

PARTIES, ISSUES AND GENDER

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Historically, women's experience in the political arena has been characterised by exclusion in most democracies. Women only won the right to vote in the first half of the twentieth century in many Western democracies, and as late as 1971 in Switzerland. Much has, however, changed since then. For example, women have increasingly achieved higher levels of education and entered the paid workforce. As a consequence of these changes, since the 1950s, women have moved towards the left and now disproportionately support leftist parties. And, in certain contexts, women have been found to be more likely to prioritise certain issues and policy positions such as support for gender equality, women's rights and expanded welfare states, relative to men.

This chapter focuses on the dynamics of gender differences in the electorate and the implications for political parties. Drawing on our unique and extensive dataset of male/female voter ratios by party family across Europe from 1985 to 2018, we show that there are indeed important gender gaps in party support, which vary by party family and across this time period. Past explanations for these gender differences are often structural, overlooking the strategic role of parties in shaping or addressing these gaps. After reviewing these common explanations, we turn our attention to how parties respond to the challenge of gender differences in party support, especially parties facing a deficit in women's support. Parties can employ a variety of tactics to improve their electoral support among women: they may introduce programmatic changes, initiate institutional changes and/or increase the descriptive representation of women to target women voters. We highlight the crucial role of strategic incentives: parties will shift party programmes and women's representation when they perceive feasible gains from doing so.

Gender differences in party support

Since women gained suffrage, gender differences in support for political parties have fluctuated across democracies. Some of the earliest studies found that women disproportionately supported conservative parties (Duverger 1955; Lipset 1960).¹

Attention to gender-based differences waned during the 1970s and 1980s, emerging again in the 1990s, when longitudinal studies unearthed important differences in the voting behaviour of men and women in the post-Second World War era (e.g. Listhaug 1985; Oskarson 1995; Manza and Brooks 1998; Knutsen 2001; Giger 2009). For instance, this work shows that, by the 1980s, women were increasingly supporting left-wing parties, a trend that has continued since.

Women's disproportionate support for left-wing parties is considered a pervasive feature of the contemporary political landscape in many post-industrialised democracies (Inglehart and Norris 2000; Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2004; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006). Yet research has also highlighted regional differences. For example, Abendschön and Steinmetz (2014) draw a contrast between Western and Eastern Europe, with women in the former increasingly supporting leftist parties, and Eastern European women favouring rightist parties. Looking at Latin America, Morgan (2015) finds narrow ideological gender gaps for most countries, with women favouring the right slightly more than men.

Focusing on Europe, Figure 27.1 shows gender differences among voters by party families between 1985 and 2018, based on national parliamentary voting behaviour data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), and when not available, the European Election Study (EES) and the European Social Study (ESS). Gender differences in party choice are measured as the ratio of the percentage of men respondents who report voting for a party to the percentage of women respondents who report voting for the same party. A score of 1 thus indicates an equal proportion of men compared with women as voters, a score higher than 1 reveals a higher proportion of men compared with women as voters, and a score lower than 1 suggests a lower proportion of men compared with women as voters.

Figure 27.1 reveals important variation in gender differences in voting across party families and time. For instance, we see a greater tendency of women to support Social Democratic parties compared with men; the male–female voter ratio values have hovered at or below the unity line of equal male–female support since the beginning of the 2000s. Green and New Left parties were once men-dominated, but since 2010, they attract more women than men. Over the period under study (1985–2018), women are – despite some ebb and flow over time – also more likely than men to support Christian Democratic parties. Figure 27.1 also reveals a tendency of men being overrepresented among the Conservative party electorate.

