by her peers. She didn't display any early drive toward political leadership or especially lofty ambitions. Her teachers do not have any recollections of her. It appears that she was a good, although not great, student (Plott Calabro, 2023, p. 48). During high school, she also helped out with her father's local construction business. Being the first one from her family to finish college, Marjorie pursued a degree in business administration at the University of Georgia. There she met her future husband, Perry Greene. They married in 1995, and she added his last name to her maiden name. After completing her bachelor's in 1996, the two helped run the Taylor family business, but, apparently, MTG was not particularly interested in the construction business, preferring to spend her days at a gym instead. It may be that her failure to establish herself in the construction business contributed to her desire to try out something else, for instance, a career in politics (Plott Calabro, 2023, p. 50). Accusing MTG of infidelity, Marjorie's husband filed for divorce as early as 2012, and their marriage finally ended in 2022.

4.2. Political Career

Up until 2016, Greene showed little interest in politics. However, when Trump began campaigning for the 2016 election, she viewed him as unusually relatable and straightforward. As she put it: "He was someone I could relate to….And I thought, 'finally, maybe this is someone who will do something about the things that deeply bother me.'" She confessed that she saw in him a man resembling her father. "He reminded me of most men I know…..Men like my dad" (Plott Calabro, 2023, p. 53). Although she did not vote that year, she made a one-time contribution to Trump's campaign in 2016.

MTG's path to national politics started in June 2019 in the relatively affluent and somewhat liberal Georgia's 6th District, where she unsuccessfully ran against Lucy McBath, a Democrat. This region of Georgia had been leaning towards Democrats, and MTG realized that she could be much more successful in a more conservative area. During the same year, she successfully ran in a very conservative, relatively poor North Georgia region (the 14th District), in which her pro-gun, anti-abortion, anti-immigrant, anti-gender agenda, and disdain for the federal government received a lot of support from the local population.

It probably helped MTG that in this region she was known for championing conspiracy theories, including QAnon, according to which a high-ranking official in the Trump administration ("Q") would release cryptic cues about a secret battle between Trump and child-sacrificing devil worshippers serving the US government. Several factors in the region—specifically, the opioid crisis, the influx of Hispanics, and the lack of health insurance—made people susceptible to conspiracy theories, and MTG seemed like a perfect choice for this electorate (Williams, 2021).

Support for QAnon conspiracy theories made MTG known nationally too, as she successfully linked these pseudo-theories to an argument that there is a global elite with enormous powers and enormous capacity for control and abuse (Davies, 2026). MTG's use of QAnon can be read as a particularly effective form of populist performativity: it did not simply communicate a set of beliefs but staged a political identity and a moral drama. By invoking QAnon's narrative of a hidden war between ordinary people and a corrupt, predatory elite, MTG repeatedly enacted a sharp boundary between "us" (virtuous, silenced, common-sense white Americans) and "them" (powerful, global, unaccountable politicians), which helped her to enter national politics and gain nationwide recognition. This boundary work is central to populism, but QAnon intensifies it by adding a conspiratorial register that turns political disagreement into existential conflict. In that framing, opponents are not merely wrong—they are dangerous, illegitimate, and often portrayed as complicit in moral crimes and should be removed through violence, if necessary.

4.3. Political and Legislative Work

Building on her populist gendered performativity, MTG entered Congress as one of Trump's most loyal supporters, even after January 6, 2021, when he was shunned by many Republicans. Just like Širinskienė with Karbauskis (and, later, Žemaitaitis), MTG supported Trump's agenda and was eager to enter into a patriarchal bargain, being both seen and acting as his helper and loyal supporter. She enthusiastically endorsed Trump's false claim that the 2020 election had been stolen, helping Trump to reframe the January 6 narrative. In addition, she rallied behind Trump's "Make America Great Again" agenda and aligned herself so closely with Trump that she got the nickname "Trump in heels" (Kruse, 2021). One of her greatest political ambitions was to be Trump's VP or at least Secretary of Homeland Security—however, this did not materialize, and Trump's failure to live up to his end of the patriarchal bargain may have pushed MTG into opposition in 2025 (Davies, 2026).

Embracing anti-gender ideology has definitely helped MTG to become loved and respected among her conservative supporters, not only in North Georgia, but also outside of that deeply conservative region. MTG's public discourse about the so-called traditional family values and protecting the children, coupled with legislative attempts (when she was in Congress from 2021–2026) to fight gender affirming care for minors, became some of her most visible strategies and activities while in Congress. In 2023, MTG introduced the Protect the Children's Innocence Act (HR 1399), which was meant to prevent minors from getting puberty blockers, hormone therapies, or surgeries to change gender (U.S. Congress HR 1399: Protect Children's Innocence Act, 2024). She described gender dysphoria as "an ideology" which was rapidly spreading across social media, and which had to be stopped (Flynn, 2024).

HR 1399 never made it beyond the committee stage in 2023. However, in 2025, MTG introduced this bill again as HR 3492, and this time, it passed the House with 216 in favor and 211 against, on December 17,

mostly along partisan lines, with three Democrats supporting the measure and four Republicans opposing it. Although this legislation probably will not pass the Senate (in 2026, the Republicans do not have the 60-vote majority needed to end a filibuster), the House bill has strengthened Republican resolve to fight against trans people's rights. The bill attempts to make gender affirming care a felony, and doctors who provide such care could be imprisoned for up to 10 years. Civil rights organizations, including the Civil Liberties Union, described this MTG-championed legislation as "the most extreme anti-trans legislation ever considered by Congress" (Kim, 2025).

The supporters of MTG's position, which became mainstream among US Republicans, argue that they are protecting the rights of minors who supposedly are endangered by gender affirming care and cannot make their own decisions. This position is closely linked to the desire of Republicans to protect family values and parental rights. The championing of this position made MTG into a star among Republicans, especially during the Republican Convention in August 2024, where she was a keynote speaker. During the convention, she articulated a position that later became part of an executive order issued by President Trump—that supposedly there are only two genders. She also vilified the left and those associated with the left (with a focus on Democrats) for their support of trans rights, arguing that they "gave us trans visibility day instead of Easter Sunday" (Sommers, 2024).

Overall, Greene's legislative record suggests that she was very active introducing many controversial, polarizing bills, most of which never became law. She was constantly engaged in legislative actions, sponsoring populist bills. For instance, HR 1883 Protect America First proposed:

> To enact a moratorium on immigration, build the wall, prioritize securing the Southern border, repeal certain Executive orders which endanger the security of the United States, re-assert a zero-tolerance immigration policy, ensure the safe return of unaccompanied alien children, reduce human trafficking, deport criminal aliens, and end chain migration. (U.S. Congress HR 1883: Protect America First Act, 2021)

Meanwhile, HR1682 English Language Unity Act stated that its goal was "to declare English as the official language of the United States" (U.S. Congress HR 1862: English Language Unity Act of 2025, 2025).

HR 1883 and HR 1682 demonstrate that to get support among her constituents, MTG used relatively common populist strategies of division into "us" and "them," demonizing immigrants and supporting white nationalism in her legislative behavior. These strategies were pursued under the banner of America First, America Only, which happens to be her Twitter/X banner as of 15 January 2026.

Although MTG had high national visibility and gained power by sponsoring controversial legislation, her legislative record of making sure that the proposed bills became laws is poor. According to the Congress website, she sponsored 111 pieces of legislation and co-sponsored 432 pieces of legislation (of which in 277 cases she was the original co-sponsor). This suggests that she was very active in introducing legislation. However, only 14 bills that she either sponsored or co-sponsored actually became law. She exercised a quieter influence by proposing amendments. During her legislative career, she proposed 43 House amendments, 11 of which were adopted. Taking this data into account, the Center for Effective Lawmaking (n.d.) assesses her legislative effectiveness as "below average," putting her near the bottom of the entire

House, at 207 out of 228 for the 118th Congress and 117th Congress. Although she was removed from important congressional committees in 2021 for supporting political violence against Democrats (she was criticized for supporting conspiracy theories, racism, and anti-Semitism), this removal did not affect her ability to propose legislation.

4.4. One Patriarchal Bargain

Despite a relatively poor legislative record, Greene's supporters see her as a fighter who does not back down and is committed to championing cultural issues important to the right. This warrior image did not disappear even when Greene became Trump's critic and left Congress in 2026: she continued to be seen as fully supporting the America First cause by her supporters (Barrow & Megnien, 2026). Her voice and visibility are appreciated more than her legislative record. In the eyes of a certain segment of MAGA, she has become an icon associated with a true commitment to America First.

MTG's continued popularity among her supporters is consistent with key arguments in the populism literature about how populist representation works. In many populist projects, what matters most is not technocratic policy production or measurable legislative output, but the successful performance of embodied representation: the leader is valued as someone who voices the people's anger, refuses elite norms, is successfully confrontational, and wages conflict on behalf of an imagined moral national community. In this sense, MTG's warrior image and performativity are not incidental—they are constitutive of her political value. Mudde (2004, pp. 543–544) emphasizes that populism is a "thin-centered" ideology organized around a moral opposition between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and Greene's public persona continuously stages that opposition through confrontational rhetoric, boundary drawing, and symbolic defiance. Seen through this lens, MTG's appeal also fits the account of populism as a style or political performance rather than primarily a governing program. Scholars who approach populism in performative terms argue that populists cultivate an image of crisis, transgression, and authenticity by violating institutional expectations and media conventions. MTG's visibility and notoriety—generated through provocation, viral confrontation, and culture-war messaging—therefore becomes a form of political productivity. Even when her bills fail, the public fights she initiates can be interpreted by her audience as evidence that she is "doing the right thing": exposing enemies, breaking taboos, and demonstrating loyalty to the people against the corrupt establishment. MTG continued to battle the system even after exiting Congress. In January 2026, she voiced her support for an isolationist American foreign policy by denouncing Trump's Venezuela operation and describing it as a "regime change/foreign intervention," thus remaining faithful to the America First agenda (Oppenheim & Cunningham, 2026). She articulated her disillusionment with Trump for betraying her and highlighted her disagreements with him over the Hamas–Israel war and Trump's long-standing resistance to releasing the Epstein files. MTG went as far as to suggest that the entire MAGA movement, led by Trump, was a lie, arguing that MAGA was "really serving…their big donors." She also criticized Trump's involvement with "big corporations" and "foreign countries," who were, in her eyes, "running the show" in Trump's America (Fields, 2026).

MTG's decision to insist on the release of the Epstein files was the main reason for the end of her patriarchal bargain with Trump. MTG adamantly condemned Trump's unwillingness to order the Justice Department to release the files, finally fracturing this relationship. The end of what appeared to be an unbreakable patriarchal bargain demonstrated the instability of personalist politics (rooted in the MTG–Trump alliance), when devotion

to the leader (demonstrated by MTG) becomes incompatible with the politician's own brand (MTG as a sincere populist). The unravelling of the patriarchal bargain between MTG and Trump revealed both the power and fragility of politics built around personal loyalty.

MTG's exit from Congress should not be read as political death so much as a shift in venue—from institutional lawmaking to the broader populist arena, where influence is measured by attention, agenda-setting, and symbolic representation. Populist leaders often remain politically consequential even when they lose office, resign, or are pushed to the margins of formal institutions because their authority is rooted less in bureaucratic capacity and more in an ongoing claim to embody the people against the entrenched power of the elites. In that sense, MTG can continue to function as a populist right-wing leader-entrepreneur—she can mobilize supporters, discipline Republicans from the outside, and sustain the moral narrative that propelled her into prominence in the first place.

5. Conclusion

By examining the formative life experiences and pathways to power of Širinskienė and MTG, our comparative case study demonstrates that their life stories are strikingly dissimilar and yet produce comparable political outcomes: a successful rise to power. Širinskienė's rural upbringing, religiosity, and academic credentials provided her with expertise, discipline, and a moral compass, which later translated into institutional effectiveness and power in legislative committees. In contrast, MTG's background, which includes a business education, an affluent suburban background, and a complicated personal story (including a divorce), did not generate expertise and discipline. Instead, she was able to present herself as an authentic politician, close to the people, which helped her rise to power and get elected to Congress. Neither of these two politicians appears to have been "destined" for success in power politics, but they were able to get there through conversion (in Širinskienė's case, from academia to party politics, and in MTG's case, from political neutrality to a strong Trump supporter), in addition to the successful use of the patriarchal bargain strategy.

Our comparative analysis of Širinskienė and MTG reveals that both women rose to political stardom as a result of patriarchal bargains that they voluntarily made with male party leaders. As part of the initial patriarchal bargain, both women not only adopted the values and ideas of male party leaders, but they also embodied and publicly performed their newly assumed roles. To reach political notoriety, Širinskienė and MTG built patriarchal solidarity with male party leaders and further entrenched patriarchal hierarchy while articulating an exclusionary populist repertoire filled with anti-gender, anti-establishment, anti-immigration public pronouncements, and legislative initiatives.

Their success in making patriarchal bargains is reflected through the comparison of their careers, which illustrate that Širinskienė's and MTG's political success had to do with their ability to become strategically useful to prominent male leaders. Širinskienė's political career shows her ability to understand the institution well and apply her expertise successfully. After entering the LVŽS and cooperating with Karbauskis, she rose rapidly by performing the party's "hard work" of governance and confrontation: committee leadership, the drafting of legislation, and investigatory commissions. She became an internal authority and a hitwoman, a figure whose value lay in her capacity to defend the male leader and his agenda. MTG's career shows a parallel path: she became nationally prominent not by dominating committee structures, but by excelling at playing populist politics to get people's attention (i.e., by successfully engaging conspiracy theories, waging

cultural wars)—and, while doing it all, showing loyalty to Trump and being his adamant supporter. Like Širinskienė, MTG's political success had to do with being recognized, valued, and keeping the attention of a male populist leader (especially at MAGA-related events); unlike Širinskienė, her influence derived more from her ability to control external factors, such as her successful use of conspiracy theories and obtaining support from the MAGA movement.

Although both women politicians practiced highly confrontational styles, especially towards political opponents and the opposition in the legislature, Širinskienė mostly limited her hostility to harsh political rhetoric in parliament and the media and launched legislative investigations to prove corrupt practices by opposition party leaders and their family members. MTG's hostility and clashes, however, were much more diverse and on a wider scale. In contrast to Širinskienė, MTG showed a strong affinity for, and promoted, various conspiracy theories, regularly voiced Islamophobic and antisemitic views, openly endorsed political violence against high-ranking members of the Democratic Party, and advanced a white supremacist agenda.

Our comparison of their legislative activities demonstrates that populist women leaders can matter legislatively in sharply different ways. Širinskienė's legislative record is immense: she was very productive in drafting and submitting bills and shaping committees' agendas. She translated her anti-gender priorities into legislative action. Her populist project was advanced institutionally, not just through rhetoric. In contrast, MTG's thin legislative record suggests a different logic. Although she was unable to push through many bills, her focus on controversial bills (including bills about immigration, language, and gender affirming care) was meant to maintain her visibility and ideological currency, even though the proposed legislative measures were not successful. MTG succeeded in normalizing extreme positions within the Republican Party and getting these positions national attention. In both cases, the two women populist politicians were successful at pushing a populist agenda but had different strategies.

Both Širinskienė and MTG engaged in patriarchal bargaining, which helped them achieve political power but at the same time revealed the fragility of their positions when they reached power. Once these women populist politicians undermined existing bargains by criticizing their party's members, agendas/priorities, or leaders themselves, these bargains broke down, and they were pressured to leave the party (or parties, in Širinskienė's case). Širinskienė's serial bargains also reveal how women can gain power through loyalty and competence yet become vulnerable when they outshine male leaders or threaten internal hierarchies. MTG's bargain reveals a different vulnerability: dependence on a male-led movement and its rewards, at least initially. Furthermore, because Lithuania is a multiparty political system, Širinskienė actually had the option of joining other political parties and, as a result, did strike multiple patriarchal bargains, whereas MTG had no party-switching alternatives given that the US political system is exclusively dominated by two parties.

Overall, Širinskienė and MTG cases demonstrate how women's visibility within populism actually strengthens, not weakens, patriarchal politics, especially when women politicians become associated with anti-gender and other traditionalist agendas. What remains to be seen is the extent and depth of the impact that these two women populist leaders will have on women in national politics. On the one hand, their anti-feminist stands could stall the progress of women's empowerment in a highly media-saturated and influenced politics; on the other hand, anti-feminist populist women leaders could produce a pushback as more women seek greater representation in national politics and are armed with a determination to reshape political landscapes and uproot male-imposed norms and values.

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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Profiling Far-Right Populist Women Leaders: A Trait Analysis of Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel

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Abstract

Limited scholarly attention has been paid to the leadership profiles of far-right populist women leaders and their implications for political leadership, particularly from a comparative perspective. Employing Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA), this article examines the leadership profiles of Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel. The article makes three contributions: first, it bridges scholarship on gender, leadership traits, and populism with LTA's theoretical framework; second, it provides empirical profiles of these three prominent far-right populist women leaders; and third, it compares them to their male far-right populist counterparts, non-populist women leaders, and a broader sample of world leaders. The analysis draws on software-assisted content analysis of party convention speeches and press conferences from 2011 to 2024. The findings show that the leadership profiles of far-right populist women leaders are marked by high self-confidence and pronounced distrust of others. Differences vis-à-vis male populist counterparts are comparatively small, consistent with the argument that masculine-coded leadership norms dominate far-right party contexts; by contrast, differences from other women leaders are pronounced.

Keywords

Alice Weidel; comparative analysis; far-right populist women leaders; gender; Giorgia Meloni; leadership trait analysis; Marine Le Pen

1. Introduction

In 2013, Andrea Pető (2013, p. 78) warned that "[p]opulist female leaders should not be underestimated." Indeed, female right-wing populists—from Marine Le Pen in France to Giorgia Meloni in Italy and Alice

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Weidel in Germany—have been highly successful in consolidating party power, winning national elections (Meloni), or emerging as serious contenders for top political office (Le Pen, Weidel). Yet their parties present highly contradictory environments for women's leadership, both ideologically and representationally. Far-right populist parties—often described as *Männerparteien* (men's parties)—are strongly male-dominated and promote authoritarian, ethnonationalist, and patriarchal ideologies that privilege heterosexual (white) men while relegating women to caregiving and maternal roles (Pettersson, 2017, p. 8; Snipes & Mudde, 2020, p. 439).

Unsurprisingly, the contradiction of women leading women-hostile parties has sparked a variety of research. Many analyses have concentrated on case studies examining the roles, leadership styles, and images of individual populist women leaders. This research has predominantly focused on Marine Le Pen, who is considered "the most prominent female populist radical right leader in the world" (Snipes & Mudde, 2020, p. 449; see also Geva, 2020a, 2020b; Pettersson et al., 2023), as well as Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister of Italy (Cianciara, 2025; Cilento, 2023; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Donà, 2024; Indelicato & Lopes, 2024), followed by analyses of Scandinavian leaders, such as Pia Kjærsgaard (Meret, 2015), Laura Huhtasaari (Kivijärvi & Takala, 2020), or Riikka Purra (Pettersson & Sakki, 2024). Methodologically, most of these studies have employed content and (critical) discourse analyses of these leaders' populist communication and self-representations, especially in social media (Bast et al., 2022; Cianciara, 2025; Cilento, 2023; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026; Meret et al., 2016; Pettersson, 2017; Pettersson et al., 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024; Saccà & Massidda, 2025), alongside mass media representations (Kivijärvi & Takala, 2020; Pettersson, 2017; Snipes & Mudde, 2020).

Yet while these analyses make important contributions to understanding the performance of far-right populist women leaders, conceptually, they rely primarily on discursive analytical tools to explain the causes and consequences of women's populist leadership. They leave open the question of what specific leadership traits far-right populist women leaders exhibit and how these traits shape their leadership performance. In other words, the leadership profiles of women who rise to prominence in these *Männerparteien* remain underexamined.

Similarly, research on the relationship between populism and leadership has expanded considerably. Core scholarship identifies national executives such as Donald J. Trump, Viktor Orbán, Hugo Chávez, or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as prototypical populist leaders, who exhibit, for example, a confrontational style, heightened assertiveness, and greater willingness to take risks than mainstream democratic leaders (see, for example, Kesgin, 2020; Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019; Nai et al., 2019; Weyland, 2017). Only a limited number of studies, however, link populism and leadership traits, focusing either mainly on foreign policy behavior (Drezner, 2017; Fitzsimmons, 2022; Fouquet & Brummer, 2023; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020; Thiers & Wehner, 2022) or on personality-based assessments using expert surveys (Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019; Nai et al., 2019).

While these studies advance our understanding of how populism and leadership are connected and how leadership traits shape populist performance, they remain gender-blind, focusing almost exclusively on male leaders and leaving open the question of how gender shapes leadership profiles. Yet evidence suggests that gender significantly influences leadership and that women face distinct constraints in male-dominated environments (see, for example, Cameron & Shaw, 2016; Campus, 2013; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Jamieson, 1995; Kesgin & McCormick, 2026; Müller & Tömmel, 2022). Similarly, Brummer (2022) demonstrates that

men and women encounter different pressures when enacting leadership traits such as dominance or conceptual complexity, suggesting that women—particularly in severely male-dominated environments—may perform decisiveness or power-seeking in ways distinct from men.

This article advances research on far-right populist women leaders by integrating a gender perspective into the analysis of populist leadership traits, using Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) to examine how these traits shape their performance. We pose three interrelated research questions:

(a) Do far-right populist women leaders share similar leadership traits?

(b) Do they differ systematically from their male populist counterparts, other non-populist women leaders, and the broader population of world leaders?

(c) If so, how and to what extent?

Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia), and Alice Weidel (Alternative für Deutschland) serve as the primary case studies in our empirical analysis. They were selected because they exemplify "successful radical right-wing populist female leaders who managed to achieve consensus and support among many white male voters in a predominantly white male party organisation," and operate as leading political figures in three of Europe's most powerful countries—France, Italy, and Germany (Meret et al., 2016, p. 123; for brief career synopses of Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel, see the Supplementary File, Appendix A1.1). Although Le Pen and Meloni have received considerable scholarly attention individually, they have rarely been examined comparatively (Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). By contrast, research on Weidel—both individually and comparatively—remains limited and has only recently begun to emerge (Bordignon & Pansardi, 2026; Haußmann et al., 2026; Kamińska-Korolczuk et al., 2025).

This article makes three contributions: first, it bridges scholarship on gender, leadership, and populism with LTA's theoretical framework; second, it empirically profiles Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel; and third, it compares them to their male far-right populist counterparts in France, Italy, and Germany, respectively, non-populist women leaders, and a broader sample of world leaders. The analysis draws on software-assisted content analysis of party convention speeches and press conferences from 2011 to 2024 (N = 283). Our analysis finds that far-right populist women leaders most consistently stand out in their self-confidence and distrust of others, especially relative to other women leaders. Compared to their male counterparts, differences are smaller. This corroborates earlier research (Geva, 2020a, 2020b; Meret, 2015) and suggests that masculine-coded leadership performances dominate far-right party contexts.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 integrates scholarship on far-right populist women leaders and populist leadership traits, laying the ground for our analysis. Section 3 presents empirical expectations, empirical material, and strategy that underlie our research. In Section 4, we present our main findings. Section 5 discusses those findings and our ensuing conclusions.

2. Theoretical Considerations: The Nexus Between Gender and Populist Leadership Traits

Populist leadership—as any kind of leadership—builds on gendered frameworks (Geva, 2020a, 2020b). As Meret (2015, pp. 82–83) asserts, the connotations underlying populist leadership are often framed—implicitly or explicitly—in strongly masculine terms. While scholars differ in how they conceptualize populism, there is broad agreement that populist leaders seek to construct a direct, personalized relationship with "the people" while positioning themselves against established elites (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 3; Mudde, 2004, p. 544).

When leaders seek to personalize power, it follows that institutional checks and balances become anathema (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 7). In turn, this means that decision-making is often centralized within a small circle of loyalists (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 8; Meret, 2015, p. 92). At the same time, dependence on popular backing is inherently volatile, as support based on personal appeal can quickly erode (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 7; Geva, 2020a, pp. 27–28). Reliance on volatile mass support, consequently, encourages opportunistic decision-making, prioritizing short-term, dramatic actions that amplify polarization, exploit grievances, and target perceived "enemies of the people" (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 8). While varying across political contexts, personalized leadership remains a recurring theme in the literature on leadership and populism.

Within this broader populist logic, populist far-right leaders interpret politics through an especially stark "us versus them" worldview (see, for example, Geva, 2020b; Mudde, 2004; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020). This black-and-white thinking is reinforced by key elements of far-right populist ideology, such as nationalism, nativism, and racism, which deepen populist politics' inherent contentiousness (Geva, 2020b, p. 6; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020, p. 143). Consequently, far-right populist leadership is often associated with confrontational, aggressive, and assertive performances that resonate with hegemonic masculine ideals of authority and social dominance, understood as culturally dominant forms of masculinity in specific social and historical contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Geva, 2020a, 2020b; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026; Meret, 2015).

Because populist performances are structured around hegemonic masculinity and far-right populist parties remain heavily male-dominated, female right-wing populists can be expected to face particularly strong gendered barriers to political success (Bast et al., 2022, p. 359; Pettersson et al., 2023, p. 907). These barriers are reinforced by the broader historical association of political power with men: leadership continues to be conflated with stereotypically masculine traits such as ambition, assertiveness, confidence, and dominance, while women are presumed to embody qualities like kindness, cooperation, warmth, and gentleness (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 90). Although these stereotypes have certainly evolved over time, particularly regarding perceptions of competence (Eagly et al., 2019, p. 313), gendered expectations of leadership remain resilient and continue to shape evaluations of leaders—across genders—with often adverse effects for women leaders (Müller & Tömmel, 2022, p. 21).

One of the most common obstacles is the so-called "femininity-competence double bind" (Campus, 2013, p. 54; see also Jamieson, 1995). Women leaders must navigate a tension between demonstrating strength, decisiveness, and assertiveness—traits typically associated with male political leadership—while conforming to traditional expectations of femininity rooted in care, nurturing, and maternal responsibility (Bast et al.,

2022, p. 360; Geva, 2020b, p. 7; Meret et al., 2016, p. 131; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024, p. 407). The double bind often yields prejudicial perceptions and evaluations of women leaders that impede their access to and exercise of leadership, requiring women "to ensure they are neither dismissed as insufficiently authoritative nor derided as aggressive 'battleaxes' " (Cameron & Shaw, 2016, pp. 11, 134). While the double bind affects women leaders across political contexts, it may be particularly pronounced in male-dominated environments where hegemonic masculine leadership norms remain especially salient.

Meret (2015, p. 101) highlights these contrasting dimensions in an analysis of Pia Kjærsgaard, whose "profile is defined at the intersection between a professional, hard core and despotic (masculine) style in the public political sphere, and a motherly, ordinary, over-emotional and straightforward nature mainly ascribed to the 'private Pia', a woman and a mother" (see also Meret et al., 2016, pp. 130–135). Similarly, Geva (2020a), examining Marine Le Pen's performance, argues that she represents a "double-headed hydra," viewed as "extraordinary due to her combined political masculinity and political femininity" (Geva, 2020b, p. 16; see also Griffini & Montecchio, 2026; Pettersson, 2017; Pettersson et al., 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024; Snipes & Mudde, 2020). Other studies likewise highlight the skillful rhetorical maneuvering of populist far-right women leaders, such as Giorgia Meloni (Cianciara, 2025; Saccà & Massidda, 2025), Riikka Purra (Pettersson & Sakki, 2024), and Laura Huhtasaari (Kivijärvi & Takala, 2020). Keeling and Ladini (2025, p. 13) argue that Meloni adopts a masculine leadership style that reproduces hegemonic gendered power structures. Likewise, Cianciara (2025, p. 113) shows how Meloni navigates the "double bind" by balancing "toughness, typical of hegemonic masculinity, and more motherly traits, such as caregiving and understanding of people's concerns" (see also Griffini & Montecchio, 2026).

Taken together, existing research has identified recurring leadership profiles across a range of mostly male populist leaders—personalistic, self-aggrandizing, confrontational—but has not systematically examined how gender shapes these profiles. At the same time, research on prominent far-right populist women leaders shows that they distinctively adopt hegemonic masculine performance patterns, blending them to varying degrees with strategically deployed feminine elements. Yet systematic evidence remains limited regarding the underlying leadership profiles of far-right populist women leaders and whether they exhibit distinct leadership traits compared with their male counterparts and other women leaders.

3. Empirical Expectations, Empirical Material, and Research Strategy

Political-personality profiling infers leaders' traits, beliefs, and motivations by analyzing patterns in their public communications (Kesgin & McCormick, 2026, p. 38). This approach rests on the assumption that leaders' language—specifically, *how* they say something—provides insight into their underlying cognitive orientations, which, in turn, shape their political performance (Allen & Gallagher, 2022; Dyson, 2023; Kesgin & McCormick, 2026).

For our study, we use LTA, developed by Hermann (2002, 2005), to examine whether Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel exhibit similar leadership traits and to what extent they may differ from their male populist counterparts, other non-populist women leaders, and the world average for political leaders. LTA is a well-established method that has been applied extensively to the study of political leaders worldwide (see, for example, Allen & Gallagher, 2022; Dyson, 2023; Fitzsimmons, 2022; Kesgin, 2020), including research on populist leaders (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023; Thiers & Wehner, 2022). LTA employs content analysis of

speech texts to infer leadership traits. In particular, LTA provides insights into a leader's willingness to challenge or respect political constraints, their openness to new information, and their ability to form alliances or maintain control in hierarchical structures (Dyson, 2023, p. 214; Hermann, 2002, pp. 6, 9). Taking both populism and gender into account, leadership traits can be examined not only for their general effects but also for how their expression varies across populist and gendered contexts.

3.1. LTA and Empirical Expectations

LTA organizes seven leadership traits into three core dimensions: how leaders respond to political constraints, how open they are to external information, and what drives them to pursue and hold political office (Dyson, 2023, p. 216). The first dimension concerns whether a leader challenges or respects political constraints and is captured through belief in ability to control events (BACE) and need for power (PWR; Hermann, 2005, pp. 13–15). BACE reflects the degree to which a leader sees themselves as shaping rather than responding to events, while PWR reflects the drive to influence and assert authority over others (see Table A1 in Appendix A1.2 of the Supplementary File for coding details of all traits).

On the one hand, populist leaders typically seek to control political events and make autonomous decisions, suggesting high BACE; on the other, populist narratives portraying elites as powerful conspirators may reflect a perceived lack of control, implying lower BACE (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 10). Similar competing expectations may apply to populist women leaders. Women who attain leadership positions in far-right populist parties do so within highly male-dominated environments, where authority, decisiveness, and control remain important markers of leadership (Meret, 2015, pp. 101–102; see also Geva, 2020a, 2020b). Consequently, they may have incentives to project political agency and autonomy, suggesting high BACE. In this sense, high BACE may also serve as a strategic signal of masculine-style leadership. At the same time, heightened awareness of structural and gendered constraints may temper rather than eliminate such tendencies, suggesting more moderate levels of BACE.

Regarding PWR, populist leaders often exhibit a strong personal drive for power, characterized by opportunism, strategic maneuvering, and norm-breaking behavior (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, pp. 10–11; see also Ernst et al., 2019; Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019). At the same time, they present themselves as selfless embodiments of the people's will rather than power-seeking individuals (Drezner, 2017; Geva, 2020a; Mudde, 2004). Similar competing expectations may apply to far-right populist women leaders. As with BACE, higher PWR may serve as a signal of leadership strength and of performance traditionally associated with masculine leadership. However, the need to balance authority with populist claims to serve rather than seek power may also result in more moderate expressions of PWR.

The second LTA dimension concerns openness to contextual information and is assessed through the combination of conceptual complexity (CC) and self-confidence (SC; Hermann, 2005, pp. 17-23). CC refers to the degree to which a leader can differentiate among people, issues, and ideas (Hermann, 2005, pp. 22–23). SC measures a leader's sense of personal capability and authority and reflects "one's sense of self-importance" and ability to cope with challenges in the environment (Hermann, 2005, p. 20). When CC scores are higher than SC, a leader is considered more open to new information; when the reverse is true, the leader tends to interpret the environment through a fixed sense of self.

For populist leaders, low CC appears consistent with populism's "good–bad" worldview and black-and-white thinking (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 11; Hermann, 2005, pp. 195–196). However, high CC is associated with cognitive flexibility, openness to contextual information, and opportunistic adaptation—traits that facilitate strategic maneuvering and political manipulation (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 11). Thus, while populists' rhetoric suggests low CC, their strategic adaptability points to high CC. Similar competing expectations apply to far-right populist women leaders. On the one hand, they may emphasize a particularly clear and uncompromising worldview to establish ideological credibility within their parties. On the other hand, navigating environments that are often challenging for women leaders may require greater flexibility and adaptation. Consequently, we expect CC scores to range from low to moderate rather than clustering at either extreme.

For SC, Fouquet and Brummer (2023, pp. 12, 20) expect populists "to be highly self-confident leaders," which was largely confirmed in their analysis. High SC underpins defiance of external pressures and personalistic decision-making. Similar expectations may apply to far-right populist women leaders. As Kivijärvi and Takala (2020, p. 430) note: "Female right-wing leaders are particularly challenged by their double-standard deviance from the expected normalcy, i.e., being right-wing women and right-wing leaders, both of which are considered possible identity category violations" (see also Bast et al., 2022; Pettersson et al., 2023). Given the additional barriers associated with attaining leadership positions in far-right populist parties, we expect these women leaders to exhibit at least comparable, and potentially higher, levels of SC than their male counterparts and other women leaders.

The third dimension, which concerns a leader's motivation for holding office, involves task focus (TASK), distrust of others (DIS), and in-group bias (IGB; Hermann, 2005, pp. 24–32). TASK reflects whether a leader prioritizes problem-solving over group harmony, DIS indicates suspicion toward external actors, and IGB captures attachment to one's own group. Together, distrust and high IGB suggest a worldview shaped by conflict and threat, while lower scores reflect a more cooperative and open orientation.

On the one hand, TASK captures instrumental activities that signal determination and agency; on the other, appealing to groups and followers reflects a more relational leadership style. Since far-right populist women leaders, like other women leaders, must balance expectations of competence and femininity, we expect them to score in the moderate range on TASK (Geva, 2020a, 2020b; Meret, 2015). For DIS and IGB, Fouquet and Brummer (2023, p. 13) expect high levels to closely align with populist leadership (see also Hermann, 2005, pp. 200, 203). While they find only partial support for this expectation—high DIS but no support for IGB—we anticipate relatively high levels of both traits among far-right populist women leaders. From a gender perspective, emphasizing distrust toward opponents and loyalty to the in-group may help women leaders project strength and ideological credibility in political parties where leadership remains strongly masculinized. Table 1 summarizes our empirical expectations for far-right populist women leaders across traits.

Table 1. Leadership traits and empirical expectations for far-right populist women leaders.

Leadership traits	Exemplary behavioral expectation and stereotypical gender connotation based on a...	
	...high manifestation of the leadership trait	*...low manifestation of the leadership trait*
BACE	• Active involvement in decision-making processes • Low willingness to delegate tasks	• Hesitant, wait-and-see behavior • Low tendency to take initiative
	Empirical expectation: Moderate to high BACE	
PWR	• Focus on maximizing own benefit • Little consideration for others	• Willingness to fit into decision-making groups • Focus on balance and fairness
	Empirical expectation: Moderate to high PWR	
CC	• Consideration of situations from different points of view • Openness to new information and advice	• Own intuition essential • Stereotypical ideas about facts and/or persons
	Empirical expectation: Moderate to low CC	
SC	• Little inclination to critically examine oneself and/or facts • Ignoring or reinterpreting "inappropriate" information	• Reluctance to commit oneself; third parties have great influence on decision-making • Erratic and inconsistent positions
	Empirical expectation: High to very high SC	
TASK	• Focus on tasks and/or issues • Groups serve primarily as a means to process or solve problems	• Focus on relationships • Relationships between group members and group cohesion central
	Empirical expectation: Moderate TASK	
DIS	• Categorical suspicion of actions and motivations of third parties (esp. adversaries) • Expectation of high loyalty from members of own group	• More unbiased perception/image of third parties • Distrust not excluded but situation-specific
	Empirical expectation: High DIS	
IGB	• Preservation of own group's independence central • Shifting of blame to other groups	• No categorical demarcations from other groups • Less tendency to hold other groups responsible for one's own problems
	Empirical expectation: High IGB	

Source: Own conceptualization based on Brummer (2022) and Dyson (2023).

3.2. Empirical Material and Research Strategy

We use speeches from party conventions and press conferences as primary sources to analyze the leadership traits of both female and male far-right populist politicians, a data source widely recognized and well-established in LTA (Suedfeld, 2010). Using speeches from party conventions allows for cross-country

comparability, as these formal settings share similar contexts and purposes (Dyson, 2023, p. 218). We use verbatim transcriptions of video recordings of these events, rather than relying on written or prepared texts, capturing the leaders' spoken words as delivered. Speeches were thus primarily sourced from official party YouTube channels and, where available, news broadcasters. The full dataset covers January 2011 to December 2024, comprising 283 speeches and 732,763 words across all leaders (see Supplementary File's Appendix A1.3 for details about source selection and A1.4 for transcription procedures). Speeches and press conferences are particularly well-suited for studying far-right populist leaders, as these leaders tend to be hostile toward mainstream media and actively avoid journalist-led formats such as interviews (Engesser et al., 2016; Ernst et al., 2019; Muis et al., 2020).

Speeches and press conferences were selected and transcribed based on formal role and political relevance. First, for the three women leaders, we also included speeches given before their formal appointment as party leaders (Le Pen: 2011; Meloni: 2012; and Weidel: 2022), provided they were already prominent public figures or held influential roles within the party structure (for details on Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel's party career trajectories, see Appendix A1.1 in the Supplementary File; for details on speech selection criteria per country, see Appendix A1.5 in the Supplementary File). Second, male individuals were included if they held a senior leadership position within their party at the time of the speech. All speeches were weighted equally; no speech was prioritized or assigned additional weight. To ensure that aggregating male leaders did not mask meaningful variation, we also conducted a robustness check excluding male leaders who contributed fewer than three speeches (see Appendix A1.10 in the Supplementary File). The substantive findings remained unchanged. Table 2 presents an overview of the number of speeches, the total word count, and the years covered.

Table 2. Overview of number of speeches, total word count, and time period.

Leader	Time period	Number of speeches	Total word count
France - RN			
Marine Le Pen	2011–2024	49	211,804
Male leaders (n = 9)	2011–2024	46	108,760
Italy - FdI			
Giorgia Meloni	2013–2024	55	206,509
Male leaders (n = 8)	2013–2024	30	40,509
Germany - AfD			
Alice Weidel	2014–2024	54	66,962
Male leaders (n = 4)	2014–2024	49	98,219
Total	2011–2024	283	732,763

Note: Male leaders' rows show aggregate totals for all male party members analyzed; see Supplementary File's Table A3 in Appendix A1.7 for a detailed breakdown of individual male leaders.

ProfilerPlus, an automated tool developed by Social Science Automation for LTA, was used to analyze leaders' verbal outputs (Levine & Young, 2014). The software uses pre-established dictionaries of words and phrases associated with each leadership trait, enabling systematic and objective coding. Each trait was calculated as a proportional score, calculated as the ratio of high trait observations to the total number of relevant observations, resulting in a score ranging from 0 to 1, which ultimately accounts for differences in speech length. ProfilerPlus supports English and German. French and Italian speeches were translated into

English for analysis. Robustness checks confirmed that the translation choices did not significantly affect LTA outcomes (see Appendix A1.6 in the Supplementary File).

For each speech or press conference, ProfilerPlus generates scores for all seven leadership traits. Because LTA assesses leadership traits assumed to be relatively stable over time, we calculated the mean score per leader across all available speeches (see also Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 8). Recent research has confirmed this stability assumption, demonstrating that cumulative trait scores stabilize after approximately 20,000–40,000 words (Young, 2025, pp. 3, 5). We provide additional support for the stability assumption in Appendix A1.9 in the Supplementary File, which shows that the trait scores are stable over time.

The standard approach to analyzing LTA outputs is to compare individual or group trait scores with a norming group, either the global sample of world leaders provided by ProfilerPlus or a relevant comparison group. In our case, the trait scores of far-right populist women leaders are compared with those of their male counterparts in the same party and country, as well as ProfilerPlus's norming group of 284 world leaders.

To further disentangle the gendered dimensions of far-right populist leadership, we also drew on a sample of 52 American women leaders compiled by Kesgin and McCormick (2026). We ran LTA using ProfilerPlus on the same 52 text files and calculated the mean and standard deviation per trait across all women leaders in the sample. We acknowledge that comparing American women leaders to European far-right populist leaders is not ideal, given differences in political systems and contexts. However, this sample represents the best and most comprehensive norming group of women political leaders currently available for LTA research.

4. Empirical Findings: Profiling Far-Right Populist Women Leaders

Table 3 shows the standardized differences of Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel vis-à-vis their respective far-right populist male counterparts, the sample of world leaders, and the sample of American women leaders. Differences are expressed as standardized z-scores, indicating how many standard deviations each woman leader's mean score deviates from the relevant comparison group, and are categorized according to LTA thresholds (very high/very low, high/low, lean high/lean low, and average), reflected in the color coding of the tables (see Appendix A1.8 in the Supplementary File for detailed z-score calculation methods and z-score classification). Similarly, Table 4 shows the standardized differences between far-right populist male leaders in France, Italy, and Germany, compared with the samples of world leaders and American women leaders. In the following, we examine the findings for each leadership trait, leader, and their respective comparison groups in turn.

4.1. BACE

Le Pen scores average on BACE relative to all three comparison groups (z-scores: −0.05, −0.12, −0.25). Weidel similarly scores average across all comparisons (z-scores: −0.04, 0.11, −0.01). Meloni, by contrast, scores lean high relative to her male counterparts (z-score: 0.59), world leaders (z-score: 0.65), and American women leaders (z-score: 0.54), indicating a stronger tendency to present herself as actively shaping events than all three comparison groups, which matches our expectation of moderate to high BACE. Table 4 shows that Italian far-right male politicians score lean low on BACE relative to world leaders (z-score: −0.53) and American women leaders (z-score: −0.66). Meloni's elevated BACE may therefore function as a signal of decisiveness

Table 3. LTA results for Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel.

	Marine Le Pen				Giorgia Meloni				Alice Weidel			
Trait	Score	vs. male counterparts	vs. world leaders	vs. American women leaders	Score	vs. male counterparts	vs. world leaders	vs. American women leaders	Score	vs. male counterparts	vs. world leaders	vs. American women leaders
BACE	0.344 (0.084)	−0.05	−0.12	−0.25	0.382 (0.070)	0.59	0.65	0.54	0.356 (0.164)	−0.04	0.11	−0.01
PWR	0.285 (0.087)	0.43	0.49	0.26	0.234 (0.072)	−0.04	−0.52	−0.79	0.311 (0.203)	0.09	1.02	0.80
CC	0.556 (0.062)	0.31	−0.57	−0.34	0.593 (0.059)	−0.12	0.04	0.37	0.522 (0.099)	−0.34	−1.14	−1.00
SC	0.391 (0.140)	0.15	0.31	1.43	0.431 (0.123)	0.14	0.71	2.04	0.356 (0.264)	−0.15	−0.04	0.87
TASK	0.609 (0.107)	0.03	−0.31	0.32	0.576 (0.099)	−0.31	−0.77	−0.03	0.687 (0.157)	0.42	0.82	1.18
DIS	0.206 (0.097)	0.24	1.27	1.37	0.191 (0.083)	0.36	1.01	1.09	0.279 (0.182)	0.37	2.48	2.67
IGB	0.147 (0.057)	0.40	−0.06	0.92	0.105 (0.060)	−0.00	−0.90	−0.15	0.151 (0.118)	0.09	0.01	1.01

Legend: z-score = very high (≥2) | high (≥1) | lean high (≥0.5) | average | lean low (≤−0.5) | low (≤−1) | very low (≤−2)

Table 4. LTA results for male far-right populist leaders.

