



January 2018

The Other Women's Movement: Analyzing Women's Support for Populist-Radical Right Parties and Candidates

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Recommended Citation

Schwiderski, Katelyn (2018) "The Other Women's Movement: Analyzing Women's Support for Populist-Radical Right Parties and Candidates," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 23

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol23/iss1/9>

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Abstract

This study seeks to answer the question of why women vote for populist-radical right (PRR) parties or candidates, which are often depicted as uniquely sexist "men's parties." Using survey data from the 2014 European Social Survey (ESS Round 7), a binary logistic regression analyzes the relationship between PRR attitudes, individual demographic characteristics, and the probability of expressing affinity with a PRR party. This study ultimately finds that women who hold a traditional gender ideology and strong populist anti-elite views are more likely than other women to support a PRR party. The findings also show that low levels of education are associated with feelings of economic vulnerability and being "left behind" by modernization, factors that are expected to increase PRR support.

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“Does she have a good body? No. Does she have a fat ass? Absolutely.”

“I like kids. I mean, I won’t do anything to take care of them. I’ll supply funds and she’ll take care of the kids.”

“You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. When you’re a star they let you do it.”

-A selection of quotes from Donald Trump, reported while he was a candidate for President of the United States.

Introduction

The previous quotes by the current American President raise an obvious question: Why would any woman vote for a party or candidate that expresses sexist ideology or worldview? A number of scholars address the “puzzle” of conservative women, a question that has been around long before the 2016 election (Mudde 2007; Deckman 2016). Aggregate data suggests that in advanced post-industrial societies, a gender gap in voting and political attitudes has opened up, with women aligning on the left of men. Women are typically more likely than men to support high social spending, to value gender equality, and to support candidates and parties that endorse

those positions (Inglehart and Norris 2016). It is, however, a mistake to assume that all women are feminists; there have always been women who defy this trend (Celis and Childs 2014).

In the 1980s, populist radical right (PRR) parties began to emerge and take root across Europe. These parties were quickly labeled by scholars as “men’s parties” due to the tendency of these parties to have very few women represented in their leaderships, memberships, and electorates (Mudde 2007). Men often give a face to these parties and to their associated street groups; and scholars typically describe the PRR gender ideology as a “normative cult of motherhood,” in which social and economic roles are defined by biological differences between men and women and women’s primary value and expectation is to bear and rear children (Mudde 2007, Peto 2012). In addition, there is strong empirical evidence that, across time and across Europe, men consistently vote at higher rates for PRR parties than women do. Why? Who are the women who support “men’s parties”?

These questions have received renewed attention following the U.S. 2016 Presidential election. Hillary Clinton was predicted to win the election and women were thought to be the ones carrying her to victory (Malone 2016). Early polls predicted a 26-point gender gap, and in order for Trump to win he would have to win an overwhelmingly majority of women. The assumption being that women typically hold feminist views, and should therefore turn away from Trump’s sexist rhetoric. Even women who do not label themselves as “feminist” would, theoretically, find his attitude toward women off-putting. Therefore, it was expected that at least a segment of women who typically identify or vote Republican would swing left to support the female candidate, Hillary Clinton.

On the eve of the election there was a 24-point gap, a historic difference in the rate of men and women voting for Donald Trump; however, this figure was not substantially larger than

the 20-point gap in the 2012 election, and it was not enough to carry Hillary Clinton to victory. Post-analysis of exit polls actually revealed that Donald Trump won 53 percent of white women's votes (Malone 2016). What happened? Why do some women support parties or candidates that espouse sexist ideologies or make misogynist comments? Who are the women that vote for "men's parties," and what motivates them?

Scholars worry about these questions because it has been thought that women were immune to the appeals of populist nativist parties and therefore acted as a bulwark against such parties gaining positions of power. There is a widespread concern that PRR parties present a threat to the liberal and pluralist values that underpin modern liberal democracy (Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014). Understanding why these parties appeal to some women may help us to understand failures in our systems of representation that are leading to the rise of populism and the rejection of stable mainstream politics. Further, if PRR parties get into positions of power, they may shape gender politics in more permanent ways that affect women's ability to fully participate in economic and political life. For example, the 2017 manifesto of the German AfD, now the third largest party in the German Bundestag, called for: termination of the promotion of gender research in universities, and specifically opposes gender mainstreaming, the use of gender neutral language, and gender quotas of any type in any sphere (Alternative for Germany 2017). The manifesto supports policies that encourage full-time motherhood and discourage women with children from working (Alternative for Germany 2017). Policies like these, and the rhetoric that surrounds them, arguably create a climate that sets women's empowerment back and sends a message to young girls about their value in society and what they can achieve.