The radical right populist (RRP) party family stands out with the largest overrepresentation of men among voters of all parties. This finding is consistent with cross-national data, showing that women are significantly less likely to support RRP parties than men (e.g. Givens 2004; Rippeyoung 2007; Hartevelde et al. 2015; Immerzeel et al. 2015; Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Coffé 2018; Hartevelde and Ivarsflaten 2018). Over time, this gender gap has narrowed and

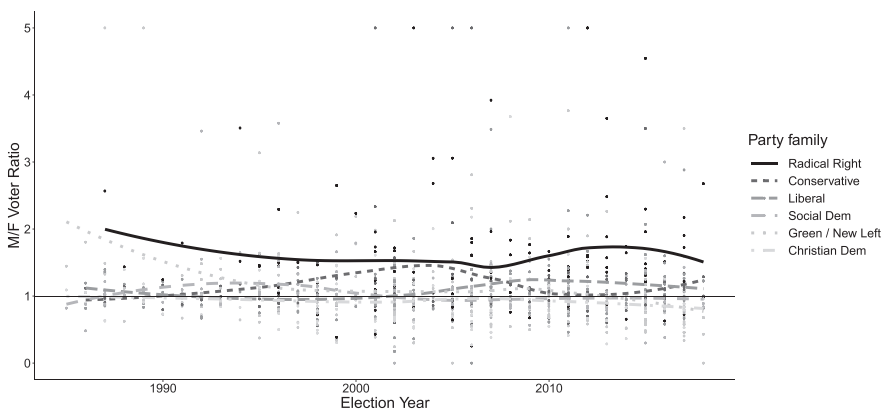


Figure 27.1 Gender differences (male/female voter ratio) in voting behaviour for different party families, Europe 1985–2018 (Loess Smoothing)

Note: M/F voter ratio data compiled from CSES, EES and ESS surveys (Weeks et al. 2022).

plateaued, but increased in the late 2000s, ending at close to 2.0: double the percentage of men voters supporting the RRP parties as women voters.

Explaining gender differences in party support

Researchers have identified a host of individual and contextual factors explaining gender differences in party support. These studies have particularly accounted for women's greater likelihood of voting for left-leaning parties. Many studies have highlighted changes in women's structural socioeconomic characteristics and related changes in policy interests and positions. Women's greater participation in the paid labour force exposes women to pay inequities and provides them with life experiences that women are less likely to experience as homemakers (Manza and Brooks 1998; Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2004; Morgan 2015). Working women are expected to be more likely to support public spending on child and elderly care, work that was traditionally unpaid and done by women (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006). Furthermore, women's greater likelihood of working in the public sector makes them more dependent on the expansion of the welfare state and thus more likely to be supportive of left-wing parties (Knutsen 2001). Additional structural explanations include the growth of women's educational opportunities, more women heading households given the increase in divorce and rise of non-marriage, and associated increasing levels of poverty among women (e.g. Manza and Brooks 1998; Inglehart and Norris 2000).

Women's support for left-leaning parties has also been attributed to women's greater emphasis on particular issues and their issue positions, including support for gender equality, women's rights and expanded welfare states (Jelen et al. 1994; Studlar et al. 1998; Gidengil et al. 2003; Alexander et al. 2020); topics often referred to as 'women's issues'. Scholars have defined such 'women's issues' in different ways, including based on gender differences (both among the public and politicians) in policy preferences or the distinction between private spheres ('women's space') and public spheres ('men's domain'). Using the former approach and examining gender differences among citizens in policy positions, Weeks (2022) finds that, across democracies and over time, women prefer greater governmental spending on health, retirement and unemployment, and are more likely to say it is the government's responsibility to keep prices under control, provide a job for everyone and reduce income inequality. Even larger gender gaps are found over issues related to gender roles in the family and work, with women on average nine points less likely than men to say that a preschool child will suffer when mothers work outside the home (Weeks 2022).