	Male Populists—France			Male Populists—Italy			Male Populists—Germany		
Trait	Score	vs. world leaders	vs. American women leaders	Score	vs. world leaders	vs. American women leaders	Score	vs. world leaders	vs. American women leaders
BACE	0.350 (0.115)	−0.00	−0.12	0.324 (0.100)	−0.53	−0.66	0.360 (0.106)	0.20	0.08
PWR	0.250 (0.082)	−0.20	−0.46	0.239 (0.106)	−0.42	−0.69	0.304 (0.071)	0.89	0.67
CC	0.528 (0.090)	−1.04	−0.88	0.604 (0.098)	0.24	0.60	0.546 (0.071)	−0.73	−0.53
SC	0.355 (0.235)	−0.05	0.86	0.408 (0.167)	0.48	1.68	0.378 (0.155)	0.18	1.22
TASK	0.605 (0.136)	−0.36	0.28	0.623 (0.149)	−0.11	0.48	0.635 (0.123)	0.07	0.61
DIS	0.178 (0.117)	0.80	0.86	0.158 (0.091)	0.46	0.50	0.205 (0.199)	1.25	1.35
IGB	0.117 (0.077)	−0.67	0.15	0.105 (0.072)	−0.90	−0.15	0.142 (0.090)	−0.16	0.80

Legend: z-score = very high (≥2) | high (≥1) | lean high (≥0.5) | average | lean low (≤−0.5) | low (≤−1) | very low (≤−2)

and leadership strength vis-à-vis her male peers, setting her apart from the broader Italian far-right leadership. Overall, the findings support our expectation that far-right populist women leaders would exhibit moderate to high levels of BACE. While Le Pen and Weidel score in the moderate range, Meloni occupies the upper end of the expected spectrum.

4.2. PWR

Le Pen scores average on PWR relative to all three comparison groups (z-scores: 0.43, 0.49, 0.26). Meloni scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: −0.04), lean low relative to world leaders (z-score: −0.52), and lean low relative to American women leaders (z-score: −0.79). This aligns with Fouquet and Brummer's (2023, pp. 10–11) observation that populist leaders often present themselves as selfless embodiments of the people's will, downplaying personal power ambitions. Weidel, by contrast, scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: 0.09), but high relative to world leaders (z-score: 1.02) and lean high relative to American women leaders (z-score: 0.80), indicating a stronger emphasis on influencing and asserting authority than both norming groups. Overall, the findings provide partial support for our expectations. While Weidel's scores align with the expectation that PWR may serve as a signal of leadership strength, Le Pen's average scores are consistent with the expectation that competing pressures may result in more moderate expressions of PWR. Meloni departs somewhat from this pattern, exhibiting comparatively low levels of PWR relative to world leaders and American women leaders.

4.3. CC

Le Pen scores lean low on CC relative to world leaders (z-score: −0.57), suggesting a stronger reliance on categorical language and less openness to alternative perspectives, consistent with populist leadership. She stands out neither from her male counterparts (z-score: 0.31) nor from American women leaders (z-score: −0.34). Meloni scores average across all three comparisons (z-scores: −0.12, 0.04, 0.37). Weidel scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: −0.34), but low relative to world leaders (z-score: −1.14) and American women leaders (z-score: −1.00), indicating a stronger tendency toward simplified, dichotomous thinking than either norming group. Table 4 shows that the German male sample also displays lean low CC relative to world leaders (z-score: −0.73), though Weidel's score is considerably lower still. Overall, the findings support our expectation that far-right populist women leaders would exhibit CC scores ranging from low to moderate rather than clustering at either extreme. While Le Pen and Weidel lean toward the lower end of this range, Meloni displays a more moderate level of CC.

4.4. SC

Le Pen scores average relative to world leaders (z-score: 0.31) and male counterparts (z-score: 0.15), but high relative to American women leaders (z-score: 1.43). Meloni scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: 0.14), lean high relative to world leaders (z-score: 0.71), and very high relative to American women leaders (z-score: 2.04). Weidel scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: −0.15) and world leaders (z-score: −0.04), but high relative to American women leaders (z-score: 0.87). Table 4 shows that male far-right leaders also score high on SC relative to American women leaders across all three countries (France: 0.86, Italy: 1.68, Germany: 1.22), though in each case the woman leader's score is higher still, most markedly for Meloni. Overall, the findings support our expectation that far-right populist women leaders would exhibit

levels of SC comparable to, and in some cases exceeding, those of their male counterparts and (consistently) other women leaders.

4.5. TASK

Le Pen scores average on TASK across all comparisons (z-scores: 0.03, −0.31, 0.32), supporting the expectation of moderate TASK. Meloni similarly scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: −0.31) and American women leaders (z-score: −0.03), and lean low relative to world leaders (z-score: −0.77), broadly confirming the expectation, although she falls somewhat below average relative to world leaders. Weidel, by contrast, scores average on TASK relative to her male counterparts (z-score: 0.42), but lean high relative to world leaders (z-score: 0.82) and high relative to American women leaders (z-score: 1.18), indicating a stronger focus on problem-solving and instrumental activities than both norming groups. This departs from our expectation of moderate TASK and suggests a more strongly task-oriented leadership style. Overall, the expectation is supported for Le Pen and Meloni, but not for Weidel.

4.6. DIS

Le Pen scores high relative to world leaders (z-score: 1.27) and American women leaders (z-score: 1.37), consistent with the expectation of elevated DIS, though she does not stand out from her male counterparts (z-score: 0.24). Meloni scores as average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: 0.36), but high relative to world leaders (z-score: 1.01) and American women leaders (z-score: 1.09), indicating frequent use of language that portrays external actors as suspicious or threatening. Weidel scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: 0.37), but very high relative to world leaders (z-score: 2.48) and American women leaders (z-score: 2.67). These differences are among the largest in the analysis. Table 4 shows that the male samples also display elevated DIS relative to world leaders across all three countries (France: 0.80, Italy: 0.46, Germany: 1.25), but in each case the woman leader's score exceeds that of her male counterparts, most notably for Weidel, whose DIS score is nearly double the German male sample score relative to both norming groups. Overall, the findings provide strong support for the expectation of elevated DIS among far-right populist women leaders and suggest that distrust may be particularly pronounced among women leaders in far-right populist parties.

4.7. IGB

Le Pen scores average relative to world leaders (z-score: −0.06) and male counterparts (z-score: 0.40), but lean high relative to American women leaders (z-score: 0.92), reflecting a greater emphasis on group loyalty than other women leaders. Meloni scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: −0.00) and American women leaders (z-score: −0.15), but lean low relative to world leaders (z-score: −0.90), leaving the expectation of high IGB unconfirmed across all three comparison groups. Weidel scores average relative to her male counterparts (z-score: 0.09) and world leaders (z-score: 0.01), but high relative to American women leaders (z-score: 1.01). Table 4 shows that male samples score average to lean low on IGB relative to world leaders across all three countries, with Le Pen and Weidel both exceeding their respective male aggregates relative to American women leaders. Overall, the findings provide only partial support for the expectation of elevated IGB. While Le Pen and Weidel display stronger in-group bias than American women leaders, neither

consistently exceeds world leaders or their male counterparts, and Meloni does not exhibit elevated IGB relative to any comparison group.

4.8. Comparative Discussion

Taken together, SC and DIS emerge as the most consistent traits across all three leaders, representing the clearest markers distinguishing far-right populist women leaders from other women leaders. Results for BACE, PWR, CC, TASK, and IGB are more mixed, with differences emerging more clearly in comparisons with world leaders and American women leaders than with male far-right counterparts.

Notably, however, in several cases, the women leaders not only meet but also exceed their male counterparts, suggesting that far-right populist women do not merely adopt the leadership norms of their party context but may actively reinforce them. This is consistent with the theoretical argument that women in highly male-dominated environments face particular pressure to demonstrate leadership strength and ideological credibility—aligning with and elevating masculine leadership ideals. At the same time, the findings extend Fouquet and Brummer's (2023) work by suggesting that leadership traits among populist actors may also be shaped by gendered expectations and constraints. In particular, the consistently elevated levels of SC and DIS indicate that these pressures may reinforce the expression of certain core populist leadership traits.

5. Conclusion

This study integrates a gender perspective into LTA to examine how far-right populist women enact leadership within male-dominated and misogynistic party environments. Profiling Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel—and systematically comparing them to samples of their male counterparts, world leaders, and non-populist American women leaders—yields five central conclusions.

First, compared to non-populist women leaders, all three far-right populist women exhibit stronger expressions of several traits commonly associated with both populist leadership and masculine leadership ideals. Most notably, all three score high to very high on SC and DIS—traits previously identified as characteristic of populist leadership (see Section 2; see also Fouquet & Brummer, 2023, p. 24). Overall, the findings are consistent with our expectations and align with earlier research: in our sample, far-right populist women leaders appear more self-confident, confrontational, and, in some cases, more control-oriented than other women leaders. This pattern suggests that entering and advancing within male-dominated far-right parties may require women leaders to project these traits particularly strongly. In other words, compared with other women leaders, far-right populist women leaders more consistently display traits associated with both populist and traditionally masculine leadership performances.

Second, compared to the broader sample of world leaders, these differences are less pronounced—except for DIS, which distinguishes all three women. High distrust emerges as the most robust trait separating populist leaders from the broader leadership population, confirming Fouquet and Brummer's findings (2023, p. 24; see also Fitzsimmons, 2022). A similar result appears in Allen and Gallagher's (2022, p. 551) analysis of Donald Trump, where distrust most distinguishes him from the world leader sample. Beyond elevated distrust, however, the women display varied profiles across traits such as BACE, PWR, CC, TASK, and IGB when compared to the world leader sample, indicating, as suggested by Fouquet and Brummer, that populist

leadership does not reflect a single, uniform personality type. However, the closer resemblance to the world leader sample than to the women leader sample suggests that the former may itself reflect historically masculinized patterns of executive leadership, including stronger expectations of agency, assertiveness, and control (see, e.g., Cameron & Shaw, 2016; Campus, 2013; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Jamieson, 1995). In turn, this underscores the importance of gendering LTA.

Third, comparisons with male far-right counterparts reveal both convergence and gendered differentiation across cases. In France, Le Pen shares relatively low CC and elevated distrust with male peers, yet exhibits stronger SC and, in broader comparisons, stronger IGB, suggesting a more pronounced emphasis on masculine-coded traits than her male counterparts. In Italy, Meloni diverges more clearly: while Italian far-right men lean low on BACE, she leans high, combining very high SC and high distrust. This configuration positions her as more action-oriented and control-focused than both her male peers and the broader leadership samples. In Germany, Weidel closely resembles her male counterparts, as the AfD sample broadly displays high distrust, lean high need for power, and low CC; however, she expresses these traits—especially distrust—at even more pronounced levels.

Fourth, taken together, these comparisons suggest that gender shapes not so much the overall configuration of far-right populist leadership traits as their intensity and expression. In our sample, women leaders often resemble their male party counterparts, but score higher on SC, distrust, and, in some cases, stronger control orientation than other women leaders.

Finally, comparing our findings to those of Fouquet and Brummer (2023) suggests that variation in populist leadership also depends on sample composition. While Fouquet and Brummer confirm high DIS and high SC among eight populist government leaders (Chávez, Kirchner, Trump, Orbán, Erdoğan, Berlusconi, Modi, and Duterte), our analysis of far-right populist leaders in France, Italy, and Germany points to a more consistent alignment with core populist leadership traits. This divergence likely reflects both the distinct context of far-right parties and the gendered pressures women leaders face within them, which may intensify the expression of selected populist traits.

By collecting a large corpus of verbatim speeches and press conferences, this article provides a robust basis for studying the leadership traits of far-right populist women leaders comparatively. Future research can build on this design in several ways. For example, while the comparison to American women leaders offered an intra-gender variation, cross-national differences in institutions and political communication may shape how the traits are expressed independently of gender and the far-right context. Future work could therefore develop a European comparison group of non-populist women leaders, and ideally non-populist men, to enable more context-sensitive gender comparisons. The exact composition of ProfilerPlus's world leaders norming sample is also not publicly disclosed and may itself include leaders with populist characteristics, a limitation that future research could address through more transparent norming datasets. Similarly, rather than a stand-alone or binary social category, gender intersects with other social identities and is expressed through diverse identities, performances, and institutional positions. Future leadership trait analyses should therefore incorporate a stronger intersectional lens, examining how gender, in conjunction with other social categories, shapes leadership traits across different groups and contexts, populist or otherwise.

Taken together, the findings suggest that far-right populist leadership is most consistently characterized by elevated SC and DIS. Gender matters not by producing fundamentally different leadership profiles within the far right, but by shaping the degree to which women adopt, perform, and, in several cases, amplify masculine-coded and populist traits to secure authority and legitimacy. Far-right populist women leaders thus do not merely mirror their male counterparts; in several instances, they intensify traits central to populist leadership, turning gendered expectations into a strategic resource rather than a constraint (Bast et al., 2022; Snipes & Mudde, 2020). It is precisely because of these carefully calibrated performances that far-right populist women leaders should not be underestimated, as Pető warned more than a decade ago.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Pamela Pansardi (University of Pavia).

Data Availability

The data are available upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used GitHub Copilot (GitHub/Microsoft, integrated into RStudio) to assist with coding and debugging; DeepL to translate French and Italian source texts into English; and OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.3) to refine grammar and language. These tools were not used to generate or alter substantive content, data analysis, or the interpretation of results. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Female Leadership, Gender Neutralization, and the Populist Radical Right: The Case of Giorgia Meloni

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Abstract

The growing presence of women at the helm of populist radical right parties has raised important questions about the role of gender in the construction and perception of political leadership. While existing literature has explored the feminization of leadership, the rise of strongwomen, and the strategic value of female leaders, less attention has been devoted to how female leadership is perceived and evaluated within populist radical right parties. This article addresses this gap by examining the case of Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia, investigating whether gender constitutes a meaningful category through which leadership is interpreted within the party. Drawing on 21 semi-structured interviews with party representatives at different organizational levels, the article analyses perceptions of leadership in relation to electoral appeal, membership recruitment, and internal party functioning. The findings point to a process of gender neutralization whereby Meloni is primarily evaluated through apparently gender-neutral qualities such as coherence, sacrifice, competence, and loyalty rather than through explicitly gendered criteria.

Keywords

female leadership; Fratelli d'Italia; gender neutralization; Giorgia Meloni; party organization; populist radical right

1. Introduction

Female leadership within populist radical right (PRR) parties presents a puzzle for the literature on both gender and populism. Although PRR parties have been typically characterized by male-dominated organizations and traditionalist views on gender roles, a growing number of women have attained leadership positions within them. This has raised questions about how female leadership operates in such contexts and

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the extent to which gender influences recruitment processes, internal functioning, and electoral support (e.g., Celis & Childs, 2018; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Geva, 2020; Meret, 2015). But how party actors interpret and evaluate female leadership within a PRR party, and whether gender constitutes a meaningful category through which leadership is understood, remain largely understudied. This article addresses these issues by focusing on the case of Giorgia Meloni and Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI), currently one of the most successful PRR parties in Europe.

Meloni's political trajectory and the rise of FdI offer a particularly instructive case for examining the relationship between leadership, party development, and gender. As the first woman prime minister in Italy and long-standing leader of a party rooted in the post-fascist tradition, Meloni combines high levels of personalization and political visibility with strong ideological continuity within the Italian right (Donà, 2024; Melito & Zulianello, 2024). This combination allows us to explore whether gender matters in shaping leadership perceptions and organizational functioning in a PRR party, or not.

Empirically, the article draws on semi-structured interviews with representatives of FdI, analyzing how Meloni's leadership is narrated from within the party and how gender is framed across multiple dimensions: its electoral appeal, the recruitment of new members, and its internal functioning. Our findings point to a distinctive pattern of gender neutralization. On the one hand, Meloni is consistently portrayed as a central and foundational leader. On the other hand, her leadership traits are almost systematically articulated in gender-neutral terms. Indeed, being a woman is not identified as a specific source of electoral attractiveness, nor is it perceived as affecting the party's capacity to mobilize supporters or members, nor as producing a distinctive leadership style.

Notably, rather than being described in terms of gender-related attributes, Meloni is repeatedly portrayed as what one interviewee described as the "human prototype" of the right: a figure characterized by self-sacrifice, political dedication, discipline, and a meritocratic rise to prominence through long-standing activism and dedication. In this narrative, the legitimacy of leadership derives from consistency and loyalty to the party, not from gender-related experiences or claims. Gender, therefore, is neither openly mobilized nor openly contested: it is neutralized, allowing Meloni's leadership to be both exceptional—given her visibility and centrality—and fully institutionalized within the party's ideological and organizational culture.

By showing how Meloni's leadership and the development of FdI have evolved in a symbiotic and gender-neutral manner, this article contributes to the broader literature on female leadership in the PRR and, more generally, it sheds light on how these parties can accommodate female leadership without altering their essential ideological traits, offering insights for research on personalization, party organization, and gender in contemporary PRR politics and beyond.

The article is structured as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework and reviews the relevant literature on gender, leadership, and the PRR. The following one introduces the case of Giorgia Meloni and FdI. We then present the research design, data, and methods, and finally the empirical analysis, which is organized around the main themes emerging from the interviews.

2. Leadership, Gender, and the Populist Radical Right

This study draws on two interrelated strands of literature, both of which are fundamental to its analytical framework. The first concerns women's political leadership, a field of research that has expanded significantly in recent years (e.g., Beckwith, 2015; Cavalieri & De Giorgi, 2025; Meret et al., 2017; Pansardi, 2025). The second strand focuses on gender and the PRR, a field that has also grown in scope, as these parties have increasingly incorporated women into prominent roles and engaged, although selectively and usually with specific strategic aims, on gender-related issues (e.g., Farris, 2017). Bringing these two strands of research into dialogue allows us to better understand the dynamics of female leadership within PRR parties.

Women's access to political leadership positions is hindered by a series of obstacles that more broadly reflect gender inequalities in political participation. The literature on feminist institutionalism highlights how, alongside institutional rules and structures implicitly or explicitly designed with men in mind, there operates a complex set of social and organizational constraints which limit women's opportunities for advancement. These constraints include formal and informal barriers, often difficult to identify, which contribute to making access to top-level roles more selective and unequal (Müller & Tömmel, 2022).

A key concept for understanding these processes is that of the "glass ceiling" (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986), which describes an invisible barrier that hinders women's (and other marginalized groups') access to leadership positions, even when they hold qualifications and skills which are equal or even superior to those of their male colleagues. Unlike the legal barriers of the past, the glass ceiling is difficult to identify because it does not manifest itself through formal rules, but through implicit biases, informal institutional practices, and persistent gender stereotypes which tend to favor male leadership.

These obstacles are further exacerbated by the way leadership is commonly defined and evaluated. As highlighted by the social role congruity theory, expectations associated with leadership positions have historically aligned with traits considered masculine, such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and emotional detachment, while qualities traditionally attributed to women, such as empathy, helpfulness, and relational attentiveness, are perceived as incompatible with the exercise of authority (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Consequently, women aspiring to leadership face a dual constraint: either adapting to dominant models and risking being judged negatively for transgressing gender norms or conforming to expectations of femininity at the cost of a diminished legitimacy as leaders (Gipson et al., 2017).

Alongside the glass ceiling, literature has developed a further explanatory model: the glass-cliff theory, proposed by Ryan and Haslam (2005). This theory highlights how women are more likely to be selected for leadership roles in phases of political, organizational, or electoral crisis, when the risk of failure is higher. In these contexts, women may be seen as particularly suitable because they are perceived as less compromised by previous elites and more capable of signaling discontinuity and change (O'Brien, 2015). Several European female political leaders have, in fact, risen to the leadership of their respective parties in moments of crisis.

A similar dynamic has also been identified in the study of the recent increase in women leading PRR parties (Weeks et al., 2023). Although these parties generally support conservative visions of women's role in society, recent years have witnessed a growing feminization of leadership, with figures such as Marine Le Pen, Alice

Weidel, and Giorgia Meloni herself. According to the extant literature, these choices are partly a response to strategies to broaden the electorate, particularly among women, who are traditionally less inclined to support the PRR (Donà et al., 2025).

However, the increased presence of women in leadership positions does not automatically imply equal treatment or a transformation of gender norms in politics. Notably, women leaders continue to be evaluated using different criteria than men, especially in the media (Campus, 2016).

The presence of a woman at the top of the party often coexists with the persistence of traditional organizational, cultural, and ideological models. From this perspective, the acceptance and legitimization of female leadership seem to depend precisely on its compatibility with the dominant gender order, rather than on its capacity to challenge it (Liveriero & Preda, 2025). Although the existing literature does not explicitly employ the concept of gender neutralization, it describes a closely related phenomenon: the leader's gender remains visible and, in certain circumstances, is even symbolically valorized, yet it does not function as a primary lens through which her political action and leadership are interpreted.

Another strand of research focuses on the so-called "paradox" of female leadership within the PRR. Numerous studies have highlighted how parties characterized by conservative values and, in some cases, openly anti-feminist positions are increasingly led by highly successful women. To explain this apparent contradiction, Casullo (2025) argues that figures such as Le Pen, Weidel, and Meloni can combine traits traditionally associated with masculine leadership—such as assertiveness, toughness, and authority—with characteristics conventionally linked to femininity, including empathy, care, and relational proximity. In this perspective emerged the figure of the "strongwoman," a concept derived from that of the strongman (an authoritarian, tough, and assertive leader) and subsequently developed by other scholars as well (Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). PRR strongwomen embody a hybrid form of leadership, which combines determination and the defense of traditional values with references to motherhood, family, and, in some cases, the protection of women, all within a broader hierarchical and conservative understanding of society and gender relations.

One further growing line of research has drawn attention to the increasing centrality of gender issues within the contemporary PRR. Over the last decade, these parties have incorporated themes related to gender and sexuality into their political agendas, both through mobilization against the so-called "gender ideology" and through broader critiques of feminism and changing family norms. As Scrinzi (2026) demonstrates, gender-related issues have become an important component of the identity-building and discursive strategies of many European PRR parties. This literature is particularly relevant to the present study because it points to an interesting tension. While gender has become increasingly politicized at the programmatic and discursive levels, it may simultaneously become surprisingly marginal when party actors describe and evaluate their own leader. It is precisely this possibility that motivates this work, which focuses on the case of Giorgia Meloni, leader of the PRR party FdI and currently prime minister of Italy: rather than observing a constant negotiation between masculinity and femininity or an ongoing mobilization of gender identity, we expect to find a form of gender suspension in the interpretation of Meloni's leadership.

This tendency toward the neutralization of gender, or its use primarily for instrumental purposes, can also be observed when examining the Meloni government, i.e., the first government in Italian history headed by a woman. Despite the symbolic significance of this achievement, female leadership at the executive level has

not been accompanied by a comparable redistribution of power between men and women. On the contrary, women hold fewer ministerial positions than in some previous governments and continue to be concentrated in portfolios traditionally regarded as less politically influential (Barbieri & Pansardi, 2026). This suggests that the presence of a woman in the highest political office does not automatically translate into a transformation of gender relations within political institutions. Hence, feminization appears to be largely symbolic: significant in terms of descriptive representation, yet much more limited in terms of the substantive redistribution of political power.

The case of Giorgia Meloni is hence very intriguing, as it shows all the just-mentioned paradoxes. Meloni does not deny her identity as a woman, despite embodying a highly personalized leadership style and featuring traits traditionally associated with masculinity—such as assertiveness, harsh language, and organizational control. Her style is based on a selective negotiation between masculine and feminine elements (Campus & Mazzoni, 2021). She emphasizes motherhood not as a limitation, but as a symbolic resource, constructing the image of a "superwoman" capable of reconciling public and private responsibilities (Icardi, 2025). Like other female leaders in the PRR before her, Giorgia Meloni's leadership is based on a strategic combination of features traditionally associated with both the masculine and the feminine, recalling the metaphor of the "two-headed hydra" proposed by Geva (2020) for the case of Marine Le Pen. Meloni's success seems to rest on her ability to navigate gender expectations without openly questioning them: her leadership does not challenge the male power structures which characterize Italian politics. On the contrary, Meloni appears fully compatible with a model that interprets political success as the result of sacrifice, discipline, and personal determination (Liveriero & Preda, 2025). In this sense, although she represents a symbolic break with traditional male leadership, her figure does not threaten the existing gender structure but rather contributes to its legitimacy.

We expect the Meloni case to show how female leadership can assert itself without politicizing gender, through a process of neutralization, which makes the presence of women at the top compatible with PRR ideology and highly hierarchical organizations.

3. A Symbiotic Rise: Giorgia Meloni and FdI

Giorgia Meloni is one of the founders and the long-time leader of FdI, a PRR party established in late 2012 ahead of the 2013 general election. FdI originated as a splinter from the center-right Popolo della Libertà, itself the product of the merger between Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN). Despite its creation as a new political actor, FdI displays strong elements of continuity with AN, both in organizational and symbolic terms: a large share of its leadership previously belonged to AN, and references to AN were explicitly incorporated into FdI's statute and symbol until 2019. From its foundation, however, the party has been strongly personalized around Meloni, who quickly emerged as its most visible and defining figure.

Meloni's political career long predates the founding of FdI. She became politically active in the early 1990s through the youth organization of the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI), and subsequently rose through the ranks of AN, leading both its student and youth organizations. She was first elected to office at the local level in 1998 and entered the Chamber of Deputies in 2006, becoming one of its vice-presidents. Following the 2008 elections, she was appointed Minister for Youth in Silvio Berlusconi's

government, at the age of 31. After leaving Popolo della Libertà in 2012, in part due to disagreements over Berlusconi's leadership and the cancellation of the coalition's primaries for the 2013 election, she co-founded FdI with other former MSI and AN members. Re-elected to parliament in 2013, she assumed the leadership of the parliamentary party group and became party president in 2014.

Contrary to a pattern frequently observed among women leaders, also in PRR parties, Meloni's trajectory is not characterized by a "legacy advantage" derived from family ties to prominent male politicians (Baker & Palmieri, 2023). Instead, her leadership is rooted in long-term organizational activism and the political capital she has accumulated within the post-fascist right. The coexistence of outsider credentials and accumulated political experience is one of Meloni's most salient strengths, allowing her to consolidate internal leadership while maintaining strong electoral appeal.

Under Meloni's leadership, FdI experienced steady electoral growth, remaining in opposition throughout the 2013–2022 period, but progressively expanding its parliamentary presence and popular support. The party eventually emerged as the largest force in the 2022 general election, leading to Meloni's appointment as Italy's first woman prime minister, and currently at the helm of one of the longest-serving governments in Italian history (Improta, 2026). Her personal approval ratings rose in parallel with the party's fortunes, contributing to her consolidation as the dominant leader of the Italian right (De Giorgi et al., 2023).

Within FdI, women who reach positions of power tend to follow career paths which are similar to those of their male counterparts, reproducing the party's political culture rather than challenging it (Donà, 2024). In terms of policy positions, for instance, Meloni's stances on women-related and gender issues closely align with the broader right-wing and party agenda. She is openly critical of feminism, which she portrays as an ideological instrument opposed to conservative politics rather than a genuinely pro-women discourse. Her positions on abortion, family policy, and LGBTQ+ rights reflect a combination of cultural conservatism and Catholic references, often articulated through critiques of the European Union and alleged threats posed by the so-called "gender ideology" to traditional family structures and motherhood (De Giorgi et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the alignment between Meloni's positions and those of her party points to a symbiotic relationship in which leadership and organizational development have progressed in tandem, with Meloni's stances and the party's agenda mutually reinforcing one another, and with gender playing little to no role in shaping this convergence.

4. Data and Methods

Existing research shows that FdI is characterized by a relatively cohesive party elite, combining some degree of social and political diversification with strong ideological continuity (Melito & Zulianello, 2024; Tronconi et al., 2025). While the party has attracted a growing number of members without prior connections to the post-fascist right, especially since the mid-2010s leadership positions—particularly at the national level—have remained largely occupied by actors with long-standing ties with the MSI and its successor organizations. Despite heterogeneous backgrounds, elites display highly homogeneous ideological orientations and limited internal variation on key political issues. This combination of organizational discipline and ideological coherence supports the use of interviews with party representatives as a reliable source for reconstructing FdI's internal political culture and leadership narratives.

To explore how female leadership is perceived within PRR parties, this article employs qualitative semi-structured interviews with party representatives, in line with other recent works on this party family (e.g., Albertazzi et al., 2025; Melito & Zulianello, 2024). This methodological approach enables us to gather information on perspectives rarely captured through external observation or media analysis, providing a unique understanding of how "insiders" construct and interpret their political experience.

The interview protocol was developed within a broader research project examining multiple dimensions of FdI's internal life. For the present purposes, the key questions of interest are the following, although relevant insights could also emerge at different points during the interviews:

- In your opinion, what are the motivations that lead voters to choose FdI?
- Why do people join (or not join) the party?
- What kind of community does the party create for its members?
- To what extent does the leader influence the party's decision-making procedures?

We conducted 21 interviews (for details, see the Supplementary File) between September 2023 and February 2024, mostly face-to-face. The identification of potential respondents followed purposive sampling criteria, targeting individuals positioned to provide substantive and contextually rich information relevant to our research goals (Kelly, 2010). Initial participants were identified through established party networks, with subsequent recruitment proceeding via snowball sampling among available interviewees. This recruitment strategy, while effective in reaching individuals with substantive knowledge of the party's internal life, may have privileged respondents who are well integrated into established party networks and therefore more likely to reproduce dominant narratives; interviewees more critical of, or more marginal to, these networks may be under-represented in the sample.

All participants were de-identified to ensure confidentiality, and fieldwork concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation (Hennink et al., 2017). Interviewees were informed in advance about the study's aims and data protection procedures and consented to being recorded. Interviews lasted between 26 minutes and 1 hour and 17 minutes. To address potential respondent bias, the sample encompasses diverse organizational levels and socio-demographic profiles, covering three Italian regions chosen for their distinct political significance to FdI: Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, and Marche (for further details, see the Supplementary File). Within each region, seven respondents were interviewed across both urban and rural areas. The sample ensured variation in gender (around 30% female, mirroring FdI's parliamentary representation), age (from young activists to veterans of predecessor parties like AN and MSI), and role (MPs, regional and municipal councilors, and party executives). Upon completion of the interviews, the recorded material was transcribed verbatim. In the following pages, the letter "f" is added after the interview number in case of female respondents.

A methodological clarification is warranted regarding the treatment of gender in the interview protocol. Gender was not a topic that interviewees were explicitly invited to discuss. Rather, as noted above, the interviews focused on respondents' motivations for voting for FdI, joining the party, perceptions of its internal community, and assessments of the leader's role in decision-making. By avoiding direct prompts about gender, we are better able to assess whether and how gender emerges as a salient dimension in respondents' narratives, or conversely, whether it remains largely absent from their understandings of

Meloni's leadership. As we show below, the limited presence of gender-based considerations in the interviews constitutes an important empirical finding in its own, rather than an artefact of the research design. In this respect, transcripts were examined using four categories: explicit references to Meloni's gender; gendered metaphors applied to her leadership (e.g., familial imagery); the attribution of masculine- or feminine-coded traits (e.g., determination, toughness, empathy) to her leadership style; and explicit statements denying or downplaying the relevance of gender to her leadership. Finally, we acknowledge that a protocol explicitly probing gender might have generated richer and more explicit reflections on this dimension. Future research could usefully combine direct and indirect elicitation strategies to further investigate these dynamics.

5. Empirical Analysis: Leadership Across Party Dimensions

The empirical analysis is organized around three inter-related dimensions of Meloni's leadership as narrated by FdI's representatives: her contribution to the party's electoral appeal (Section 5.1), her role in membership recruitment (Section 5.2), and her influence on internal functioning (Section 5.3). Across all three dimensions we show how gender is consistently absent from the vocabulary through which the interviewees portray Meloni's leadership, even where, as we discuss in the concluding section, this absence is itself open to more than one interpretation.

5.1. Electoral Appeal

Interviews reveal a nearly unanimous consensus regarding the central role played by Giorgia Meloni's leadership as the primary driver of FdI's electoral appeal, and the data highlight several factors behind her attractiveness. Respondents emphasize the coherence demonstrated by the party leader since the party's foundation (Interviews I3f, I5, I6, I10f, I12, I13, I15f, I16, I19f). As explained by a female representative (I19f), a big role is played "by the coherence shown by the party over the years and by our leader, Giorgia Meloni. Certainly, much of our electorate revolves around her, the proposals she has championed, and her ideas" (I19f; see also I8).

This "image of coherence and seriousness" (I6), embodied both by Meloni and her party, is framed by several interviewees as a refusal to compromise and a rejection of the tactical "maneuvering" (*giochetti*) considered endemic to traditional Italian politics (I10f; see also I12). In this respect, Meloni is credited with the merit and ability to maintain a "steadfast political stance on major issues over time" (I13), "even at the cost of renunciation and sacrifice" (I15f). This narrative of exceptional dedication and self-sacrifice resonates with O'Brien's (2015) finding that women party leaders are typically held to a more demanding performance standard than their male counterparts and are expected to demonstrate a higher level of commitment that legitimizes their position compared to men. Among the factors explaining why Meloni's leadership fostered electoral support for FdI, her ability to embody the party's core values clearly stands out. For instance, an interviewee (I12) argues that "Italian citizens chose FdI due to an adherence to a worldview and core values that the party has always embraced and based on the way its leader interprets them."

According to the respondents, this perception fostered a deep sense of trust among the electorate (I2, I5, I9f, I12, I14), in some cases even re-engaging citizens who had previously abstained from voting (I14), allowing Meloni to achieve "an approval rating significantly higher than that of the party itself" (I2). Notably, a crucial

aspect underlined by FdI's representatives is Meloni's ability to convert her long-standing coherence into efficacy once becoming prime minister in 2022. As explained by two interviewees:

> Meloni has also been recognized for an operational capacity that, especially on the international stage, has earned her support beyond what she initially mobilized through the idea of coherence and socio-cultural issues. (I13)

> [She is] a leader capable of governing Italy, as she is doing now. (I7)

More generally, essential to attracting voters are specific personality and relational traits of Meloni, in particular the perception of her as a charismatic leader (I4, I7, I9f, I16). For instance, interviewee 7, self-described as always having had a "right-wing soul," argues that one of the crucial reasons that led him to approach FdI was seeing "a charismatic leader in Giorgia Meloni" (I7). Representatives' framing of Meloni's charisma as an individual, non-gendered attribute parallels Meret's (2015) study of Pia Kjærsgaard's leadership of the Danish People's Party, where charismatic authority was likewise narrated as a personal quality rather than a gendered one. This gender-neutral framing of charisma is itself analytically significant. Classical and contemporary theorizations of charismatic authority have historically constructed it as an implicitly masculine attribute, with women's access to charismatic legitimacy treated as the exception rather than the norm (Joosse & Willey, 2020). Hence, the findings point to a broader framework in which charisma and femininity have rarely been considered compatible.

An integral part of the perception of Meloni's charisma is represented by her closeness to ordinary citizens and their needs, differently from other politicians and traditional party elites (I16, I18, I21f). Indeed, "her approach is so natural, so authentic, so unusual, because politics often seems stagnant or inaccessible. Instead, [she] is so immediate" (I16). She is thus credited with an atypical natural and immediate approach, alongside an extraordinary "capacity to communicate" (I16). The authenticity of Meloni is decisively influenced by her background and the persistent perception of her being an outsider, despite her entry into the mainstream of national politics, also thanks to the consistent posture adopted by FdI over the years. Interviewee 21 describes FdI's leader as "a serious, coherent, and humble person who worked her way up and went against the grain of political standards," and who maintains "a down-to-earth profile when it comes to her approach to the territory, to her roots" (I21), even as prime minister. In this respect, a female representative (I18f) explains that Meloni "has managed to bring the people closer…reaching out to the most vulnerable working classes without neglecting high-profile entrepreneurial sectors." In this way, by combining charisma, communication skills, and proximity to the people, Meloni manages to be simultaneously an ordinary and an extraordinary leader, in line with the well-known definition of the successful populist leader (in general) provided by Taggart (2000).

While nearly all interviewees emphasize Meloni's pivotal role, four respondents do not explicitly cite the party leader as a primary voting motivation for FdI (I1, I11, I17, I20). Nonetheless, even these respondents refer to the aforementioned elements such as coherence (I17, I20), values (I11), and grassroots rooting (I1), but with reference to the party itself rather than its leader.

These accounts resonate with the debates on gendered leadership evaluation discussed above. Respondents' emphasis on coherence, charisma, and closeness to ordinary citizens, rather than on gender-specific qualities, suggests that Meloni's electoral appeal is constructed through criteria that appear gender-neutral.

This is consistent with what Meret et al. (2017) describe as the capacity of women leaders to succeed within structurally masculine PRR parties by anchoring their legitimacy in a specific declination of charisma rather than in gender-specific terms.

5.2. Membership Recruitment

The interviews reveal the decisive role of Meloni in attracting new members to FdI. The data suggest a nearly unanimous consensus among representatives on the pattern of "spontaneous affiliation" of new members (e.g., I2, I10f, I16) that the party has experienced over the last few years. This point is broadly consistent with the party's own reported membership figures (280,000 members in 2023), which point to a marked national increase in registered members over the same period ("Arianna Meloni, campagna," 2023). Interviewees maintain that this is part of the central importance of party leaders in contemporary politics (I1, I13, I15f). As explained by a representative:

> The recruitment process is entirely centered on the leader's image. [It] relies on the capacity for persuasion and fascination of the leader. I believe that charismatic parties are the parties of the modern era, nearly all of them. (I13)

In the specific case of FdI, this is fostered by Meloni's personal characteristics (I1, I2, I8, I10f, I13). In this respect, a recurring explanation provided by the interviewees points to trust in Meloni (e.g., I2, I10f, I14), primarily due to her "way of doing politics" (I17). Such attractiveness of Meloni in drawing new members and sympathizers is well explained by an interviewee:

> There is great trust in Giorgia Meloni's leadership. We see it clearly when we are out on the streets; people stop at our stalls and gazebos to compliment Meloni. This indicates her capacity to attract support or, at the very least, the sympathy of many people. (I2)

This trust is considered to be also fostered by the positive opinion of Meloni's performance, especially since taking office, which has led to a significant shift compared to the past, as expressed by a long-standing member of FdI:

> I have been part of this party since we were at 2%. At that time, it was a cultural and identity-based affiliation….Now it has become much easier because many people say, "Giorgia Meloni is doing well, and we want to join the party to support her." (I8)

As previously mentioned, Meloni is considered able to instill trust in the broader electorate, some of whom decide to join the party or become sympathizers to contribute to her political project (I8, I9f, I10f, I13, I19f), in the case of the latter a clear instance of "purposive incentive" (Albertazzi et al., 2025), closely linked to the embodiment of the party message within the leader. Indeed, Meloni emerges as a role model not only for new members and sympathizers, but also for representatives themselves: to them, activism is also "a way to signal trust to the premier….A way of saying to the premier and to us, the politicians representing the party, 'we are here, we are present'" (I10f).

Joining the party is seen as an opportunity to contribute to change and to feel "part of something" (I10f, I19f; see also the next section for details), a clear instance of communitarian incentive (Albertazzi et al., 2025), thanks to the perceived capacity of Meloni to listen and be a direct and charismatic leader who is accessible to members. As explained by a female representative: "[She] is not seen as someone distant….She is very charismatic, very direct. She is not the typical distant leader" (I10f).

This perception of closeness to Meloni is decisively fostered by the effort of FdI to invest in physical activism (Melito & Zulianello, 2024), which is underlined by the explicit effort of the party in bringing people closer through "listening and seeking solutions to their problems" (I17). This acts as a catalyst for recruiting new members and sympathizers, by developing a close connection between the party and its leader:

> Those who are fascinated by Meloni see that message, that image, embodied in human beings….Because Italians identify with the leader and want to do something more. They want to be there. (I13)

Notably, physical activism thus plays a highly relevant role in attracting new members, in addition to boosting electoral success (Melito & Zulianello, 2024), as it provides a physical manifestation of the goals to be pursued, which are themselves important factors in the choice to join (I1, I9f, I13, I14, I19f). Nevertheless, some interviewees emphasize the role of social media instead, especially Meloni's communication on such channels, rather than physical activism (I9f, I13, I16, I19f). Rather than pointing to the substitution of one channel of engagement for another, this pattern is consistent with what Zulianello (2021) defines as "phygital activism": a continuous interaction between online and offline forms of participation that jointly reinforce the party's organizational presence and digital visibility. The combination of personal trust, identification with the leader, and the leader's capacity to personify the party and its message also echoes recent findings on the factors underpinning the success of PRR parties, both in mobilizing electoral support and attracting new members (Albertazzi et al., 2025).

5.3. Internal Functioning

Meloni is portrayed as an effective and competent leader, who is "very present in the party" (I8) as well as "very attentive, very meticulous" (I3f). Indeed, several respondents praise Meloni's capacity to be present and to follow the internal workings of the party, including the details. For instance, a National Directorate member (I2) explains that "Giorgia is very attentive, she wants to know…even today, despite her thousand governmental responsibilities, she manages to keep an eye on the party." In addition, she emerges as a demanding leader, as she requires that both representatives and members "know how to run" (I3f) and "dedicate themselves totally" (I6), as she needs "a team of thoroughbreds" (I6). Critically, a female representative explains:

> She asks everyone to give their contribution, so she is not the authoritarian father, but the good father of the family. [But] she is a woman [smiles], [and] I have never heard anyone say "mother of the family" [neither within the party nor outside it]. (I3f)

This points to a crucial finding: respondents regard Meloni as an effective and decisive leader, while largely disconnecting their evaluations from her gender. In this sense, she appears to embody a form of "gender-neutralized" leadership, in which gender is neither invoked nor considered particularly relevant in

accounts of political authority. Yet, as Geva (2020) suggests, such apparent neutrality does not imply the absence of gendered meanings. Even when respondents explicitly reject gender-based interpretations of leadership, the language they employ continues to draw on implicitly gendered understandings, as evidenced by the absence of a maternal equivalent to the "father of the family" metaphor discussed above.

Instead, interviewees emphasize the symbiotic relationship between leader and party, together with their ability to sustain a narrative of *outsidership* even while occupying positions of political power. As an interviewee acutely explained to us, Meloni is the human prototype of the right:

> She has set the imprint of the human prototype, I would say. People are expected to try to be like her. This whole underdog narrative is very powerful: she is the typical, and rare, case of someone who has made herself, through hard work and study….There is a "Meloni model" defined by dedication, sacrifice, commitment to learning, and the rejection of opportunism. (I13)

Notably, these qualities have historically been coded as masculine within dominant paradigms (Eagly & Karau, 2002); while interviewees present them as neutral, universal markers of leadership quality, this reproduces rather than overcomes a masculine-coded idea of leadership. This distinction matters: it suggests that gender neutralization, far from signaling the irrelevance of gender, may itself operate as a gendered strategy through which Meloni's leadership is made legitimate by conforming to an implicitly masculine standard.

