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

Rossella Merullo
(Universität Hamburg)

Abstract

How do women leaders shape the agendas of populist radical right (PRR) parties, and how does this in turn impact the party's 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 party priorities and positions, 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, exploratory, stage we describe key differences between men- and women-led PRR parties using manifesto data from 15 Western European countries from 1988 to 2025. We find that women-led PRR parties expand the breadth of their issue agendas, but do so primarily through valence topics, such as technology, infrastructure, cultural policy, and national solidarity. We further observe selective positional shifts, moving leftward on labor policy and rightward on defense-related issues. These findings suggest an overall expansion of issues, with a particular focus on protection. In the second stage, we test the effects of these appeals through a survey experiment manipulating leader gender and issue emphasis. We expect that broader messages will reduce the party's perceived extremity and enhance favourability compared to messages focused primarily on immigration, particularly for female leaders, without eroding the party's ownership of the immigration issue. The findings offer new insights into how women leaders can reshape party positioning both within and beyond traditionally "feminine" issues.