Women's issue positions related to redistribution and government intervention align with left-wing parties' greater attention to social policies and positional support for policies aimed at improving gender equality (such as gender quotas) (Caul 1999; Wängnerud 2009; Kittilson 2011; Lilliefeldt 2012). However, gender differences on issues related to gender roles in society do not fall neatly along the left-right dimension. Indeed, left-wing parties have been criticised for their failure to support measures to promote women's employment, for fear that gender equality might compete with the importance of class-based concerns (Gelb 1989; Huber and Stephens 2001). Parties often frame the issue of women's employment differently, the left highlighting gender equality and the right, fertility or productivity ('business case') arguments. Gender gaps on both redistributive and social issues also exist *within* parties' electorate. For example, analysis from the USA finds that Republican women tend to be significantly more moderate than Republican men (Barnes and Cassese 2017). As such, parties on both the left and the right can and have shifted positions on these issues to gain women's votes, as we discuss later in the chapter.

Explaining men's overrepresentation in support for RRP parties has proved more challenging than explaining women's overrepresentation among left-leaning parties. Common

explanations for gender differences in RRP voting include men's larger share of manual jobs in blue-collar sectors, which are seen to be threatened by modernisation and globalisation (Kitschelt 1995). Men are more likely to lose their jobs or to be forced into lower-paying jobs in the new global economy, raising the salience of these issues for men as voters (Givens 2004). Consequently, men may develop a sense of economic insecurity and resentment that leads to support for nativist policies (Studlar et al. 1998). This insecurity and resentment are especially likely to affect men without a college education. Research finds that this group's relative social status has declined in recent decades, due in no small part to the *rise* of women's social status (given rising levels of women's employment) – and that low subjective social status predicts voting for radical right populists (Gidron and Hall 2017).

Other common explanations of the gender gap in RRP voting are men's greater prioritisation of law and order and focus on individual responsibility compared with women (Gilligan 1982) – attitudes that fit well with RRP parties' authoritarian discourse. It has also been argued that RRP parties' traditional views of a woman's role in society are more strongly supported by men than women (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Finally, some studies suggest that the male-dominated leadership of RRP parties may explain this gender gap. Mayer (2013) demonstrates that gender differences in support for the Front National narrowed as Marine Le Pen took a leading role within the party and gave it a more modern image.

Yet recent research shows that some of these explanations offer less leverage over time. For example, Mayer (2013) points out that service sector jobs, dominated by women, are increasingly uncertain (the COVID-19 pandemic only confirms this). Scholars have also argued that women do not necessarily hold less strict attitudes towards law and order or immigration than men (Mudde 2007; Mayer 2015). Hartevelde and Ivarsflaten (2018) found few gender differences in policy preferences over migration, showing instead that women are more motivated to control prejudice. Furthermore, some Northern European RRP parties have embraced femonationalism, which refers to the trend of exploiting gender equality issues in campaigns against Muslims, on the grounds that Islam is unsupportive of women's rights (Farris 2017, see also, e.g. Mayer 2013; Akkerman 2015; de Lange and Mügge 2015; Mudde et al. 2015). Hence, the explanation about the RRP parties' positions towards women's role in society becomes less convincing.

Implications of the gender gap for party strategies

The structural explanations dominant in past research on gender differences in party support suggest a passive role for parties. However, studies of party politics demonstrate that parties actively target groups of voters during elections. Bringing together these two streams of the literature suggests that parties may play a strategic role in shaping gender differences. Extant work on party competition in general posits that parties act strategically to increase their vote share. Applying this logic, political parties may make concerted efforts to gain women voters in particular. In this review, we focus on three sets of tactics identified in previous research: shifting programmatic appeals, making institutional reforms and increasing women's presence among party candidates, MPs and leaders.

Changes in issue emphases and positions

Political parties diversify their issue offerings or alter their policy stances to appeal to untapped voters (Downs 1957). Recent work (Meguid 2005, 2008; Bale et al. 2010; Han 2015; Abou-Chadi 2016) extending this argument to single-issue parties has shown that mainstream parties approximate the position of threatening niche parties to win over their voters. There are

ample examples of political parties shifting their policy stance and heightening the salience of gender-related issues to attract women voters. For example, Morgan (2013) presents the cases of conservative parties in the Netherlands, the UK and Germany, promising more progressive social programmes including childcare, parental leave and working time flexibility, to appeal to previously alienated women voters on the basis of work-family policies. Weeks (2019) shows that gender quota laws cue party leaders to increase competition over gender equality issues to target or retain women voters.