Notably, Meloni's internal influence on the party proves decisive regarding the human model to follow. She "influences greatly because she has solid credibility" (I14), which is determined by three factors:

> 1) Because she made herself; 2) because she demonstrated that a woman can succeed if capable of building herself, not thanks to someone else but thanks to herself; and 3) because Giorgia Meloni is premier but remains the last of the militants. (I14)

This self-made narrative can be read through two partly divergent theoretical lenses. On the one hand, it exemplifies what Casullo (2025) describes as the radical right "strongwoman": a leader whose authority rests on the display of traditionally masculine-coded traits, such as determination and toughness, presented as the result of personal achievement rather than as a challenge to gender norms. On the other hand, it complicates the glass-cliff hypothesis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), which suggests that women are more likely to attain leadership positions during periods of organizational crisis and vulnerability. FdI representatives portray Meloni's rise not as an opportunity created by the party's precarious circumstances, but as the product of individual merit, thereby lending support to O'Brien's (2015) argument that women leaders are expected to meet higher standards of performance to be regarded as legitimate.

The second point of the quote also conveys that it remains unusual for a woman to reach such a position independently; however, being a woman does not seem to influence, per se, her leadership style or attractiveness. For these reasons, belonging to FdI is perceived as a source of "pride," with "a leader like Giorgia Meloni who gives you standing, gives you status" (I16): she is portrayed as "an extraordinary woman" and "a point of reference" (I16), embodying a model of someone "who made herself from scratch and who from scratch brought her ideas to the top" (I14). This again highlights the importance of the leader as a role model for activists and activism in general: a female representative (I18f) states, "Each of us, in our small way, tries to be a little Meloni."

At the decision-making level, Meloni stands at the apex of a party defined as "hierarchical" and "almost military" (I18f). At the national level, Meloni carries substantial decisional weight (I1, I2, I8, I11, I14, I18f, I21): while interviewee 8 characterizes her influence as "almost total" (I8), interviewee 9, a female representative, argues that she is not "a woman alone in command, as some would have it" (I9f). The latter view is shared by another female representative (I15f), who maintains that she has created a group sharing "a harmony of methods, values, and modus operandi" (I15f). Another female representative (I3f) emphasizes Meloni's capacity to select "trustworthy people, loyal people," using the previously mentioned metaphor of "mother of the family" to highlight Meloni's responsibility—one of the few gendered references from interviews.

In addition, almost all interviewees also acknowledge the decisive role of Meloni in the creation and maintenance of an internal community (e.g., I2, I10f, I12, I14, I16, I17, I18f, I20). For instance, a representative (I17) speaks of a "very united group" that remains "always close to Giorgia Meloni." The internal community is characterized as cohesive, and the absence of internal factions is primarily attributed to her ability as the leader (e.g., I12, I13). In this respect, various representatives appreciate the space for dialogue that Meloni provides, particularly noted by National Directorate and Assembly (FdI's internal bodies) members (I1, I2, I14, I19f). However, interviewee 14, while acknowledging "her great capacity to always listen to all militants," characterizes her as "straight" and "difficult to influence" (I14); at the same time, a female local administrator (I3f) depicts her as a woman with clear ideas, determined by founding values, but open to dialogue. More generally, regarding the possibility of influencing Meloni, divergent views emerge. Interviewee 14 states, "Giorgia Meloni is never influenced by anyone because she is very straight," though acknowledging her "great capacity to always listen" (I14). Many respondents (I1, I2, I4, I6, I16, I19f, I20, I21) suggest substantial control and centralized decision-making, while accounting for listening and synthesizing positions within the framework of the party's coherence, values, and rules. In this respect, and more generally, at the local level greater independence from the leader seems to exist (I7, I17, I18f). This combination of uncompromising resolve and attentive listening mirrors the hybrid repertoire that Casullo (2025, p. 236) attributes to radical right strongwomen, who often "combine the titillating allure of aggression with the warmth and softness traditionally associated with femininity."

Finally, some long-standing members express concerns about contemporary parties risking excessive dependence on the leader. According to interviewee 13, for instance, compared to AN, "with social media everything has changed"; now "the party risks every day…being bypassed by the fact that there is now a direct relationship [with the leader]" (I13). This creates a tension between FdI's continued territorial rootedness, within a broader context characterized by the growing importance of the leader, and its ability to combine features of an activist party with a clear mass-party vocation (see Melito & Zulianello, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that Giorgia Meloni's leadership constitutes a possible case of gender neutralization within a PRR party. Drawing on the perspectives of party representatives, the analysis shows how her identity as a woman is systematically subordinated to the fact that she embodies what interviewees describe as the "human prototype" of the right. In this construction, leadership legitimacy derives from discipline, self-sacrifice, meritocratic advancement, and ideological coherence rather than from explicit gendered experiences or attributes.

Gender neutrality emerges as a fundamental component of FdI's political identity, operating both externally and internally. Externally, Meloni's appeal is not linked to stereotypically feminine traits or claims of gender representation, but rather to an image of political seriousness, consistency, and determination. She is often described as an "underdog" who has succeeded through perseverance and sacrifice, a narrative that emphasizes her closeness to ordinary citizens while conveying authority and competence. This allows her to reconcile strong leadership with populist authenticity without challenging the party's traditional ideological foundations. Internally, gender neutralization also shapes organizational dynamics. FdI reproduces a hierarchical and highly centralized party structure in which Meloni's authority is both unquestioned and personalized, yet commonly portrayed as accessible and attentive.

Even when gendered metaphors such as that of the "mother of the family" are used, they serve less as indicators of femininity than as rhetorical devices highlighting Meloni's sense of responsibility, diligence, and concern for the organization. In this sense, gendered language is employed selectively while its political significance is downplayed. A brief reflection on possible differences between male and female respondents is warranted. Male respondents made no spontaneous reference to gender, describing Meloni's leadership in ungendered terms; while a few female interviewees explicitly acknowledged its gendered dimension, they ultimately neutralized or dismissed it.

Our interpretation of gender neutralization, however, is not free of ambiguity, and it is worth making the underlying tension explicit. One reading, consistent with our respondents' own accounts, is that FdI representatives treat Meloni's leadership as substantively gender-neutral, evaluating her through the same criteria of coherence, sacrifice, and competence that would presumably apply to a male leader. A different, and in our view equally plausible, reading is that this apparent neutralization is itself a form of gendering: precisely because Meloni is a woman leading a party historically suspicious of female authority, her legitimacy may need to be secured through a more forceful disavowal of gender than would be required of a male leader, whose authority is rarely subject to comparable scrutiny or justification. Under this second reading, the "human prototype" is not so much a gender-neutral category as a masculine-coded default to which Meloni is granted access, on the condition that her womanhood remains unremarked. Our analysis cannot definitively adjudicate between these two interpretations, nor do we believe that the choice between them should be foreclosed. Rather, neutralization and gendering may operate simultaneously at different levels of the same discourse, reflecting the broader difficulty of studying a process that party actors themselves experience as unmarked and taken for granted.

More broadly, the FdI case suggests that the growing presence of women in leadership positions within the PRR does not automatically entail a gendering of political styles, agendas, or organizational cultures. Meloni's leadership illustrates how female leaders can be fully integrated—and indeed central—within PRR parties through the neutralization rather than the mobilization of gender. This finding adds to the literature on female leadership and the PRR, demonstrating how visibility and authority can coexist with the reproduction of established ideological norms. Ultimately, Meloni's case shows that female leadership is not necessarily transformative and highlights the ability of PRR parties to welcome women into leadership roles while leaving gender in a position of political marginalization.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of qualitative interviews with party representatives. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the interview transcripts have been de-identified and are not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used Microsoft 365 Copilot for language proofreading only.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Visual Self-Presentation of Radical Right Leaders on Social Media: Platform and Gender Differences

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Abstract

Social media play an important role in how populist radical right (PRR) leaders communicate with supporters and present themselves to the public. Previous research has examined how political leaders' self-presentation varies by gender and by platform, but we know less about how these two factors interact. This study addresses this gap by analyzing 900 images posted on the Instagram, Facebook, and X accounts of six prominent European PRR leaders (three women and three men). The results show that gender mattered, but its role in visual self-presentation varied by platform. On Facebook and X, female leaders appeared in substantially more images than male leaders, compared to Instagram. Female leaders also use agentic cues more frequently, which emphasize competence and leadership, rather than communal cues, which emphasize warmth and relationships. These gender differences in self-presentation are smaller on Instagram, where personalized communication is common among all leaders. Overall, the findings imply that how PRR leaders present themselves is shaped not only by gender and platform but also by the distinctive communication styles of individual leaders.

Keywords

gender; populist radical right; self-presentation; social media platforms

1. Introduction

On Christmas Eve 2024, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni posted a selfie on Instagram showing her daughter asleep on her shoulder. In the caption, she wished her followers a day full of peace and joy. The post fits the personal, intimate style of communication that is common on the platform (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Meeks, 2016; Valmori et al., 2021). At the same time, it also aligns with a broader trend where

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politicians' private lives are gaining more attention (Langer, 2010). Social media have contributed to this trend by making it easier for politicians to share images from their daily lives directly with their followers.

How politicians use social media to share images of themselves varies across platforms. Platforms are not interchangeable; their design and norms encourage different forms of communication (Bossetta, 2018). These platform-specific pressures may also affect male and female leaders differently (Hikmatullah et al., 2026), as men and women face distinct expectations and constraints when presenting themselves in public (Bast et al., 2022; Mattan & Small, 2021). So far, we know little about how platform differences and gender work together to shape political leaders' visual self-presentation (Hikmatullah et al., 2026). This article therefore asks: How do platform differences and gender shape the visual self-presentation of populist radical right (PRR) leaders on social media?

The study focuses on PRR leaders because leadership occupies an unusually central position within these parties, which tend to be highly personalised and organised around dominant figures rather than strong party organisations (Kriesi, 2025). As a result, party identity is often closely tied to a leader's public image. PRR online self-presentation is also particularly relevant because leaders of these parties might rely heavily on social media to counter associations with extremism and strengthen PRR legitimacy (Bonansinga, 2025). Finally, in PRR parties, female leaders often operate within organisations that promote traditional gender norms, which creates tensions in how they can construct their public image (Bast et al., 2022; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). For these reasons, studying gendered self-presentation is especially relevant in the PRR context.

Findings from a quantitative content analysis of 900 images shared on the Instagram, Facebook, and X accounts of six prominent European PRR leaders (three women and three men) show that gender mattered, but its role in visual self-presentation varied by platform. On Facebook and X, female leaders appeared in substantially more images than male leaders compared to Instagram. The findings also show that female leaders use agentic (competence-oriented) cues more frequently than communal (warmth- and relationship-oriented) cues, compared to male leaders. Also, here, gender differences were smaller on Instagram. This suggests that differences in how male and female leaders present themselves are partly shaped by the platform that they use. At the same time, individual leaders' personal communication styles account for the largest differences.

2. Visual Self-Presentation of PRR Leaders on Social Media

PRR actors combine populism with nativist and authoritarian ideas (Kriesi, 2025). Populism views society as divided into two opposing groups: ordinary citizens and "the corrupt elite." Populists argue that politics should reflect the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). As a thin ideology, populism is not inherently radical or right-wing, but can occur across the ideological spectrum. This study focuses specifically on PRR party leaders rather than populists in general. Leaders play a particularly central role within PRR parties, making their self-presentation especially important.

Citizens' evaluations of leaders play an important role in how they evaluate political parties (Bittner, 2011). Citizens assess politicians not only based on their policy positions but also on perceived personal characteristics, such as competence, trustworthiness, and integrity (Bittner, 2011). Images provide an effective way of communicating such characteristics implicitly (Lindholm et al., 2021) and social media allow

politicians the opportunity to share personal, often self-produced images directly with their followers and shape their own visual self-presentation (Russmann et al., 2024).

In this study, visual self-presentation consists of two dimensions: First, it concerns the visibility of leaders in images. Politicians and their communication teams can share a wide range of content on social media, including campaign material, news reports, and party messages. The decision to post images in which the leader is visible is therefore meaningful. Second, visual self-presentation in this study refers to the visual choices made, including setting, clothing, facial expression, composition, and interaction with others, which can signal or emphasize leadership qualities. These choices can also be influenced by the gender of the politician, as female and male leaders face different expectations and pressures when it comes to their visual self-presentation.

2.1. Gender and Leadership in the PRR Context

Within PRR parties, female leaders face a specific tension. PRR ideology emphasises strong and decisive leadership while also often promoting traditional gender roles and family values (Bast et al., 2022). This creates a challenge for female leaders: on the one hand, they must deliver authoritative leadership; on the other, they are expected to conform to traditional gender roles and family values, which can conflict with expectations of authoritative leadership.

This tension between gender and leadership expectations is not unique to the PRR context. Role congruity theory helps explain why it arises. Societal expectations of men and women do not always align with expectations of leadership. Whereas women are stereotypically associated with so-called communal traits, such as warmth, empathy, and care, leadership is associated with agentic traits, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and authority, which have traditionally been viewed as masculine traits (Mattan & Small, 2021). As a result, women may be perceived as less suitable for leadership or evaluated negatively when they deviate from traditional gender expectations. This dilemma is often referred to as the double bind (Jamieson, 1995). Bast et al. (2022) argue that female PRR leaders face a "double double bind," in which their self-presentation is shaped by both gender expectations and the ideological expectations of PRR parties.

Strategic stereotype theory argues that leaders and their campaign teams are aware of these expectations and adjust their self-presentation accordingly (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014, as cited in Mattan & Small, 2021). Politicians can strategically emphasise, downplay, or combine agentic and communal traits to gain political advantage (Mattan & Small, 2021). This balancing act is often more challenging for women than for men, as women are expected to demonstrate both agentic and communal traits, which can be difficult to reconcile. Moreover, women face a double risk: signalling communal traits too much can undermine perceptions of competence, while too much assertiveness can conflict with expectations of femininity (Schneider & Bos, 2019). Men generally face fewer such constraints and are less likely to be penalised for combining traits associated with both strength and empathy (Mattan & Small, 2021).

2.2. Strategic Self-Presentation of Male and Female PRR Leaders

Although visual self-presentation can help all politicians build stronger connections with voters, it might be particularly important for PRR leaders. As PRR leaders are often associated with extremism, visual self-presentation can help them construct legitimacy and distance themselves from negative associations

(Bonansinga, 2025). The decision to make the leader visible is therefore not merely an aesthetic choice, but can also function as a political strategy.

Social media content is often carefully curated by professional communication teams. Even seemingly spontaneous images are often staged, such "calculated amateurism" can help create a sense of intimacy with the public (Starita & Trillò, 2022). By sharing behind-the-scenes photos, personal moments, or everyday activities, politicians can foster parasocial relationships with their audiences and strengthen emotional connections (Cohen & Holbert, 2021).

When leaders share images of themselves, how they are presented also matters. Through elements such as setting, clothing, and symbols, images contribute to the impression leaders seek to create (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Serazio, 2017). Images showing leaders in institutional settings, engaging in work-related activities, wearing formal clothing, or with restrained emotions can signal agentic leadership. In contrast, images in informal settings, where the politician is smiling and interacting with supporters, children, or family members, can convey communal leadership (Lindholm et al., 2021; Mattan & Small, 2021; Sullivan, 2023; Valmori et al., 2021). These visual strategies can be interpreted differently depending on the gender of the leader. For example, images of fatherhood can strengthen perceptions of authority and reliability among male politicians, while similar images of female politicians could raise questions about their work and life balance (Langer, 2010). At the same time, personalized content can offer opportunities for female leaders to increase attention and engagement online (Brands et al., 2021; Lindholm et al., 2021). Male politicians also frequently use personalized communication, particularly during election campaigns (McGregor et al., 2017; Meeks, 2016).

Research on PRR leaders shows that their visual strategies on Instagram largely resemble those found in political communication on the platform more generally (Bast, 2024). Previous research shows that female politicians are more often portrayed smiling, interacting with others, or engaging in caregiving and family roles, whereas male politicians are more often shown wearing formal clothing, using more restrained expressions, and occupying more prominent positions within images (Lindholm et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2023; Valmori et al., 2021). Female PRR leaders specifically strategically emphasize competence rather than warmth in their social roles, while still conveying warmth through their visual and non-verbal self-presentation (Bast et al., 2022). An analysis of how Meloni and Le Pen discuss gender-related issues on TikTok and Twitter similarly shows that these leaders combine so-called "strongman traits," such as toughness and assertiveness, with traits associated with hegemonic femininity (Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). Rather than resolving the tension between agency and femininity by choosing one over the other, female PRR leaders may therefore combine elements of both. At the same time, individual PRR leaders develop distinctive visual styles (Bast, 2024). While gender shapes visual self-presentation, research also indicates that social media platforms provide different opportunities and constraints for male and female leaders to present themselves (Hikmatullah et al., 2026).

3. Platform Norms and the Visual Self-Presentation of PRR Leaders

Previous studies have provided insights into the visual self-presentation of individual PRR leaders on specific platforms (Bast, 2024; Bonansinga, 2025; Starita & Trillò, 2022), as well as into gender differences in political self-presentation (Bast et al., 2022). However, little is known about how PRR leaders adapt their visual self-presentation across different social media platforms.

This study examines visual self-presentation along two dimensions: leaders' visual visibility and the leadership qualities communicated through images. Social media platforms are not neutral communication channels. Each platform has its own norms that make certain forms of political self-presentation more likely. These differences result not only from technical features but also from socially established expectations about appropriate behaviour on each platform (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). Politicians and their communication teams therefore consider both what a platform allows and the forms of communication that users perceive as appropriate.

Such norms emerge through processes of institutionalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). When practices are repeatedly performed, they can become taken for granted. This also applies to social media. On Instagram, for example, sharing personal photos, selfies, and images from everyday life has become an established practice, whereas similar forms of communication are less common on platforms such as X or LinkedIn. Platforms therefore differ not only in their technical possibilities but also in expectations regarding self-presentation.

Bossetta (2018) identifies three platform characteristics that are particularly relevant for political communication: functionality, network structure, and algorithmic ranking. These characteristics can shape both how often politicians use visual self-presentation and the kinds of leadership cues they communicate.

Functionality determines which forms of communication are central to a platform. Instagram is strongly oriented towards visual communication: every post contains a visual, while text is optional. In contrast, X has traditionally been text-oriented, with images often functioning as additions to written content. Facebook occupies an intermediate position, as images are visible but displayed below accompanying text (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Images on Instagram are therefore more likely to function as standalone messages, whereas images on X and Facebook more often complement textual communication. Because visual content is particularly personalized (Farkas & Bene, 2021), the role of images within a post can shape how leaders use them for self-presentation.

Platform interactions and algorithms can also shape what politicians post. Earlier research, for example, shows that images containing faces attract more attention on Instagram (Bakhshi et al., 2014). Research on Facebook has also found that personal and emotional political messages tend to perform particularly well on the platform (Metz et al., 2020). Because algorithms often reward engagement, politicians and their communication teams adapt their strategies in response to the types of content that attract the most attention. In turn, these adaptations can reinforce platform-specific norms about which types of political content are most effective.

Platform preferences also depend on network structure. X has a more open network structure, meaning that messages can diffuse beyond direct followers, which makes it attractive to journalists and professional audiences (Jacobs et al., 2020). Facebook and Instagram have network structures that are more strongly oriented towards direct followers, but they also differ from one another. On Facebook, politicians communicate through pages rather than accounts, creating a more hierarchical relationship. On Instagram, politicians and users have the same type of account, creating a more direct relationship (Farkas & Bene, 2021). These differences imply that Instagram is particularly suited to personal and relational forms of visual self-presentation, whereas X is better suited to professional and institutional forms of communication.

Facebook occupies an intermediate position, combining personal communication with the more hierarchical structure of political pages.

Although platforms encourage certain forms of communication, politicians retain the ability to deviate from them. Sonnevend and Steiert (2024), for example, show that some leaders deliberately maintain a communication style that does not fully align with dominant platform norms. Angela Merkel, for example, continued to use a relatively institutional and impersonal communication style on Instagram.

3.1. Visual Visibility

Platforms differ in the importance they give to visual content. Due to the central role of images in personalization, and the central role of images on Instagram, we can expect PRR leaders to engage in visual self-presentation more often on Instagram than on X, with Facebook taking an intermediate position (H1).

Platform norms also contribute to gender differences in visual self-presentation. Personal images can increase attention and engagement, particularly for women (Brands et al., 2021; Lindholm et al., 2021); however, they can also expose women to additional evaluations of their appearance and personal roles. Because female politicians face greater pressure to appear both competent and accessible, visual self-presentation could offer a way to manage these competing expectations. We therefore expect female leaders to appear in images more often than male leaders (H2).

At the same time, because personalized communication is more established on Instagram, visual self-presentation is more strongly normalized for both female and male leaders. Male leaders are therefore more likely to appear in images on Instagram than on platforms where personal visibility is less central. As a result, we expect the gender difference in leaders' visual visibility to be smaller on Instagram than on platforms where such norms are less pronounced (H3).

3.2. Leadership Representation

Platform norms can also influence how leaders visually represent leadership qualities. This study distinguishes between agentic representation, which emphasizes authority, leadership, and institutional power; communal representation, which emphasizes closeness and relational characteristics; and hybrid representation, which combines agentic and communal characteristics.

Based on the discussion in Section 3, the more professional focus of X, compared with the more personalized communication associated with Facebook and particularly Instagram, leads us to expect that leaders use agentic representations more often on X than on Instagram and Facebook (H4).

Due to the double bind, female politicians are expected to demonstrate both competence and warmth. As a result, they are more likely to rely on hybrid forms of leadership representation that combine agentic and communal characteristics. Male politicians, in contrast, can generally emphasize agentic characteristics with fewer reputational risks (Jamieson, 1995; Schneider & Bos, 2019). We therefore expect female leaders to use hybrid leadership representations more often than male leaders (H5).

We expect gender differences in leadership representation to vary across platforms. On Instagram, where personal and relational self-presentation is more strongly normalized, communal cues are less exclusively associated with female leaders and are also used by male leaders. On X, where communication is more strongly oriented toward professional and institutional political discourse, female leaders face greater pressure to combine agentic and communal cues, whereas male leaders can simply rely on agentic cues. We therefore expect gender differences in leadership representation to be more pronounced on X than on Instagram (H6). Facebook is expected to occupy an intermediate position between Instagram and X.

4. Methods

4.1. Sample and Data Collection

To analyse how platform design and gender influence the visual self-presentation of PRR leaders, a quantitative content analysis was conducted on images shared on Instagram, Facebook, and X by six prominent European party leaders: three men (Tom Van Grieken, Nigel Farage, and Geert Wilders) and three women (Giorgia Meloni, Alice Weidel, and Marine Le Pen). All leaders are classified in the literature as PRR actors (Rooduijn et al., 2024) and have active, verified accounts on all three platforms, which allows comparisons across platforms.

Instagram, Facebook, and X were selected because they are among the most important social media platforms for political communication in European countries. These platforms allow politicians to share text and images, but due to their differences in design and usage norms, they provide different incentives for visual self-presentation. Images were collected manually in April 2025. For each leader and platform, the 100 most recent posts containing at least one image were collected, resulting in an initial dataset of 1800 posts. Posts from other accounts in which the politician was tagged were excluded. Because historical data was, at the time of data collection, only available to a limited extent through the platforms' research APIs, only a limited period was studied. The dataset therefore represents a snapshot of the selected leaders' online communication at a specific moment in time.

A random sample was drawn from this initial collection. Each post was assigned a randomly generated number, and the posts were then randomly sorted by leader and platform. The first 50 posts from each list were selected, resulting in a final sample of 900 images. When a post contained multiple images (a carousel), only the first image was analysed, as this is the most visible image to users and is typically the main image through which the post is encountered (Bast et al., 2022). The downside of this approach is that the first images in carousels are likely to also be more polished than those that follow.

As the sample is limited to six leaders and a short period, the findings cannot be generalized to all PRR leaders or other periods. Furthermore, the timing of data collection means that some images overlap with political events. For example, some images from Nigel Farage were collected during the British general election campaign. The six leaders also differ in institutional position (e.g., Meloni as prime minister and Weidel as co-leader of a party). These differences mean that the findings should be interpreted with caution when comparing leaders.

4.2. Operationalization and Coding Procedure

Because this study focuses on visual self-presentation, the image constitutes the primary unit of analysis. Textual elements, both in and next to the image, were considered only as contextual information for interpreting the image. The analysis consisted of two steps: First, all 900 images were coded for the visual presence of the politician. A politician was coded as present when they were directly recognizable in the image, including promotional images in which the politician appeared alongside text. Images in which the politician appeared only indirectly, such as in screenshots of posts containing a profile picture, AI-generated images, or cartoons, were coded as absent. Similarly, images showing personal objects or family members without the politician being visible were coded as absent. Because this variable is manifest and requires limited interpretation, coder disagreement was minimal.

Second, the 534 images in which leaders were visible were subsequently coded based on their visual presentation of leadership. Initial coding of individual visual characteristics, including facial expression, clothing, and setting, did not consistently help to identify the two leadership types. As Mattan and Small (2021) argue, political images consist of multiple visual cues, including setting, people, positioning, and facial expression, making it difficult to determine the meaning of an image based on any single element. Therefore, the analysis ultimately focused on the dominant leadership frame conveyed by each image. This approach also fits better with how people actually interpret images: visuals are generally considered holistically, rather than by focusing on individual elements in isolation. Each image was therefore coded as representing an agentic, communal, hybrid, or unclear leadership presentation.

Two dimensions of leadership self-presentation were distinguished: agentic and communal representation. Agentic images emphasise the leader as competent and strong, for example showing leaders delivering speeches, appearing in parliament, or giving interviews. Portrait images were coded as agentic when they presented the leader as an active and purposeful political actor. Communal images portray the leader as approachable and connected to others. These include images in which leaders interact with supporters, family members, colleagues, pets, or members of the public. A hybrid category was used for images combining agentic and communal cues, for example, a politician in a highly formal setting while hugging their child, or hugging a fellow parliamentarian. Images lacking clear leadership cues were coded as unclear. A subset of 15 percent of images was independently coded by a second coder. Intercoder reliability for leadership presentation was acceptable (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.79$).

Applying these categories consistently across leaders was challenging as individual leaders have very different ways of signalling the same cues. To account for this variation, a separate thematic analysis grouped visually similar images together, including those coded as unclear, providing a more qualitative interpretation of how individual politicians presented themselves as leaders.

4.3. Analysis

To test H1 to H3, generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs) were used to predict whether the politician appeared in their own image (visible versus not visible). Analyses examined whether this likelihood varied by platform (H1), by the politician's gender (H2), and whether the gender difference depended on the platform (H3). Because each politician contributed multiple images to the dataset, a

random intercept for each leader was included to account for the fact that observations from the same person are not independent.

For H4 to H6, leadership representation (agentic, communal, or hybrid) was analysed across platforms (H4), by gender (H5), and in relation to the interaction between gender and platform (H6). As the outcome had three categories, chi-square tests and cross-tabulations were used to examine associations between leadership representation and platform or gender. However, this approach does not provide a formal test of the gender and platform interaction or account for the repeated observations contributed by individual leaders. The H4 to H6 findings should therefore be treated as descriptive and interpreted with caution.

5. Findings

5.1. Visual Visibility of Political Leaders by Platform and Gender

Figure 1 shows how often each political leader is visible in the images shared on their Instagram, Facebook, and X pages. Overall, visibility in images is highest on Instagram (73.3%), followed by Facebook (55.7%), and X (49%). Female leaders were more frequently visible in the images than male leaders (74% versus 44.7%). Chi-square tests show significant differences in visibility by gender, $\chi^2(1) = 79.03$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V = 0.30; platform, $\chi^2(2) = 39.32$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = 0.21 and leader, $\chi^2(5) = 282.82$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V = 0.56. Cramer's V indicates that, while there is an effect for platform and gender, there is a considerably larger effect size for leader. This indicates that leaders' individual styles play a more important role in determining whether images featuring them are shared than gender or platform alone.

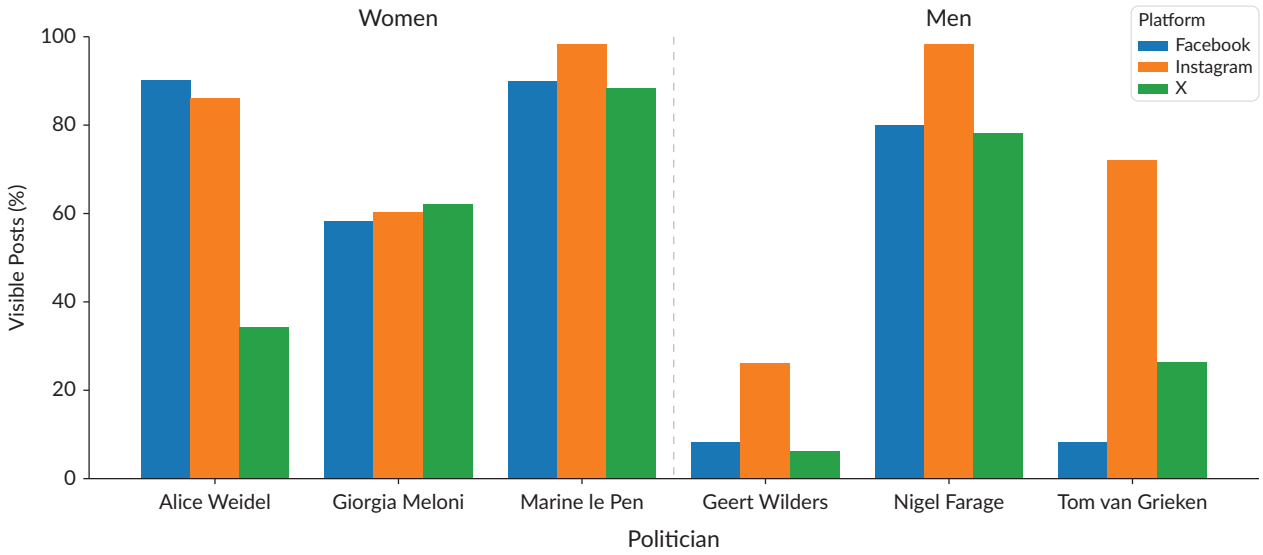


Figure 1. Percentage of images in which the political leader is featured by leader and platform.

H1 predicted that politicians would be more visible on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram. A GLMM examining platform effects on visibility, with a random intercept for leader (see Supplementary File for full results), shows that the probability of politicians sharing images in which they are visible is significantly higher on Instagram than on Facebook (b = 1.18, SE = 0.22, $p < 0.001$) and significantly lower on X than on Facebook (b = −0.40, SE = 0.20, $p = 0.045$). This finding, with Instagram being highest, Facebook intermediate, and

X lowest, fits the expectations that were outlined in the theory. When gender is added as a control variable, these platform effects remain robust. Therefore, H1 is supported.

H2 predicted that female leaders would share images in which they are visible more often than male leaders. In the gender-only model, female leaders had a higher predicted probability of visibility than male leaders (0.77 versus 0.44). However, this difference was not statistically significant (b = −1.47, SE = 1.01, $p = 0.145$). The difference remained non-significant after platform was added to the model (b = −1.60, SE = 1.09, $p = 0.141$). Although the chi-square test indicates a significant association between gender and visibility, the GLMM does not find a significant gender effect once the repeated observations within politicians are accounted for. H2 is therefore not supported as an overall gender effect.

H3 predicted that gender differences in visual self-presentation would vary across platforms, with the gender gap becoming smaller on Instagram, where self-presentation is normalized. Unlike H2, which looks at overall gender differences, H3 instead addresses whether the extent of gender differences varies across platforms. Relative to Facebook, the gender gap in visibility was significantly reduced on Instagram (b = 2.23, SE = 0.46, $p < .001$) and on X (b = 1.37, SE = 0.43, $p = 0.001$). As shown in Figure 2, the gender gap was smallest on Instagram, where the predicted probability of visibility was 0.76 for male leaders compared with 0.85 for female leaders. On X, the gap was also smaller than on Facebook, although female leaders had a higher predicted probability of visibility than male leaders (0.64 versus 0.30). The difference between the gender gaps on Instagram and X was not statistically significant (b = −0.85, SE = 0.44, $p = 0.052$). H3 is therefore partially supported: relative to Facebook, the gender gap was significantly smaller on Instagram and X.

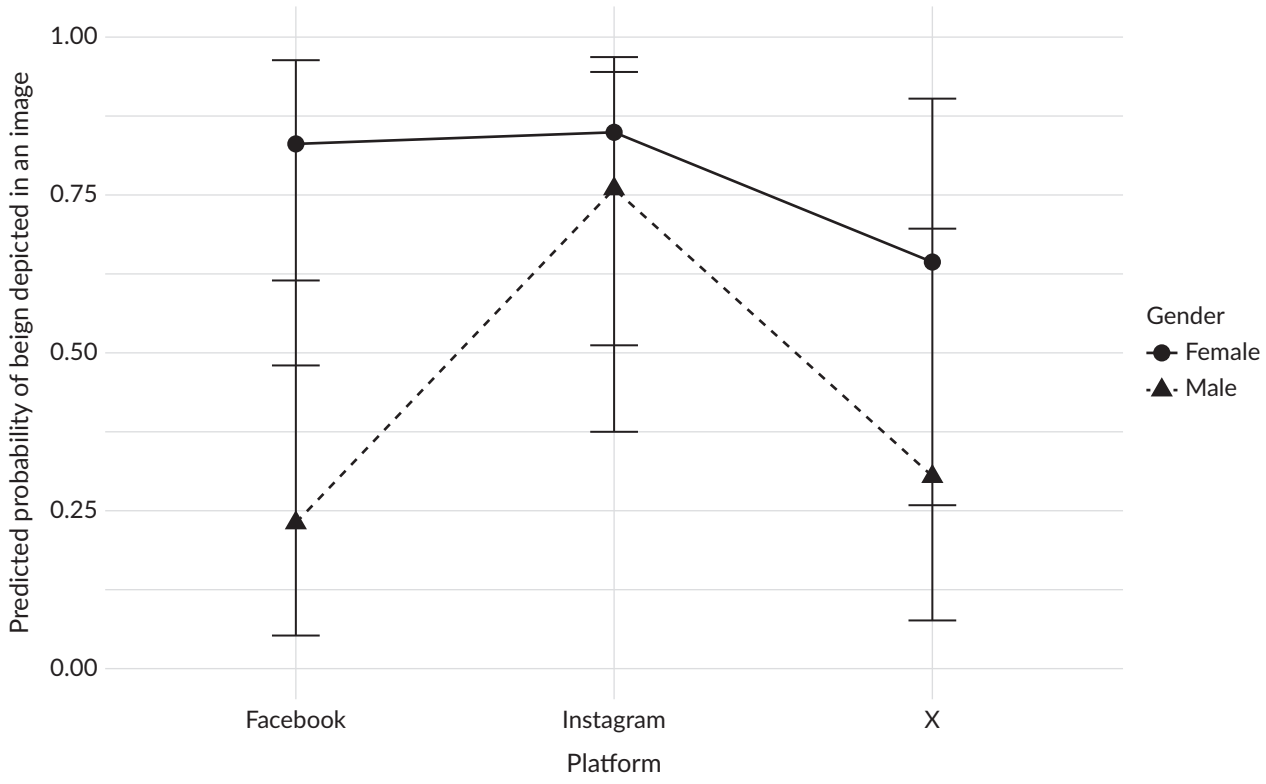


Figure 2. Predicted probability of visibility of political leaders in images by platform and gender.

Instagram's focus on personal and visual communication gives political leaders greater visibility across genders, reducing the gender gap in visual presence. At the same time, the findings indicate that gender differences in visual visibility cannot be explained simply by distinguishing between more and less visually oriented platforms, or between platforms characterized by more open or more closed follower networks. Despite offering fewer visual affordances and a more open network than Facebook, X is associated with a higher proportion of images featuring the politician. This suggests that the platform's public and professionally oriented communicative environment might encourage leaders to use their personal image as a resource for public persona construction.

Together, these results show that platform and gender do not operate independently but interact in shaping politicians' visual visibility. While platforms differ in the extent to which visible self-presentation is prevalent, the findings also suggest that gender differences vary according to the communication environment in which leaders operate.

5.2. Signalling Leadership on Social Media

When leaders appeared in images, how were they presented? Among the 534 images featuring leaders, agentic representations were most common (47%), followed by hybrid (23%) and communal representations (21%). Around 9% of images could not be classified into one of these leadership styles because these portrayals did not contain a clear representation, or they were shot from too far to properly assess them. These images were excluded from the remaining analyses to get a clearer comparison of leadership representations.

H4 predicted that leaders would be more likely to adopt agentic representations on X than on Instagram or Facebook. While the highest proportion of agentic representations was indeed on X (56.4%), followed by Facebook (53.9%) and Instagram (47.5%), this difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 3.77$, $p = 0.438$, Cramér's V = 0.062). H4 is therefore not supported. The findings instead suggest that agentic representation is not particularly associated with X, but is a relatively common form of political self-presentation across platforms among PRR leaders.

H5 predicted that female leaders would be more likely than male leaders to adopt hybrid representations. The data do not support this expectation. Instead, female leaders were more frequently represented through agentic leadership cues than male leaders (56.8% vs. 43.5%), while hybrid representations were slightly more common among male leaders (29.4%) than female leaders (23.1%). While female leaders were predominantly framed using agentic cues, male leaders showed a more even distribution across agentic, communal, and hybrid representations. The overall distribution of leadership representations differed significantly by gender ($\chi^2(2) = 8.03$, $p = 0.018$, Cramér's V = 0.129), but the effect size was small. H5 is not supported.

H6 predicted that gender differences in leadership representation would be smallest on Instagram. H6 was evaluated using separate chi-square analyses examining the association between gender and leadership representation within each platform. While this approach allows for descriptive comparisons of gender differences across platforms, it does not formally test the interaction between the two. Female leaders have higher proportions of agentic representations on every platform, but the difference with male leaders varied across the platforms. On Instagram, female and male leaders showed relatively similar distributions across leadership representations, particularly for hybrid representations. Agentic representations, however, being

the most common for both groups (50 % vs. 44.1%). The gender difference was most pronounced on Facebook and, somewhat less, on X, where female leaders were more frequently represented through agentic cues than male leaders (60% vs. 39.5% and 62.2% vs. 46%, respectively). Representation of male leaders also included relatively many communal cues (on Facebook) and hybrid cues (on X) compared to those of female leaders. The association between gender and leadership representation was weakest on Instagram and was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 1.43$, $p = 0.489$, Cramér's V = 0.084). Stronger associations were observed on Facebook ($\chi^2(2) = 8.82$, $p = 0.012$, Cramér's V = 0.248) and X ($\chi^2(2) = 10.14$, $p = 0.006$, Cramér's V = 0.269). The descriptive pattern is therefore consistent with H6.

These findings suggest that gender differences in leadership representation are not consistent across platforms. One possible explanation is that platforms characterized by stronger norms of personal communication can provide greater scope for female leaders to incorporate communal or hybrid leadership cues, whereas platforms with fewer such norms may be more strongly associated with agentic representations. The relatively strong presence of agentic representations among female leaders, contrary to expectations of the double bind, could indicate that women signalling agency and leadership are more compatible with the emphasis on authority and strong leadership in PRR politics.

Leadership representation also differed significantly across individual leaders ($\chi^2(10) = 71.06$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's V = 0.271). This association was stronger than the associations observed for gender or platform. Figure 3 shows leadership representation by leader and platform. Weidel and Wilders were mostly framed through agentic cues. As Wilders was only visible in a handful of images, his findings should be interpreted cautiously. Farage and Le Pen were more frequently represented through communal cues, while Meloni and Van Grieken also relied more frequently on hybrid representations. Representation patterns remained relatively consistent across platforms for most leaders, except for Wilders, whose limited number of visible images makes platform-specific patterns difficult to interpret. The following subsections provide a qualitative overview of how the different leaders construct their visual leadership.

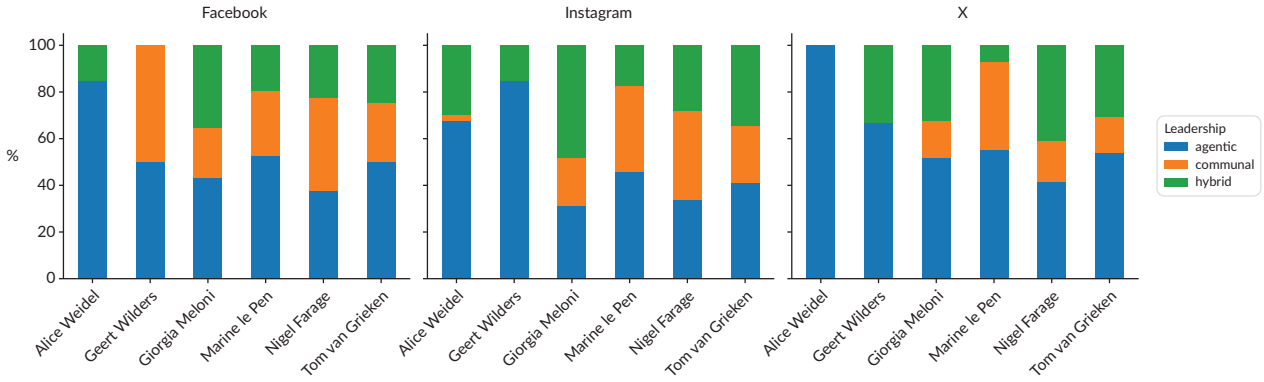


Figure 3. Leadership styles split by politician and platform (excluding images with no clear leadership representation).

5.2.1. Representation of Female Leadership

All three female leaders signal agentic leadership, but differ in the extent to which, as well as how, communal cues are incorporated into their self-presentation.

Marine Le Pen combines agentic and communal traits. Her signalling of communal leadership mainly happens through relationships with citizens: listening to citizens, visiting disaster areas, meeting supporters; embracing elderly people, children, and animals; and smiling. She shares few to no family-related images. Agentic leadership is primarily signaled through her central positioning in speeches and official commemorations. Le Pen often appears in a blue blazer, a color associated with authority, and one that coincidentally reflects the blue of the French flag next to which she is frequently pictured, another symbol of power.

Giorgia Meloni represents a different, but similar strategy. Her agentic leadership is primarily signaled through images of state visits alongside other political leaders and through images of her walking resolutely. Many of the communal images are hybrid and take place within institutional settings, such as hugs with Elon Musk or Matteo Salvini. Meloni is the only female leader in the sample who shares markedly personal images of her private life, including her daughter and close-up selfies. More so than Le Pen, she contrasts her strong agentic representation with conventionally feminine styling, including brightly coloured pink suits, floral earrings, purple eye shadow, and red lipstick.

Alice Weidel differs from Le Pen and Meloni. Instead, she builds her visual communication primarily around institutional authority and strong standardization. Her communication is dominated by the repeated use of the same professional portrait combined with party logos and programmatic messages. This results in a highly consistent and strongly party-aligned visual repertoire. While there are images of official settings, debates, and state visits, images dominated by communal leadership cues are mostly absent. Only on Instagram are more hybrid forms of representation visible, but also here repeated party communication dominates. This institutional consistency is also visible in her styling: she often wears a dark suit or blazer.

5.2.2. Representation of Male Leadership

Compared with the female leaders, the male leaders display more distinct and differentiated visual strategies.

Nigel Farage can be characterized as a populist showman whose communication is highly performative and oriented toward visibility, theatricality, and staged charisma rather than institutional authority. His images are dominated by agentic displays, such as standing alongside prominent political figures or adopting rockstar-like poses in front of large crowds. At the same time, Farage's communication contains elements of communality. Images of him dressed as a steelworker among laborers, standing with his arms on two tractors to signal support for farmers, or repeatedly raising a glass of beer toward the audience, despite reportedly not being especially fond of beer himself (Valluvan & Singh, 2026), indicate a largely staged form of communality. Similarly, although Farage is frequently pictured with crowds, these images are often highly posed: he typically keeps his distance from the crowd, positioning himself in front of a relatively stiff and posed audience. Farage thus fits well with the conceptualization of populism as a communication style in which normality is strategically performed (Moffitt, 2016).