Women on the Right

The literature suggests several explanations for why some women support “men’s parties” (Kandiyotti 1988; Mudde 2007; Deckman 2016; Denvir 2016). In order to understand conservative and far right parties’ appeals to women, their platforms must be examined.

Populism can be defined as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (Mudde 2007). The Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties combine the ideologies of authoritarianism and nativism. Authoritarianism is an attitude characterized through the oppression of one’s subordinates (Patterson 2015). Nativism is an ideology that holds that members of the native group should exclusively inhabit states, and that non-native elements are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015).

In the past, men have dominated the electorates of Populist Radical Right political parties. Previous research indicates that men have a higher tendency to vote for populist radical, or far right, parties. Little evidence is known as to why women are more reluctant to support the far right, but two interrelated categories give account to the gender gap. The attitudes of the PRR parties and the gendered differences in structural background claim to account for the gender gap among men and women (Montgomery 2015). Differences in occupation, employment status, and religion contribute to why women may resist PRR parties (Montgomery 2015). Women’s representation in service jobs allows them to withdraw-from the economic vulnerability that the PRR party encourages (Mayer 2011). In recent elections parties have looked to shrink this gap by broadening their appeal to women (Mudde 2007). For example, in France, Marine Le Pen’s

leadership of the National Front has been designed to “de-demonize” the party and make it seem less extreme and risky to female voters (Mayer 2011).

The anti-immigrant platform of many PRR parties may also appeal to some women. Some scholars suggest that women, particularly in their roles as mothers, tend to be protective of their space and wish to deny access to this space to others (Bacchetta and Power 2002). PRR party platforms complement women with this mindset, valorizing women as the primary caregiver and crucial to the nation’s future. This platform is appealing to women in the sense that they face inequalities in the labor market; therefore, supporting the traditional family values allows women to be valued in the home (Abendschon and Steinmetz 2014).

Authoritarian, racist women are commonly seen as aggressive and violent, characteristics that transgress expected gender behavior; but fulfilling their duties as a mother and wife allows women to be mobilized in the racial warfare. Mothers are seen as the protector of children, family, and civilization, and are therefore justified in guarding against racially inspired threats to their children and family. Far right parties play on women’s fears by conveying a message that their children and their safety are endangered, and this model of mothers’ protectiveness can be generalized to the entire white race (Blee 2003). Women are portrayed as survivors of racial brutality, and their grief draws in other women to fight against the victimization of racist activists.

In contemporary U.S. politics, for example, Tea Party activists believe their party holds appeal for women. Women such as Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann have risen as leaders within the movement. While some parties prioritize family values in terms of nativism, others link economic policy to pro-family values. The Tea Party makes a connection between free market economic policies and women’s roles as caregivers. These Tea Party women, otherwise

known as “Mama Grizzlies,” advocate for lower taxes, reducing the debt, and limiting the scope of government to promote pro-family values. Tea Party women promote the freedom of individual actors to pursue policies in their own self-interest (Deckman 2016). Their concern for economic policies is framed in the sense that mothers must protect and provide for their children. These women claim that a large-scope government promotes women’s dependency on the government, and Tea Party women’s view of laissez-faire politics allows for women’s independence and greater possibilities. Women are pulled into activism in response to gender concerns that arise out of their frustration, like government spending (Henderson, Jeydel 2014). The Tea Party women frame political issues through motherhood rhetoric so that all mothers feel they are welcomed and call on them to be engaged. The motherhood rhetoric allows women to rationalize their tough, masculine, behavior in politics (Deckman 2016).