Another example is the strategy of femonationalism discussed earlier, which shows how RRP parties are diversifying their policy stance to attract women nominally on the basis of feminist issues. This tactic goes beyond the simple addition of a new issue, however. It is rather the linking of the party's existing anti-Islam stance to a central 'women's issue' of women's control over their bodies and rejection of subjugation to men.

In these cases, parties feel the need to alter their policy stances because of the differential preferences of women and men voters. As discussed previously, these preferences may include differences in prioritisation of issues and policy positions such as support for gender equality, women's rights and expanded welfare states, relative to men. Of course, the strategy to change issue emphases and positions will only be pursued by rational parties if their electoral costs are outweighed by the benefits. If the policy shifts or issue diversification necessary to attract women voters will alienate more existing voters or if the party is already successful under the existing programmatic stances, such tactics will not be pursued (Meguid 2022).

Institutional reform

Parties may also press for institutional reforms to target specific groups of voters. Specific to women's party support, two examples of institutional reforms initiated by political parties are nationwide reforms allowing women to vote and nationwide and intraparty gender quotas for political candidates.

When women received the right to vote – in the first half of the twentieth century in many Western countries – they were expected to be more likely to support conservative parties than men. This expectation was based on women's higher levels of religiosity, their roles as housewives and their generally conservative attitudes at the time. Many parties, both left- and right-leaning, were split on the issue of women's suffrage (e.g. Maguire 2007). Within the British Conservative party, some members realised that giving the vote to women on the same basis as men (a property franchise) would give the vote to middle- and upper-class women, who would be more likely to vote for them. In other words, suffrage extension could be a strategy to increase and broaden the Conservative's electorate. By contrast, despite full adult suffrage being the Labour Party's policy as of 1912, some Labour members initially opposed votes for all women. They argued that the Labour Party was set up to represent the working class and believed that campaigning for women's votes, in addition to those of working class men, would weaken their cause and hurt their electoral appeal. Thus, the extension of female suffrage was viewed through a strategic lens by parties of the left and right.

In modern eras, suffrage extension has been replaced with other institutional strategies such as gender quota laws. Quota adoption can be used strategically to attain different goals depending on the national and international context. One such goal is increasing support among women voters. For example, when presented with polling data revealing a deficit in women's votes in the 1990s, the British Labour Party adopted women-only shortlists in some constituencies to quickly raise women's descriptive representation in parliament (Eagle and Lovenduski

1998; Childs and Webb 2012; Campbell 2016). Previous research in wealthy democracies demonstrates that parties are more likely to adopt quota laws in times of high electoral uncertainty as an attempt to increase their support among women voters (Baldez 2004; Murray et al. 2012; Weeks 2018). Parties will also adopt a quota law as a way of exerting control over their candidate lists when decentralised candidate selection procedures give party leaders little control otherwise (Weeks 2018). In countries where women have low status, quotas can be adopted as a way to demonstrate the country's commitment to democracy, and thus to secure foreign aid (Bush 2011). (For a wider discussion of institutional reforms, see Chapter 9.)

Changes in women's representation

A third tool for targeting women's support is to increase the number of women faces in the party when it is politically expedient, without the use of a quota. Concerted efforts have been made by party elites across Europe and the USA to boost the number of women candidates, MPs and party leaders within their parties. Figure 27.2 shows the share of women in the parliamentary party across party families in Europe from 1980 to 2018. The figure reveals that not only has the average share of women elected increased, but this rise is also found in every party family since 2000. Research has shown that women's descriptive representation tends to be higher in left-wing parties, which is related to their greater likelihood of introducing party-level gender quotas (e.g. Reynolds 1999; Kittilson 2011).