Tom Van Grieken represents a different populist strategy, constructing leadership through proximity, normality, and approachability rather than spectacle. Images regularly show him in everyday campaign situations, such as handing out flyers, participating in protests, or interacting informally with campaign teams. Even in more formal contexts, his presentation generally is informal, and he is often pictured among

the audience rather than positioned above or in front of it. Also in his media appearances, he is often shot as if having a relaxed conversation, in casual outfits or settings. One key image shows him during an interview while his daughter holds onto his leg. Compared to other leaders, his use of institutional symbolism, such as flags, is limited. His style is furthermore less theatrical, with more images appearing less deliberately posed than those of Farage.

Geert Wilders presents a distinctly different pattern, characterized by a minimal and atypical form of visual self-presentation. Most images posted on his accounts were excluded from the analysis because he was not visible in them himself. This absence is itself relevant, suggesting that a substantial part of his communication does not revolve around visual leadership representation at all. Among the relatively small number of images in which he does appear, no consistent visual strategy could be identified.

5.2.3. Variation in Representations of Leadership

Both female and male leaders use distinct visual strategies, which are summarized in Table 1 by bringing together leaders' levels of visibility, dominant leadership representations, and overall visual style.

Table 1. Typology of leadership styles.

Leader	Visibility	Leadership	Visual style
Le Pen	High	Agentic & Communal	Compassionate stateswoman
Meloni	Medium	Agentic & Communal	Approachable commander
Weidel	High	Agentic	Controlled communicator
Farage	High	Agentic & Communal	Populist showman
Van Grieken	Medium	Hybrid	Grassroots populist
Wilders	Low	—	Programmatic minimalist

Variation between leaders can partly be linked to differences in political systems, institutional positions, party organization, and national political culture. Le Pen's high visibility and emphasis on agentic representation can be situated within the personalized and presidential nature of French politics, where party leaders are central to campaigns and strong leadership ideals remain influential (Krogstad & Storvik, 2010). Meloni stands out among the six leaders for combining high levels of both agentic and communal signalling. This might reflect her position as prime minister, where projecting both strong and approachable leadership could matter more than the direct supporter-oriented messaging that opposition leaders typically rely on. Although previous research suggests that images of motherhood can expose female politicians to criticism (Langer, 2010), Meloni frequently uses them. One possible explanation is that her strong political position, combined with the cultural significance attached to motherhood in Italy, may make such images more compatible with her leadership persona. Weidel's institutionalized, standardized communication fits her role as co-leader of the AfD, a party which, due to previous conflicts, may favor cautious, low-risk, repeated formats. This may also indicate her position as one of the party's public faces rather than its sole representative. The emphasis on consistency over intimacy is also not unusual in the German context (Sonnevend & Steiert, 2024).

Farage represents a highly performative, media-oriented leadership style in which visibility and theatricality function as central resources for constructing authority. This highly visible approach may reflect the British

first-past-the-post electoral context and, more specifically, the campaign period during which Farage's data were collected. By contrast, the two male leaders from more proportional political systems use less centralized images of authority: Van Grieken through a community-centered leadership style, Wilders through his relative absence from his own visual communication. Van Grieken builds leadership through proximity rather than spectacle, which corresponds with the party's broader emphasis on building a political community, where accessibility, informality, and everyday contact function as tools of political bonding (Sijstermans, 2021).

Wilders presents a markedly different case from all other leaders: he posts very few images of himself, and those that do feature him do not construct a coherent visual leadership persona. As the party's sole official member, Wilders himself is inseparable from the party organization, yet his visual communication rarely centers on his own physical presence. At the same time, the personal is deeply political in Wilders's case: many of the images excluded from the sample as AI-generated were related to death threats he received from Islamist extremists. Living under constant security because of these threats means that politics is inseparable from his personal life. In that sense, Wilders may be the clearest example of how the personal and the political become inseparable, despite his relatively impersonal visual communication.

6. Conclusion

This study addressed how platforms and gender shape the visual self-presentation of six European PRR leaders on Instagram, Facebook, and X by analysing their visibility and visual leadership representations.

The findings show that PRR leaders were more likely to appear in their own images on Instagram than on Facebook or X, consistent with the platform's emphasis on visual and personalized communication. Gender also mattered, but its role in visual self-presentation varied by platform. Gender differences were smallest on Instagram and bigger on Facebook and X. On the latter two platforms, female leaders appeared in substantially more images than male leaders, whereas this difference was smaller on Instagram, where both male and female leaders shared many images of themselves.

Beyond visibility, the analysis of leadership representations showed that, contrary to expectations derived from the double-bind literature, female PRR leaders used more agentic representations than male leaders. Consistent with Bast et al. (2022), these findings suggest that in PRR contexts, where strong leadership is highly valued, female leaders may be more encouraged to use agentic traits in their self-presentation. Future research comparing PRR leaders with politicians from other party families could examine whether this finding is specific to the PRR. Here too, the role of gender appeared to depend on the platform, although this was not formally tested. On X and Facebook, female leaders used more agentic representations than men, whereas this difference was smaller on Instagram. This indicates that platforms encouraging more personal and relational communication may provide greater room for both male and female leaders to signal competence alongside warmth.

The findings of this study have broader implications for research on political communication. First, they reinforce the importance of studying social media platforms as distinct communication environments, with different designs and norms that create different opportunities for political communication. Second, the findings highlight the relevance of considering these online opportunities when studying the self-presentation of male and female leaders. Some platforms may reduce gender differences, while others

may reinforce them. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the double bind is expressed differently across platforms, with female leaders more likely to combine agentic and communal cues on some platforms than others. Finally, this article highlights the importance of individual politicians' styles. Although gender and platforms create opportunities and constraints, they do not completely determine how leaders present themselves. Strong variation exists between individual leaders, who often have consistent and recognizable visual styles across platforms. This is in line with Bast's (2024) conclusion that individual communication style remains an important aspect of PRR leaders' visual self-presentation.

While these findings open up new avenues for research, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study includes only six leaders and three platforms, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The data were also collected using convenience sampling over a limited period, which may have resulted in an overrepresentation of campaign communication or responses to specific political events. Future research could explore whether similar findings emerge during election campaigns, periods in government, or political crises, as well as explore variation across ideological families, countries, and other platforms.

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Data Availability

Data can be obtained from the author upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

Perplexity and ChatGPT were used for language suggestions.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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"We Are Not as They Portray Us": Women Populist Leaders' Re-Presentations of Racism-Related Scandals

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Abstract

This article offers a comparative analysis of how two prominent women populist leaders—Finland's Riikka Purra and Italy's Giorgia Meloni—respond to racist scandals involving themselves or their parties. The cases analysed include the resurfacing of Purra's past racist online comments and Meloni's reaction to racist and antisemitic remarks made by members of her party's youth wing. Using actantial analysis informed by social representations theory, we analyse media-reported statements by the two politicians. The article identifies how these leaders negotiate political accountability and manage their image in the face of controversy. We show how scandals are not only individual crises but arenas in which shared social meanings are constructed and contested. Despite differences in the two politicians' responses, our analysis shows the centrality of denial, self-defence, and counterattacks in their scandal management, calling into question the notion that right-wing populist women are bound by gender-stereotypical repair strategies. This study makes two contributions: First, it bridges the gap between two separate bodies of literature—women populist leadership and political scandal—by focusing on whether and how gender intersects with the performative dynamics of scandal response. Second, it highlights the utility of social representations theory in capturing how meaning-making functions in political crises. In doing so, the article advances our understanding of the intricate ways in which women populist leaders navigate politically damaging allegations.

Keywords

accountability; actantial analysis; populism; racism; scandals; social representations; women populist leaders

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1. Introduction

In the Summer of 2023, news media resurfaced Riikka Purra's—Deputy Prime Minister of Finland and leader of the right-wing populist Finns Party (in Finnish: Perussuomalaiset; in Swedish: Sannfinländarna)—old writings from 2008 posted on an online discussion forum. These writings contained highly offensive racist remarks and incitement to violence against ethnic minorities. Following widespread media attention and political pressure, Purra publicly apologised for the comments, emphasising that they originated from a different time and no longer reflected her views.

One year later, in June 2024, hidden-camera footage published by the Italian online outlet *Fanpage* revealed that young members of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party (in Italian: Fratelli d'Italia) were making racist, antisemitic, and neo-fascist remarks, including fascist salutes and praise for extremist groups. As in the Finnish case, the revelations generated a major public scandal, prompting widespread criticism and renewed debate regarding the far-right roots of Meloni's party. Following initial silence, Meloni publicly condemned the actions of the youth wing members and distanced her party from fascism and racism, although her later responses took a more complex rhetorical form.

Political scandals have been conceptualised as norm transgressions that generate public outrage (Neckel, 2005), are amplified by the media (Thompson, 2013), and become sites where social norms, values, and identities are publicly negotiated (Lull & Hinerman, 1997). The nature and severity of the scandal, the position of the involved politician, and the broader political context shape how public actors respond to allegations against them (Newmark et al., 2019). In recent years, research has increasingly examined how right-wing populist politicians manage scandals involving racism, extremism, or anti-democratic rhetoric, often through strategies of denial, victimisation, counterattack, or appeals to anti-elite resentment (e.g., Hatakka et al., 2017; Herkman, 2018). At the same time, scholarship on women populist leaders has highlighted how these politicians often navigate tensions between symbolic modernity and traditionalist, nationalist, or exclusionary agendas (Cilento, 2023; Pettersson et al., 2023; Sensales, 2024).

Both the Finns Party and Brothers of Italy reflect the broader rise and normalisation of populist radical-right parties in Europe, combining nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-elite rhetoric with increasing electoral and governmental success (Mudde, 2019). While Finland and Italy differ considerably in their political cultures and gender regimes, both countries have recently seen women become increasingly visible and accepted as leaders within right-wing populist parties. Yet these forms of leadership often combine symbolic gender progress with conservative and nationalist political projects. Purra, who succeeded Jussi Halla-aho as leader of the Finns Party in 2021, has publicly rejected feminist framings and presented herself as a strong, self-made politician unwilling to conform to expectations of conciliatory women's leadership (Pettersson & Sakki, 2024). Purra has emphasised immigration restriction, law-and-order policies, and economic conservatism, situating the Finns Party firmly on the populist radical right (Henley, 2023). Meloni, in turn, has combined nationalist rhetoric and traditional family values with the symbolic position of being Italy's first woman Prime Minister (Keeling & Ladini, 2025), embodying what Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes (2024) describe as the paradox of women's right-wing populist leadership.

There is a line of research on (racist) political scandals that has focused specifically on the responses of right-wing populist politicians, and, to a lesser extent, on studies examining the gender dimensions of

right-wing populist leadership and scandal communication. However, research bringing these two fields together remains limited. This article therefore contributes to the literature on populist leadership and political scandal, in a first instance, by examining whether women right-wing populist leaders respond through gender-stereotypical repair strategies identified in previous research, or whether populist and ideological repertoires enable more confrontational and traditionally "masculine" forms of scandal management. Secondly, it demonstrates the utility of a social representations perspective and actantial analysis (Greimas, 1983) for examining how meaning-making, storytelling, and identity construction operate in political crises.

We focus on Purra and Meloni because they represent two prominent women leaders governing European right-wing populist parties, who faced major racism-related scandals within a relatively short period. The selected scandals were analytically relevant because they generated extensive attention, threatened the legitimacy of both leaders and their parties, and required public responses from Purra and Meloni themselves. In Finland, the controversy surrounding Purra's writings contributed to a broader governmental crisis and parliamentary no-confidence proceedings concerning racism scandals within the ruling coalition (Lehto, 2023). In Italy, the *Fanpage* investigation prompted wider debate regarding racism, antisemitism, and neo-fascist continuities within Brothers of Italy (Pons, 2024). Rather than striving for broader generalisation, the present article compares how two women leaders negotiated racism-related scandals across contrasting gender-political contexts, highlighting how populist scandal repertoires may at times complicate or partially override conventional gendered expectations of political communication.

2. Political Scandals, Right-Wing Populism, and Gender

There are several approaches to and definitions of political scandals. From a sociological perspective, Neckel (2005) conceptualises political scandals as publicised norm transgressions by political actors that generate moral outrage and threaten political legitimacy. According to Neckel, scandals are socially constructed and structured processes that typically evolve from primary exposure to media coverage, followed by public reaction, eventually ending in some form of resolution. Similarly, Thompson (2013) conceives scandals as inseparable from the media environment that shapes their trajectory, and highlights the central role played by intense media coverage in escalating political scandals and damaging the reputation of the involved politicians. Lull and Hinerman (1997) add the dimension of scandals as "morality tales" told in the media, where publicised transgressions become sites for negotiating social values, identities, and desires.

The outcomes of scandals depend on an array of factors, including the severity and type of transgression (e.g., whether it involved personal or political misconduct), the leader's political capital before the scandal, their degree of partisan loyalty, and whether the leader can reframe the event in their favour (Allern & Pollack, 2012; Newmark et al., 2019). Likewise, politicians' responses to scandals range from submissive to assertive tactics (Benoit, 2024; McGraw, 2001) and from denials to explicit apologies (Kim et al., 2004). Benoit's (2024) image repair theory outlines five broad categories of strategies—denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—which can be used simultaneously or interchangeably as a scandal unfolds. Typically, when a scandal has escalated and outright denial is not possible, politicians deploy self-defensive strategies, including attempts at excusing or justifying the event, providing concessions and partial acknowledgment of responsibility, and attacking accusers by questioning the legitimacy of their allegations (Benoit, 2024; McGraw, 2001).

However, political scandals, the reactions they demand, and the consequences they entail should always be examined in relation to their surrounding cultural context (Allern & Pollack, 2012), especially regarding norms of political morality. This may be particularly important when scandals involve racist or xenophobic dimensions. Regarding scandals around right-wing populist politicians, the literature suggests that these share many features of general political scandals yet also have specific characteristics. In his study of media coverage of scandals surrounding right-wing populist parties in the Nordic countries, Herkman (2018) shows that, depending on the position of the party and the involved member(s), right-wing populists may benefit from scandals. Especially in their incipient phase, these parties may utilise the scandal to claim an underdog position, framing allegations as unjust witch-hunts orchestrated by the media and political elites.

Hatakka et al. (2017), in turn, show that a typical pattern of scandal management by right-wing populist parties is what the authors term the strategy of "calculated ambivalence," where confrontation (rejecting the legitimacy of the accusation and reframing it as elite/media bias) is mixed with submission (partial distancing from the accused comment or person). Other studies (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019; Pettersson, 2019) confirm that right-wing populist discourse tends to be more confrontational on social media and more submissive in interviews with mainstream news. Such "dual communication" allows right-wing populists to balance between ideological purity and political survival, simultaneously maintaining appeal among loyal supporters while avoiding full alienation from mainstream audiences.

Few studies to date have focused on the gender dimensions of political scandal management. One exception is a study by Cucchi et al. (2021), who experimentally examined participants' evaluations of restoration strategies by women and men politicians following a scandal. They found that using mitigating circumstances was more beneficial to women politicians, while diffusing responsibility by accusing others was more beneficial to men. These results suggest that gender-stereotypical behaviour—connecting submissive strategies with femininity and assertive strategies with masculinity—evokes more positive public assessments in scandal management.

A question that remains open, however, is whether ideological affiliation interacts with gender in shaping the strategies politicians deploy—and how well they function—in alleviating scandals (Cucchi et al., 2021). Women politicians are generally known to face a "double bind" of identity management: emphasising womanhood may result in accusations of "playing the gender card," whereas stereotypically strong, "masculine" behaviour may be ridiculed, forcing a lose–lose situation (Jamieson, 1995). Interestingly, some studies suggest that behaving "gender appropriately" may be less constraining for women right-wing populists, as they skilfully navigate between the traditional "patriarchal" ideology of populist parties and liberal norms of women's rights and gender equality (Bast et al., 2022; Cilento, 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024; Sensales, 2024). Whether and how such navigation matters for the scandal management strategies of right-wing populist women remains unclear. In the following section, we outline how a social representations approach can be deployed to address this question.

3. A Social Representations Approach: Political Scandals as a Co-Construction of Meaning, Ideology, and Identity

A few decades after Moscovici's (1961) foundational study on psychoanalysis in French society, research on social representations expanded to include gender, adopting diverse theoretical and methodological approaches (Arruda, 2003). This work emphasised the role of language and communication, particularly

through mass media (e.g., Duveen, 1996), in shaping how groups internalise and negotiate social representations and reproduce gender stereotypes (Kruse et al., 1988). This line of research has informed later studies on gender bias in representations of women politicians within the androcentric field of politics (Sensales & Areni, 2017; Sensales et al., 2016).

Like research on political scandals, social representation approaches acknowledge the role of media and publics in constructing social reality and reinforcing or contesting hegemonic ideologies (Wagner et al., 1999), while placing particular emphasis on language and communication (Harré & Moghaddam, 2015). The media are understood as active participants in producing common sense and mediating between political actors and citizens. At the same time, laypeople also actively co-construct reality by promoting competing versions of the social world that protect particular identities and interests (Howarth, 2006). Thus, representations of political scandals become struggles over legitimacy, identity, and power.

A social representations approach, therefore, examines how politicians, media, and publics co-construct meanings and identities around scandals. As Buhagiar and Sammut (2020) argue, social representations are action-oriented forms of social "re-presentation" that guide social practices. Political scandals, in turn, involve interactions between politicians, citizens, and media actors that continuously shape one another (Jerslev et al., 2025). According to Marková (2003), these struggles often revolve around self/other distinctions expressed through narratives, arguments, and justifications.

This framework is particularly relevant for examining how women populist leaders manage racism-related scandals, where ideological and gendered tensions intersect. As noted above in our discussion of the double bind facing women politicians, they are typically judged not only politically but also through gendered expectations regarding authority, rationality, and emotionality (Cucchi et al., 2021; Jamieson, 1995). Media play a central role by framing scandals and demanding responses, forcing politicians to navigate political legitimacy, ideology, and gendered expectations simultaneously.

Social representations research distinguishes between sociogenesis (societal level), microgenesis (group interaction), and ontogenesis, referring to how representations are mobilised in everyday sense-making (Flick et al., 2015). In analysing Purra's and Meloni's speeches and written responses, we focus on the ontogenetic level to examine how socially shared representations are activated in their discourse. Although articulated individually, these responses draw on common-sense understandings surrounding their parties and the scandals in question.

4. The Present Study

4.1. Data

The data analysed in this study consists of Riikka Purra's and Giorgia Meloni's public statements following racism-related scandals connected to them or their parties. Rather than focusing on explicitly gender-related scandals, we argue that visible racism-related scandals are useful for examining whether and how gender becomes implicated in women populist leaders' scandal responses under conditions of intense political pressure. Such cases make it possible to explore how gender intersects with broader ideological and populist repertoires even when the controversy itself primarily concerns racism, ideology, and party legitimacy.

The comparison further allows us to examine similar scandal situations across distinct national and gender-political contexts while holding constant several analytically relevant features: both leaders headed electorally successful populist radical-right parties, both scandals concerned racism-related allegations threatening party legitimacy, and both required highly visible public responses. At the same time, Finland and Italy represent contrasting symbolic contexts regarding gender and women's leadership, with Finland often associated with the Nordic model of gender equality (Tanhua, 2018) and Italy associated with more traditional Catholic gender norms. The aim is therefore not statistical generalisation, but analytical comparison of how women populist leaders draw on similar repertoires of meaning-making and scandal management across comparable yet distinct cases.

In the case of Purra, the data consist of 19 news articles collected from the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE's website, the daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, and the evening tabloid *Iltalehti* during the months following the scandal—"Purra" was used as a search word. As Meloni's and Purra's responses to the scandals comprised mainly public statements and social media posts that were reported in news media, the newspapers functioned primarily as repositories of publicly available statements and reactions rather than as objects of media analysis. The articles covering the scandal specifically were then selected manually. Many of the articles cited Purra's blog entry on 10th July 2023, where she defended herself against criticism for past online comments, arguing that digging into her old posts was politically motivated, and insisted she has grown and changed over time. In the later addition, she acknowledged her past frustration about immigration-related issues, framing her earlier angry writings as spontaneous outbursts of anger. The analysed articles also contained Purra's Twitter (later X) posts and responses to the media.

In the case of Meloni, the data consists of 25 news articles collected from major Italian newspapers and news websites—*La Stampa*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*—during the months following the scandal, using "Fanpage scandal" as the search term. Many of these articles referenced four key statements made by Meloni. Her initial response came on June 28, 2024, when she broke her silence and addressed the revelations by *Fanpage* in a press statement at the end of a European Council session in Brussels. This statement was also posted on her social media accounts and widely reported by Italian media. The second statement was an official letter to the leader of the Brothers of Italy, published on July 2, 2024, which reinforced her position on the matter. The third statement occurred on December 16, 2024, during a public speech at the annual political festival organised by the Brothers of Italy, where Meloni directly addressed the youth wing and framed her stance within a broader political narrative. The fourth statement occurred on September 21, 2025, during the youth wing Festival Fenix 2025. The festival's theme was "Without filters. The courage to live in a new time."

4.2. Methodological Perspective and Analytic Approach

We analysed the data using two complementary approaches. First, we applied actantial analysis (Greimas, 1983) to identify the actors (actants) and their actions in the scandal narratives involving Purra and Meloni. Since dealing with the scandal was a central quest for both women politicians, the actantial model is particularly suitable for analysing actions within quest-based narratives (De Paola et al., 2026). This model identifies six key actors that drive a story forward: main character, quest, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent. To illustrate, consider the familiar tale where Prince Charming rescues and marries the Princess (Hébert, 2019). The main character is the protagonist pursuing a goal (Prince Charming); the quest is the

desired achievement (marrying the Princess); the sender is the character who initiates the quest (the King); the receivers are those who benefit from success (the Prince, the King, the kingdom, etc); the helper is the character assisting the hero (e.g., a magic horse); and the opponent is the character hindering the quest (often a dragon). Our analysis focused on identifying these six actors in what we approached as the stories that Purra and Meloni constructed around the scandals.

Next, we examined the central concepts of social representations theory—anchoring, objectification, and themata (Marková, 2003)—for each of the scandals. Anchoring refers to the process of making new or unfamiliar phenomena understandable by connecting them to familiar ideas or categories. Objectification entails the process of turning abstract concepts into concrete, tangible images or symbols, whereas themata constitute deep-seated cultural oppositions (e.g., us/them) that subtly structure how people interpret social issues. Social representations are often organised in narrative form (László, 1997), which helps structure meaning and communicate it effectively. Reflecting this, our identification of objectifications focused on the verbal images generated in written and oral statements about the scandal. Anchorings were understood as the ways in which Purra and Meloni linked different constructions of the scandal to pre-existing concepts.

The first and second authors of this article, being native speakers of Finnish and Italian, respectively, analysed the original data and translated the quotes analysed in Section 5 into English, retaining linguistic nuances as far as possible. Throughout the analytic process, we discussed our interpretations and findings, relating these to each other and reflecting on similarities and differences between the two cases, before finalising the results. Supplementary File 1 contains a full list of articles included in the data corpus and Supplementary File 2 contains the quotes analysed in Section 5 in their original languages.

5. Findings

In this section, we illustrate our findings through excerpts from Purra's and Meloni's written and spoken responses to political scandals. We first analyse these responses using the actantial model to identify the key narrative forces structuring their scandal narratives. We argue that these responses construct stories in which Purra and Meloni are the main characters engaged in a quest to address the scandal while defending themselves and their parties. We then draw on social representations theory to interpret their practices and actions as representational strategies supporting this quest, while examining how gendered positioning and expectations are negotiated within these narratives.

5.1. Riikka Purra

The narrative of Purra's response to the resurfacing of her 2008 online comments unfolds across four distinct actions undertaken by Purra herself as the central figure in the narrative. Each action corresponds to a distinct stage in this process, characterised by a specific re-presentation of the scandal and an accompanying communicative shift. Purra's response re-presents the scandal across four representational stages: (a) non-story; (b) politically motivated attack; (c) emotional outburst; and (d) stupid mistake. In the following subsections (5.1.1 to 5.1.4), we illustrate these re-presentations with quotes from the analysed data.

5.1.1. Re-Presenting the Scandal as a "Non-Story"

In this first phase, the prevailing action of the main character—Riikka Purra—is her refusal to make comments or express any guilt. The immediate strategy is one of silence and dismissal, aimed at minimising the issue by framing it as insignificant and unworthy of serious attention. This phase reflects an attempt to construct the scandal as a "non-story" in an effort to avoid amplifying the controversy and to signal that the matter does not merit a substantive response. This is illustrated in the following response Purra gave to *Iltalehti* in a text message in February:

> I have no need to comment on the guestbook writings on Scripta from 2008. I have previously said that I read Halla-aho's blog and took part in the discussion. The guestbook is available for everyone to read. (Iltalehti, July 12, 2023)

From a social representation perspective, by referring to her own violent online writings as "available for everyone to read," the main character can objectify the alleged scandal as a freely available resource stripped of any mystery or secrecy. In addition, Purra presents her online writing as a thing of the past, anchoring the alleged scandal to the popular notion that time cures everything. Indeed, by repeatedly using past tense and by situating the mistake in the year 2008, the scandal is represented as an "expired" matter—an issue rendered obsolete and resolved by the passage of time. Overall, this initial phase of denial and avoidance functions as a self-defensive strategy to distance the main character and her party from any involvement in racist activities.

5.1.2. Re-Presenting the Scandal as a Politically Motivated Attack

As the media and political opponents intensify scrutiny, Purra shifts to a defensive strategy and represents the scandal as a politically motivated attack to undermine her position as a politician. This narrative positions the main character as the target of unfair treatment by the opponents, who at times remain implicit, yet at other times are explicitly singled out as "left-wing politicians" and "the media."

In a *YLE* article on July 10, Purra draws on the imagery of the "energetic actor" and the "archeologist" to objectify her opponent as excessively invested in an obsessive "pastime" and "game" she refuses to join. This depiction frames the opponent as relentlessly committed to sustaining the accusations through practices of "wading through the guestbook" and "digging." The imagery anchors the scandal to a lose–lose scenario in which the main character appears trapped: the accusations will never cease, leaving her unable to alter the situation. Refusing to engage in the "game" can also be interpreted as a strategy for avoiding a gendered double bind in which assertiveness risks being judged as aggression, while compliance risks appearing weak. While declining to participate in the game imposed by the opponents ("but I will not get involved in a game with the left and the media"), she simultaneously redirects attention toward what she frames as the only relevant issue: the political aims of the Finns Party. The full quote is:

> Before the elections last winter (IL 1.2.2023) and now again, energetic actors have waded once more through the guestbook of Halla-aho's blog Scripta and searched there for my sins. We're talking about the year 2008. That is, almost ten years before I even entered politics. Surely there will be more to come, since there are thousands of my writings on the internet. Nice pastime for archaeologists. (YLE, July 10, 2023)

As she does not feel the need to renounce or apologise for her earlier writings or actions, Purra proceeds:

> Why on earth should I do that? I certainly don't agree with nearly everything [I wrote], with many things I do, but I will not get involved in a game with the media and the left….There would be no end to it. Absolutely no end. Even memory would become an issue. So let the interested ones dig. (YLE, July 10, 2023)

On July 13, 2023, Purra frames the quest as the defence of the Finns Party's political legitimacy as it enacts a strict anti-immigration policy within a democratically elected system. In this narrative, the helpers are her fellow party members and supporters, depicted as acting courageously through democratic and legitimate means, whereas the opponents are constructed as adversaries who both actively seek to undermine the party and fail to address the problems that only the Finns Party dares to confront as it "speaks about those problems that others, for one reason or another, do not." Purra declared:

> Our immigration policy line is justified and legal, and there is nothing wrong or suspicious about it—even though, from some quarters of the political field, there is a desire to present it as if the goal were to nullify our agenda. (YLE, July 11, 2023)

She proceeded by adding:

> The Finns Party always advances its policy objectives in accordance with parliamentary and democratic principles, and also speaks about those problems that others, for one reason or another, do not. (YLE, July 11, 2023)

Overall, the function of this stage is to position the main character and her helper (the Finns Party) as vulnerable underdogs under endless attack by an allegedly biased collective elite comprising the media and political adversaries (the opponents) who engage in an endless "game." This stance of victimhood may become particularly persuasive when it aligns with gendered stereotypes of vulnerability and moral worth, thereby strengthening the representation of Purra as the unjust target of elite hostility rather than as a legitimate object of political accountability.

5.1.3. Re-Presenting the Scandal as an Emotional Outburst Within a Heroic Pursuit

As the controversy continued to dominate the news cycle, Purra shifted toward partial acknowledgment of the issue. She admitted that her remarks were inappropriate, yet denied engaging in dual communication, speaking in different ways depending on the context—news media or online—and the audience (Hatakka et al., 2017)—general population versus own supporters—and downplayed their significance, as demonstrated by the following quote:

> I don't engage in any kind of dual communication. I sometimes use humour—I should do that less. I don't think anyone else in my party engages in dual communication either. (YLE, July 12, 2023)

This strategy allowed her to concede some ground while simultaneously creating distance between her outdated and allegedly irrelevant comments from the distant past and her present self, portrayed as the

main character in a quest to defend Finland and Finns. The following quotes from *Iltasanomat* on July 11, 2023, that cited Purra's writings on X illustrate the partial acknowledgement of the issue:

> At times, I was very frustrated and despairing about certain side effects of immigration seen in Finland, for example, harassment and sexual offenses against women, and the unequal practices of Islam. As many others have been to. In those moments, one might say or write angrily or foolishly….My angry text is just angry text, nothing more. I do not accept, and have never accepted, any kind of violence….As I said earlier, of course, in this position, stage of life, and age, I would not write anything like that, and I no longer agree with many of those things. (Iltasanomat, July 11, 2023)

In these passages, emotional imagery (i.e., frustration, despair, and anger) frames the online comments as an outburst triggered by the main character's frustration at being hindered in her central quest: defending Finland—and particularly Finnish women—positioned as the receivers of that quest. The image of harassment enables Purra to balance her identity as an accountable political actor with that of a woman protecting other women. In this frame, her "despair" and "frustration" gain embodied credibility, as her position as a woman also renders her vulnerable to harassment. This emotional framing anchors the scandalous comments to a transient emotional reaction with no real-world consequences ("an angry text remains just text"), while firmly linking the opponent to tangible harm, namely sexual harassment. Temporal references ("in those moments") further underscore Purra's transformation from an emotionally driven main character into someone occupying a different "position, life stage, and age." Yet one element remains unchanged: unlike her opponent, she insists she has never accepted "real violence." Through these actions, Purra distances herself from her earlier online writings, including any perceived incitement to violence, while simultaneously legitimising her party's anti-immigration agenda as a mission to protect the receivers—Finland and the Finns—from immigration-related threats.

5.1.4. Re-Presenting the Scandal as the Stupid Mistake of a Virtuous Figure

Finally, under mounting political and public pressure, Purra issued a formal apology, signalling that the controversy could no longer be deflected or minimised. By acknowledging the harm caused and apologising, she sought to resolve the matter and restore her political legitimacy. This stage is illustrated in the following quote:

> I apologise for the stupid social media comments I made 15 years ago and for the understandable harm and distress they have caused. I am not a perfect person; I have made mistakes…. At that time, I expressed myself in ways and with words that I would in no way accept or use today. (YLE, July 11, 2023)

Purra then tweeted:

> Taken out of context and judged in the present, some of the texts look even worse…. I do not accept any form of violence, racism, or discrimination. Those who know my way of working and my values know that. (YLE, July 11, 2023)

Here, Purra formulates an explicit apology. Her condemnation of violence and racism is unequivocal; however, as the main character of her own narrative, she mitigates personal guilt by highlighting the "stupidity" of her earlier comments, emphasising the time elapsed since they were written, and asserting that her present self would not express such views. She further suggests implicitly that the remarks have been taken out of context by the media. By describing herself as "only human" and fallible, Purra frames imperfection as a general rather than specifically gendered failing, enabling her to express accountability while avoiding the construction of failure as tied to her position as a woman leader. This strategy anchors the scandal to the actions of a flawed yet moral protagonist—incomplete but guided by higher principles ("my way of working and values") and whose integrity is affirmed by close colleagues (helpers) who recognise her genuine good character.

Ultimately, Purra's apology—recognising the harm caused—can be seen as functioning to neutralise opposition and refocus political discourse on her object explicated in the final quote of Section 5.1.2: the party's strict immigration policy. At the same time, the apology downplays gender by framing the controversy primarily as general human fallibility rather than gendered failure.

Table 1 summarises the actors presented across the four stages in Purra's narrative of the scandal. For each stage, the anchoring and objectification strategies that shape its re-presentation are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Actors in Purra's narrative (actantial analysis).

Actors	Purra's narrative of the scandal
Main character	Riikka Purra
Quests	Protecting Finland (core quest); protecting herself and the Finns Party from the scandal
Sender	Finland and Finns (implicit)
Receiver	Finland and Finns
Opponent	Left, media, and immigrants
Helpers	Finns party

Table 2. Ontogenesis of the online writings scandal, actions by the main character, objectifications, anchoring, and themata (social representations analysis).

Re-presentation of the scandal	Actions by the main character	Objectifications	Anchoring	Themata
"Non-story"	Dismissal and denial	Expired matter, freely available, resource devoid of mystery, 2008	Time cures all things	Non-story *vs* scandal
Politically motivated attack	Self-defensive counter-attack	Archeologist, energetic actors, game, past time	Lose-lose scenario	Game-playing *vs* bravery
Emotional outburst within a heroic pursuit	Partial acknowledgement	Desperation, anger, sexual assault	Consequences of words and actions	Emotional outburst vs real violence
Stupid mistake of a virtuous figure	Public Apology	Only human, stupid mistake	Human fallibility	Transient mistakes vs stable ethics

5.2. Giorgia Meloni

Giorgia Meloni's response to the revelations by *Fanpage* begins on June 28, 2024, when she breaks her initial silence with a press statement following a European Council session in Brussels. The statement is subsequently echoed across the Italian media, followed by an official letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, and an appeal to the party's youth wing during a public speech. These communications are marked by repetition and overlapping formulations, creating a sense of rhetorical persistence rather than narrative progression. Unlike Purra's case, Meloni's narrative does not unfold through distinct phases but through multiple re-presentations of the scandal that define the roles and positions of the various characters involved. Within this storyline, Meloni frames the scandal as: (a) the misconduct of a few individuals; (b) a regime-style investigation; (c) stupid folklore; and (d) an ugly story. In Sections 5.2.1 to 5.2.4, we illustrate these re-presentations with excerpts from the data.

5.2.1. Re-Presenting the Scandal as the Misconduct of a Few Individuals

From the onset of the scandal, Giorgia Meloni—positioned as the main character in the scandal narrative—emphasises the gravity of the alleged misconduct attributed to the youth wing of her party, thereby framing the accusations as a matter of profound significance. Her initial press statement (June 28, 2024) highlights the incompatibility of racism with the mission of her party and reinstates the distance between the misconduct and the image of the party as self-evident:

> As I said many times before, and I say it again, I think that whoever has sentiments of racism, antisemitism or nostalgia, has simply chosen the wrong home, as such sentiments are incompatible with Fratelli d'Italia, they are incompatible with the Italian Right, and they are incompatible with our orientation. On this, I do not accept any kind of ambiguity, and I asked the Party to take action….This people who clearly did not understand where they are, are possibly the best allies for those who wish us harm, and therefore I think that we have to be very determined and clear about that….Someone asked for the dissolution of the Youth Party based on what instead concern only specific individuals. (Press statement in Brussels, June 28, 2024)

In this statement, the home metaphor draws on culturally familiar ideas of family and parental—particularly maternal—authority in defining who belongs within the moral household. The metaphor makes tangible the physical and symbolic distance between the Brothers of Italy youth wing and the few unwitting intruders (i.e., the racist members), who "did not understand where they were." Although this is the first time Meloni has broken her silence on the issue, her firm intolerance of any "sentiment of racism, antisemitism, or nostalgia" is presented as long-established ("I have said it many times, and I say it again") and further reinforced by her readiness to mobilise her allies—the Brothers of Italy—and "take action." The culpable members, rather than representing the youth wing itself, are portrayed as instruments ("best possible allies") in the hands of malicious opponents ("those who wish us harm") seeking to undermine Meloni and her allies.

Overall, this re-presentation permits Meloni to fully acknowledge the gravity of the footage that emerged, while at the same time containing the accusation from spreading to the entire youth wing. By ascribing racist sentiments to "specific individuals," the scandal is anchored to the understanding that finding one malefactor in a group should not make you suspicious of everybody else—as the popular saying goes, there are always going to be a few bad apples in a barrel.

5.2.2. Re-Presenting the Scandal as a Regime-Style Investigation

In the same statement (June 28, 2024), Meloni also criticises the investigative method, calling for greater transparency and questioning the ethical principles and core values of journalism:

> For decades of republican history, no one ever thought of infiltrating a political party and secretly recording its meetings. Is this allowed? I'm asking you, I'm asking the political parties, I'm asking the President of the Republic: is this allowed from today? Perfect, because now we know that from today it is permitted to infiltrate political parties and secretly record their meetings. Do you know why I'm saying this? Because in other times these were the methods used by regimes….No one has ever thought of infiltrating a political organization, secretly recording its meetings, recording even the personal situations of minors, selecting what to broadcast. (Press statement in Brussels, June 28, 2024)

Attacking the investigative method more clearly casts the press in the role of opponent. By comparing journalists' actions to those of a regime, the narrative reverses the scandal storyline, portraying journalists as guilty of the same totalitarian associations they sought to expose—likely alluding to the OVRA, Mussolini's secret police. The image of "minors" further sharpens the moral divide between legitimate and illegitimate conduct while aligning Meloni with gender-congruent expectations of care and protection. Finally, by appealing to opponents ("I'm asking you, I'm asking the political parties") and the sender ("I'm asking the President of the Republic"), the narrative reframes the scandal as a broader struggle over the moral boundaries of journalism. Although Meloni signals willingness to conform ("Perfect, because now we know that from today it is permitted"), such compliance remains conditional on the establishment of new rules, allowing her to maintain gender-role congruity without appearing submissive.

5.2.3. Re-Presenting the Scandal as Stupid Folklore

On July 2, 2024, in a formal letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, Meloni largely reiterates the narrative constructed during her Brussels interview—framing the scandal as the misconduct of a few individuals and portraying the investigation as "regime-style." This is achieved through near-identical repetition of the lines used earlier. Beyond reinforcing this framing, the letter also clarifies the party's role and its core mission:

> There is no room, in Fratelli d'Italia, for racist or antisemitic positions, just as there is no room for nostalgics of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, or for any display of foolish folklore. The right-wing parties from which many of us come to politics reckoned with the past and with the fascist twenty-year period several decades ago. (Letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, July 2, 2024)

Meloni reconstructs the Party's mission by balancing historical roots with forward-looking aspirations, emphasising the intention to "leave the past behind." She assigns contemporary right-wing values—land, family, and freedom—while depicting fascism as a totalitarian system, using terms such as "nostalgia," "1900," and "stupid folklore." In this narrative, nostalgic elements are portrayed as obstacles to the party's quest, a point reinforced by the anaphora "I/We do not have time":

> Our task is far too great to allow those who have not understood its significance to ruin everything. I do not—and we do not—have time to waste on those who are unable to understand what Fratelli d'Italia is and what the great historical challenges of our era are. I do not—and we do not—have time to

> waste on those who want to take us backward, or on those who turn us into a caricature. I do not—and we do not—have time to waste on those who, knowingly or not, become a tool in the hands of our adversary. Those who cannot understand this, who have not grasped this path, who are not able to keep up, cannot be part of Fratelli d'Italia. (Letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, July 2, 2024)

The letter also conveys pride in the party's achievements:

> I am convinced that the constant growth of Fratelli d'Italia is the result of this long journey of ours. Of the fact that Italians see in us the political force that more than any other cares about the national interest, and that more than any other defends the "conservative" values of the land, of life, of the family, of freedom. (Letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, July 2, 2024)

The letter then introduces its core objective: the quest to serve the Italian people. Italians emerge as a new sender, recognising the party as a guardian of national interest. By distinguishing "stupid folklore" from a rational understanding of the past, Meloni positions the party as future-oriented while maintaining continuity with traditional values. Anchoring the scandal to this notion of nostalgic folklore legitimises the party's image and presents its mission as fundamentally incompatible with any form of racism.

5.2.4. Re-Presenting the Scandal as an Ugly Story

In her formal letter to the party, Meloni also seeks to reframe the image of the youth wing as the victim of an "ugly story":

> We are not as they would like to portray us. Neither we nor our young people of Gioventù Nazionale are like that. We have a youth movement that is strong, healthy, vibrant, curious, and open. Our young people, who with uncovered faces and clean reputations, armed with flyers and initiatives, defend Freedom in schools and universities from the violence and arrogance of the left, are the first to be harmed by this ugly story. (Letter to the leaders of the Brothers of Italy, July 2, 2024)

In her more recent statement on the *Fanpage* investigation, delivered at the annual political festival organised by the Brothers of Italy (December 16, 2024) and more recently at the youth wing festival "Youth Without Filters" (September 21, 2025), Meloni addresses the youth wing directly, expressing pride and hope, and reinforcing their agency and identity:

> You are not Meloni's youth because you fight for your own values, and I am not a value; I am simply another person fighting alongside you for the same things. You are not Meloni's youth, you are not Meloni's young people, because you do not belong to me—you belong to Italy. You love Italy, you fight for Italy. (Meloni's speech at the festival "Youth without filters," September 21, 2025).

At the same time, Meloni reconstructs the investigation as a personal attack against herself—an attack that, in her framing, leaves the image of the youth wing untarnished:

> That is why I want to tell you that I am immensely proud of you, of the beauty you represent, of the love you put into what you do every single day. Clearly, as I was saying, for some people this is a problem—it must be tainted. They tried to do that to you as well: they exposed you to public ridicule, they portrayed

> you as monsters, because your genuine commitment, your selfless dedication, is a problem for some people—it is dangerous to some. And because, in the end, despite your young age, you were being used to strike at a much larger target. Clearly, that target was me. (Meloni's speech at the festival "Youth without filters," September 21, 2025).

Here, the youth wing is presented as stable and intact, while the investigation is framed as an attack on the main character—herself. Meloni stresses both the autonomy of the youth wing ("You are not my 'youth'") and its belonging to the national collective ("you belong to Italy"), while simultaneously claiming that she is the true target of the attack. This construction replaces the image of the caring mother with that of a more liberal maternal figure who recognises her children's independence. The logic follows a classic Aristotelian syllogism: If Meloni and the youth wing are distinct agents, and the opponent targeted Meloni, then the youth wing cannot be the true object of accusation. Responsibility is thus displaced from the collective, positioning the group as innocent of the charges. This innocence is reinforced through recurring oppositions between beauty and ugliness, cleanliness and dirtiness. Gioventù Nazionale is portrayed as "strong, vibrant, healthy," with a "clean reputation," whereas the investigation is described as "an ugly story" seeking to portray them as "monsters." These contrasts maintain a clear symbolic boundary between the organisation's internal identity and the negative associations attached to the investigation.

Table 3 summarises the actors presented across the four stages in Meloni's narrative of the scandal. For each stage, the anchoring and objectification strategies that shape its re-presentation are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Actors in Meloni's narrative (actantial analysis).