In debates over which women are attracted to the far right, gendered differences in occupation play an important role. Women who are economically stable are drawn to conservative parties and their platforms, as they are not dependent on government spending to survive (Rippeyoung 2007). Not all women are economically independent, though. Some women rely on their husbands and are appealed to through the patriarchal bargain (Deniz Kandiyotti 1988). The patriarchal bargain is a tactic in which a woman chooses to accommodate and uphold the patriarchal norms, accepting gender roles that disadvantage women overall, but maximize her own power and options. Women who do not have options in life, such as career mobility, are found buying into this bargain through economic anxieties (Denvir 2014). Women with less economic or personal autonomy express feelings of being “left behind” by modernization. Women who feel “left behind” are drawn to a culture of family values that emphasizes men’s responsibility to look after women. Women who do not have men to look after

them support policies that make it possible for them to move up in their jobs, as well as combine work and family (Denvir 2016). PRR parties receive great support from lower income women because of their support for a nativist welfare system.

Radical right parties are influenced by religion, especially in countries where religion still plays an important role in the political realm. For example, in Croatia, Poland, and Slovakia, religion seems to serve as a strengthening buffer for voting on the right side of the spectrum. Religious actors also promote party support and encourage their congregation to get involved (Henderson, Jeydel 2014). Right wing parties advocate for religious liberties which they believe have been under attack in America (Deckman 2016). Therefore, women who are religious, attend church services, and look to preserve religious liberty, typically vote for the Right. In countries like Poland, PRR parties receive great support among older religious women (Mudde 2007). There are many controversial issues on women's morality and religious influence, however there is a broad view on abortion. While some PRR parties defend women's right to choose, others do not take a stance on the subject. Women are interested in these moral issues, such as abortion, as they are known as "practical gender interests." Practical gender interests are those interests that are traditionally considered within women's realm of concern (Henderson, Jeydel 2014). Women who support Trump and his values believe women's freedom from male control, in regards to sexuality and abortion, threatens women's entitlement to male protection; this is not unique to the United States, and there may be a similar pattern in Europe (Denvir 2016).

With regard to gender ideology, PRR parties have often been depicted as strictly traditionalist. Some parties do conform almost exclusively to traditional gender roles and hierarchies, but recent research demonstrates far more variation among PRR parties. Most PRR

parties treat gender as a secondary concern, and tend to instrumentalize gender in the service of the core nativist ideology. Some parties are primarily concerned with the “demographic crisis” and threats to national survival. Women’s primary value to society lies in their roles as the literal and symbolic reproducers of the people (the ethno-national community) and it is PRR parties that advocate for traditional gender roles and “natural biological” differences between the sexes. Other parties use anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric to defend Western values of gender equality and LGBTQA+ rights. There is reason to believe that attitudes respecting gender, lesbian, and gay equality may play a role in explaining why women vote for the PRR parties (Spierings and Zaslove 2015). Women are more likely to express sympathy, as well as empathy, for others. PRR parties use their platforms to advocate for the differences that native people endure and women’s compassion is seen as a fight to the extremist Islamic ideals.

Discussion

Although there are more accounts of women getting involved in conservative and Populist Radical Right parties, there are still fewer women than men that constitute the electorates of PRR parties. However, the underrepresentation of women in the far right can be generalized to almost all political parties, left and center. Though it may be true that more men than women vote for the PRR, the differences in support are less convincing once compared with mainstream parties (Spierings and Zaslove 2015). PRR parties have begun to seek out women to serve as models so other women may become involved in politics whether that may be in leadership roles, as activists, or just simply as supporters.

While it is evident that more research is needed on the subject, it can be inferred that right-wing women organize under their diverse role as wives, mothers, and caretakers to legitimize their demands. The goals of the right are to preserve nationality and the traditional

family structure, but now it is more convincing that other elements constitute their platform. Most research that has been conducted with a feminist bias has overstated the gender inequality and traditional gender views within PRR parties (Mudde 2007). The most persuasive texts indicate that women support parties on the right side of the spectrum for personal, social, and economic reasons. The review of the existing literature therefore suggests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Women who feel economically vulnerable and embrace gender traditionalism will vote for far right or populist radical right parties.

Hypothesis 2: Those holding traditional values and the less-educated groups left behind by cultural changes will vote for far right or populist radical right parties.