Actors	Meloni's narrative of the scandal
Main character	Giorgia Meloni
Quests	National interest (core quest); protecting the youth wing from the scandal
Sender	The president of the republic and the Italians who believe in the party
Receiver	Italians
Opponent	Left and media
Helpers	Brothers of Italy

Table 4. Ontogenesis of the *Fanpage* scandal, actions by the main character, objectifications, anchoring, and themata (social representation analysis).

Re-presentation of the scandal	Actions by the main character	Objectifications	Anchoring	Themata
Misconduct of a few individuals	Acknowledgment and recognition	Wrong home	A few individuals don't spoil the whole group	Few/real group
Regime-style investigation	Counter-attack	Regime	Ethical journalism	Ethical/unethical
Stupid folklore	Distancing	1900 folklore caricature	Nostalgia	Emotional outburst vs real violence
Ugly story	Re-framing the main character as the target of the scandal	Uncovered faces flyers monsters	Innocence	Beautiful vs ugly

6. Conclusion

This article examined how two right-wing populist women leaders responded to political scandals involving accusations of racism and/or fascism directed at themselves or their parties. Drawing on social representations theory and Greimas' (1983) actantial model, we analysed how Riikka Purra and Giorgia Meloni publicly negotiated these scandals through denial, justification, distancing, and counterattack. From this perspective, scandals are not merely individual crises but arenas in which meanings, (gendered) identities, and moral boundaries are publicly contested (Jerslev et al., 2025). Political responses can thus be understood as attempts to re-anchor threatening events within familiar representational frameworks and restore legitimacy.

Our analysis highlights both similarities and differences linked to political context, audience, and the nature of the scandals. Consistent with previous research on right-wing populist scandal communication (Hatakka et al., 2017; Herkman, 2018), both politicians relied heavily on confrontational and self-defensive strategies, including denial, victimisation, attacks on media and political opponents, and portrayals of the scandals as politically motivated. The data also revealed elements of calculated ambivalence or dual communication (Hatakka et al., 2017), visible in Meloni's shifting rhetoric across audiences and in Purra's movement from denial and counterattack toward partial acknowledgement and apology. These manoeuvres reflected attempts to balance competing representational demands: maintaining in-group legitimacy while responding to broader public expectations.

We nevertheless found differences in how the scandals were managed, reflecting not only communication style but also political position, audience, media context, party dynamics, and the nature of the scandals. Purra's responses aligned relatively closely with the phases identified in image repair theory (Benoit, 2024), progressing from denial and attacks on accusers toward reducing offensiveness and eventual mortification. Her position within a governing coalition under intense pressure limited opportunities for continued denial and likely contributed to her apology. Audience also mattered, as Purra's strongest self-defence appeared in communication directed at supporters, whereas later concessions reflected broader governmental expectations of accountability.

Meloni's responses, by contrast, varied less across time than across audiences and communicative settings. She alternatively framed the scandal as the actions of a marginal group, a politically motivated investigation, banal "folklore," or an orchestrated attack against herself, reflecting victimisation strategies associated with right-wing populism (Bouchafra, 2025; Di Cicco et al., 2024; Rovamo & Sakki, 2024). Unlike Purra, Meloni could more easily distance herself from the scandal by framing it as involving members of the party's youth wing rather than her own past statements, allowing her to condemn the behaviour while protecting the party's legitimacy.

Regarding gender, our findings only partly align with research suggesting that women politicians benefit from more conciliatory or stereotypically "feminine" scandal-response strategies (Cucchi et al., 2021). Although Purra eventually shifted toward partial concession and apology, this appeared closely linked to escalating political pressure and her institutional position rather than gendered expectations alone. Overall, both leaders relied primarily on rhetorical repertoires already identified in research on right-wing populist scandal management, particularly confrontation, victimhood, anti-elite positioning, and delegitimisation

of critics (Hatakka et al., 2017; Herkman, 2018). These cases therefore suggest that populist and ideological repertoires may partially override or reshape conventional gendered expectations surrounding scandal communication.

At the same time, gender was not absent from the leaders' responses. Consistent with previous research on women right-wing populists (Pettersson et al., 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024), Purra invoked concerns about immigration, Islam, and women's safety when accounting for her earlier writings, linking anti-immigration discourse to gendered vulnerability and protection. Meloni, in turn, combined assertive self-defence with a protective stance toward the youth wing of her party, echoing the "maternal" performances identified in earlier studies of women populist leaders, such as Marine Le Pen (cf. Pettersson et al., 2023). Rather than disappearing, gender remained intertwined with broader populist identity performances and ideological positioning, functioning less as a direct constraint than as a flexible symbolic resource within populist narratives of victimhood, protection, and national identity.

The contribution of this study is therefore not to claim that gender is irrelevant in populist scandal communication, nor to generalise across women populist leaders, but to show how these two highly visible racism-related scandals illuminate the interaction between gender, populist ideology, and scandal management in specific political and media contexts. The cases were analytically relevant because they involved major controversies threatening the legitimacy of governing right-wing populist parties and required explicit public responses from the leaders themselves. Comparing Purra and Meloni thus offered insight into how women populist leaders negotiate such crises across different gender-political contexts while drawing on similar populist repertoires. While the cases differed in important respects—including the broader gender-political context and whether the allegations concerned the leader herself or members of her party—the analysis nevertheless identified comparable strategies for negotiating accountability and legitimacy.

At the same time, the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, as well as the limited number of cases, necessarily circumscribe the scope of its conclusions (see Goodman, 2008). The findings do not allow firm claims about women populist leaders generally, nor definitive comparisons with men populist leaders or women politicians from other ideological backgrounds. Rather, the cases illustrate how gender may intersect with populist identity performances when racism-related accusations threaten both personal credibility and party legitimacy. Unlike scandals surrounding some other women political leaders—such as the strongly personalised and gendered scrutiny directed at Sanna Marin (Sakki & Martikainen, 2022)—the scandals analysed here centred primarily on ideology, racism, and political legitimacy rather than femininity or personal morality.

Finally, a social representations perspective helped illuminate how scandal responses function as boundary-making practices that stabilise collective identities by defining "us" and "them" (Marková, 2003; Wagner et al., 1999). Both Purra and Meloni constructed narratives in which their parties appeared unfairly targeted by media and political adversaries, while positioning themselves as defenders of national values and legitimacy (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Future research should compare scandal communication across women and men populist leaders, as well as across ideological contexts, media systems, and forms of gendered political scrutiny. Further research could also examine how different audiences—including party supporters, political opponents, and the broader public—interpret and respond to these scandal-management strategies.

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Data Availability

Data is available from the authors on request.

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Open AI (ChatGPT) was used to polish the language and remove repetitive content. All suggestions made by AI were carefully reviewed by the authors. AI was not used for content generation.

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Skirmishing Femininity: Female Populist Skirmishers and the Gendered Politics of Illiberalism in Hungary and Poland

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Abstract

This article explores the role of female political actors who mobilize gendered symbolic capital to advance illiberal populist agendas in contemporary Europe. Building on the concept of the populist skirmisher, we analyze women who act as combative and hypervisible disruptors of discursive norms. They engage in performative incivility—weaponizing confrontation, vulgarity, and taboo-breaking to command attention and push ideological boundaries. Focusing on emblematic figures: Poland's Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik and Hungary's Dóra Dúró, we examine how these women operate through gendered repertoires of moral defense and cultural warfare. We argue that these women embody skirmishing femininity: a strategic mode of political agency that fuses protective traditionalism with disruptive communicative practices. Here, motherhood and femininity do not soften aggression but authorize it as moral protection. Their confrontational performances help redraw the boundaries of acceptable speech and normalize radical discourse.

Keywords

anti-gender politics; femonationalism; illiberalism; motherhood; populist radical right; populist skirmishers; skirmishing femininity

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1. Introduction: The Strategic Weaponization of Motherhood

A remarkable first appearance of the populist radical right Polish MEP Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik (b. 1990) at the EP plenary session in Strasbourg made waves:

> I address you as a woman to a woman, as a mother to a mother:….You are responsible for every rape, every assault, every tragedy caused by the influx of illegal immigrants…..And for what you are doing, you should be in prison, not in the European Commission. (European Parliament, 2024)

The closing slogan "Hands off Poland!" ("Od Polski ręce precz!") has become the brand phrase of her YouTube program.

In that short time, this newly elected MEP presented her whole rhetorical arsenal: a brutal, personalized takedown framed as representing "most Europeans." The speech connects three themes—the Green Deal, migration, and EU authority—into a single accusation of civilizational sabotage orchestrated by Ursula von der Leyen. The form is deliberately vulgar and confrontational: direct address by first name ("Mrs. Urszula"), mockery ("hangover"), and criminalization ("you should be in prison"). The "woman to woman, mother to mother" invokes womanhood and maternal identity as a handle for the status overreach: an emerging political actor performing self-elevation solely by means of shared gender to strip EC's president of institutional hierarchy. In doing so, a previously unknown newcomer to the EP, back then representing its smallest political group—Europe of Sovereign Nations—establishes political capital by attacking the Union's most prominent heavyweight.

The staging reinforces the dominance display (Di Mauro & Joffe, 2009, p. 48), as Zajączkowska-Hernik is standing at the podium while von der Leyen is seated, creating asymmetry. When Zajączkowska-Hernik turns toward her and wags a finger, the gesture mimics a teacher scolding a pupil. This standing reprimand, directed at someone who must remain seated, produces a visualized status overreach and a theatrical contempt display; it has become a signature spectacle for this MEP, fully utilized and multiplied by her social media channels.

Zajączkowska-Hernik demonstrates the paradox we analyze in this article: Far-right women who preach traditional family values like domesticity and the significance of motherhood are often those who most aggressively occupy the center of the (social) media stage, hurling accusations, weaponizing their gender, and pushing the boundaries of acceptable speech. They are different from men, as for men—especially within the far-right political ecosystem, understood here in line with Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 1–8) as encompassing both the extreme right and the populist radical right—combative behavior is already normalized and expected (Sigl, 2013, as cited in Blum & Köttig, 2017, p. 370). This ecosystem constitutes a social field of politicians, activists, party cadres, movement adherents, and affiliated intellectual actors, in which it is obvious for men to put on display militarized masculinity. By contrast, women often enter politics in these milieus as an explicit alternative to liberal or progressive female politicians perceived as unfeminine (Blum & Köttig, 2017, p. 370; Sigl, 2013; see also Schreiber, 2016, p. 12). They are not numerous; women constitute roughly one-tenth of Konfederacja's membership (interviewee A), which further amplifies their visibility within a masculinized party environment, creating a competitive advantage that is intentionally exploited through rhetorical excess and platform-optimized provocation.

A parallel configuration of gendered confrontation can be observed in Hungary, albeit in a markedly different political arena. There, Dóra Dúró (b. 1987)—a long-standing Member of the National Assembly and a leading figure of the radical right party Mi Hazánk—has built political authority through the moralized, non-traditional defense of children, family, and nation. Embedded in a consolidated illiberal environment, Dúró mobilizes motherhood to advance pronatalist policies, child-protection legislation, and cultural censorship framed as demographic and civilizational necessity. Her landmark 2020 public shredding of the children's book *Meseország mindenkié* (Lengyel-Szabó et al., 2020), condemned by cultural institutions yet celebrated within radical right milieus, exemplifies a skirmisher-style performance whose power lies in its virality and mnemonic endurance: a moral-panic-driven act of censorship staged as maternal protection of Hungarian children, which continues to resonate several years later and evokes parallels with historical book burnings.

This article conceptualizes these actors—exemplified by Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik in Poland and Dóra Dúró in Hungary—as female populist skirmishers, understood as a gendered subset of the broader skirmisher role (Zbytniewska, 2022). These actors accumulate political capital through confrontation, strategic norm-breaking, and the gendered performance of controversy.

Building on this framework, this article advances the concept of skirmishing femininity, a gendered political repertoire that extends the earlier notion of the populist skirmisher. Skirmishing femininity captures how women deploy gender—particularly motherhood, femininity, and moral authority—as an additional political resource that expands the tactical range and legitimacy of skirmishing practices.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

This section develops the analytical framework by integrating six strands: (a) Populism as performative political style; (b) skirmishers and "social-mediatized" political communication; (c) gender as constitutive infrastructure of illiberal politics; (d) gendered role repertoires and conservative performances of femininity; (e) "symbolic glue" and anti-gender politics; and (f) femonationalism as a gender-equality register weaponized for nativist and exclusionary projects.

2.1. Populism as Performative Political Style

This article conceptualizes populism as a discursive-performative political style, rather than exclusively as an ideology or strategy. While ideational approaches define populism as a thin-centered ideology opposing "the pure people" to "the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004, pp. 543–544, 2007, p. 23), and strategic approaches emphasize leadership and mobilization (Weyland, 2001, p. 14, 2021, p. 185), this study aligns with the performative turn in populism research.

Following Benjamin Moffitt, populism is understood as a political style characterized by antagonistic boundary construction, the use of "bad manners," and the performance of crisis, threat, and breakdown (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 47–48). In this perspective, populism operates through how politics is enacted—via rhetoric, affect, and mediated visibility—rather than only through programmatic content.

This approach is further developed in relational and performative accounts of populism (e.g., Casullo, 2021, 2025; Ostiguy, 2017), which emphasize embodiment, affective signaling, and the stylized opposition between "high" and "low" politics. It is particularly suited to analyzing actors whose political efficacy depends on provocation, emotional intensity, and platform circulation.

Within this framework, skirmishing femininity is conceptualized as a gendered modality within the performative repertoire of populist politics. It builds on the insight that populist performance works through hybridization: the leader's body can combine multiple, even contradictory signifiers at once, allowing audiences to read aggression, care, ordinariness, authority, femininity, and transgression as part of the same political persona (Casullo, 2021, 2025).

2.2. Populist Skirmishers in a Social-Mediatized Attention Economy

Populist skirmishers have been theorized as aspiring political actors positioned below first-tier leadership whose central modus operandi is the systemic deployment of incivility as a visibility-maximizing strategy that accelerates career advancement (Zbytniewska, 2022). Skirmishers are therefore defined by their capacity to violate norms, attack political opponents, and probe the limits of acceptable discourse manifestly and deliberately. They function as subsidiary frontrunners—"light political infantry"—tasked with harassing opponents and radicalizing publics on behalf of party leadership, performing communicative acts that leaders cannot safely undertake without incurring reputational or institutional costs (Zbytniewska, 2022, pp. 72–76). Skirmishers thus also play an important role within party structures, where a single charismatic leader alone would be insufficient to address diverse segments of the electorate, sustain multilevel political mobilization among party supporters, and ensure a constant presence across fragmented media environments (p. 72).

Here, based on that theoretical insight, we examine a gendered subset of populist skirmishers, focusing on how womanhood, femininity, and motherhood are mobilized within skirmisher-style politics to advance illiberal projects. In radical right political contexts, these categories are typically framed as civilizational duties tied to national reproduction, moral guardianship, and cultural continuity (Dietze, 2020, pp. 158–159; Grzebalska & Pető, 2017, p. 4; Krzyżanowski & Krzyżanowska, 2026, pp. 3, 10–14). Motherhood in particular becomes a semi-sacralized and politicized status associated with authority to speak on behalf of "children," "family," and the "nation's future," often positioned as a moral counterweight to unfeminine self-serving hypocrisy of liberal or feminist claims about gender equality (Dietze, 2020, pp. 158–159; Félix, 2017, pp. 99–100; Norocel, 2018, pp. 44–45, 51; Schreiber, 2016, pp. 11–12).

Illiberalism is understood as a political order that maintains electoral competition while progressively undermining rights, pluralism, and constitutional checks and balances (Mounk, 2018, p. 51; Pető, 2022, p. 313; Sadurski, 2019, p. 13; Zakaria, 1997, p. 22). While analytically distinct, populism often provides the discursive and mobilizational vehicle for illiberal transformations, claiming exclusive representation of the homeland to delegitimize opposition and dismantle liberal constraints in the name of "the people" (Taggart, 2000, p. 97).

The contemporary proliferation of skirmisher-style political actors is inseparable from changes in political culture and media ecology. The broader rise of illiberalism has been linked to elite failure and the inability of

political elites to offer compelling programs (Pető, 2022). Under conditions of a fragmented, pillarized media landscape (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 35), constant news cycles, and platform-driven visibility incentives, political attention becomes increasingly responsive to provocation and norm violations.

The attention dynamics of social media amplify the effectiveness of this role. Research on affective diffusion and virality shows that negative emotions, outrage, and controversy increase visibility and sharing (Fan et al., 2014, pp. 12–14; Garimella et al., 2018, p. 18; Han et al., 2023, p. 560; Jakubowicz, 2018, pp. 75–77; Jamieson, 2018, pp. 47–48). In political terms, skirmishers operationalize rage bait as a systematic repertoire: short-form conflict, personalized targeting, and moral escalation.

This platform logic is reinforced by a broader phenomenon of "social mediatization," that is, the reorganization of political practice around platform affordances and the erosion of traditional media gatekeeping as politicians bypass legacy media constraints (Zbytniewska, 2026; see also Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Gainous & Wagner, 2014, pp. 16, 18, 49–50). In such conditions, peripheral actors can leap to the center of political communication through strategic incivility and performative aggression (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016, p. 41; Schumann et al., 2019, p. 5). Research further suggests that exploiting this dynamic can translate into electoral payoffs for populist radical right actors (Schumann et al., 2019, pp. 6, 16). Skirmishers are thus best understood as roles that emerge from the interaction between illiberal party strategy and social media visibility incentives.

2.3. Gender as Political Infrastructure and Symbolic Glue in Illiberal Projects

If skirmishing describes a communicative role within an attention economy, gender constitutes a deeper political infrastructure through which illiberal projects are legitimized, reproduced, and emotionally anchored. This infrastructure is captured through the concept of "gender as symbolic glue," and as Anikó Félix, applying this concept to the Hungarian context, observes: "gender as a symbolic glue integrates anti-EU, anti-liberal, anti-communist, and homophobic attitudes, which can produce voters for the rightists. In the case of far-right anti-government, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant attitudes are also included in the discourse of 'gender' " (Félix, 2015, p. 77).

Anti-gender mobilization serves as the unifying mechanism behind far-right electoral success, condensing anxieties about liberalism, pluralism, migration, sexuality, and supranational governance into a single moralized and antagonistic register (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017, p. 2; Pető, 2015, pp. 130–131). The female skirmishers embody and apply "gender as symbolic glue," multiplying their impact.

2.4. Gendered Repertoires and Alternative Emancipation

Research on women in far-right and illiberal movements has moved beyond treating women as marginal or auxiliary actors (Klammer & Goetz, 2017, p. 82; Matfess & Margolin, 2022, p. 14; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2017, p. 17). This shift in the literature reflects the recognition that women perform political functions that are structurally central to illiberal and far-right projects, including propaganda, welfare provision, moral pedagogy, ideological reproduction, institutional consolidation, promotion, and legitimization (Köttig et al., 2017; Matfess & Margolin, 2022, pp. 14, 49; Pető, 2020).

However, women remain numerically underrepresented within many far-right environments (Köttig et al., 2017). While this underrepresentation limits descriptive representation, it simultaneously produces a condition of *gendered exceptionality*. Because women are scarce within these milieus, their presence attracts disproportionate attention, amplifying visibility and increasing the communicative payoff of norm-breaking behavior (Guerreiro & Claudino, 2022; Norocel, 2018, p. 43; Schumann et al., 2019, p. 6). Under social media conditions, this gendered exceptionality can be strategically mobilized, granting female far-right actors a tactical advantage in attention competition and rendering boundary-transgressing performances particularly effective.

A key conceptual framework for understanding the presence of conservative women in politics is the notion of "alternative emancipation." Félix (2017) uses this concept to describe women's advancement within contemporary Hungarian radical right movements through forms of agency that explicitly reject feminist frames, while enabling women to occupy public, authoritative, and leadership positions (p. 98). Emancipation is hereby reframed: legitimacy derives from moral superiority, loyalty to the nation, and the performance of exemplary femininity rather than from equality claims.

Félix's typology of women's participation in the Hungarian radical right—the *culture keeper*, the *fighter*, and the *spiritual woman*—offers an operational lens for analyzing women of the far-right (Félix, 2017, pp. 98–106). The *fighter*, who occupies frontline positions, embraces confrontation and shows no hesitation in aggression, most closely anticipates the figure of the female skirmisher. However, contemporary skirmishing femininity cannot be reduced to this role alone. Female skirmishers selectively combine the *fighter's* militant posture with elements of Félix's *culture keeper's* symbolic reproduction and the *spiritual woman's* morally elevated self-positioning, producing a hybrid form of gendered agency that is simultaneously confrontational, pedagogical, and morally absolutist.

Casullo's analysis of female right-wing populist leadership helps specify the performative logic behind this hybridity. Casullo argues that women in right-wing populism can combine apparently contradictory markers—toughness and care, aggression and femininity, propriety and transgression—and that this contradiction is a strategic advantage. It creates ambiguity and deniability while allowing women to support masculinist, anti-feminist politics without simply reproducing the male strongman script (Casullo, 2025).

Ronnee Schreiber's work on conservative women further refines this logic. She identifies and operationalizes the frames of "feminine toughness" and the "conservative supermom" to show how conservative female actors present themselves as women who allegedly succeed in combining motherhood with public activism precisely by rejecting feminism and actively promoting conservative norms and values (Schreiber, 2016, pp. 7–8). In this framework, only the simultaneous mobilization of both frames allows a conservative female politician to claim the status of being "truly liberated," as opposed to "out of touch," "unfeminine" feminists (Norocel, 2018; Schreiber, 2016, p. 12).

Norocel's (2018) analysis of conservative women on the "right-wing continuum" further specifies the gendered repertoires through which this hybridization of career advancement with conservatism operates. He identifies two recurring ideal types: idealized motherhood associated with care, sacrifice, and moral authority; and feminine toughness, characterized by visible femininity combined with aggression, resilience, and competence (Norocel, 2018, pp. 45–50). Crucially, Norocel demonstrates that conservative women's

claims to emancipation hinge on mobilizing these roles as superior to feminist models, which are framed as selfish, artificial, or socially corrosive (Norocel, 2018, p. 45). The gender repertoire of the skirmishers is impactful as it combines two seemingly antagonistic political repertoires.

2.5. Femonationalism and the Instrumentalization of Women's Rights

Where gender as "symbolic glue" explains the aggregating function of gender within anti-gender politics, femonationalism explains a related but distinct mechanism: the instrumentalization of women's rights or gender equality to advance exclusionary nationalist projects, primarily through anti-immigration and anti-Muslim narratives.

In her 2012 formulation, Sara R. Farris defines femonationalism as "the contemporary mobilization of feminist ideas by nationalist parties and neoliberal governments under the banner of the war against the perceived patriarchy of Islam in particular, and of migrants from the Global South in general" (Farris, 2012, p. 185). She shows how demands for migrant "integration" are framed around "Western culture and values," with "gender equality" positioned as a key value—while the "instrumentalization" of women's equality becomes a defining feature of the political conjuncture (Farris, 2012, p. 185). In this repertoire, nationalist actors claim to defend women (and sometimes homosexuals) against racialized, externalized patriarchal threats, as illustrated by references to figures such as Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders in Farris's discussion (Farris, 2012, p. 185). Still, following Patrick Wielowiejski, we stress that femonationalism is "in no way exclusive to the far right" and "could even be interpreted as being at odds with a far-right political agenda" (Wielowiejski, 2020, p. 141).

Farris's (2017) definition tightens the conceptual scope, referring "both to the exploitation of feminist themes by nationalists and neoliberals in anti-Islam (but…also anti-immigration) campaigns and to the participation of certain feminists and femocrats in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality" (Farris, 2017, pp. 6–7).

For this article, femonationalism is used as an analytical lens: a way to identify when female skirmishers (or their surrounding ecosystems) mobilize gender equality, women's safety, or women's rights rhetorically to legitimize exclusionary, nativist, or anti-immigration positions—especially when "protection" is framed through racialized or civilizational threat narratives. This lens is especially relevant to the "protect women/children" scripts deployed in migration-related attacks and to the gendered moralization of border politics.

2.6. Summary of the Theoretical Foundation

To sum up, these concepts establish a coherent analytical framework for examining gendered confrontational actors. Skirmishing captures a strategic communicative role that thrives under social media-driven attention dynamics, where incivility, personalization, and short-form antagonism are rewarded (Zbytniewska, 2022, 2026). In this sense, skirmishing femininity is not merely the feminization of an existing skirmisher role, but a hybrid performative configuration in which gendered respectability and maternal authority intensify, rather than soften, populist norm transgression. Anti-gender scholarship explains how gender operates at the ideological level as a high-capacity integrator, condensing heterogeneous grievances

into a single, moralized, and antagonistic register (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017; Korolczuk et al., 2025; Pető, 2015).

Within this infrastructure, women's political agency is organized through conservative gender repertoires theorized as "alternative emancipation" (Félix, 2017), "conservative supermom" and "feminine toughness" (Schreiber, 2016), and idealized motherhood combined with toughness (Norocel, 2018). These concepts converge in showing how conservative women claim authority, visibility, and advancement by rejecting feminist frames while mobilizing femininity and motherhood as morally superior. Nothing in this emancipation is substantively alternative: its novelty lies solely in the framing, and as this article will demonstrate, the modus operandi, which constructs a binary opposition in which "our" femininity and motherhood are elevated against feminists, liberals, or leftists as ethically inferior others.

Finally, femonationalism identifies a related but distinct mechanism: the selective mobilization of women's rights or gender equality to legitimize exclusionary, civilizational, and anti-immigration projects, without presuming its universal presence across cases (Farris, 2012, 2017).

3. Methods: Approach, Cases, Materials, and Analytical Procedure

3.1. Research Design and Interpretive Orientation

This study is situated in the interpretive paradigm, treating political communication as meaning-making embedded in institutional settings, media environments, and ideological projects. Following Schwartz-Shea and Yanow's (2012, pp. 4, 10) understanding of political inquiry as reconstructing intersubjective meanings, the analysis examines how female skirmishers (and actors around them) mobilize gendered claims—especially motherhood—to produce authority, justify confrontation, and stabilize antagonistic worldviews. The design is a qualitative, comparative case study focused on mechanisms rather than representativeness: it traces how similar gendered repertoires travel across different arenas (supranational parliamentary performance versus domestic illiberal politics), and how those arenas shape the gendered payoff structure of provocation and moralization.

3.2. Case Selection and Comparative Logic

This article analyses two female skirmishers positioned in the populist radical right in Poland and Hungary: Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik (Konfederacja; EP) and Dóra Dúró (Mi Hazánk; Hungarian National Assembly). The cases were selected for their fit with Zbytniewska's (2022) original category, especially prioritizing their (a) high visibility and sustained public presence; (b) explicit mobilization of motherhood/femininity in political attack and moral boundary work; and (c) contrasting political arenas and opportunity structures: Zajączkowska-Hernik in the EP's mediated stage versus Dúró as an established figure embedded in a consolidated illiberal domestic configuration. This contrast enables a controlled comparison of how the same repertoire—materialized, protective aggression, and anti-gender boundary policing—operates under different institutional constraints and media incentives.

3.3. Empirical Corpus

The empirical material combines these main source types:

1. Speech material from the EP: a comprehensive, manual, qualitative analysis of 29 Zajączkowska-Hernik's interventions from July 18, 2024, to Nov 12, 2025 (European Parliament, n.d.).
2. Speech material from the Hungarian National Assembly: a targeted manual review of selected parliamentary interventions by Dúró (Dúró, n.d.; Hungarian National Assembly, n.d.).
3. Social media content: systematic review of both actors' output across major platforms, collected manually from their official accounts.
4. In-depth interviews (IDIs) and qualitative elite materials: semi-structured IDIs and anonymized expert interviews were conducted to reconstruct insider interpretations of gender, skirmishing, and strategic communication within the populist radical right ecosystem. While only three interviews are quoted directly in the analysis (Table 1), additional exploratory interviews contributed to contextual understanding. All interviews quoted directly in the analysis relate to the Polish case. Interviewee gender is indicated only where analytically relevant; accordingly, interviewee A's gender is specified because she is herself a populist radical right politician and thus provides an insider perspective.
5. Corroborating sources: speeches, journalistic profiles, reporting, party materials, and selected public events used as analytically "thick" moments—like the already mentioned Dúró's 2020 public shredding of "*Meseország mindenkié*" as a durable mnemonic and moral panic-producing act.

Table 1. IDIs and qualitative materials (Poland).

Source	Position/Affiliation (anonymized)	Date	Format	Relevance
Interviewee A	Female professional party operative and politician (Konfederacja)	3 September 2025	IDI	Insider articulation of conservative liberalism; abortion as a moral absolute; and anti-feminism
Interviewee B	Political analyst and advisor (including for Konfederacja)	23 May 2025	IDI	Gender as tactical communicative resource; skirmishing logic; culture-war escalation, and enforced anti-nuance
Interviewee C	Political sociologist and advisor	23 July 2025	IDI	Gendered voting heuristics post–Polish Women's Strike (*Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*); strategic feminization of PRR candidate lists; and tokenism vs. representation

The project also includes a cross-social-media comparison of follower counts (manually collected), used solely to contextualize attention competition and reach rather than as outcome variables (Table 2). To complement the close reading and comparative analysis of the two politicians' X platforms, parts of the X corpora were also reviewed automatically using an xAI tool (Grok) to assist in identifying patterns (e.g., recurring targets, dominant issue clusters, and recurrent framings). This review served only as an auxiliary aid to verify manually derived findings; all interpretive claims are grounded in direct textual analysis of the original posts. ChatGPT was also used for translation assistance, minor language editing, and stylistic smoothing.

On this basis, the analysis examines how skirmishing femininity is enacted, calibrated, and rewarded across the two cases.

4. Findings: Skirmishing Femininity Across Two Political Configurations

Building on the argument that charismatic leadership and party organization are not sufficient to explain sustained mobilization, the category of the populist skirmisher helps explain how parties maintain continuous output across all social media platforms—from proliferating legacy media formats to multiple social media channels and segmented audiences (Zbytniewska, 2022). Female skirmishers can further expand outreach and mobilization because their visibility is primarily achieved via narrative violence that is amplified by gendered exceptionality and by the audience demand for "women in politics."

As interviewee C noted, Konfederacja's strategy has capitalized on the recent gains and salience of the pro-choice movement, notably the Women's Strike. As a result, gender-based voting—previously marginal outside progressive electorates—has begun to spread more widely. Alongside the standard criterion of "I'm looking for a party I want to vote for," a second criterion has emerged: "I'm looking for a female candidate, not a male one, because I want more women in politics." Even Konfederacja voters have begun to articulate their preferences in these terms, arguing: "Finally, this party isn't discriminating against women; finally, it's not so outdated; finally, they've included women too." As interviewee C put it: "It doesn't matter that these women have nothing to do with women's rights—they're already fulfilling the demand that at least women have a presence."

4.1. Two Female Skirmishers, Two Arenas of Payoff

Born in 1990 in Radom, Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik represents a younger generation within the Polish populist radical right. Trained as a historian, she previously worked as a beautician, a beauty salon manager, and briefly as a history teacher (Długosz, 2025). From 2014, she was active in the circles of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a veteran fringe politician and, above all, a pioneer of highly social-media-savvy political skirmishing, who consciously broke taboos to capture mainstream attention (Zbytniewska, 2026). She later worked for media linked to Szczepan Wójcik, the "king of Polish fur farming," including ŚwiatRolnika.info and wSensie.pl, the latter reportedly disseminating Russian propaganda (Długosz, 2025; Mierzyńska, 2018). Zajączkowska-Hernik's defence of natural fur, including its defence as healthier than synthetic alternatives, became one of her early signature talking points ("Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik w podcaście," 2024). In 2023, she became Konfederacja's press spokesperson and, after an unsuccessful Sejm campaign, entered the EP in 2024 with over 100,000 votes—one of the strongest results in the Warsaw constituency (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, 2024; Rusek, 2024). At the EP, she initially joined the far-right Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), alongside colleagues from AfD and Mi Hazánk, before moving in March 2026 to Patriots for Europe, the Parliament's third-largest political group. A mother of two, she repeatedly mobilizes motherhood as a source of political authority, legitimizing moralized confrontation across parliamentary, media, and social media settings.

The Hungarian case centers on Dóra Dúró, born in 1987 in Szentes, who similarly combines motherhood and polarizingly conspicuous political visibility. Trained as a lawyer, she entered the National Assembly in 2010 at the age of 23 as the youngest MP at the time, initially representing the far-right party Jobbik.

Following her expulsion from Jobbik in 2018 when the party was mainstreamed (Hyttinen, 2022), she became a leading figure of the newly formed Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) party. She is married to the party's co-leader, and together they have four children, a biographical fact she consistently integrates into her political self-presentation. As Mi Hazánk's sole female MP and deputy leader, re-elected in the 2026 parliamentary election and serving as Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, she occupies an influential and visible symbolic position. Dúró advocates pronatalist policies and condemns ideologies promoting "conscious childlessness," framing motherhood as empowering rather than restrictive (Félix, 2017). At the same time, she claims that women's emancipation is flawed because it has failed to include mothers. As she argued: "a mother of many children should not feel compelled to become a top executive if she does not want to, because her life can be fulfilled through raising children" (Dúró, 2023). Through initiatives such as the *Anyaparlament* (Parliament of the Mothers), she positions mothers as guardians of Hungary's future and advances legislative efforts extending child-protection laws to cultural institutions. In 2020, she shredded the children's book *Meseország mindenkié* (Wonderland Belongs to Everyone), denouncing it as "homosexual propaganda" because it reimagined classic fairy-tale characters as LGBTQ or as members of marginalized groups—a defining performance that shaped her political persona (Lengyel-Szabó et al., 2020; Rorke, 2022).

The two actors thus instantiate the same skirmishing role under sharply different arena conditions. Zajączkowska-Hernik operates in a fragmented and highly competitive Polish populist radical right ecosystem, densely populated by (predominantly male) skirmishers, as well as on the supranational stage of the EP. Here, short speaking slots, mediated plenaries, and platform circulation structurally reward high-intensity, clip-ready confrontation. As a political advisor close to Konfederacja put it: "Once you're in the right-wing climate, you can't afford to nuance too much. You have to go full bazooka—all in" (interviewee B). The EP mandate further multiplies her financial resources—MEPs receive a monthly salary of roughly €10,000 plus institutional allowances—enabling the systematic conversion of institutional stage time into social media capital and, through that, into domestic political leverage. In this environment, skirmishing is oriented primarily toward virality: attention capture, amplification, and visibility maximization.

To contextualize the visibility environment in which these actors operate, Table 2 presents their social media reach across major platforms.

Table 2. Social media reach of the analyzed actors (followers, as of December 21, 2025).

Platform	Ewa Zajączkowska-Hernik (Poland)	Dóra Dúró (Hungary)
Facebook	665,000	382,000
TikTok	408,200	—
YouTube	227,000	12,900
Instagram	208,000	12,600
X (Twitter)	190,300	10,000

Dúró operates in a consolidated illiberal environment in which cultural governance, demographic politics, and moral pedagogy are already mainstreamed. She represents a far-right alternative to Viktor Orbán's illiberal FIDESZ party in power. Her skirmishing is therefore stabilizing rather than exploratory: instead of "scouting" new discursive limits in an uncertain field, it reinforces and radicalizes an already established

ideological grammar. At the same time, she exerts pressure on FIDESZ from the further radical right position of Mi Hazánk, legitimizing increasingly punitive cultural politics as forms of "protection."

While in the case of Zajączkowska-Hernik one primarily observes virality and can only ask whether the correlation between skirmisher incivility and political effects extends beyond personal and party-level support, Dúró's case demonstrates a more direct systemic impact. Together with her party colleagues, she exerts sustained pressure on FIDESZ, contributing to the absorption of more radical moral-panic agendas into state policy. A salient example is the regulation that entered into force on 15 September 2022, requiring doctors in Hungary to present women seeking an abortion with "a clearly identifiable indication of fetal vital signs" before the procedure—the so-called "heartbeat rule"—which Dúró publicly claimed originated as a proposal of her party (Dyer, 2022). However, this sheds light on another function of the female skirmishers: to export ideas connected to reproduction to their own national context. The discourse on "heartbeat" was invented in the US, and from then on, it has been a "travelling concept and practice" of far-right NGOs globally funded directly from the US. The well-organized and well-funded international illiberal actors have developed an efficient and functional educational and advocacy system in Europe to train activists who then deliver the same message and advocate the same policies across different countries under the guise of national sovereignty and in the name of fighting so-called "gender ideology" (Pető & Svégel, 2024).

Both women enact what this article terms "skirmishing femininity": a fusion of conservative gender repertoires with the skirmisher's operational logic of confrontation, moral absolutism, and visibility maximization. Motherhood, femininity, and women's moral authority are systematically instrumentalized for skirmishing purposes: they widen the space of legitimate norm transgression, recode aggression as "ethical duty," and render denunciation harder to contest by anchoring it in protected social positions ("as a mother," "as a woman," "in defense of children"). Under social media conditions, gendered exceptionality—women's numerical scarcity and symbolic salience in masculinized right-wing milieus—further amplifies the communicative payoff of such performances. These performances resonate because maternal authority recodes aggression as protection, while platform dynamics reward emotionally charged, conflictual content (Dietze, 2020; Fan et al., 2014; Han et al., 2023; Norocel, 2018; Schreiber, 2016).

As interviewee C notes, being a woman "gives extra points in the culture war," a resource that both female skirmishers explicitly incorporate into their modus operandi. Academic research on the disadvantages of women's underrepresentation in politics is being appropriated by illiberal skirmishers, who exploit their scarcity to leverage visibility and maximize their political impact.

Accordingly, both Zajączkowska-Hernik and Dúró mobilize femininity and anti-gender politics within broader populist illiberal projects structured around moralized claims to authority, protection, and cultural order. In both cases, gendered repertoires function strategically to strengthen political visibility, antagonistic boundary-making, and ideological cohesion.

4.2. Gendered Repertoires as Skirmishing Infrastructure

The empirical material shows that both actors mobilize conservative gender repertoires in ways consistent with the analytical lens developed in Section 2, while also extending it by demonstrating how these repertoires are weaponized for skirmishing.

First, both cases fit Félix's (2017) insight that women in the radical right can occupy roles that enable agency while rejecting feminism—"alternative emancipation"—and that the *fighter* persona can appear at the movement's front line. Zajączkowska-Hernik most clearly embodies the *fighter* updated for social media politics: visible femininity combined with aggressive confrontation, personalized insult, and contempt performance. On X, for example, she described the Polish prime minister as "anti-Polish, leftist, and truly idiotic" (Zajączkowska-Hernik, 2026a) and argued that the EU's Security Action for Europe instrument "can only be supported by an idiot or a traitor" (Zajączkowska-Hernik, 2026b).

Dúró embodies a hybrid of *culture keeper* and *fighter* within institutionalized illiberalism: she governs the symbolic universe (culture, childhood, and education) while staging acts of moral coercion and censorship. Her social media communication reflects the same confrontational logic, combining moralized authority with aggressive denunciation; in one post, for instance, she claimed that "in recent decades, the LGBTQ lobby has been completely brainwashed by culture and international corporations" (Dúró, 2026). Migration is framed in similarly alarmist terms. In a post addressing border policy, Dúró declared that "Mi Hazánk demands immediate tightening of measures and stronger rights for border guards so that there will be no Hungarian victims of the migrants' invasion" (Dúró, 2022).

In both, traces of Félix's *spiritual woman* are present as moral elevation: conservative womanhood is performed as ethical superiority, enabling denunciation rather than argument.

Still, Zajączkowska-Hernik introduces an additional tension that is analytically instructive. While she foregrounds womanhood and motherhood—especially in securitized narratives about women's and children's safety in the context of migration and "gender propaganda" (Zajączkowska-Hernik, 2025)—her communicative style otherwise mirrors that of male populist skirmishers: aggressive, insulting, personalized, and performatively domineering. In the end, her speeches or X posts are, most of the time, gender neutral. What differentiates her is not the form of skirmishing but the "gendered license" under which it is exercised. By "gendered license," we mean the additional legitimacy and visibility conferred on boundary-breaking behavior precisely because a woman enacts it. Identical acts of verbal aggression are reframed as morally justified feminine outrage and thus, as interviewee C notes, earn "extra points." Femininity here does not soften skirmishing; it intensifies its payoff by converting masculine-coded aggression into morally shielded feminine outrage.

Second, Norocel's (2018) typology clarifies the internal mechanics of skirmishing femininity. Zajączkowska-Hernik enacts a high-intensity hybrid of idealized motherhood and feminine toughness, with a clear emphasis on the latter: she invokes maternal authority ("as a mother of two") to claim exclusive rights to define protection and morality, while simultaneously practicing post-shame aggression—vulgarity, intimidation, ridicule, and delegitimization—optimized for circulation. This hybridization is precisely what makes her repertoire unusually potent in a masculinized party environment: it renders boundary-breaking both more visible and more defensible.

Dúró, by contrast, aligns more closely with Norocel's configuration of dominant idealized motherhood. Every day, maternal imagery and "family-first" authenticity form the moral substrate for punitive cultural politics, including calls for extreme punishment, exclusion, and zero tolerance. She thus exemplifies idealized motherhood weaponized for authoritarian governance, where toughness is reframed as an ethical duty

rather than transgression—and where, as evidenced by the resonance of her social media output, this illiberal moral register finds sustained audience uptake.

Zajączkowska-Hernik's hybrid persona arises from her media-centered professional trajectory and long-term involvement in confrontational right-wing politics, which began under the patronage of the most prominent and enduring skirmishing personas in Polish politics, preparing her for visibility-seeking, post-shame communication styles typical of digitalized far-right milieus. Dúró's maternal moral register, by contrast, reflects her embeddedness in Hungarian far-right parliamentary politics, where she has built a career on family policy advocacy and symbolic cultural governance, making idealized motherhood an effective vehicle for legitimizing punitive actions. In Hungary, after 15 years of illiberal rule, the idealized representation of motherhood promises greater political gain. These different institutional pathways—media-driven skirmishing versus parliamentary moral authority—produce distinct feminine political repertoires, even within similarly illiberal, masculinized party ecosystems.

Third, Schreiber's (2016) "conservative supermom" frame helps explain how both convert motherhood into public authority while rejecting feminist emancipation claims. Yet the cases demonstrate different operationalizations. Zajączkowska-Hernik uses supermom credibility to legitimize attack and humiliation—maternal authority as a license for confrontation. Dúró uses supermom credibility to legitimize governance—maternal authority as a license for censorship, demographic moralization, and pedagogical nationalism. In both, motherhood is a political strategy.

Finally, the "symbolic glue" perspective (Félix, 2015; Grzebalska & Pető, 2017) is crucial for distinguishing ideological centers of gravity without overstating difference. Dúró's repertoire aligns most directly with a femonationalist configuration: motherhood fused with nativist protection of the nation conceived as an extended family, with childhood as the privileged site for defining belonging and legitimizing exclusion. Zajączkowska-Hernik's repertoire is more sovereigntist and EU-centered (or rather, anti-EU-centered), but gender functions as an accelerator within that sovereignism: "women and children's safety," "protection against migration," and anti-gender boundary policing are repeatedly used to moralize EU conflict and to stabilize an antagonistic worldview in which "Eurocrats" and "loony-left" (*lewackie*) elites become civilizational enemies. In this sense, the cases are not simply "different." They show how the same gendered infrastructure can be anchored either in domestic illiberal demography and culture (Hungary) or in supranational conflict and social-mediatized outrage production—still focusing on the national audience (Poland), while remaining recognizably skirmisher in function.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, these findings clarify the conceptual contribution of skirmishing femininity as a distinct analytical extension of the populist skirmisher framework. While the original concept explains how subordinate political actors deploy incivility to generate attention and advance politically, skirmishing femininity shows how gender itself becomes integrated into this mechanism. Femininity—especially motherhood—provides (a) moral authority, (b) a socially protected platform for denunciation, and (c) heightened visibility that allow female actors to perform confrontational roles that might otherwise appear politically excessive or norm-violating. In neither case is gender an emancipatory claim. It functions instead as a tactical asset within populist illiberal strategy: a means to widen the range of legitimate aggression, shield incivility from contestation, and translate outrage into political leverage.

Our study refines the skirmisher concept by showing that gender is not an "add-on" to skirmishing but a constitutive part of its modus operandi, thereby multiplying skirmishers' effectiveness in masculinized radical right milieus and in media environments that reward outrage. Second, the analysis clarifies that female populist skirmishers are not simply "women who are skirmishers." The category proposed here is narrower: it refers to those women who actively mobilize femininity (and motherhood) as an additional tactical and narrative card within skirmishing logic—consciously instrumentalizing their gendered identity, aestheticized public persona, and maternal authority as resources that further increase the payoff of provocation.

The comparative lens presented in this article also cautions against simplistic claims of effectiveness. The Polish arena is larger, more competitive, and saturated with populist skirmishing, privileging virality, making it difficult to infer political impact from visibility alone. Hungary's consolidated illiberal context, by contrast, makes the translation of symbolic performances into policy pressure more visible.

The cases are not representative of all women in radical right politics. Rather, they identify mechanisms through which gendered symbolic resources can be integrated into skirmisher-style communication across different political contexts. A fuller reception-side analysis remains a task for future research.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that gendered resources that were historically politicized through feminist struggle can be captured by anti-feminist beneficiaries who use the "womanhood/motherhood" card to legitimize exclusion, censorship, and illiberal pedagogy. Whether comparable gendered performance resources can be mobilized elsewhere on the ideological spectrum is a separate question; analytically, the key point is that gendered authority is politically portable and, under social media conditions, can be converted into attention and leverage, even when deployed against pluralism and rights claims.

In short, skirmishing femininity names a recurrent contemporary mechanism of illiberal politics: a deliberately exploited "gender as superpower" that converts conservative womanhood into a protected vehicle for denunciation, moral absolutism, and scalable mobilization.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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To complement the close reading and comparative analysis of X platforms of politicians under analysis, parts of the X corpora were also reviewed automatically using an xAI tool (Grok) to assist in identifying patterns (e.g., recurring targets, dominant issue clusters, and recurrent framings). This review served only as an auxiliary aid to verify manually derived findings; all interpretive claims are grounded in direct textual analysis of the original posts. ChatGPT was also used for translation assistance, minor language editing, and stylistic smoothing. This disclosure is also included in the article (Section 3.3).

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Populist Radical Right Women Leaders and the Framing of LGBTQI+ Issues: Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel

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Abstract

The increasing prominence of women leaders of populist radical right (PRR) parties raises important questions about the relationship between gender, leadership, and ideological discourse. This article examines how three PRR women leaders—Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel—articulate LGBTQI+ issues in their public communication. Drawing on framing theory, the study analyses a selection of leaders' speeches, complemented by media interviews given by the three leaders, to identify how LGBTQI+ themes are constructed and integrated into broader party-political narratives. Our findings show that LGBTQI+ issues vary in salience and framing across leaders. Le Pen largely avoids the issue, invoking LGBTQI+ rights only within a homonationalist narrative opposing Islamic communitarianism. Meloni adopts a more traditionally conservative frame, grounding her framing in the protection of children and of the "natural family," while Weidel selectively combines homonationalist and anti-gender discourses. Despite these differences, all three oppose the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights against their own country's status quo, selectively accepting sexual orientation while marginalising gender identity and transgender rights.

Keywords

frame analysis; homonationalism; LGBTQI+ rights; populist radical right; women's leadership

1. Introduction

The increasing prominence of women at the helm of populist radical right (PRR) parties represents one of the most significant transformations in contemporary European politics. Parties traditionally described as *Männerparteien* (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015; Spierings et al., 2015) have progressively entrusted leadership to women who have not only normalised their public image but also guided them towards unprecedented

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electoral success. This development raises important theoretical questions about the relationship between gender, leadership, and ideological discourse within the radical right, particularly in policy areas historically associated with moral conservatism, such as sexuality and family politics.

Among these, LGBTQI+ issues constitute a particularly significant topic. PRR parties have long held socially conservative and anti-egalitarian positions on gender and sexuality. Yet, recent scholarship shows that their discourse on these issues has become increasingly complex and strategically adaptive (Spierings, 2020, 2021; Spierings et al., 2015). While maintaining opposition to the expansion of sexual and gender equality, some radical right actors selectively mobilise LGBTQI+ rights as markers of national modernity and Western identity, especially in opposition to immigration and Islam (Akkerman, 2015; Duina & Carson, 2020; Magni & Reynolds, 2023). Other actors, however, continue to frame sexuality primarily through traditionalist narratives centred on the defence of the heterosexual family and the preservation of the traditional cultural order (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Donà, 2021). These developments suggest that a key analytical question is not simply whether PRR actors support or oppose LGBTQI+ rights, but how these rights are discursively constructed, selectively recognised, and politically instrumentalised.

Within this broader debate, the role of women's leadership remains underexplored. Existing research frequently associates women politicians with more favourable attitudes towards LGBTQI+ rights and inclusive policymaking (Siegel et al., 2022; Wängnerud, 2009). However, political party affiliation remains a central determinant of elite positions on sexuality and gender issues (Siegel et al., 2022), and there is limited evidence that women's leadership alone leads to substantive programmatic moderation within the radical right.

Female PRR leaders therefore occupy a potentially paradoxical position: their presence challenges the traditionally masculine image of radical right politics, yet they operate within party families whose ideological foundations are rooted in nativism, authoritarianism, and cultural conservatism (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Mudde, 2007).

Understanding how these tensions are negotiated discursively is crucial for assessing how the growing feminisation of PRR leadership contributes to a strategic articulation of existing positions on LGBTQI+ rights. This article addresses this gap by focusing explicitly on PPR women leaders' political discourse. It asks the following question: how do women leaders of PRR parties articulate LGBTQI+ issues in their public communication? Rather than examining party manifestos or policy outputs, the study shifts attention to leader-centred discursive practices, analysing how political leaders frame LGBTQI+ issues, assign meaning to them, and integrate them into their broader narratives of nation, identity, family, and social order. Accordingly, this article investigates whether and how these leaders endorse LGBTQI+ rights or reproduce opposition to their expansion and adapt their framing strategies to their overall parties' narrative.

Our empirical approach builds on framing theory (Entman, 1993; Rein & Schön, 1993), which conceptualises political communication as a process by which actors select and emphasise specific interpretations of reality to structure political conflict and shape audience perceptions. The study examines a selection of public speeches by three prominent European PRR leaders—Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel—who operate within distinct national contexts and embody different trajectories of radical-right leadership. The three cases allow for a theoretically informed comparison because they vary along three dimensions:

the institutionalisation of LGBTQI+ rights in the national context, the party's strategic trajectory, and the leader's public biography.

By comparing how these leaders frame LGBTQI+ rights, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between gendered leadership and PRR discourse in contemporary Europe. It shows that female radical right leaders do not simply offer a uniform anti-LGBTQI+ position. Rather, they adopt different discursive strategies, as they selectively activate, avoid, or rearticulate LGBTQI+ issues in ways that make opposition to the expansion of rights compatible with their broader political positioning.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on PRR parties, sexuality, and gender, with particular attention to the emergence of the homonationalist frame and the role of women's leadership within those parties. The two following sections present the case selection and methodological approach, before moving to the empirical analysis of leaders' framing strategies. The last section discusses our findings and concludes.

2. Populist Radical Right Parties, LGBTQI+ Rights, and Gendered Leadership

PRR parties' core ideology is commonly defined by nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015), combining strong anti-immigration stances and preferences for "law and order" domestic policies (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Mudde, 2007, 2013) and a broader defence of a culturally homogeneous national community. Similarly, PRR parties have historically maintained deeply conservative and anti-egalitarian positions on gender and LGBTQI+ issues (Spierings, 2020, 2021; Spierings et al., 2015), arguably because the emancipation of women and LGBTQI+ rights threatens what they posit as their understanding of the natural order and the reproduction of an ethnically and culturally homogenous society (Höhne, 2024). Their positioning on gender and LGBTQI+ issues, accordingly, is part of a wider ideological project centred on social order, cultural continuity, demographic reproduction, and the symbolic boundaries of the nation.

Research has shown that PRR parties' narratives frequently connect LGBTQI+ rights, feminism, immigration, and economic struggle in terms of a broader civilisational threat (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024). First, family-related LGBTQI+ rights—such as same-sex marriage, adoption rights, and sexual freedom—are often construed as direct attacks on the so-called "traditional family," which PRR actors present as the very foundation of European and Christian societies (Donà, 2021; Lavizzari, 2025; Reinhardt et al., 2024). This opposition is rooted in the belief that gender differences and heterosexuality are natural and immutable, and that attempts to question these categories represent a dangerous ideological indoctrination that threatens social stability and cultural continuity (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Donà, 2021; Lavizzari, 2025).

Secondly, a particularly recurrent element in this discourse is the framing of anti-LGBTQI+ claims through the protection of children. When opposing comprehensive sexuality education in schools, anti-bullying campaigns, or policies concerning gender identity, PRR parties claim they are "protecting children" from the so-called "gender theory" or "gender ideology" (Prearo, 2024; Prearo & Garbagnoli, 2017) that, by allegedly corrupting the innocence of children (Björkdahl & Cognini, 2026), poses a threat to the stability and reproduction of society.

Finally, feminism, LGBTQI+ rights, and the normalisation of non-heterosexual relationships are linked to declining birth rates and contribute to what PRR parties frame as "the great replacement," whereby the white, native European population will be demographically substituted by non-white, non-Christian immigrants (Ekman, 2022; Obaidi et al., 2022).

In this sense, LGBTQI+ issues are not marginal to PRR ideology: they are one of the arenas through which these parties define legitimate forms of family, reproduction, belonging, and national continuity. Yet, PRR positions on LGBTQI+ issues are not uniform. As populism is generally understood as a thin-centred ideology that must be combined with thicker ideological elements, PRR actors retain considerable flexibility in adapting their discourse to different national, cultural, and electoral contexts (Mudde, 2004, 2007). This flexibility helps explain why their positions on gender and sexuality vary across countries and over time. In highly gender-egalitarian contexts, radical right actors may defend the existing status quo and argue that equality has already been achieved, whereas in more traditional contexts they may openly challenge even the limited LGBTQI+ rights that are already in place (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Vossen, 2011).

This strategic adaptability has become particularly visible as PRR parties have expanded their electorates and recalibrated their positions on several issues (Magni & Reynolds, 2023; Rovny, 2013; Rovny & Polk, 2020; Schäfer & Steiner, 2026; Scrinzi, 2026; Spierings, 2020). While these parties generally do not advocate the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights and often actively oppose it (Magni & Reynolds, 2023), some of them have developed more nuanced positions, especially where certain LGBTQI+ rights have become legally institutionalised and socially normalised. In these contexts, openly attacking already established rights might be politically costly, while selectively defending them can help PRR actors to present themselves as modern, secular, and protective of national values. In particular, scholars have noted PRR actors may frame LGBTQI+ rights favourably through neoliberal repertoires, reducing them to private liberties detached from broader equality claims (Boulila et al., 2025; Fenger, 2018).

The concept of homonationalism captures this ambivalence. Originally theorised by Puar (2007, 2013), homonationalism refers to the ways in which gay and lesbian rights can be incorporated into nationalist and racialised projects, producing hierarchies between supposedly modern and backward societies. The concept has since been widely used in the literature on PRR parties to describe how they mobilise LGBTQI+ rights—in parallel to the femonational mobilisation of women's rights (Farris, 2017)—as symbols of "Western modernity" and civilisational superiority, particularly against Islam, immigration, and multiculturalism (Akkerman, 2015; Boulila et al., 2025; Duina & Carson, 2020; Spierings, 2021).

In homonationalist discourse, LGBTQI+ rights are not defended as universal equality claims, nor do they generally serve to support new rights claims. Rather, they are invoked selectively as already achieved liberties that must be protected from external threats, especially from Muslim immigrants who are portrayed as inherently homophobic and misogynistic (Magni & Reynolds, 2023; Miller-Idriss, 2024). This allows PRR actors to combine apparent moderation on sexuality with exclusionary politics (Scrinzi, 2026): they can distance themselves from explicit homophobia, appeal to secular or liberal national traditions, and redirect attention towards racialised or religious outsiders. This strategy is particularly relevant in countries such as France and the Netherlands, where secularism and civil liberties, including gay rights, are often considered integral to national identity (Akkerman, 2015; Duina & Carson, 2020).

At the same time, this selective defence of LGBTQI+ rights tends to be narrow. It often concerns gay and lesbian citizens who can be incorporated into national narratives of modernity, while claims related to gender identity, transgender rights, queer politics, sex education, and anti-discrimination policies continue to be framed negatively as expressions of "gender ideology," "wokism," or moral disorder.

The growing prominence of women leaders within PRR parties adds a further layer of complexity to this picture. PRR parties have traditionally been described as *Männerparteien*, both because of their predominantly male electorate and because of their masculinised ideological and organisational profiles (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015; Spierings et al., 2015). However, recent years have seen several women rise to leadership positions in radical right parties, often contributing to their public normalisation and electoral expansion. This development has also been interpreted as part of a broader attempt to renew parties' image and to reduce the voting gender gap to expand their electoral base (Chueri & Damerow, 2023; Keeling & Ladini, 2025; Weeks et al., 2023).

Existing research often associates women's political representation with more inclusive attitudes and policies towards gender and sexual equality. At the individual level, women tend to display less negative attitudes towards homosexuality than men (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019). At the elite level, female prospective MPs have been found to be more likely than their male colleagues to reject bans on same-sex unions, while women's presence in legislatures and cabinets has often been associated with the adoption of more inclusive policies (Siegel et al., 2022; Wängnerud, 2009). These findings suggest that gender may matter for political attitudes and policy agendas concerning LGBTQI+ rights.

However, these expectations cannot be transferred mechanically to PRR leadership. Party affiliation and ideology remain crucial determinants of elite positions on sexuality and gender issues (Siegel et al., 2022). Women leaders may therefore challenge the masculine image of radical right politics without necessarily producing substantive programmatic moderation. Accordingly, this article investigates the communicative strategies through which these leaders construct and take position on LGBTQI+ rights, to clarify how their gendered leadership shapes the discursive repertoires through which LGBTQI+ issues are framed.

3. Case Selection and Methods

Our study focuses on three PRR women leaders: Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel. These three leaders were able to bring their parties to unprecedented electoral success in the three largest countries of the European Union—both in terms of population and GDP. Their selection allows for a theoretically informed comparison, as they combine important similarities with analytically relevant differences, as they operate in national contexts marked by different trajectories of LGBTQI+ rights recognition, belong to parties with distinct strategic profiles, and present different political trajectories and public biographies. Particularly relevant is the variation in the institutional status quo regarding LGBTQI+ rights across the three countries, as the degree to which these rights have been legally recognised and politically normalised may shape both their salience and framing in the three leaders' rhetoric.

Among the three countries, Germany provides the most extensive legal recognition of LGBTQI+ rights. According to the last report provided by ILGA-Europe (2026), on a score from 0 to 100, France scores 60.25; Germany scores 69.54; and Italy scores 24.11%. Germany recognises full marriage equality, joint and second-parent adoption, and allows individuals to amend their name and gender through a

declaration-based procedure, without medical intervention requirements. France also recognises marriage equality, joint and second-parent adoption, but does not provide a fully self-determination-based procedure for legal gender recognition and still lacks a comprehensive ban on medically unnecessary interventions on intersex minors. Conversely, Italy does not recognise marriage equality, providing only civil unions, and does not guarantee equal access to joint adoption or automatic co-parent recognition, despite recent Constitutional Court rulings expanding the recognition of same-sex parenthood in specific circumstances. Moreover, it remains characterised by a fragmented and largely court-driven framework for LGBTQI+ rights, with weaker protections for trans, non-binary, and intersex people.

To investigate how the three leaders articulate LGBTQI+ rights, this study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in frame analysis. Frame analysis conceptualises political communication as an active process through which leaders select and emphasise certain interpretations of reality while marginalising others (Benford & Snow, 2000; Entman, 1993).

In political contexts, framing is understood as the way in which actors construct meaning around contested issues, position them within broader ideological narratives and mobilise symbolic resources in ways that shape their public understanding and political conflict in general (Rein & Schön, 1993). Frames are therefore inherently normative and valenced, either explicitly through direct evaluative language or implicitly through selective emphasis and omission (Matthes, 2012). Frame analysis is thus especially well-suited to studying PRR discourse on gender and sexuality, given its emphasis on the strategic articulation of identity boundaries and cultural narratives (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2007) and its reliance on value-based claims to structure political conflict. Operationally, the analysis examines how LGBTQI+ issues are framed in leaders' speeches by identifying recurring interpretive patterns. The goal is to reconstruct the interpretive logics through which these issues are embedded within broader narratives.

The analysis focuses on a corpus of public speeches delivered by Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel during political campaigns. Speeches constitute a particularly appropriate source for studying framing processes, as they represent highly visible moments of political communication in which leaders directly address voters, construct collective identities, and signal ideological positioning. Compared to party manifestos or institutional documents, speeches allow for greater attention to rhetorical strategies, narrative choices, and discursive emphasis, making them especially useful for capturing how LGBTQI+ rights are articulated within broader political narratives.

To create our corpus, we collected and transcribed all the videos of speeches held at rallies that the three leaders' official accounts published on their YouTube channels. This resulted in 50 transcriptions of Le Pen's speeches, ranging from 05/02/2017 to 15/09/2025; 43 transcriptions of Meloni's speeches from 31/05/2021 to 18/11/2025; and 32 transcriptions of Weidel's speeches from 11/08/2021 to 30/05/2025 (detailed information on data collection is available in the Supplementary File). Finally, to select the speeches that mentioned LGBTQI+ issues, we relied on the keyword dictionary developed by Prearo and Scopelliti (2024). The final counts of speeches resulting from this filtering are three for Le Pen, seven for Meloni, and 14 for Weidel.

To understand the framing and rhetorical devices employed to characterise the discourses around LGBTQI+ themes, we carefully read and organized the transcribed speeches and the passages where they were

explicitly mentioned. The analysis proceeds through a qualitative manual coding process to identify recurrent frames and interpretive patterns in leaders' discourse. The coding combined deductive attention to frames identified in the literature—such as "homonationalism," "gender ideology," "traditional family," and "protection of children" (see Section 2)—with inductive observation of patterns emerging from the material, including rhetorical strategies such as issue avoidance and the recurrent reference to own personal experience.

In addition, to further substantiate, interpret, and contextualise the relevant frames and to trace the evolution of the position on LGBTQI+ issues expressed by the three leaders, the analysis of speeches is complemented by the study of a selection of video and print-interview material. A presentation of the selected sources is available in the Supplementary File.

4. Analysis and Results

The way in which Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel frame LGBTQI+ issues in their public communication is analysed by focusing on three dimensions: each of the following subsections first outlines the leader's political trajectory and public positioning on LGBTQI+ issues, then assesses the salience of these issues in their speeches, and finally examines the interpretive frames through which they are articulated. The analysis of the three cases shows that LGBTQI+ themes are not mobilised uniformly by PRR women leaders. Rather, their framing depends on the political function they serve within each leader's broader discourse.

4.1. Marine Le Pen: "Dédiabolisation" by Issue Avoidance

Marine Le Pen has emerged as one of Europe's most prominent PRR political figures, transforming the Front National, later renamed Rassemblement National, from a radical movement into a major electoral force. Under her leadership, the party has achieved unprecedented electoral success, with Le Pen reaching the second round of French presidential elections in both 2017 and 2022. Le Pen benefited from the so-called "legacy advantage" (Baker & Palmieri, 2023), inheriting the leadership of the party from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, but her strategy has been characterised by the attempt at the so-called *dédiabolisation* (in English, de-demonization). This strategy sought to distance the FN from its most extremist positions, especially antisemitism, while moderating its language on the cultural axis (Stockemer, 2017; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017) and repositioning the party on economic issues (Mayer, 2013; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). Within the same strategy, Le Pen avoids taking explicit positions on social conservative issues, including feminist and LGBTQ+ themes, same-sex marriage, and abortion.

This ambiguity is calculated: as a divorced mother and political leader who elevated a homosexual man, Florian Philippot, as her "right-hand man," Le Pen projects a "modern woman" image, combined with performances of hegemonic femininity (Geva, 2020; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026), while maintaining strategic silence on issues that are potentially divisive for her electorate.

As a matter of fact, interviews or direct quotes on LGBTQI+ topics by Le Pen are limited, and her trajectory on LGBTQI+ themes does not seem to represent a genuine ideological evolution, but rather a progressive rhetorical refinement in service of an electoral strategy. After taking over the party leadership from her father, who was openly homophobic, Le Pen introduced a homonationalist frame into the party positioning,

presenting LGBTQI+ people as one of the minorities to be protected against Islamic communitarianism. Indeed, in Le Pen's discourse, "Islamic communitarianism" refers to Muslim collective identity and social organisation framed as incompatible with French republican universalism and *laicité* because it is portrayed as privileging group-based, cultural, and religious norms over individual citizenship and secular rights. The move was apparently successful: polls show a growth in the gay vote for the FN from 14% in 2007 to 19% in 2012.

However, the opposition to same-sex marriage remained for a long time a coherent trait of Le Pen's program. At the beginning of the 2010s, despite refusing to participate in the demonstrations organised by anti-LGBTQI+ movements that protested the legalisation of same-sex marriage, she harshly condemned the reform that led to the Taubira law of 2013. Moreover, during her second presidential campaign, she promised to repeal same-sex marriage. The RN's 2017 electoral manifesto confirms this without ambiguity: proposal 87 called for replacing the Taubira law with "civil unions (improved PACS [usually PACS grant lower rights and protection compared to civil unions])" without retroactive effect, while maintaining the ban on surrogacy and in vitro fertilisation for lesbian couples.

A second apparent turning point for RN comes in 2022, when Le Pen promised a married lesbian woman that she "will not remove any rights from French citizens," thus abandoning the promise of repealing the Taubira law. Here, Le Pen's ambivalence (Scrinzi, 2026) starts to emerge vividly, as she seeks to appear moderate enough to appeal to the median voter without alienating her more radical electorate. She accepts the preservation of the legal status quo, presenting it as something to be protected from the Islamic threat, while opposing any further expansion of LGBTQI+ rights.

Concerning the framing of LGBTQI+ issues in the speeches delivered during her campaigns, Le Pen confirms her strategy of avoiding taking positions on sensitive topics. Despite being the leader with the highest number of speeches initially collected for our corpus, Le Pen mentions LGBTQI+ themes significantly less often than Meloni and Weidel, with only three speeches flagged by our keyword search. When she does, however, she always invokes the protection of LGBTQI+ rights—together with those of women and of Jewish people—against the threat of Islamic communitarianism that is jeopardising the *laicité* of the French Republic by questioning its identity and values. For example, in one of the selected speeches, she states:

> I was criticised for defending our Jewish compatriots, our homosexual compatriots. They are, however, the first victims of radical Islamism and its political and media complicities. I was criticised for attacking a medieval ideology that destroys lives. [sic!] Who undermine entire sections of society, at the forefront of which are women. (Speech id: lepen_22, 2017)

And, again, we find the same frame:

> Today, we allow individuals to expose their anti-Semitic theses, their misogynistic, homophobic, or even Christianophobic theses in public meetings. (Speech id: lepen_19, 2017)

Overall, LGBTQI+ issues appear only rarely in Le Pen's discourse, mainly characterised by what can be labelled an "issue avoidance" strategy, and, when mentioned, are framed in homonationalist terms. As a matter of fact, "Islamism" and "globalism" are the two opposing threats frequently mentioned by Le Pen in her speeches.

Globalism—and the European Union as its main actor—is among the other things responsible for promoting the "woke" culture. However, "wokism," understood as a catch-all term encapsulating every progressive policy on gender, sexuality, and identity, is only briefly invoked and left deliberately vague, without further explanation or any connection to specific policies or proposals (Speech id: lepen_37, 2024).

4.2. Giorgia Meloni: A Neo-Traditional PRR Leader

After an early debut on the political scene and a fast career, Meloni founded her party, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), in 2013, splitting from the centre-right party, Popolo delle Libertà (PdL). Fratelli d'Italia has been characterised as a populist radical-right party and has since been closely associated with Meloni's leadership (Puleo & Piccolino, 2022). Concerning women's issues, Meloni positions herself as a "neo-traditional" radical right leader who claims to defend women's interests while reducing women primarily to their role as mothers and stressing the nuclear, heterosexual family as the foundational element of society (De Giorgi et al., 2023).

This neo-traditional positioning is also reflected in Meloni's and her party's stance on LGBTQI+ rights. In the famous "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother"—this speech was delivered on 19th October 2019. The excerpt is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=Lh9AMSW_JM0—Meloni explicitly attacks existing policies that are inclusive of LGBTQI+ people, such as using the gender neutral "parent" as opposed to the qualification of "father" and "mother" on official documents. Her party, moreover, has proposed a bill to amend the Italian constitution to state that the only "natural" marriage is the one between a man and a woman (De Giorgi et al., 2023). Furthermore, Meloni's party has long supported associations and movements based on explicit anti-LGBTQI+ stances, such as *Family Day*, *Pro Vita & Famiglia*, and *Manif pour tous* (Prearo, 2024).

Meloni's position on LGBTQI+ themes has remained largely consistent over time, in contrast with her stances on other policies, like her most Eurosceptic positions, which evolved. From the beginning, her opposition to the introduction of new policies for the protection of LGBTQI+ rights revolved around three themes: the defence of biological sex, the heteronormative traditional family, and, especially, the protection of children. The defence of children and the "natural" structure of the family have also informed her position on the Italian debate on civil unions, which led to the adoption of the so-called Cirinnà Bill (2016). Meloni presented her opposition to civil unions not as a denial of the individual rights of homosexual people—rights she claims to recognise—but rather as a response to what she viewed as a legislative step towards same-sex marriage and, ultimately, adoption by same-sex couples. Meloni's opposition to egalitarian marriage has since been consistent, as has her opposition to surrogacy and adoption for non-heterosexual couples. The only partial exception is her position on civil unions; despite her harsh opposition in 2016, she has more recently declared that "[the law on Civil Unions] is fine as it is." During the debate over the Ddl Zan—a bill proposing to amend the already existing law on hate crimes to include homotransphobia—she again framed her opposition as based on the need to defend the traditional family and children.

In our selected corpus, Meloni mentions LGBTQI+ themes more extensively than Le Pen, as they appear in seven of her 43 speeches. Meloni articulates her opposition to LGBTQI+ rights around three main themes: opposition to the dangers of "gender identity" or "gender self-identification"; opposition to the possibility for same-sex couples to adopt; and opposition to surrogacy.

The first is presented both through the lenses of biological essentialism, in terms of the "gender ideology" frame, and as a threat to women's rights and the well-being of children. She articulates:

> Fighting discrimination against homosexuals has nothing to do with denying biological identity, because we are born male or female. Whether we like it or not, we cannot erase it. If we intend to erase it, in the end what we will do is nullify the rights of women that we have won in centuries of battles. (Speech id: meloni_3, 2021)

Meloni's rhetoric, moreover, introduces a religious justification for the "gender ideology" frame, when condemning gender identity rights: "Our spirituality, the sense of sacred and Christian roots, is being attacked. In the name of an absolute relativism and an aggressive atheism that ultimately paves the way for fundamentalist proselytism" (Speech id: meloni_2, 2021). Likewise, in a later passage of the same speech, she links the supposed degeneration of society and the loss of sacredness to a number of contested policies—surrogacy; gender transition; third-term abortions; assisted suicide for minors—that, in her view, are to be morally condemned. It is worth noting that surrogacy, third-term abortion, and assisted suicide for minors have never been legal in Italy and only the first is subject to public debate. Meloni invokes these examples as a scare tactic to mobilise her electorate.

The importance of Christian values is primarily witnessed by her famous slogan "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian" in which Meloni effectively depicts the way in which she wants her persona to be construed, activating the "traditional family" frame. Moreover, by placing women (as "mothers") and children at the centre of her discourse, Meloni's stated objective is to defend the traditional or "natural" family against the supposed threats posed by the so-called "gender ideology" or ideas promoted by the LGBTQI+ community. For example, she argues that:

> It is the reason why one of the main points of the Fratelli d'Italia program is the implementation of the largest birth incentive plan that the history of Italy has ever seen, and it is the reason why we continue to defend the natural family from the ideological delirium of those who would like to erase it. (Speech id: Meloni_3, 2021)

Similarly, Meloni expresses her opposition to the possibility of same-sex couples adopting a child, in nearly identical wording in three speeches (Speech id: meloni_1, 2021; meloni_7, 2022; meloni_8, 2022). She states: "the right state takes care of [those who] cannot be defended alone and what cannot be defended is that child" and that: "to a child who has already been unfortunate [i.e., a child placed for adoption], one tends to give their best" (Speech id: meloni_8, 2022). Meloni frames the entire debate as being about the child rather than about the couple, mobilising the "protection of children" frame. She consistently presents her opposition not as a restriction on the rights of gay and lesbian individuals, but as a protective stance on behalf of what she calls the "weakest part" in the adoption equation. This child-centred framing allows her to present her opposition to same-sex couple adoption not as discrimination against LGBTQI+ people, but as a form of institutional and political protection of children. Indeed, she refutes the homophobia accusation by equating it to the legal ban on single people from adopting. For example, she asks:

> My friends, they also say that I am homophobic because I am not in favour of adoption by a homosexual. But tell me, what does the phobia have to do with it? In the Italian legal system, a single person cannot adopt a child. So the State is single phobic? [sic!] (Speech id: meloni_7, 2021).

It is interesting to notice that Meloni leverages her personal family history to justify her opposition to same-sex couples' right to adopt. For example, she states that she "spent her entire childhood envying those who had a father, the large families that gathered at Christmas, all around the table" (Speech id: meloni_8, 2022), a direct reference to her father leaving her family when she was a child. And, again, she argues: "my reaction is not to take away from others what I did not have, it is to give to others what I did not have" (Speech id: meloni_23, 2022).

Finally, opposition to surrogacy is also mentioned in at least two of Meloni's speeches. Interestingly, Meloni always frames the debate through the lenses of "gender ideology," implying that it is homosexual men who mainly resort to surrogacy—while estimates suggest that 90% are heterosexual couples (Tebano, 2023). She states: "Because I do not consider modernity men who buy a child from poor women simply because that woman may feel compelled. It is not modernity, it is barbarism" (Speech id: meloni_7, 2022).

Thus, unlike Le Pen, Meloni engages openly with LGBTQI+ issues. Moreover, whereas Le Pen tends to mention them only within frames that invoke the protection of LGBTQI+ rights (exclusively) from a homonationalist stance, Meloni openly states and justifies her opposition to the promotion of specific LGBTQI+ rights. Meloni's framing of LGBTQI+ issues is grounded in a traditionalist, conservative ideological framework, where LGBTQI+ issues are mostly presented as threatening to the integrity of the traditional family, and in particular to the rights of women and children.

4.3. Alice Weidel: Homonationalist Leader

Compared to Le Pen's legacy political career and Meloni's *cursus honorum* typical of professional politicians, Weidel worked extensively in research and the private sector before joining the AfD in 2012. While initially drawn to the party due to her strong opposition to the euro and the EU, she quickly climbed to the very leadership of the party, which she took on formally in 2022 (Roch, 2024). Weidel has often been described as presenting a more "bourgeois" and "moderate" image for the AfD due to her professional and academic background (Vorländer, 2017), the fact that she is a woman (Casullo, 2025), and her personal life, specifically, being openly homosexual and in a long-term relation with a Swiss national of Sri Lankan descent with whom she has two children. While she identifies as a liberal conservative, her political platform centres on hard-line stances against immigration—including calls for "remigration" of all foreigners—and Euroscepticism (De Smedt & Jaki, 2017).

Over the course of her political career, Weidel has rhetorically exploited her own identity and personal experience—being a woman in a homosexual relationship with children—to promote the AfD's homonationalist anti-immigration position. For instance, she declared during an interview that "as a lesbian woman I do not want to be thrown off a roof under the sharia law" (Schuler, 2023). By instrumentalising her identity, she has been able to deflect the accusation of homophobia and to present the AfD as "the true and only" party protecting gays and lesbians, while signalling that it welcomes LGBTQI+ voters. On the other hand, she has consistently refuted the definition of "queer"; thus, while being open about her sexual orientation, she does not identify as part of the LGBTQI+ community. This ambiguity allows her to advance AfD's stances that are in contradiction with her personal history, such as opposition to same-sex marriage, adoption for same sex couples, and surrogacy.

In Weidel's rhetoric, homonationalism is also mobilised to defend the status quo and dismiss possible enlargement of LGBTQI+ rights, maintaining her party line. She states: "the gays and lesbians in this country will not care at the end of the day whether their relationship is a 'registered life partnership' or 'marriage' when they do not dare to go out on the street, arm in arm." When Germany legalized same-sex marriage, she tweeted that a "'marriage for all' debate while millions of Muslims illegally immigrate to Germany is a joke" (Germany legalized same-sex marriage, known as "Ehe für alle" on October 1, 2017, allowing same-sex couples full marriage rights, including adoption).

Of the three leaders, Weidel is the one who mentions LGBTQI+ related topics the most, both in absolute (15 speeches out of 32) and in relative terms (47% of the total speeches). She frames LGBTQI+ themes with two—apparently contradicting—objectives. On the one hand, she weaponised the "homonationalist frame" to justify her anti-immigration and pro-remigration stances, also leveraging her own experience of being an openly gay, married woman with two children. On the other hand, she mobilises the "gender ideology" frame to criticise harshly what she calls "gender madness" (*Genderwahn*) and to adopt gender-critical and anti-trans positions.

Weidel's homonationalism is almost textbook and is repeated practically verbatim across different speeches: "There are areas […], where I would advise people who wear a kippah or are openly gay or lesbian to be more cautious" (Speech id: weidel_25, 2025; weidel_26, 2025; weidel_28). According to Weidel, this explicit threat to Jews and homosexuals has a clear origin:

> It is the [sic!] imported. Muslim anti-Semitism….The people come from a cultural region where homosexuals are killed, hanged from a crane, and pushed off the roof with a sack over their heads. (Speech id: weidel_25, 2025; weidel_26, 2025; weidel_28)

Weidel also stresses her personal experience as a lesbian, which makes her particularly sensitive to the threats posed by Muslim immigrants:

> And that is also the reason why I, as a woman who is in a relationship with another woman, raising children, am politically opposed to exactly that, because I do not want my freedom to be dictated and restricted by these people…..It is high time for the turnaround. Time to deport the illegals. Time for secure borders. Time for our safety. Time for Germany. (Speech id: weidel_25, 2025)

Thus, LGBTQI+ rights and freedom—together with her own lived experience—are weaponised in hard anti-immigration stances. At the same time, however, it is implied that such rights are to be preserved and defended, not expanded: even when adopting a homonationalist stance, the primary goal remains the preservation of the status quo rather than the expansion of rights and protections. For example, Weidel takes a gender critical position, promising that her government would pursue the abolition of the so-called gender ideology: "We reject gender ideology. Only women can be mothers, and men cannot become women" (Speech id: weidel_18, weidel_27, 2024–5).

The justification of the rejection of what Weidel calls the "queer-woke madness" (Speech id: weidel_23, 2025) also lies in the "protection of children" frame. On the one hand, gender ideology is construed as dangerous because of "early sexualisation." For example, she states:

> Children are primarily to [be] protected against early sexualisation. Early sexualisation is, among other things, an instrument of gender ideology and begins in some places in Germany already in kindergarten, and has already made headlines with the establishment of relaxation rooms for body exploration and sexual education. Such projects have no place in kindergarten. (Speech id: weidel_17, 2024)

On the other hand, gender ideology is presented as a waste of time, at the expense of what is actually important for children and their education:

> To land a great job, to be qualified, that is what we want as AfD. And I can tell you, I can promise you, we will clean up this whole gender madness and this gender ideology. Everything will be shut down. [sic!]….All gender chairs. We need math. We need German. We need foreign languages. We need intelligent people. (Speech id: weidel_27, 2025)

It is worth noticing that Weidel's discussion of LGBTQI+ issues combines elements present in the rhetoric of the other two leaders. Although the protection of LGBTQI+ people is framed in homonationalist terms, she simultaneously invokes secular conservative arguments, especially those based on the protection of children and against "gender ideology," to resist further expansions of rights, particularly in the area of gender identity.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This article has examined how three women leaders of PRR parties—Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel—frame LGBTQI+ issues in their public communication. The analysis has shown that all three leaders reproduce opposition to the further expansion of LGBTQI+ rights, while adapting their discourse to different national contexts, party strategies, and public biographies. The main difference in their discursive strategies lies in how opposition to the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights is made politically acceptable: LGBTQI+ issues are avoided by Le Pen, openly mobilised by Meloni, and selectively appropriated by Weidel, but in all three cases they remain embedded in broader PRR narratives of national identity, social order, and cultural threat. These differences reflect the political function that LGBTQI+ issues serve within each leader's broader discourse. Yet, despite this variation, the three leaders converge in resisting the expansion of LGBTQI+ rights and in narrowing the meaning of LGBTQI+ equality. In particular, they tend to reduce the LGBTQI+ spectrum to questions of sexual orientation, while marginalising or openly opposing claims related to gender identity, transgender rights, and queer politics.

However, salience and framing vary in the way the three leaders weaponise LGBTQI+ issues. Regarding the first, LGBTQI+ issues are not equally visible in the three leaders' speeches, nor does their visibility simply reflect the intensity of ideological opposition. Rather, salience depends on the political usefulness of LGBTQI+ issues within each national and party context. In France, where marriage equality and adoption rights are already institutionalised, Le Pen has little incentive to foreground explicit opposition to LGBTQI+ rights, as doing so would undermine her broader strategy of *dédiabolisation*. In Italy, the more limited and contested status of lesbian and gay rights makes opposition to same-sex marriage, adoption, surrogacy, and gender identity claims a more salient resource for conservative mobilisation. In Germany, where basic lesbian and gay rights are more consolidated, Weidel can invoke these rights as evidence of Western modernity and national tolerance, while redirecting opposition towards immigration, Islam, and gender identity claims.

Second, the three leaders do not rely on the same combination of frames. Le Pen's strategy of issue avoidance is accompanied by rare homonationalist references, through which homosexual citizens are presented as members of the national community threatened by Islamic communitarianism. Meloni's open mobilisation of LGBTQI+ issues relies instead on frames centred on the traditional family, the protection of children, and gender ideology, through which LGBTQI+ rights are represented as threats to biological sex, motherhood, children, and the "natural" family. Weidel's selective appropriation combines the homonationalist frame with the gender ideology and protection-of-children frames: gay and lesbian rights are invoked as national liberties to be defended from Muslim immigration, while gender identity and queer claims are rejected as expressions of gender ideology. This selectivity is particularly important because it allows PRR leaders—in particular, Le Pen and Weidel—to distance themselves from explicit homophobia while continuing to resist the broader transformation of gender and sexual norms. Overall, the same general opposition to rights expansion is therefore articulated through different combinations of frames, depending on whether LGBTQI+ issues serve a strategy of normalisation, conservative mobilisation, or nationalist exclusion.

Taken together, these findings suggest that female radical right leaders' engagement with LGBTQI+ themes, despite some similarities, is neither monolithic nor discursively uniform. Rather, it is shaped by the specific national context, party positioning, and informed by the personal experience of the leader. What unites Le Pen, Meloni, and Weidel is rather a strategic, instrumental use of LGBTQI+ themes, selectively embraced.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Henriette Müller (New York University Abu Dhabi).

LLMs Disclosure

LLMs were used to transcribe and translate the speeches analysed in this study, specifically through the Clip.to platform. All translations were subsequently revised and verified by a native speaker who is also fluent in English. Additionally, LLMs were employed to check spelling, grammar, and syntax to improve overall readability.

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ARTICLE

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Women's Leadership and the Expansion of Populist Radical Right Party Agendas

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Abstract

How do women leaders shape the agendas of populist radical right (PRR) parties, and how does this in turn impact nativist parties' electoral appeal? Historically male-dominated PRR parties are now increasingly led by women. Yet, research has not systematically examined how women-led PRR parties recalibrate priorities, or what influence this has on perceptions of the party. To shed light on these questions, we combine observational and experimental evidence. In the first stage, we describe key differences between men- and women-led PRR parties using manifesto data from 15 Western European countries (1988 to 2025). We find that women-led PRR parties broaden issue agendas, increasing attention to areas such as environmental protection, labour policy, and cultural policy. In the second stage, we test the effects of these appeals through a survey experiment manipulating leader gender, agenda breadth, and rhetorical framing. We draw on role congruity theory, which distinguishes between (masculine) agentic political communication, emphasising strength and authority, and (feminine) communal communication, emphasising care and collective wellbeing. Our results show that simply broadening the issue agenda does not consistently reduce perceived extremism or increase support. Instead, responses depend on how the expanded platform is communicated. Agentic framing increases perceptions of ideological radicalism, whereas communal framing improves leader favourability and increases vote likelihood. These effects do not vary systematically by leader gender or respondent gender. The findings offer new insights into how women leaders reshape party agendas, and the conditions under which such issue expansion influences perceptions of nativist parties.

Keywords

gender and politics; party agendas; populist radical right; women's political leadership

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1. Introduction

Across Europe, populist radical right (PRR) parties have moved from the margins of party systems into positions of substantial electoral strength and, in some cases, government office. At the same time, a notable demographic shift has taken place within these historically male-dominated parties: An increasing number are now led by women. Prominent examples include Giorgia Meloni of Brothers of Italy, Marine Le Pen of the French National Rally, and Alice Weidel of Alternative for Germany. These leadership changes have often been accompanied by claims that PRR parties are broadening their appeal and moderating their image. For instance, under Marine Le Pen's leadership, the French National Rally pursued a strategy of *dédiabolisation*, seeking to normalise the party by softening its image and expanding its policy agenda beyond its traditional focus on immigration (Mayer, 2013, 2015). Similarly, observers have noted that Giorgia Meloni's leadership places greater emphasis on competence, economic governance, and other valence issues alongside its nativist core (Pedrazzani & De Giorgi, 2025).

Despite these developments, we know surprisingly little about whether and how women leaders shape the agendas of PRR parties, or what consequences such changes have for voters' perceptions of these parties. Existing research offers two important insights while leaving this question unresolved. First, scholarship on party competition shows that PRR parties—historically narrowly focused on immigration and national identity—have increasingly diversified their agendas as they seek to expand their electorate (Akkerman, 2015; Bergman & Flatt, 2020; Meguid et al., 2025). Second, literature on gender and political leadership suggests that women leaders can influence party agendas, though the evidence is mixed and focuses primarily on mainstream rather than niche parties (Greene & O'Brien, 2016; Kroeber, 2022). It remains unclear whether the agenda-setting dynamics associated with women's leadership extend to parties whose identities are strongly anchored in a small set of core issues.

In this article, we bring these strands of research together to examine how women leaders shape the policy agendas of PRR parties and how voters respond to changes. Building on research showing that diversity within party elites tends to broaden party platforms (Greene & O'Brien, 2016), we consider whether women leaders expand the range of issues PRR parties emphasise, rather than fundamentally alter their ideological positions. For PRR parties, which face a strongly gendered support base and reputational constraints linked to extremism, expanding the agenda may represent a strategic way to attract new voters without alienating existing supporters. We further argue that this strategy has electoral consequences: Broader issue agendas can reduce perceptions of extremity and improve evaluations of nativist parties, particularly when communicated by women leaders.