Research Design

To test these hypotheses, survey data from the 2014 ESS (ESS Round 7 2014) is used. Women are pulled out of the sample to determine which kinds of women support “men’s parties”. The universe of cases for this study includes all PRR parties in Europe. There are 21 European countries included in the survey. Countries were selected if they exhibited a populist contender in the most recent legislative election. The cases used in this study are: for Austria, Freedom People’s Party; for Denmark, Danish People’s Party; for Finland, True Finns; for France, National Front; for Hungary, Jobbik and Fidesz; for Poland, Law and Justice; and for Sweden, Sweden Democrats. This sample includes approximately 749 respondents, who, when asked if there is a particular party they feel closer to than all other parties, responded with affinity for a populist radical right party in their country. Populist radical right parties are marginal everywhere, so fewer respondents overall will feel an affinity for these parties and of those even fewer will be women.

The 2014 ESS data contains all the necessary individual level information to code for vote choice. For the dependent variable, PRR support, the 2014 ESS asked individuals is there a particular political party they feel closer to than all the other parties? If so, which one? If a PRR party was indicated, the response was coded as (1). All other party responses were scored (0). Those who refused to answer, or did not feel affinity for a PRR party, were treated as missing data.

The review of literature indicates a number of independent variables that may account for why some women feel affinity for the PRR. As an indicator for the degree to which less-educated groups feel left behind, a measure of education is used. For the independent variable education, the 2014 ESS asked individuals “how many years of education have you completed, whether full-time or part-time?” Data was reported in full-time equivalents and rounded up or down to the nearest whole year. The expectation is that those who feel left behind, in terms of education, will be more likely to feel an affinity for a PRR party as those parties cater to the patriarchal bargain through economic anxieties.

As an indicator of holding traditional values, Christian identity was examined. For the independent variable Christian identity, the 2014 ESS asked individuals “do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination? If so, which one?” If a woman identified as Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, or other Christian denomination, the response was coded as (1). All other religions or denominations were scored as (0). The expectation is that women who self-identify as Christian will be more likely to express affinity with a PRR party, as those parties often market themselves as defenders of European Christian civilization.

For the independent variable domicile, the 2014 ESS asked individuals which phrase best describes the area where you live. Responses were coded from a 0-5 scale running from rural to urban. The expectation is that those women who reside in more rural areas are more likely to support PRR parties, as they support the small-town, traditional way of life.

For the PRR attitude cluster, this research employs measures of survey questions relating to populism and traditionalism. Populism is measured by the response to a question about whether politicians care what people “like me” think. Those responses were coded from a 0-10 scale running from not at all to completely. Those who answered “don’t know” were treated as missing data. The expectation is that those who feel politicians do not care what people like them think, are more likely to support the anti-elite PRR party. Traditionalism is measured by the response to whether or not gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish. The responses were coded on a scale from 1-5 (“agree strongly” to “disagree strongly”). Those individuals who answered “don’t know” were treated as missing data. The expectation for this variable is that as one expresses strong feelings against the gay and lesbian lifestyle, support for populist radical right parties will increase because they promise a return to the traditional breadwinner model.

Analysis and Findings

Bivariate correlations shown in Table 1 demonstrate the relationships between each of the independent variables and the dependent variable, affinity for a PRR party. They also reveal relationships among some of the independent variables. Overall, bivariate correlations lend support to the hypotheses by analyzing the correlation among the independent variables. Education and domicile are both statistically significant and support both hypotheses. As education increases, the likelihood of support for the PRR decreases. Findings suggest that

education and domicile have a statistically and negative correlation, so as education increases, domicile decreases, indicating less-educated people reside in more rural areas. Those who reside in rural areas often feel economically vulnerable.

Table 1: Bivariate correlation matrix of women's support for the PRR

	1	2	3	4	5
1. PRR Support	-				
2. Christianity Identity	0.27*	-			
3. Education Level	-0.039**	-0.082**	-		
4. Gender Traditionalism	0.026*	0.142**	-0.183**	-	
5. Populism	0.057**	-0.041**	0.213**	-0.177**	-
6. Domicile	0.024*	0.121**	-0.183**	0.026*	-0.048**

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

The variable for traditional values, Christianity, predicts that those who identify as Christian will be more likely to support the PRR. There is a significant negative correlation between identifying as Christian and education, and between identifying as Christian and populism. The variables for cultural attitudes include gender traditionalism and populism. Both variables have a significant positive correlation with PRR support. This provides support for our hypotheses that as these cultural attitudes increase, the likelihood of supporting the populist radical right increases.