To investigate these dynamics, we adopt a two-stage research design that combines observational and experimental evidence. In the first stage, we conduct an analysis of party manifestos from PRR parties in 15 Western European countries between 1988 and 2025. This analysis allows us to assess whether women-led PRR parties differ from men-led parties in the breadth of their issue agendas and to identify the types of issue expansions that occur. The results reveal a consistent pattern: Women-led PRR parties address a wider range of issues in their manifestos. Women give greater attention to environment, labour policy, and cultural policy. These findings suggest women PRR leaders bring a particular focus on protection, without fundamentally shifting the party's core ideology.

In the second stage, we test how voters respond to such agenda expansion using a survey experiment that manipulates leader gender and issue emphasis. The experimental design is directly informed by the manifesto analysis. We test whether broader messages, compared to messages focused narrowly on immigration, shape perceptions of extremity, favourability, and electoral support. The results show that expanding the issue agenda does not, in itself, change voters' perceptions of nativist parties or increase support. Instead, responses depend on how broader agendas are communicated. Messages that frame expanded policy agendas using communal language, emphasising collective wellbeing and social responsibility, attract more favourable evaluations (especially among the centre-right) than those framed using agentic rhetoric, emphasising strength and authority. Contrary to our expectations, these responses do not vary systematically by leader gender.

Our study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it advances research on gender and political leadership and on PRR parties by showing that women PRR leaders shape the breadth of party agendas, even in this context of highly constrained ideological profiles. Second, it demonstrates that the electoral consequences of agenda expansion in nativist parties depend less on the presence of new issues than on how those issues are communicated. Third, bringing these insights together, the study suggests that communal framing—more commonly but not uniquely used by women—rather than gender per se could motivate "softened" perceptions of nativist parties.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. We first review research on issue ownership and agenda expansion among PRR parties, and the role of women leaders. We then develop theoretical expectations about how women's leadership shapes PRR parties' issue agendas and how gender, agenda expansion, and gendered styles of political communication may, in turn, affect electoral support. We examine how women's leadership influences agenda-setting through an observational analysis of PRR manifestos across Western Europe. Next, we present results from a survey experiment on voter responses to different agenda strategies. The final section discusses implications for party competition, gender and leadership, and nativist party strategy.

2. PRR Issue Expansion and Women Leaders

PRR parties are widely understood as niche parties with strong ownership of immigration, combined with an authoritarian and populist worldview (Kriesi et al., 2008; Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2005). These parties emerged and gained support by emphasising cultural conflict, anti-immigration, and opposition to political elites, organised around what Rydgren (2005) describes as a successful ideological "master frame." Thus, PRR parties have historically concentrated on a relatively narrow set of issues compared to mainstream parties. This strategy creates challenges: Reliance on a limited issue agenda may restrict parties' ability to broaden their electoral base or adapt to changing political competition.

A long tradition in the party competition literature suggests that parties respond to electoral incentives by expanding their issue offerings or emphasising additional topics that can attract new voters (De Sio & Weber, 2014; Downs, 1957). Although this argument was originally developed with mainstream parties in mind, a growing body of research shows that niche parties can also diversify their agendas. Recent studies document that PRR parties increasingly address issues beyond immigration, including welfare, economic protection, the environment, and gender-related topics (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Akkerman, 2015; Bergman & Flatt, 2020; Meguid et al., 2025; Spoon & Williams, 2023; Weeks et al., 2025). Through multidimensional competition,

parties can strategically broaden their appeal or blur their positions on secondary issues to reach a wider electorate (Rovny, 2012, 2013). Such strategies may become especially attractive when parties approach an electoral ceiling on their core issue (e.g., their core goal is met; Meguid, 2023), especially when it is salient among the public (Spoon & Williams, 2023), or when other parties adopt similar positions on their core issue (Fernandes et al., 2026).

While we know that PRR parties are expanding their agendas, thus far studies do not investigate how leader gender matters for PRR issue diversification. There is good reason to believe that it does. The literature on women's party leadership reports mixed findings on the question of whether women shift party positions: Some studies find agenda effects, such as greater emphasis on sociocultural and social justice issues (Kittilson, 2011; Kroeber, 2022), while others offer little evidence that women-led parties are systematically more left-leaning or programmatically distinct from men-led parties (Greene & O'Brien, 2016; O'Brien, 2019). Instead, research finds that women's leadership is associated with more diverse, broader party agendas across party families, even as the underlying ideological positions remain unchanged (Greene & O'Brien, 2016).

This finding is particularly relevant for PRR parties, because they face distinctive constraints as niche parties focused on a narrow set of issues (Mudde, 2007). Rather than expecting women leaders to alter the ideological foundations of these parties, we argue that their influence is more likely to be expressed through broader agenda-setting. Consistent with Greene and O'Brien (2016), women leaders may increase the range of issues that PRR parties emphasise while leaving core nativist commitments intact.

There are two reasons that women PRR leaders are more likely to be associated with issue expansion than men PRR leaders. First, the selection of a woman party leader can itself be a visible sign of party renewal, as a change from the historically male ("*Männerpartein*") status quo. In that sense, the gender of the leader could be endogenous to the broader changes party elites aim to produce in both the leadership and (more mainstream) direction of the party—leader gender could be part of a broader strategy of de-demonisation (Mayer, 2013). Second, as in other party families, women leaders of PRR parties have different life experiences than men, and they bring these perspectives into internal deliberations, reducing information barriers and helping parties identify latent issues in the electorate (not least, women; Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995). For example, Meret (2015) discusses how Pia Kjærsgaard intentionally cultivated a reputation as the mother of the Danish People's Party and emphasised certain gendered issues while maintaining the party's core ideology. This leads us to our first hypothesis:

H1: Women leaders of PRR parties are associated with issue expansion.

3. Electoral Consequences of Agenda Expansion

While existing research shows that PRR parties diversify their agendas, we know less about the electoral consequences of these strategies. In particular, it remains unclear whether broader issue agendas causally affect how voters perceive nativist PRR parties. Observational studies are indicative; Mayer (2013) reports that after Marine Le Pen's normalisation tactics ahead of the 2012 election, through which she "gave her platform a very social tone, asking for a more protective state, more public services, and with a deep anti-EU and protectionist tone, arguments to which women are more receptive than men," vote share increased and

the gender gap closed. And drawing on manifesto data from 23 countries, Bergman and Flatt (2020) find that nationalist parties broadened their agendas over time and that those that increased issue diversity gained votes.

We propose that issue emphasis serves as a cue for party identity. Voters commonly associate PRR parties with a narrow ("niche") issue focus (Meguid, 2005). Appealing more broadly, conversely, leads voters to perceive that parties are closer to their own ideological position (Somer-Topcu, 2015). A broader policy agenda may therefore signal a more mainstream, governing-oriented party profile and reduce perceptions of ideological extremism. This is especially likely among voters on the right who are open to nativist positions but hesitant about extremist reputations. Building on this research, we expect that presenting a broader agenda will improve evaluations of nativist party leaders in the following ways:

> H2a: Party leaders who present a broader policy agenda are perceived as less extreme than leaders who focus narrowly on immigration.
>
> H2b: Party leaders who present a broader policy agenda receive higher favourability evaluations than leaders who focus narrowly on immigration, especially from right-wing voters.
>
> H2c: Party leaders who present a broader policy agenda achieve higher levels of electoral support than those who focus narrowly on immigration, especially among right-wing voters.

We expect these effects to be moderated by leader gender. Women politicians are seen as less extreme than their male counterparts (Adams et al., 2026; O'Brien, 2019) and perceived more warmly in general (Adams et al., 2023). Therefore, agenda expansion may be interpreted as a more credible signal of moderation when communicated by women leaders. Research from political communication highlights the importance of source credibility in voters' evaluations (Druckman, 2001); here, our argument is that women could be perceived as the more credible source. In contrast, similar expansion efforts by male leaders may be more readily dismissed as strategic. Consequently, voters may react more positively to agenda broadening when it is associated with women leaders. This leads us to expect:

> H3: Broadening the policy agenda increases favourability evaluations for women leaders more than for men leaders.

4. Gendered Issue Expansion: Communal vs. Agentic Styles

Beyond differences in issue agendas, research on gender and political communication suggests that women and men often differ in *how* they communicate politically. Studies of parliamentary speech show that women legislators are less adversarial and more likely to draw on personal experience and use inclusive or collective frames (Hargrave & Langengen, 2021; Müller & Pansardi, 2023; van Dijk & Poljak, 2025). Such findings align with social role theory, which argues that women are associated with communal traits such as warmth, empathy, and cooperation, whereas men are associated with agentic traits such as assertiveness and dominance (Eagly, 1987).

Applied to political communication, these expectations can shape both leaders' communication style and voters' evaluations: Women politicians are often expected to display more communal and less confrontational modes of speech, and deviations from these expectations can be penalised (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women leaders can face bias both because they are viewed as inherently less suitable for leadership (as a masculine role) and because such penalties might be heightened if women display traits perceived as masculine in that role, such as assertiveness, power-seeking, or ambition. For instance, using a series of experiments, Schneider et al. (2022) report that agentic traits are seen as desirable qualities for politicians, that women are seen to lack such traits, and that this incongruence causes depressed preference for female leaders over male leaders.

Role congruity theory is especially relevant to consider in the context of PRR parties, which are known for highly authoritarian, confrontational styles of politics (Sauer, 2020). In these masculine parties, women face a challenge of combining leadership with socially acceptable communication styles. Research from psychology finds that one way to mitigate such negative responses is for women to incorporate more communal speech, including, for example, signs of caring, collective wellbeing, and social cohesion (Bowles & Babcock, 2013; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). Communal styles might also soften PRR rhetoric: Messages framed in terms of protection, care, and social cohesion appear less aggressive and therefore less ideologically extreme than rhetoric emphasising dominance or conflict. In this way, communal framing may help repackage controversial or exclusionary policies in language that feels more socially acceptable or moderate.

Therefore, beyond adding attention to other issues, women leaders might also moderate the tone of their speech to emphasise more communal language, without abandoning the party's core messages. Such a strategy offers women leaders one way to align with gendered social roles (and thus, increase their support) even in the context of leadership of a male-dominated, authoritarian party. This leads us to the following expectations:

> H4: Among leaders addressing additional political issues, those adopting communal framing on the additional issues are perceived as more moderate and favourable than those adopting agentic framing.
>
> H5: Adopting communal rather than agentic framing will increase favourability evaluations for women leaders more than for men leaders.

5. Study 1: Women PRR Leaders and Issue Expansion—Evidence from 15 European Democracies

Having set out our theoretical expectations regarding PRR leader gender and issue expansion, we next turn to the empirical evidence. To investigate leader gender and PRR party issue diversification (H1), Study 1 examines party manifestos as systematic indicators of issue emphasis over time.

5.1. Data and Methods

We construct a longitudinal dataset combining information on party leadership, gender composition, electoral performance, and manifesto content for 34 PRR parties in 15 Western European countries between 1988 and 2025 (countries, parties, and manifestos are listed in Table A1 in the Supplementary File). We focus on Western

Europe, where the PRR party family emerged within postwar democratic systems and immigration-based cleavages (Kitschelt, 1994; Mudde, 2007), where the gender gap in PRR support is particularly pronounced (Harteveld et al., 2015), and where prominent cases of female leadership provide leverage to examine gender.

The dataset includes 141 manifestos, including 25 observations of parties with a woman leader, across 10 parties—Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Danish People's Party (DF), Progress Party (FP), The New Right, National Rally (FN;RN), Alternative for Germany (AfD); Brothers of Italy (FdI), Right Answer 21 (JA21), Progress Party (FrP), Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—in eight countries—Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, UK (for further details, see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). Because women's leadership remains relatively rare among PRR parties, we treat the analysis as primarily descriptive. Accordingly, our objective is not to determine whether these patterns are unique to PRR parties, but to document how women's leadership is associated with agenda breadth and issue emphasis within this party family. These patterns also inform the experimental design presented in Study 2.

We examine two outcomes. First, we test whether women leaders are associated with broader policy agendas in party manifestos. Second, we assess whether leadership gender corresponds to shifts in the relative salience of specific issues.

We measure issue attention using the Manifesto Project Dataset (MPD), which provides the most comprehensive cross-national data on party programs. The MPD (Lehmann et al., 2025) coding scheme has known limitations, including broad and sometimes heterogeneous issue categories (Gemenis, 2013). These concerns are particularly relevant to cross-cutting issues such as gender, which may span several policy domains (Meguid et al., 2025). Because our analysis focuses on agenda breadth and the distribution of issue attention rather than precise ideological positions, the MPD remains an appropriate source for examining cross-national patterns over time.

To operationalise agenda breadth, we use the effective number of manifesto issues (ENMI), a Shannon entropy-based measure developed by Greene (2015) that captures how evenly manifesto attention is distributed across policy categories. Higher values indicate more diverse platforms. ENMI is calculated across 34 policy dimensions derived from the 56 main MPD categories (Table A2 in the Supplementary File). Following Lowe et al. (2011), we collapse confrontational pairs and related categories into composite indices to avoid inflating entropy by counting multiple expressions of the same issue as distinct. To examine shifts in emphasis, we also estimate issue-level salience across the 34 policy dimensions using their log-transformed importance scale (Appendix A in the Supplementary File).

The key independent variable is a binary indicator of whether the party was led by a woman at the time of the election. We control for the lagged share of women in the parliamentary delegation (Greene & O'Brien, 2016), incumbency status (Greene, 2015; Greene & O'Brien, 2016; Wagner & Meyer, 2014), and lagged vote share to account for the possibility that parties expand their agendas following weak performance (Somer-Topcu, 2015). We also include a lagged dependent variable to capture the persistence of manifesto agendas across electoral cycles. We include time period fixed effects to account for time trends; we use a five-year time period, since election timing is irregular across our countries. All models are estimated with party fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the party level.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Issue Breadth

We first examine whether women leaders are associated with broader policy agendas in PRR party manifestos. Consistent with our expectations (H1), Table 1 indicates a positive association between female leadership and issue breadth. In the baseline specification (Model 1), the coefficient on women leaders is positive and statistically significant (1.797, $p < 0.05$), indicating that, within parties, manifestos issued under female leadership tend to feature broader agendas. The association remains substantively unchanged in the full specification (Model 2; 2.422, $p < 0.01$). In substantive terms, the estimated effect corresponds to approximately a 0.6 standard deviation increase in ENMI, equivalent to a party expanding its manifesto from roughly 16 to 18 distinct issues.

As identification relies on a limited number of leadership transitions (DF, Denmark; FN, France; AfD, Germany; FrP, Norway; DUP, UK; FPÖ, Austria), Figure B3 in the Supplementary File shows that the results are not driven by any single country. Descriptive and robustness checks support the main findings (Appendix B in the Supplementary File).

None of the additional covariates reaches conventional significance. Contrary to Greene and O'Brien (2016), we find no significant association between women's parliamentary representation and agenda breadth in PRR parties, possibly because the low levels of women's representation in PRR parties constrain the

Table 1. Female leadership and manifesto issue breadth in PRR parties.

	Baseline model (1)	Full model (2)
Woman leader	1.797*	2.422**
	(0.779)	(0.697)
% Female MPs (t − 1)		0.022
		(0.034)
Incumbency		0.432
		(2.423)
Vote share (t − 1)		−0.061
		(0.067)
Lagged ENMI		−0.184
		(0.134)
Observations	133	94
R^2	0.343	0.323
R^2 (within)	0.024	0.085
Party fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Time period fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Clustered standard errors	Party	Party
Parties	29	20

Notes: + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; period fixed effects are measured in five-year bins (1988–2025); the reduction in observations and parties across models is due to missing values in the lagged variables and the automatic removal of singleton fixed effects; models 1 and 2 are OLS models with party fixed effects and party-clustered standard errors, estimated using the function *feols* from the fixest package in R (4.4.1).

mechanisms identified in prior research, leaving leadership as the more consequential channel through which gender shapes party agendas.

5.2.2. Issue Salience

Having confirmed that women leaders are linked to broader agendas, we next explore how exactly agendas shift by examining individual issues. Figure 1 presents the estimated "effects" of female leadership across individual policy dimensions. Each estimate is derived from a separate regression. Because the analysis involves multiple issue-specific models, individual coefficients should be interpreted cautiously; we therefore focus on patterns among issues exhibiting meaningful within-party temporal volatility rather than isolated coefficients. These estimates are descriptive in nature and serve primarily to inform the design of the survey experiment presented in the next section.

The results reveal a coherent pattern of issue reorientation under female leadership. Significant effects are concentrated on issues with moderate-to-low levels of within-party temporal volatility; that is, policy domains in which parties adjust emphasis across elections but are not among the most volatile or episodic elements of PRR agendas. Diagnostics on baseline salience and volatility are reported in Table C1 in the Supplementary File.

The estimated effects are distributed across several types of policy areas. Female leadership is associated with increased salience of environmental protection, worker protection (labour policy), multiculturalism, and cultural policy, alongside reduced attention to law and order and traditional morality. Notably, environmental protection also shows a positive and significant effect—a noteworthy result given the relatively low volatility of this issue across PRR manifestos. Together with the positive shifts in labour and cultural policy, this pattern is consistent with findings that female party leaders in Western Europe tend to pay greater attention to Green, Alternative, and Libertarian (GAL)-related issues (Kroeber, 2022).

At the same time, increases in multiculturalism-related discourse, capturing attention to issues of cultural identity, integration, and relations between cultural groups, and political authority suggest that female leaders do not distance themselves from the PRR's core agenda. Instead, they appear to foreground key elements of the party's identity politics while reinforcing narratives of leadership strength and governing competence. This pattern is consistent with Spierings and Zaslove (2015), who argue that PRR party leadership remains strongly masculinised even under female leaders, and with Meguid et al. (2025), who show that women in PRR parties tend to engage strategically with the party's ideological core.

The simultaneous decline in law and order and traditional morality salience suggests a complementary dynamic. These issues are among the most strongly associated with authoritarian masculinity in the radical right agenda and may generate role incongruity costs for female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002)—consistent with Meret (2015), who finds that female PRR leaders often soften the party's authoritarian tone without abandoning core positions.

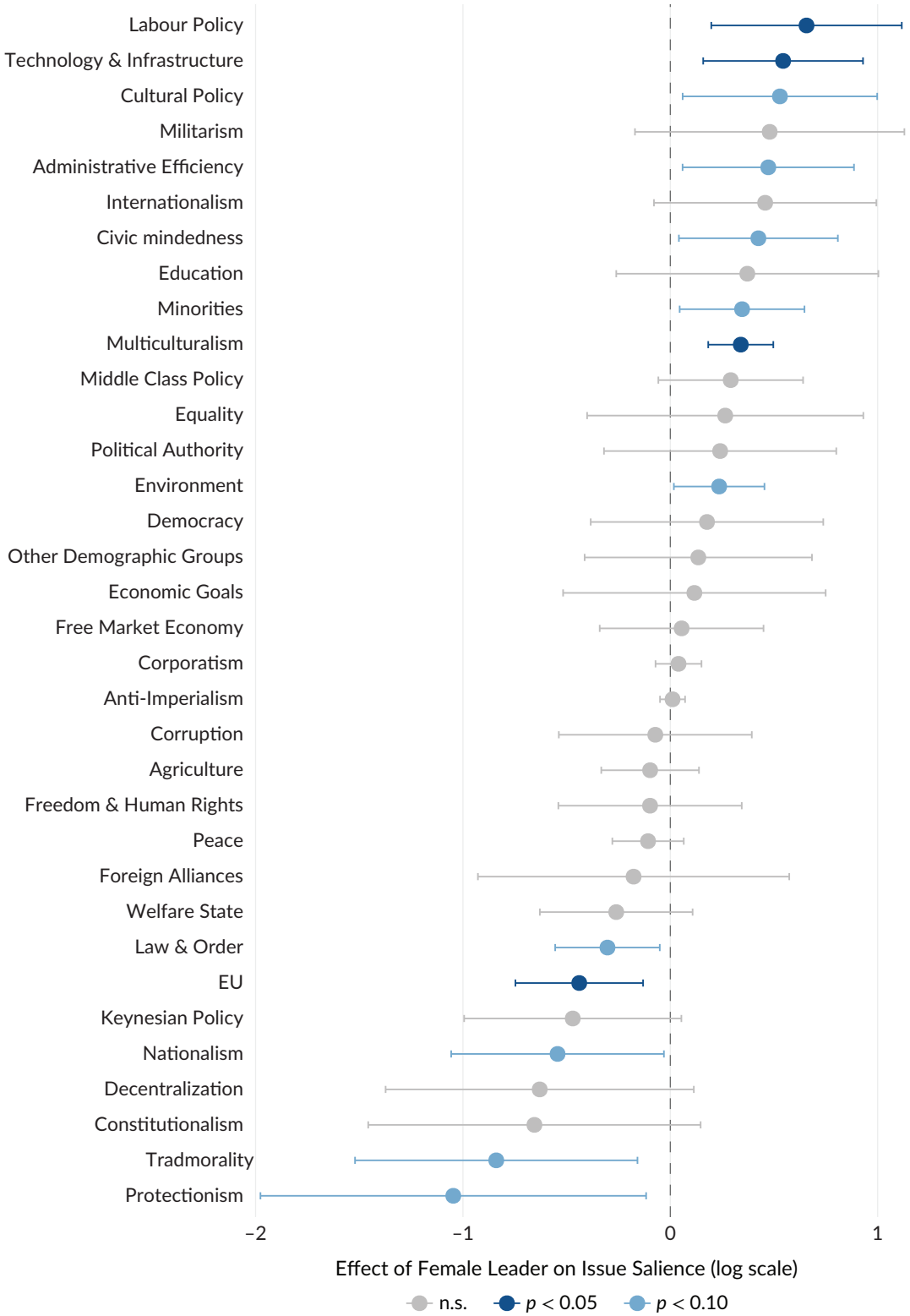


Figure 1. Issue-specific effects of female leadership on manifesto salience. Notes: Points represent within-party coefficient estimates from fixed-effects models with party and five-year period fixed effects, and 90% confidence intervals; positive values indicate issue salience increase under female leadership; models include the same controls used in the previous analysis (Model 2); all models are estimated in R 4.4.1 using the function *feols* from the fixest package.

Taken together, these results indicate that PRR women leaders maintain ownership of core issues while expanding attention to additional policy domains such as the environment and labour policy. These patterns establish the empirical foundation for the second part of our analysis. If women leaders broaden the policy repertoire of PRR parties, an important question is how voters respond when these issues are presented as part of the party platform. We address this question in the next section through a survey experiment.

6. Study 2: Evidence From a UK Survey Experiment

The observational analysis shows that women-led PRR parties tend to broaden their policy agendas and increase emphasis on socially protective policy domains. These patterns inform the design of our survey experiment. Rather than testing abstract forms of ideological moderation, the experiment evaluates how voters respond when nativist parties incorporate additional policy domains into their platforms. We focus the experimental stimuli on environmental and labour policy.

6.1. Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an original survey experiment in the UK in February and March of 2026. The UK offers a useful setting for testing our argument. Although PRR parties have historically been less successful in the UK than in continental Europe, our study was fielded during a period of strong support for Reform UK. This allows us to examine voter responses to PRR agenda expansion in a context where the PRR is politically salient, and also offers a useful point of comparison with more established European cases. Importantly, Reform UK has never had a woman leader, meaning respondents are unlikely to have prior associations between the party and female leadership, reducing the risk that pre-existing attitudes toward a specific leader confound our experimental estimates. The survey was administered online through survey provider Prolific to $N = 3{,}983$ UK voters. A detailed description of the sample is reported in Table D3 in the Supplementary File.

Recruitment quotas were applied based on party affiliation using the most recent YouGov voting intention poll available prior to fieldwork (details in Table D4 in the Supplementary File). The study was pre-registered; the pre-registration is available at https://aspredicted.org/bi2bj8.pdf. Appendix D in the Supplementary File details how this study relates to the pre-analysis plan.

In the experiment, respondents read a short vignette describing a hypothetical political leader presenting their electoral agenda. We randomly manipulate both the scope of the policy agenda and the rhetorical framing used by the leader. The experiment includes three agenda conditions: (a) a narrow agenda focused exclusively on anti-immigration policy (control), (b) a broader agenda combining immigration, environmental, and labour policy framed using agentic language (treatment 1), and (c) the same broader agenda framed using communal language (treatment 2). For the environmental component, we specifically refer in the vignette to climate policy, coded in the MPD under the category of environmental protection (Lehmann et al., 2025) and typically articulated through climate and energy policy in PRR parties (Lockwood, 2018). More details in Table D1 in the Supplementary File.

We operationalised the agentic/communal distinction by varying the framing of each additional policy statement. The agentic framing employed language emphasising strength, authority, and decisiveness

(e.g., “decisive,” “scrap,” “break,” “slash”), while the communal framing employed language emphasising care, cooperation, and social responsibility (e.g., “family,” “community,” “support,” “protect”). Beyond word choice, the two framings also differed in how they identified the beneficiary of the policy: Agentic statements were phrased in individualistic, first-person terms centred on the leader’s own resolve, whereas communal statements explicitly named the family and the community as the beneficiaries of the policy. Table D1 in the Supplementary File reports the full wording. To validate this manipulation, we, in addition, analyse respondents’ open-ended answers using the same dictionary-based approach: Respondents in each condition use significantly more of the corresponding (agentic or communal) language (Table E2, Supplementary File).

We also manipulate the gender of the leader described in the vignette. Leader gender is signalled through gendered names, pronouns, and a silhouette displayed alongside the text. The combination of agenda scope, framing style, and leader gender produces six experimental conditions (see Table 2). The vignette is shown in Figure 2.

Table 2. Overview of experimental conditions.

Condition	Framing	Male Leader	Female Leader
Control: Narrow Agenda	—	Control	Control
Treatment 1 (T1): Broad Agenda	Agentic	T1	T1
Treatment 2 (T2): Broad Agenda	Communal	T2	T2

The policy positions in the vignette reflect highly nativist issue positions commonly associated with populist radical-right parties, although the leader’s party affiliation is not explicitly stated. This was a deliberate choice, because when party labels are present, voters tend to rely on partisan cues as a shortcut, displacing attention from other substantive information (Kirkland & Coppock, 2018). Accordingly, we interpret our experimental results as capturing responses to a nativist party leader rather than to any specific PRR party.

Importantly, we confirm that the majority of respondents (60%) did place the party on the radical right of the ideological spectrum (L–R from 8 to 10), and among these respondents the results are substantively identical to those obtained in the full sample (Table E3.1, Supplementary File). The treatment effects are thus not an artefact of ambiguity in how the nativist party was perceived.

Stimuli in the vignette draw on recurring policy proposals from UK PRR manifestos while avoiding verbatim reproduction of any specific party document. As we show in Table D1 in the Supplementary File, the substantive policy positions remain identical; only agenda scope and rhetorical framing vary. Computational text analysis further indicates that the agentic and communal versions occupy very similar ideological positions, confirming that the manipulation operates through framing rather than substance (Figure D1, Supplementary File). This design thus allows us to isolate how voters respond to differences in agenda breadth, framing style, and leader gender.

After reading the vignette, respondents evaluated the leader and message across several dimensions. Our main outcome measures capture evaluations of the leader and the perceived ideological character of the message, including leader favourability, perceived extremism, vote likelihood, and party placement on a 0–10 left–right scale. Finally, we collected standard demographic information, including gender and party

Control Condition: Narrow Agenda

Rebecca [Henry] Mitchell, the party leader, said:

I believe Britain must take back **control of its borders**. As a woman/man born and bred in this country, my priority is clear: **to end mass immigration, stop all small-boat crossings** and **deport illegal migrants** from safe countries.

Record mass immigration has damaged our country. We must act in the national interest and stand for British culture, identity, and national values.

Treatment 1: Broad Agenda with Agentic Framing

Rebecca [Henry] Mitchell, the party leader, said:

I believe Britain must take back **control of its borders**. As a woman/man born and bred in this country, my priority is clear: to **end mass immigration, stop all small-boat crossings** and **deport illegal migrants** from safe countries.

Under my new leadership, our party will **scrap the costly Net Zero agenda**. I will take decisive action to harness Britain's own resources **to drive down energy bills**, instead of forcing taxpayers to find unrealistic renewable targets.

And to strengthen our economy and break the benefit trap, I will **cut taxes on work**, tighten eligibility and **strictly limit welfare support** to only those who qualify, and **slash the red tape** holding back British enterprise to create well-paid jobs.

Treatment 2: Broad Agenda with Communal Framing

Rebecca [Henry] Mitchell, the party leader, said:

I believe Britain must take back **control of its borders**. As a woman/man born and bred in this country, my priority is clear: to **end mass immigration, stop all small-boat crossings** and **deport illegal migrants** from safe countries.

Under my new leadership, our party will **shift away from the Net Zero agenda**. We will work together to use Britain's shared resources to **make energy bills affordable** and **protect the livelihoods of our families and communities**, instead of asking households to shoulder the burden of unrealistic renewable goals.

And to strengthen our economy and **help people escape the benefit trap**, we will **cut taxes on work**, ensure our **welfare system protects and supports** only those in genuine need, and carefully **reduce unnecessary regulations** that hold back British enterprise to create well-paid jobs for families across the country.

Figure 2. Vignette overview. Notes: Names in brackets indicate the male leader condition; bold text indicates key policy terms.

affiliation, to examine heterogeneous treatment effects. The full questionnaire is reported in Table D2 in the Supplementary File.

We estimate OLS regression models to capture average differences between experimental conditions in respondents' evaluations of the leader and message, with interaction models to assess whether effects vary by leader gender, respondent gender, and party affiliation. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the treatment effects; full regression tables are in the Supplementary File.

6.2. Results

We begin by testing whether presenting a broader policy agenda changes how voters evaluate nativist party leaders and their messages (H2). Recall that these hypotheses predict that leaders presenting a broader agenda should appear less extreme (H2a), receive more favourable evaluations (H2b), and generate greater electoral support (H2c). The manipulation check confirms that treated respondents correctly identified the issues in their assigned message (Figure E1, Supplementary File).

Figure 3 displays the estimated treatment effects across the main outcomes, with full regression results reported in Table E3 in the Supplementary File.

Pooling the two agenda-broadening treatments together provides little support for these expectations. Presenting a broader policy agenda slightly increases perceived message radicalism ($\beta = 0.086$, $p < 0.05$), corresponding to approximately 0.08 standard deviations on the outcome scale (a modest effect; Cohen, 2013). This result runs counter to H2a and suggests that expanding the agenda does not, on average, make PRR messaging appear less extreme. This result is driven primarily by the agentic condition.

In contrast, communal broadening generates a different pattern of responses. When the broader agenda is framed using communal language, respondents place the party significantly further to the left on the ideological scale ($\beta = -0.193$, $p < 0.05$), corresponding to approximately 0.10 standard deviations. Communal broadening also improves evaluations of the leader. Leaders presenting a broader agenda with communal framing receive higher favourability evaluations ($\beta = 0.119$, $p < 0.05$, 0.08 standard deviations) and modestly higher vote likelihood ($\beta = 0.114$, $p < 0.10$, 0.07 standard deviations). These effects provide partial support for H2b and H2c. Agenda expansion alone does not automatically soften perceptions of PRR messaging. Instead, its electoral consequences depend on how the expanded agenda is communicated: Communal framing appears to moderate perceived ideology and improve leader evaluations, whereas agentic framing reinforces perceptions of radicalism.

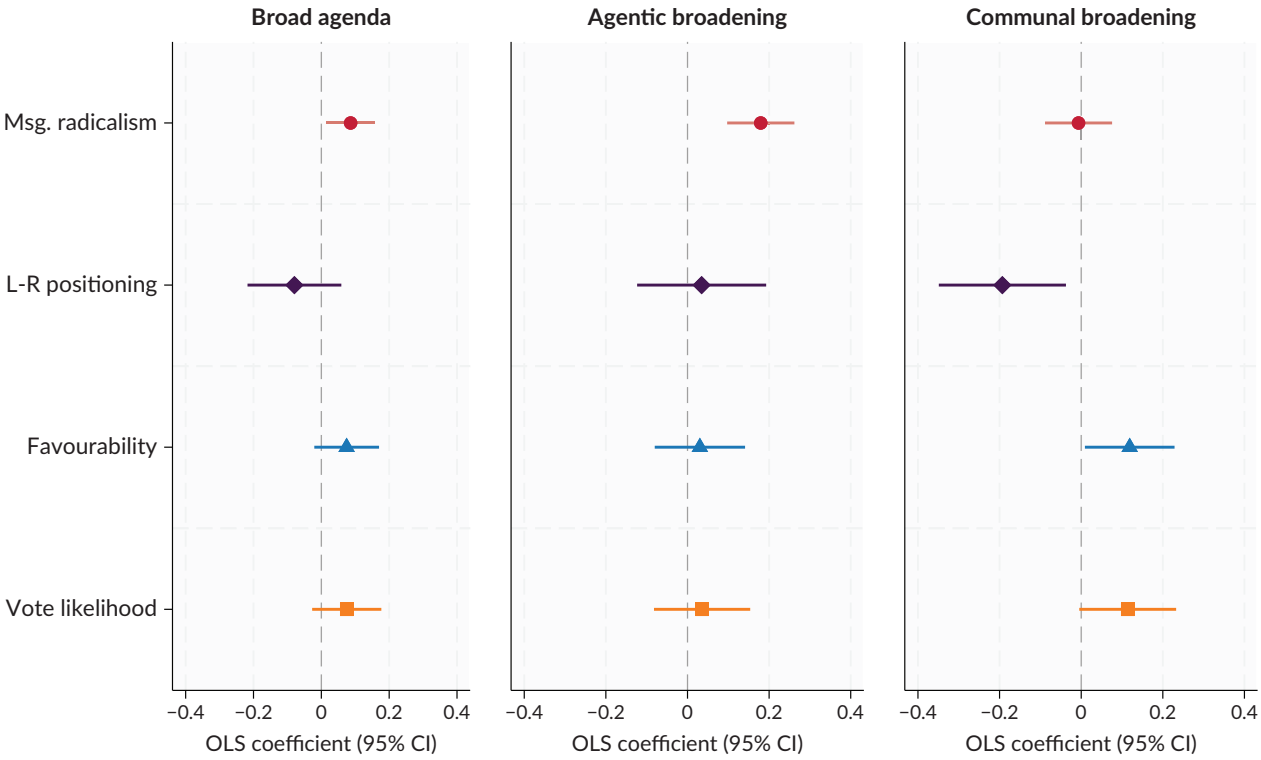


Figure 3. Treatment effects across outcomes. Notes: Each panel displays OLS coefficients with 95% confidence intervals for one broadening condition (broad agenda overall, agentic broadening, and communal broadening) across four outcomes (message radicalism [H2a], left–right party positioning [alternative for H2a], leader favourability [H2b], and vote likelihood [H2c]); the dashed vertical line indicates the null effect (zero); all models are estimated in STATA 19, with robust standard errors; $N = 3{,}983$.

To assess whether these effects vary across the electorate, Table E4 in the Supplementary File presents interaction models between the treatment conditions and respondents' party affiliation. Of particular interest are responses among right-wing voters, for whom H2b and H2c predict stronger positive effects of agenda broadening. To further illustrate these differences, Table E4.2 in the Supplementary File reports party-specific regressions estimated separately for each party subsample. The results provide some evidence consistent with these expectations. Among Conservative voters, presenting a broader agenda increases leader favourability and vote likelihood. These patterns suggest that right-leaning voters respond more positively to expanded policy agendas than to immigration-only messaging.

The difference we observe between agentic and communal framing is also consistent with H4. While the preceding results estimate each condition against the control, Table 3 compares the two conditions directly. Restricting the sample to treated respondents, communal framing produces substantially lower perceived message radicalism than agentic framing ($\beta = -0.186$, $p < 0.001$, approximately 0.17 standard deviations), and places the party significantly further left on the ideological scale ($\beta = -0.228$, $p < 0.01$, roughly 0.11 standard deviations). Both effects are modest but consistent with the expectation that communal language repackages messaging in ways that feel less extreme to voters, even when the underlying policy content remains unchanged. The differences in leader favourability and vote likelihood are directionally consistent with H4 but not statistically significant. These findings offer partial support for H4: Communal framing softens ideological perceptions of PRR messaging, while its direct impact on candidate evaluations and vote intention remains suggestive rather than conclusive.

Table 3. Communal vs. agentic framing: Treatment comparison across outcomes.

	Msg. Radicalism	L–R Positioning	Favourability	Vote Likelihood
Communal	−0.186***	−0.228**	0.088	0.078
	(0.041)	(0.076)	(0.056)	(0.061)
Constant	3.378***	7.588***	2.838***	2.631***
	(0.029)	(0.054)	(0.040)	(0.043)
Observations	2,650	2,650	2,650	2,650
R^2	0.008	0.003	0.001	0.001

Notes: OLS regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses; + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; models estimated in STATA 19.

6.2.1. Leader Gender

We next test whether agenda broadening improves evaluations of female leaders more than male leaders (H3), and whether communal framing produces larger gains for women leaders than for men (H5). Figure 4 presents predicted means by treatment condition and leader gender; interaction models are presented in Table E5 in the Supplementary File.

The results provide little support for either hypothesis. Across the full sample, the interaction between the treatments and the leader's gender is not statistically significant for any outcome. In other words, broadening the agenda or changing the rhetorical framing does not improve evaluations of women leaders more than those of men leaders.

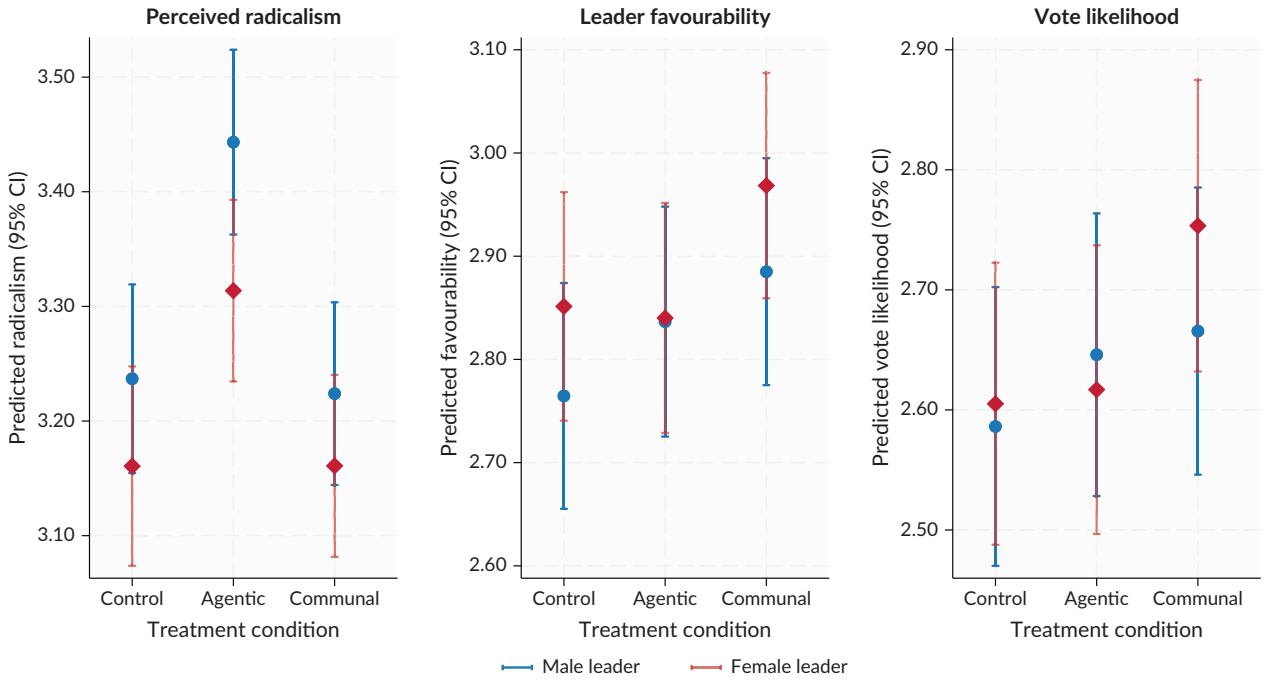


Figure 4. Treatment effects by leader gender. Notes: Each panel displays predicted means from OLS regressions with treatment variables interacted with leader gender across three outcomes (perceived radicalism, leader favourability, and vote likelihood); dots indicate the estimated means, while bars show 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors; blue circles represent male leaders and red diamonds represent female leaders; all models are estimated in STATA 19, with robust standard errors; $N = 3{,}983$.

Descriptively, messages attributed to female leaders are perceived as slightly less extreme on average than identical messages attributed to male leaders, although these differences are small. The predicted values in Figure 4 also show modest variation across framing conditions: Female leaders perform somewhat better under communal framing and slightly worse under agentic framing relative to the control. However, the trajectories for male and female leaders remain largely parallel, indicating that the broadening treatments do not differentially benefit female leaders.

We also test whether treatment effects (communal and agentic) vary by respondent gender. As shown in Table E6 in the Supplementary File, we find no statistically significant gender differences in responses to the framing treatments. We further examine whether responses differ between centre and radical right voters, with the discussion and results reported in Appendix E7 in the Supplementary File.

To summarise our experimental results, simply broadening the issue agenda does not consistently moderate perceptions of nativist party messaging. Instead, the electoral consequences of expansion depend on how the broader platform is communicated. Communal framing of the expanded agenda improves leader evaluations and increases vote likelihood, particularly among centre-right voters, whereas agentic framing reinforces perceptions of radicalism and does not increase vote intention. And contrary to our expectations, these effects do not vary systematically by leader gender. Women leaders are neither penalised nor rewarded for presenting broader agendas, and male and female voters respond similarly to the issue expansion treatments. Overall, the findings suggest that the strategic benefits of agenda expansion for PRR parties lie less in the gender of the leader presenting the message than in the rhetorical style through which the expanded policy agenda is communicated—a style which, in practice, is associated more with women.

7. Conclusion

Are women leaders associated with PRR agenda expansion, and how do voters respond when nativist parties present broader policy platforms? Combining cross-national manifesto data with a survey experiment, we find that European PRR parties present broader policy agendas when they are led by women. Within the same party, manifestos issued under women's leadership give attention to a wider range of policy domains. Women leaders are associated with diversification of issue attention even within niche PRR parties.

The results of our UK survey experiment show that such agenda shifts can have electoral consequences, but these depend on how broader platforms are communicated. Presenting a wider set of policy issues does not in itself reduce perceptions of extremism or increase support. Instead, broader agendas receive more favourable evaluations when they are framed using communal language that emphasises collective wellbeing and social responsibility—and this is especially true among centre-right, Conservative voters. In contrast, agentic framing that emphasises strength and authority leads respondents to perceive the message as more radical and does not increase willingness to support the party. Contrary to our expectations, these responses do not vary systematically by leader gender, nor do they vary by respondent gender. Instead, our results suggest that the gender of leaders matters more indirectly, insofar as it shapes rhetorical style.

These findings contribute to several strands of literature. First, they add to research on niche party competition by showing that agenda diversification shapes voter perceptions in ways that depend on communication style. While previous work has documented policy expansion among PRR parties (Bergman & Flatt, 2020), our results highlight the importance of how newly introduced issues are framed when presented to voters. Second, the findings speak to debates on gender and political leadership. Much of the existing literature focuses on whether women leaders shift parties' positions ideologically or prioritise certain "women-friendly" policy domains. Our results suggest a different dynamic: Women's leadership in PRR parties is associated with attention to a broader range of political issues, rather than systematic ideological change. These patterns resemble findings from research on mainstream parties showing that women leaders expand the scope of agendas without altering positions (Greene & O'Brien, 2016); we establish this is even true within the niche PRR.