In order to test these relationships, this research employs a binary logistic regression model, which is necessary when the dependent variable is a binary categorical variable.

Logistical regression models the probability or likelihood of a particular outcome, such as feeling close or support for a PRR party. Independent variables in the model include the Christian

identity measure, followed by individual characteristic variables, such as education and domicile.

The PRR attitudinal variables associated with populism and gender traditionalism follow, which include whether or not politicians care what individuals think and stance on if gays and lesbians should be free to live as they wish.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Model of Women's Support for the PRR

Variable	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Christian identity	0.127	0.034	0.107	1.135
Education level	-0.040	0.011	0.000***	0.961
Gender traditionalism	0.079	0.034	0.019**	1.082
Populism	0.094	0.016	0.000***	1.098
Domicile	0.049	0.016	0.000***	1.050
Summary				
N	749			
Nagelkerke R²	0.016			

*Significance at the 0.10 Level

**Significance at the 0.05 Level

***Significance at the 0.01 Level

Findings suggest that Christian identity has a weak positive relationship with PRR party support; therefore holding a Christian identity leads to an increase in the odds of support for a PRR party. Among the less educated groups left behind by cultural changes, there is a weak negative, and statistically significant relationship with support for the PRR. Therefore, each unit increase in education leads to a decrease in the odds of voting for a PRR party. This is consistent with the notion of an education gap in PRR support. Less-educated women feel left behind and are more likely to support PRR parties. Domicile of a female individual has a positive statistical relationship with support for the PRR; the more rural the residence, the greater the odds of a woman supporting a PRR party. This is consistent with the literature stating that women who are more economically vulnerable reside in more rural locations. A unit increase in education leads to a decrease in residing in a more rural location.

For the PRR attitude cluster, populism and gender traditionalism were measured. According to the data in Table 1, populism has a positive and statistically significant relationship with PRR support. Therefore, a unit increase in populism (that politicians care about what people like me think) leads to a slight increase in the odds of support for a PRR party. Gender traditionalism also appears to have a positive relationship with support for PRR parties. In other words, the more the respondent disagrees that gays and lesbians should be free to live as they wish, the higher the likelihood that she will support a PRR party.

Conclusion

This analysis began with a question: Why do some women support parties or candidates that espouse sexist ideologies or make misogynist comments? That very general question led to an empirical question about the kinds of women who support these so called “men’s parties” and what motivates them. It has been thought that women were, to some extent, immune to the

appeals of “men’s parties” and therefore served as a barrier to PRR party’s positions of power. However, the analysis presented in this paper confirms that women *do*, in fact, support PRR parties, albeit at much lower rates than men. As gender traditionalism and populist attitudes increase, the probability of supporting a PRR party increases. Yet, as education level increases, the probability of supporting a PRR party decreases. Low levels of education cause women to feel economically vulnerable as they are negatively impacted by modernization. The data analysis confirms the hypotheses, and the notion that women who feel economically vulnerable and “left behind” by economic and social changes are drawn to right wing populist claims. Those women are likely to reject progressive parties in favor of parties that promise a return to national greatness and to the traditional breadwinner model.

Race is often associated with the “left behind” variable. The white race is frequently associated with groups that feel “left behind,” often believing political elites place the needs of immigrants over the needs of the native born. However, in the empirical model a race variable was not included. This research was limited by the ESS Wave 7 as it does not include a race question. Future research should focus on modeling the interaction of race and the other left behind variables included in this study. White women may perceive that the nation (and the future generation) is under attack from immigrants. This threat to national identity calls for support for parties, such as the populist radical right, who advocate for the country to be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group. White women challenge their feelings of being “left behind” by conveying a message that their children and their safety are endangered and mothers’ protectiveness can be generalized to the entire white race (Blee 2003).

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