Last, the results contribute to work on gendered political communication by highlighting the important role of communal framing. In our experiment, voters respond more positively to political messages that emphasise collective welfare and social cohesion, even though (or perhaps especially because) such messages originate from parties known for confrontational political styles. This contrasts with research suggesting that agentic traits are seen as desirable qualities for politicians (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schneider et al., 2022). One interpretation is that agentic leadership traits are subject to ceiling effects: When rhetoric centred on strength and authority becomes too pronounced and veers into authoritarianism, its electoral value diminishes.

Our study has several limitations, which offer directions for future research. The observational analysis relies on a limited number of gendered leadership transitions among PRR parties and should therefore be interpreted with caution. Future research could incorporate additional cases over time or extend the analysis to PRR parties in other regions to increase leverage on leadership change. The survey experiment focuses on a single national context and a specific set of policy issues; replicating the design in other countries and

policy domains would help assess the generalisability of findings. In particular, future work should examine whether the effects identified here travel to contexts where PRR parties are more deeply institutionalised and have longer histories of electoral success. Finally, future research could usefully analyse real-world political communication to determine how frequently men and women PRR leaders employ communal or agentic framing when presenting policy agendas.

Overall, our findings point to a broader implication for understanding contemporary PRR politics: Agenda expansion alone does not necessarily soften the perceived radicalism of nativist parties. Instead, the effects of broader party agendas depend on how issues are communicated. In this sense, the rhetorical style through which policies are presented may matter as much as the policies themselves.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data and replication code available on request.

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The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing. All content and analysis are the authors' own, and the authors take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Populist Parties, Female Populist Leaders, and the Gendered Vote in Germany

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Abstract

Studying the relationship between gender and populist voting is challenging because few electoral contexts allow for a direct comparison of relevant populist parties from different ideological camps under shared structural conditions. The 2025 German federal election provides a rare case: two ideologically distinct populist parties, both led by prominent female leaders, competed nationally. Alice Weidel headed the radical-right AfD, while Sahra Wagenknecht led the left-authoritarian BSW. Although both parties are headed by women and use populist appeals, their gendered electorates differ sharply: the AfD is supported disproportionately by men, whereas the BSW draws a larger share of female voters. Because the two parties operate in the same electoral and institutional environment, this case lets us isolate the roles of general issue preferences and gender-related attitudes in shaping gendered divides in populist voting, without the confounding influence of differing opportunity structures or leadership gender effects. Using data from the German Longitudinal Election Study, we analyze propensity-to-vote scores for both parties. The results show that the gender gap persists in baseline models but disappears once respondents' attitudes toward gender-related issues are introduced, indicating that such policy preferences systematically structure gendered voting. Mediation analysis confirms that the initial gender gap operates through these gender-related attitudes. Although leader evaluations are strong predictors of overall party support, they do not account for the gender gap. Together, these results underscore the central role of gendered policy orientations in structuring populist vote choice, highlighting how issue positions, leadership cues, and gender-related attitudes jointly shape gendered electoral behavior.

Keywords

female populist leaders; gender and populism; German politics; voting behavior

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1. Introduction

Studying the relationship between gender and populist voting is difficult because most electoral contexts do not allow for meaningful comparisons across populist parties from different ideological camps. Existing research suggests that support for populist parties is shaped by the interaction of multiple factors, including the activation of individual-level populist attitudes, issue preference and ideological congruence, and features of the political supply side (Hawkins et al., 2020; Zhirnov et al., 2026). Furthermore, variation in the available choice set—whether voters face one or multiple populist options—is likely to shape vote choice itself. In electoral contexts with only one relevant populist party, this additionally complicates efforts to disentangle the effects of ideology from those of populism when it comes to gendered vote choice.

The 2025 German federal election provides a rare opportunity to address this problem. In this election, two ideologically distinct populist parties with credible prospects of entering parliament competed nationwide: the populist radical-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the left-authoritarian Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht—Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (BSW). Alice Weidel, who has co-led the AfD alongside Tino Chrupalla since 2022, was selected as its sole chancellor candidate for the 2025 election. She enjoys strong support among the party base and electorate. At the same time, her personal profile is at odds with the party's ideology: she is openly lesbian and in a long-term relationship with a woman of color, which contrasts with the party's emphasis on traditional gender roles and conservative family norms.

The newly founded left-authoritarian populist party BSW is led by its founder Sahra Wagenknecht, a former leading figure of the Left Party (Die Linke). Wagenknecht left the party in late 2023 due to escalating strategic and ideological conflicts over migration, "identity politics," and the party's target electorate, arguing that it had become "too liberal," and subsequently founded the BSW as a new political project. While positioned on the left on economic issues, the party adopts comparatively conservative positions on cultural questions, placing it much closer to the AfD than to Wagenknecht's former party on this dimension (Steiner & Hillen, 2025).

Despite being led by prominent female populist candidates, the parties' electorates diverged sharply along gender lines in the 2025 federal election. As in previous German elections, the "modern gender gap" was evident, with women tending to favor left-leaning parties and men more likely to support conservative or right-wing parties (Hudde, 2025). A gender gap is also visible between the AfD and BSW. Women are comparatively more likely to support the BSW, whereas men are disproportionately represented among voters of the AfD. However, so far, research has not addressed how this discrepancy could be explained. This stark contrast provides a particularly clear case for examining how populist vote choice intersects with gender.

Due to the regional and ideological sensitivity, exploring the connection between gender, populism, and voting requires a context in which two ideologically distinct populist parties compete under shared structural conditions. Against this backdrop, the 2025 German federal election provides a valuable opportunity to investigate whether gender plays a more significant role in shaping support for populist parties than is generally acknowledged. Moreover, this case is particularly well suited for comparative analysis, as both parties are led by women, ensuring a level of comparability that would be harder to achieve if leadership differed by gender. In addressing the underexplored nexus between gender and populism, this study investigates the following research question:

RQ: Why and how does gender structure support for the two female-led populist parties, AfD and BSW, in the 2025 German federal election?

Using survey data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) 2025, this study examines the sources of the gender gap in support for the AfD and the BSW. The next section reviews the literature on gender gaps in voting behavior and the gendered dimensions of populist support, integrating demand- and supply-side perspectives. We then develop a theoretical framework that conceptualizes gender-related attitudes as a key mechanism linking gender to vote choice. Using OLS regression models and mediation analysis, our findings show how gender differences in party support are attenuated once gender-related attitudes are taken into account. The final section discusses the implications of these findings for understanding the role of gendered policy orientations in structuring support for populist parties.

2. Gender Gaps in Voting Behavior

Gender gaps in electoral behavior have been studied extensively for decades, with research showing that these patterns are neither fixed nor uniform but vary across time and countries. In most Western democracies, women were more likely than men to support conservative and center-right parties until the 1970s, a pattern often attributed to women's higher levels of religiosity and their exclusion from the labor market (A. Campbell et al., 1980). Since then, however, this pattern has reversed. Women are now more likely than men to support left-leaning parties—a shift commonly referred to as the "modern gender gap"—which is also reflected in their ideological self-placement and policy preferences (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014; Inglehart & Norris, 2000).

Most of the explanations emphasize gradual, long-term societal transformations (Shorrocks, 2018). In their "developmental theory," Inglehart and Norris (2000) argue that modernization processes like women's expanding education and labor-force participation have enhanced women's autonomy while exposing them to persistent gender-based inequalities, thereby fostering left-leaning political orientations. Complementary research highlights the role of secularization and women's overrepresentation in comparatively lower-paying sectors, all of which contribute to the formation of new gendered political preferences over time and across generations (Dassonneville, 2021; Emmenegger & Manow, 2014; van Ditmars & Shorrocks, 2025).

Another strand of attitudinal research suggests that the gender gap may partly reflect a "feminism gap" rather than a genuinely gender-based divide (Bergh, 2007). From this perspective, variation in "feminist consciousness" (i.e., gender-related attitudes such as perceptions of gender roles, support for women's rights movements, and endorsement of feminist policies) constitutes a key explanatory factor. Because left-wing parties are generally more progressive on gender equality, and women tend to hold more egalitarian attitudes, they are more likely to vote left (Grunow et al., 2018). Similarly, individuals of any sex who hold progressive positions on these issues are also more inclined to support left-wing parties (Gurin, 1985; Hayes, 1997). This perspective gains renewed relevance in light of recent research highlighting the increasing politicization of gender across policy fields and national contexts, which is strongly driven by the anti-gender mobilizations of a broad coalition of radical-right, conservative, and center-right actors (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Research on candidate gender and voting behavior further suggests that women are, on average, more likely to support female candidates; however, this effect is highly contingent on contextual factors like country,

party affiliation, and the candidates' perceived policy positions (R. Campbell & Heath, 2017; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Crucially, descriptive representation alone is insufficient: gender-based affinity effects are strongest when female candidates are perceived as substantively representing women's interests (Plutzer & Zipp, 1996). Consequently, the electoral relevance of female populist leadership might depend less on the gender per se than on the alignment between leader identity, party ideology, and gender-related policy positions. However, female leadership can increase support among women even in contexts where such alignment is weak. A prominent example is the French radical-right Rassemblement National, which attracted more women under Marine Le Pen than under her father (Mayer, 2013).

These insights are particularly relevant when shifting the focus from general gender gaps in voting to populist party competition. As populist parties have gained strength across Europe, research has increasingly converged on a common conceptualization of populism. Following Mudde's ideational approach, populism is commonly conceptualized as a thin-centred ideology that relies on a host ideology to articulate a broader political agenda (Mudde, 2004). Further studies suggest that populist parties engage with gender differently depending on their ideological and cultural contexts (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015).

Against this backdrop, most existing research on gender and populism has focused on the persistent (populist) radical-right gender gap, whereby men are consistently more likely than women to support populist radical-right parties (Immerzeel et al., 2015). Mediation-based explanations attribute this gap to gender differences in the thick ideological attitudes associated with radical-right support. While some evidence points to a broader gender gap in populist attitudes beyond the radical-right, findings remain inconclusive (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017).

Moderation-based accounts posit that comparable levels of nativist and authoritarian attitudes do not translate into radical-right vote choice to the same extent among women as they do among men (Harteveld et al., 2015). Other studies emphasize socio-psychological factors, noting that men are generally more likely than women to support ideologically extreme and socially stigmatized parties, as women are more sensitive to social harmony and social desirability (Harteveld et al., 2017).

3. Demand-Side Factors: Explaining the Populist Vote

At the individual level, populist attitudes are often associated with support for populist parties, irrespective of the parties' thick ideological orientations (Hawkins et al., 2020; Loew & Faas, 2019; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). Yet, research on how populist attitudes interact with ideological components in shaping vote choice remains limited. Studies of the populist radical-right suggest that support depends on both populist attitudes and alignment with party positions on key issues (Lewandowsky & Wagner, 2023; Zhirnov et al., 2026). Concerning sociodemographic factors, support for these parties is more common among individuals with lower educational attainments, working-class backgrounds, and those living in precarity (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018).

Nevertheless, by comparing support for populist parties from varying political camps, Rooduijn (2018) does not identify a common denominator uniting all populist voters. However, evidence from European democracies suggests that right- and left-wing populist voters share some core beliefs and attitudes. They exhibit low institutional trust, negative evaluations of political responsiveness, economic pessimism, and

high Euroscepticism (Krause et al., 2017). The key difference lies in issue positions and priorities: radical-right populist voters emphasize immigration and Euroscepticism, while left-wing populists focus on economic grievances and redistribution.

The gendered dimensions of populist attitudes remain understudied. While some studies find no significant differences in the distribution of populist attitudes between men and women (Hameleers et al., 2021; Piterová & Loziak, 2024), others show that men are more likely to hold populist attitudes at a higher level than women (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Pruysers, 2021; Rico & Anduiza, 2019), which might translate to a higher likelihood of men voting for populist parties (Geurkink et al., 2020).

4. The Supply-Side: Populist Parties and Gender

As for the supply-side relationship, the focus is similarly limited to the populist radical-right (T. Akkerman, 2015; Dietze & Roth, 2020). Here, studies consistently find that these parties are structurally misogynistic and committed to the re-traditionalization of gender relations, promoting a binary and essentialist understanding of gender that reinforces the sexual division of labor and opposes feminist and egalitarian values.

Despite their gender positions, populist radical-right parties include a notable number of active female members and prominent leaders (Ammassari, 2025), with Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni among the most visible. Research suggests that radical-right parties strategically exploit the contradiction between essentialist gender ideologies and the visibility of women within their own parties, defying traditional roles as a "dynamic paradox" (Dietze, 2018), which legitimizes rather than undermines their agenda. Female members and leaders can selectively highlight women's issues, especially during electoral campaigns, without substantively altering the party's core positions (Meguid et al., 2025). These strategies frequently take the form of femonationalist framings (Farris, 2017), invoking women's rights to justify exclusionary, particularly anti-immigrant, policies, thereby attempting to appeal to more moderate voters. In this context, female leaders function as signals of moderation and credibility. However, such appeals remain purely symbolic, and they are found to achieve limited success in closing the gender gap in support for radical-right parties, outside of the aforementioned case of Le Pen in France (Meguid et al., 2025).

Among the few studies comparing the gendered appeals of different populist actors, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015) are particularly influential. Comparing European right-wing and Latin American left-wing populist parties, they find that gender positions primarily reflect host ideology and national context: Latin American left-wing populists adopt relatively progressive gender stances within conservative settings, while European right-wing populists defend more traditionalist positions in comparatively progressive contexts, often invoking femonationalist narratives. They conclude that populism itself has no intrinsic relationship with gender. However, because they compare ideologically distinct actors embedded in markedly different regional contexts, such an inference may be premature and warrants further systematic investigation.

The absence of a uniform gender pattern across ideological variants does not imply gender neutrality; rather, gender may function as a flexible symbolic resource through which populists construct collective identity and articulate inclusion and exclusion. The aforementioned supply-side research shows that populist parties deploy gender strategically, albeit in divergent ways across the ideological spectrum (Mostov, 2020). Right-wing populists emphasize binary and traditionalist gender norms while leveraging female leaders and

femonationalist rhetoric to broaden appeal, whereas left-wing populists foreground women's political and economic equality while often limiting recognition of broader gender diversity.

5. Two Populist Female Chancellor Candidates: BSW and AfD in the 2025 German Federal Election

The German political landscape in 2025 offers a rare opportunity to study how two ideologically distinct female-led populist actors—the BSW and the AfD—compete for votes under shared national and institutional conditions. The final results reveal intriguing divergent gender gaps between these populist competitors: representative election statistics show that the AfD received 20.8 percent of the vote overall, with support among men exceeding that of women by 8.4 percentage points, whereas the BSW captured 4.98 percent, with support among women being 1.3 percentage points higher (Die Bundeswahlleiterin, 2025, p. 14). Among all parties, the gender gap was largest for the AfD, despite its female chancellor candidate. In this section, we take a closer look at the 2025 electoral competition and the populist parties' positions, particularly regarding gender attitudes, to better understand the observed gap.

Although the BSW is relatively new and its programmatic base is still evolving, its programs for European, federal, and regional elections already provide sufficient material to classify it as a left-authoritarian populist actor in its combination of traditional left-wing economic positions with sociocultural conservatism (Thomeczek, 2024; Wagner et al., 2023). In the year preceding the 2025 federal election, the party joined governing coalitions in Brandenburg and Thuringia and received 6.2 percent of the vote in the 2024 European Parliament election. In the federal election itself, however, the party narrowly failed to enter parliament, missing the 5 percent threshold by only about 9,000 votes. Despite this outcome, the BSW has emerged as a significant new competitor in the German party landscape.

By contrast, the AfD has strongly consolidated its profile as a prototypical authoritarian, nativist, and populist radical-right party since its foundation in 2013 (Heitmeyer, 2024). Over time, the party has developed a stable core electorate and achieved growing electoral success across state and federal elections, most notably emerging as the strongest party in Thuringia in 2024 and the second strongest party in the 2025 federal election (Heinze, 2025).

Both parties compete for a populist electorate but occupy distinct positions within a two-dimensional party space. The AfD is located in the right-conservative quadrant, whereas the BSW occupies a left-conservative position, rendering the two parties relatively close on the sociocultural dimension but more distant on the socioeconomic dimension (Steiner & Hillen, 2025). While the AfD combines neoliberal elements with nationalist anti-capitalist rhetoric, the BSW advances an anti-neoliberal, nationalist agenda centered on the selective expansion of welfare state measures. Despite their general ideological differences, the parties share several core positions. Both AfD and the BSW support restrictive immigration policies, adopt protectionist economic positions while criticizing the EU and globalization, oppose military support for Ukraine in its defense against Russia, and reject cosmopolitanism and diversity (Thomeczek & Wagner, 2025).

Alongside immigration, debates about gender have become an increasingly salient component of the sociocultural dimension of party competition (Wallaschek et al., 2024). As is the case for populist attitudes (Hawkins et al., 2020), the impact of any issue on voting depends on whether those attitudes are activated in

a given context. The same logic likely applies to gender-related attitudes. In Germany, recent public debates have focused particularly on institutional gender equality measures, gender quotas, and gender-inclusive language (Jäckle, 2022). While these issues are increasingly polarized in public opinion, their salience in electoral campaigns varies over time. In the 2025 campaign, gender issues generally played a minor role, only surfacing briefly in debates on the potential decriminalization of abortion in early 2025.

A careful review of the parties' federal election programs reveals their positions on some gender-related issues. The AfD follows a typical radical-right pattern, promoting traditional gender roles, opposing abortion rights, and framing gender equality policies as expressions of a "totalitarian gender ideology" (Lang, 2017). Consistent with this rhetoric, the AfD's 2025 federal election program embeds gender in traditionalist, heteronormative, and biologically essentialist narratives, linking the protection of women, children, and families to nationalist and civilizational concerns (Alternative für Deutschland, 2025, pp. 145–155).

Although systematic research on BSW's gender positions remains absent, the party generally follows a second-wave feminist perspective, advocating expansive legal and social equality for women and supporting state measures to strengthen women's and family rights (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2025, pp. 33–34). At the same time, this framework remains firmly binary: the BSW portrays trans women and efforts to deconstruct gender categories as threats to these goals (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2025, p. 34). Although both parties employ femonationalist rhetoric, the AfD does so systematically and extensively throughout its program and campaign, whereas BSW references it only briefly (Alternative für Deutschland, 2025, pp. 102, 122; Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, 2025, p. 36).

To sum up, although both populist parties reject trans-inclusive conceptions of gender, they differ markedly in their support for measures promoting the equality of women and in their general understandings of gender roles. Here, the AfD advances a biological essentialism embedded in nativist, traditionalist, and heteronormative worldviews, whereas the BSW promotes a women's-rights agenda that, although expansive, primarily addresses the equality of cisgender women while marginalizing trans and non-binary individuals. These distinctions are crucial for developing specific expectations about how individual attitudes toward gender issues influence support for each party.

The presence of prominent female leaders in both the AfD and the BSW adds an important layer. The two parties represent contrasting configurations of female populist leadership. Alice Weidel exemplifies a central paradox of right-wing populism: the prominence of female leaders within parties that promote "traditionalist" and anti-feminist gender ideologies. Despite leading a party grounded in a biologically essentialist and heteronormative conception of gender, her personal profile as a woman in a same-sex, interethnic relationship is at odds with this ideology. This disjuncture does not necessarily undermine credibility; rather, it can mobilize strategically. By decoupling personal identity from party ideology, Weidel may contribute to a moderating effect in public perception while selectively foregrounding her gender when deploying femonationalist narratives that frame migration as a threat to women (Ulrich et al., 2022). In this sense, her gender functions less as a vehicle for substantive representation and more as a symbolic and strategic resource that broadens the party's appeal.

By contrast, Sahra Wagenknecht represents a more coherent alignment between her personal identity, her leadership, and the party's positions. As the highly personalized face of the BSW, she reinforces the party's

emphasis on social justice and state support for women, thereby lending credibility to its gender-related policy agenda. At the same time, this alignment is not without tension. Although critical of identity politics, Wagenknecht strategically mobilizes her gender and East German background to successfully appeal to specific constituencies.

These cases suggest that female populist leadership conditions, rather than determining, the effect of gender attitudes on vote choice. Where leader identity and party positions are congruent, as in the case of Sahra Wagenknecht, leadership may enhance the credibility of policy commitments and strengthen support among voters with egalitarian gender attitudes, particularly women. In contrast, where such congruence is absent, as in the case of Alice Weidel, female leadership is unlikely to generate comparable affinity effects. Instead, Weidel might partially mitigate the AfD's gender gap while failing to make the party genuinely attractive to women. However, the extent of this effect—and whether the gap would be larger without her—remains uncertain.

6. Hypothesis

Building on the concept of "feminist consciousness" discussed in Section 2, this study examines gender-related attitudes (i.e., individual positions on issues linked to gender and sexual equality) as a potential explanation for the contrasting gender gaps in support for the BSW and the AfD, alongside sociodemographic and broader issue-based determinants. These attitudes generally span a broad range, from specific policies promoting gender and sexual equality—such as abortion regulation, gender quotas, or marriage equality for same-sex couples—to more general, normative beliefs about gender, gender roles, and the conceptualization of gender itself, of which we can only analyze a small fraction.

We argue that gender-related attitudes constitute a central mechanism underlying the divergent gender gaps in support for the two populist contenders. The party positions outlined in Section 5 allow us to derive specific expectations regarding vote choice. Voters endorsing state-led measures promoting gender equality, such as gender quotas, are more congruent with the BSW, which is why we expect a positive effect on BSW support. In contrast, opposition to such policies aligns with the AfD's positions, which frame such measures as part of a broader "gender ideology."

At the same time, both parties are critical of broader, pluralistic conceptions of gender, often reflected in their rejection of gender-inclusive language, making this issue unlikely to differentiate support between them. Consequently, the gender gap in vote choice is expected to be driven strongly by women's higher support for gender equality measures and concern about the underrepresentation of women. In other words, gender-related attitudes focused on the equality of women are hypothesized to substantially mediate the gender gap in populist voting behavior:

> H: The gender gap in support for the BSW and the AfD is substantially mediated by attitudes towards gender issues.

Consistent with previous research, we expect that the gender gap is partly shaped by women's greater left-leaning orientations on broader socioeconomic and sociocultural issues, including redistribution, climate policy, and immigration. Drawing on the socio-psychological Michigan model of voting (A. Campbell et al.,

1980), we argue that long-term social characteristics like gender shape voting indirectly by influencing more proximate attitudes—a funnel of causality in which enduring traits structure party preferences through issue positions. Accordingly, our analysis considers both attitudinal and sociodemographic factors in explaining the gender gap. Finally, we incorporate leadership evaluations of Alice Weidel and Sahra Wagenknecht into our regression models. This accounts for the fact that both figures generate high levels of affect among their respective partisan bases. By controlling for these evaluations, we ensure that the observed gendered effects are not merely artifacts of strong party-based leader attachment, as sympathy for these leaders largely mirrors broader partisan sympathy.

7. Data and Operationalization

We use data from the 2025 post-election cross-section of the GLES to test this hypothesis. The dependent variables are party preferences for the AfD and the BSW. These were both measured using the propensity-to-vote (PTV) item included in the survey, which asks respondents "to indicate how likely it is that you would ever vote for that party." Answers range from 1 ("I would certainly not vote for this party") to 11 ("I would certainly vote for this party"). Thus, the PTV measure captures graded electoral preferences for each party.

To capture the gender gap, we use a binary gender variable distinguishing male and female respondents. Individuals identifying as non-binary/diverse or declining to report their gender are excluded due to small sample sizes and privacy concerns. While gender is a central variable in political science, it is rarely critically reflected on in quantitative research (de Vries et al., 2024). Standard survey categories (male, female, and diverse) reflect administrative conventions and often assume cisnormativity, failing to capture distinctions such as gender identity, expression, or conformity. As a result, the variable provides only a limited proxy for the multidimensional concept it represents (Solevid et al., 2021). Accordingly, we acknowledge that our analysis is constrained by these measurement limitations, as more nuanced indicators would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of gendered effects.

Gender attitudes are the central explanatory variables hypothesized to account for gender voting gaps for both the AfD and BSW, which we measured with three items. First, we measure evaluations of women's descriptive representation in parliament. Respondents were informed that, after the 2021 election, the share of women in the Bundestag was 31.4%, and then asked whether this percentage was *too high*, *too low*, or *about right*. This variable was recoded into a binary indicator, with 1 representing the view that the percentage is *too low* and 0 representing *about right* or *too high*. Second, we measured attitudes toward gender-sensitive language using agreement with the statement: "Writing and speaking in gender-sensitive language, for example 'Bürger*innen,' are useful measures to ensure greater equality." Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Third, we included an item capturing opinions on state-led gender equality policies: "Governmental measures for gender equality in society already go too far," which was also measured on a five-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. All items capturing gender attitudes are coded in a way that higher values indicate more critical or restrictive positions toward gender equality policies and discourses.

Candidate preference is measured using standard like–dislike scales for the two chancellor candidates, Alice Weidel for the AfD and Sahra Wagenknecht for the BSW. Respondents were asked: "Please rate your opinion

of different political leaders. What do you think of…?" Answers range from −5 ("I think very poorly of this person") to +5 ("I think very highly of this person"). These items capture generalized evaluations of leaders and allow us to assess the extent to which personalized support influences gendered party preferences.

Populist attitudes are measured using an index composed of six survey items corresponding to the populist attitudes scale proposed by A. Akkerman et al. (2014). Responses were aggregated into an additive index by calculating the mean across items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$), with higher values indicating stronger populist attitudes (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). To capture potential non-linearities and ease interpretation, quintiles were constructed from the resulting scale.

Issue positions are measured along three core policy dimensions that are central to party competition in Germany (Stövsand et al., 2022): redistribution, immigration, and climate change. Preferences on redistribution are captured by the following item: "Some people prefer lower taxes, although this results in fewer social services. Others prefer more social services, although this results in raising taxes. What position do you take on taxes and social services?" Responses range from 1 (*Lower taxes and fewer social services*) to 11 (*More social services and higher taxes*). Attitudes toward immigration are measured by asking whether immigration for foreigners should be facilitated or restricted, again on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (*Facilitate immigration for foreigners*) to 11 (*Restrict immigration of foreigners*). Preferences regarding climate policy are operationalized using a trade-off question between environmental protection and economic growth. Respondents indicate whether fighting climate change should take precedence, even if it impairs economic growth (1), or if economic growth should take precedence, even if it impairs climate protection (11). All issue scales are coded such that higher values represent more restrictive or market-oriented positions.

We proceed with our analysis in three steps. First, we estimate baseline OLS models including populist attitudes, issue positions, leader evaluations, and sociodemographic characteristics predicting the populist competitors' PTVs. Second, we extend these models by adding gender-related attitudes to assess their explanatory power for the observed gender gap. Third, we employ structural equation models to examine whether support for these attitudes mediates the effect of gender on party support. All models include a standard set of control variables: region (East vs. West Germany), age (in years), and educational attainment. To ensure representativeness, all analyses were conducted using the provided sociodemographic and regional survey weights.

8. Results

Figure 1 presents the results from OLS regression models explaining PTV scores for both parties. Model A constitutes the baseline specification, while Model B adds the gender-related attitude variables central to our theoretical argument (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File for full regression tables).

Model A reveals a small but statistically significant gender effect even after controlling for leader evaluations, populist attitudes, issue positions, age, education, and region: women are more likely to support the BSW, whereas men are more likely to support the AfD. The control variables behave largely as expected. Evaluations of party leaders are strongly associated with support for the respective parties, indicating substantial leader effects, while populist attitudes are positively correlated with support for both parties. Negative attitudes

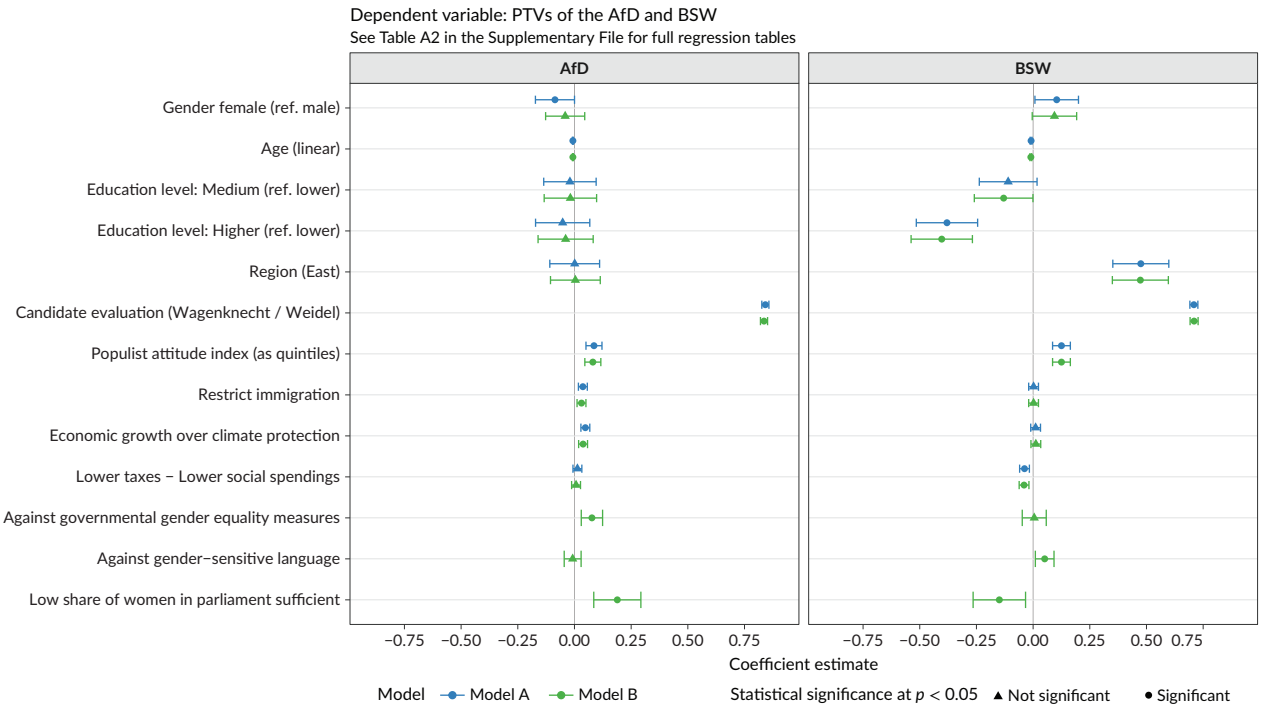


Figure 1. Coefficient plot of OLS regression models.

toward immigration and climate policy are significantly associated with higher AfD support, whereas support for redistribution is positively associated with BSW support.

Once Model B introduces attitudes toward gender-related policies, the independent effect of respondent gender disappears, indicating that these attitudes mediate the observed gender gap. However, the additional explanatory gain is comparatively limited, with adjusted R^2 increasing only modestly from Model A to Model B (AfD: 0.76 to 0.77; BSW: 0.59 to 0.60). At the same time, supplementary models including only the three gender-related attitude measures (results not shown) yield markedly different explanatory power across parties: while these variables account for a substantial share of variance in AfD support (Adj. $R^2 = 0.15$), their explanatory contribution for BSW support remains very limited (Adj. $R^2 = 0.02$). This pattern likely reflects the AfD's much clearer anti-feminist positioning, which renders gender-related attitudes more politically salient for AfD support than for support of the BSW.

For the AfD, the results show a consistently conservative electorate on gender issues. Agreement with the statement that government measures promoting gender equality *go too far* is positively associated with AfD support. Furthermore, respondents who do not perceive the share of women in parliament as too low are significantly more likely to support the AfD. Surprisingly, rejection of gender-sensitive language does not have a statistically significant effect in the full AfD model.

Post-estimation diagnostics indicate no violations of key OLS assumptions. All variance inflation factors (VIF) are well below the conventional multicollinearity threshold of 5 (the largest VIF is 1.97; the mean VIF ranges from 1.44 to 1.50). Additional tests for heteroskedasticity fail to reject the null hypothesis of constant error variance.

Figure 2 illustrates the substantive effect of perceptions that the proportion of women in parliament is too low on party support, holding all other things equal (results based on Model B). For the BSW, evaluating the share of women as too low increases the predicted PTV from approximately 3.0 to 3.2. For the AfD, the effect is reversed: the same attitude decreases the predicted PTV from about 3.2 to 3.0.

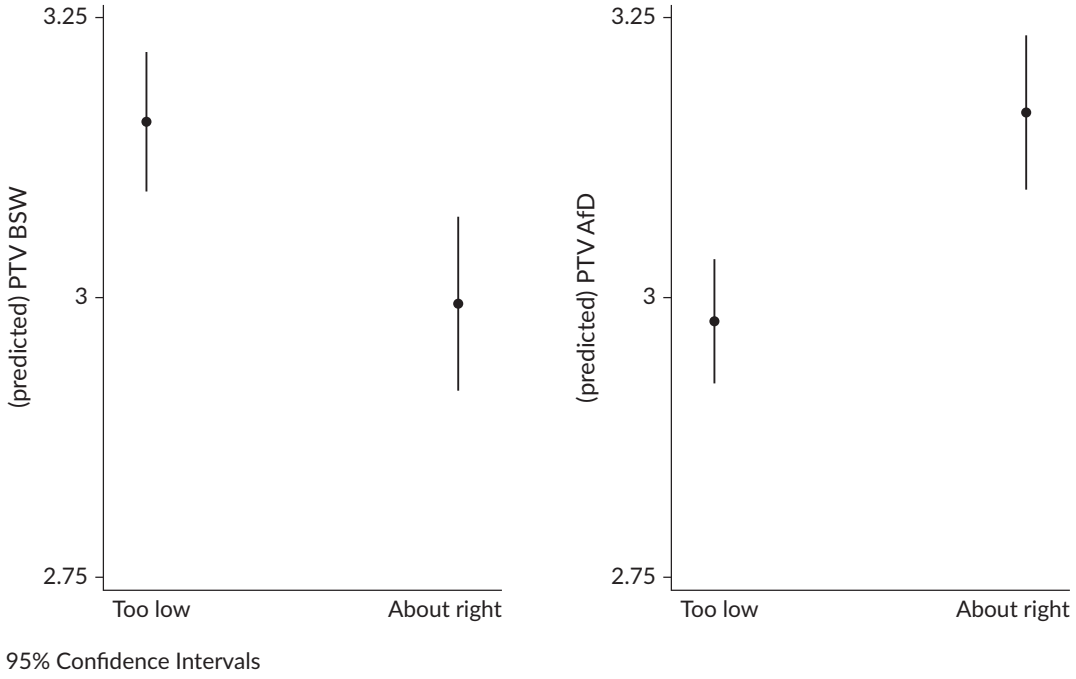


Figure 2. Effect of attitudes on the share of women in parliament on PTVs for AfD and BSW.

Substantively, the results indicate that while both parties challenge liberal feminist positions, they do so in distinct ways. Support for the AfD is consistently associated with opposition to institutional gender equality measures. In contrast, support for the BSW combines endorsement of descriptive representation (i.e., increasing the number of women in parliament) with skepticism toward symbolic or cultural aspects, such as gender-inclusive language.

To more rigorously test the mediation mechanism, we estimate survey-adjusted structural equation models. The specification follows a standard mediation framework: respondent gender predicts gender-related attitudes, which in turn predict party support. The aforementioned control variables are included as exogenous predictors of party support.

The results, presented in Figure 3, show that gender has a statistically significant effect on all three gender-related attitudes (see Table A4 in the Supplementary File for full regression tables). Female respondents hold more progressive views systematically: they are less likely to agree that gender equality policies *go too far*, less critical of gender-sensitive language, and more likely to perceive the share of women in parliament as insufficient. Crucially, once these attitudes are included, the direct effect of gender on BSW and AfD support becomes statistically insignificant. This pattern is consistent with the mediation hypothesis: gender differences in party support are at least partly transmitted through differences in attitudes toward gender equality policies. Overall, the findings indicate that gendered normative orientations toward equality policies constitute a key mechanism structuring support for both parties, albeit in ideologically distinct ways.

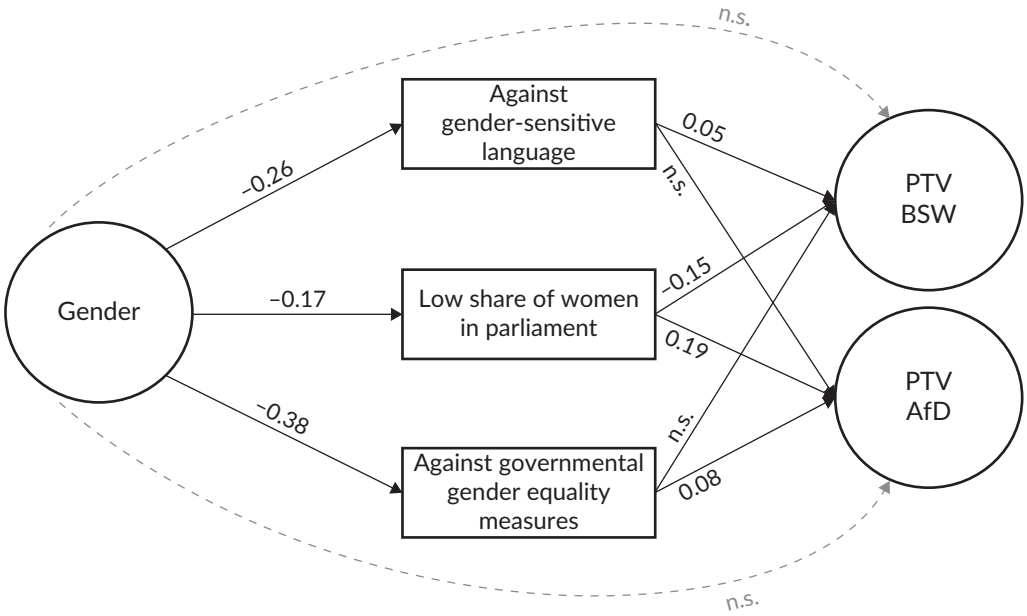


Figure 3. Result of the mediation analysis. Notes: n.s. = not significant; $p < 0.05$.

We conducted several robustness checks to assess the stability of our findings. First, we re-estimated the fully specified OLS models including party identification. We exclude party identification from the main specification because the BSW is a newly established party, and party identification is typically conceptualized as a long-term psychological attachment. Including it could therefore introduce asymmetry between the models. Nevertheless, incorporating party identification does not substantively alter the results: the effects of gender-related attitudes and the attenuation of the direct gender effect remain stable (Table A3 in the Supplementary File includes PID). Second, we examined whether foreign policy attitudes—specifically, positions on the Russian war against Ukraine—affect our conclusions. Both parties have taken distinctive stances on European–Russian relations, making this a potentially relevant dimension. The only suitable survey item captures agreement with the statement: "Germany should stop supplying weapons to Ukraine," which is measured on a five-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Although this item addresses only one aspect of the broader issue, including it in the fully specified models leaves the substantive results unchanged (Table A3 in the Supplementary File, including Ukraine). Third, we test for nonlinear age effects by replacing the linear age variable with categorical age groups. This specification change does not alter the central findings (Table A3 in the Supplementary File, including age categories). Across all alternative specifications, the results consistently support the conclusion that gender-related attitudes substantially account for the observed gender gaps in support for both parties.

9. Conclusion

The motivation of this article was an apparent paradox: in the unusual context of the 2025 German federal election, two prominent female populist leaders, Alice Weidel (AfD) and Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), competed for votes nationwide. Yet, their electorates were clearly divided along gender lines. Women were disproportionately drawn to the BSW, whereas men were overrepresented among the supporters of the AfD. This juxtaposition of two populist parties led by women with opposing ideological profiles provided an instructive setting in which to examine how gender structures populist voting.

Using the 2025 GLES post-election cross-section, we analyzed voters' propensity to vote for both parties. Across model specifications, gender-related attitudes played an important mediating role in explaining the observed gender gap, even though their additional explanatory contribution in the full models remained comparatively modest. Our key finding is that the apparent direct effect of gender on support for the AfD versus the BSW disappears once attitudes toward gender equality policies are considered. Women hold more progressive views on descriptive representation and gender equality measures, which explains their greater propensity to support the BSW. Conversely, more conservative positions on gender equality are strongly associated with support for the AfD. While leader evaluations are the strongest predictor of party support, they do not supersede or attenuate the impact of substantive gender policy orientations. Structural equation models further corroborate a mediation pattern: Gender shapes gender-related attitudes, which then structure party preferences. The modest substantive impact of these attitudes likely reflects the low salience of gender issues in the 2025 campaign, which limited their activation. Nevertheless, they remain statistically significant, which might imply a latent, untapped potential for gender-based mobilization if gender issues become more salient in future campaigns.

These findings have several implications for research on gender, populism, and electoral competition. First, gender differences in populist voting cannot be attributed solely to a differing "populist" disposition, as even within a populist choice set, policy-related attitudes toward gender equality remain consequential. Second, populist parties differ not only along economic or cultural dimensions but also in their gender-policy profiles, and these differences have concrete electoral consequences. Female leadership alone does not eliminate the gender gap: substantial differences persist even when both parties are led by prominent female figures. Instead, substantive representation in the form of credible policy positions on gender equality appears crucial for attracting female voters. Accordingly, competition between populist parties is as much a contest over gender related policy as over economic or cultural issues. The emergence of left authoritarian or broadly left populist parties could therefore offer a new electoral home for women who are currently deterred by the anti-feminist positioning of the radical-right, a possibility that future research should examine more systematically in comparative settings with a broader supply of populist parties.

At the same time, several limitations qualify our conclusions and suggest directions for future research. First, available survey measures treat gender as a binary variable and do not capture whether respondents are transgender, nor do they reflect variation in gender expression, conformity, or attitudes toward traditional gender roles. As a result, the gender variable used in empirical analyses remains a limited proxy for a multidimensional construct. Future research would benefit from more nuanced measures of both gender identity and gender-related attitudes. Second, our analysis focused on two ideologically distinct populist parties within a single national context. Comparative studies that include a broader range of left- and right-populist parties would help determine whether the identified mechanisms can be generalized. Third, the cross-sectional design limits strong causal inference. While the mediation analysis is consistent with the proposed mechanism, panel data or experimental designs would allow for more rigorous identification of causal pathways.

Finally, disentangling leadership effects remains challenging, as leader evaluations and party support are closely intertwined and may reflect broader affective alignments. An additional problem arises in parties with multiple prominent leaders, such as the AfD, where Weidel served as the sole chancellor candidate but prominently co-led the party with Tino Chrupalla. Unfortunately, our data did not permit separate

assessment of their influence, as Chrupalla was not included in the survey. Future research should seek designs that compare male and female leaders within and across populist parties, and allow for better distinguishing personalistic appeal from policy congruence and partisan attachment.

Overall, the findings are consistent with the enduring relevance of the Michigan model of voting behavior. In line with the funnel-of-causality logic, socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, influence party support primarily indirectly, via more proximate attitudinal factors. In this case, gender shapes attitudes toward gender equality policies, which in turn structure support for competing populist parties. Contemporary patterns of populist competition do not render established theoretical frameworks obsolete; rather, they underscore the frameworks' continued utility in explaining how underlying social characteristics are translated into political behavior.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data available at https://www.gesis.org/en/gles/2025-federal-election

LLMs Disclosure

We used OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.3) for language refinement, grammar, and style improvements in the manuscript. No substantive content, data analysis, or interpretation of results was generated or altered by the model.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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