Several factors may explain this positive trend in women's representation. Beyond the idea that good democratic government requires representation of all citizens, more tactical explanations emerge for closing the gender gap in political representation (Teele 2018; Weeks 2018). Valdini (2019) theorises that men party gatekeepers strategically calculate that running more women for office will improve a party's less-than-positive image, thereby increasing women's electoral support for the party. Women's presence serves as a visible symbol of the party's support for the issue of equality, without the party necessarily needing to implement more fundamental gender-based reforms. Evidence of this tactic can be seen across a wide variety of world regions and political organisations, from party actions following corruption scandals in Spain, Portugal

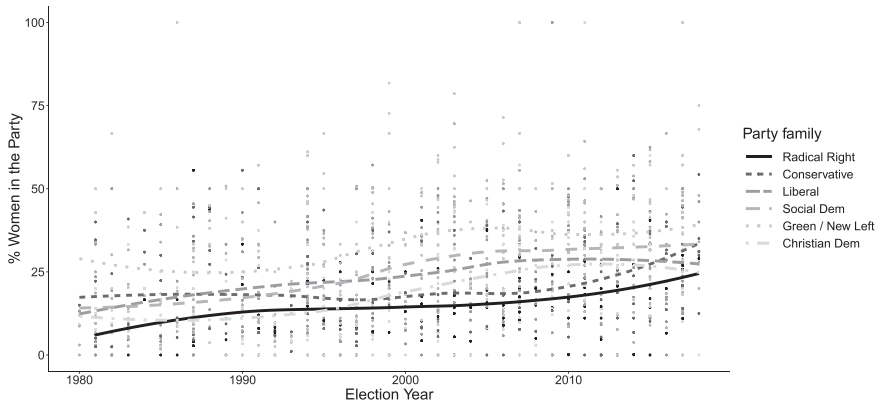


Figure 27.2 Share of women in parliamentary party by party family, Europe 1980–2018 (Loess Smoothing)

Note: Data from own data collection (Weeks et al. 2022).

and Ireland (Valdini 2019), to Jordanian tribes reacting to gender quotas (Bush and Gao 2017), to patriarchal social movements (Nielsen 2020). O'Brien (2015: 1022) finds similar evidence of the tactical use of women in her study of party leaders, concluding that parties are more likely to consider women leaders when their electoral performance is declining.

Even if the presence of more women does not signal policy or reputational changes, parties may increase women's representation because women voters are more likely to vote for women as candidates. Indeed, in the USA, voters are more likely to support representatives who share their race or gender, even after controlling for party affiliation (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2003), and women in the electorate are more likely to support women candidates and parties that run and elect more women (Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Banducci and Karp 2000).

In recent work (Weeks et al. 2022), we propose a new theory of *strategic descriptive representation* to describe this tactic of descriptive representation (increasing the number of women MPs) as a tool to appeal to a broader set of voters. The theory has the factors of electoral loss and the oft-overlooked variable of gender differences in voter support at its core. We argue that electorally struggling parties with large gender gaps in voter support will increase their proportion of women MPs to attract previously untapped women voters.

Having the largest gender gaps in support across Europe, RRP parties emerge as key employers of strategic descriptive representation. Unlike green parties who view gender equality as central to their electoral programme and *raison d'être* (Keith and Verge 2018) and have decentralised party organisations with a wealth of women representatives already, RRP parties seem to be bolstering their representation of women as a strategic tool to gain women's votes. In time-series cross-sectional analyses relying on survey data and data on women's representation in 30 European countries from 1985 to 2018, we find that RRP parties across Europe increase their percentage of women MPs when they have both men-dominated electorates and experienced vote loss (Weeks et al. 2022). We argue that this vote-seeking strategy may be less costly than programmatic changes, as increasing the number of women does not require shifting the position of core issues or diversifying policy stances. Our analyses further demonstrate that strategic descriptive representation has a more significant effect on shaping the number of women MPs in RRP parties than other institutional tactics, such as national gender quotas.

One illustration of this mechanism of strategic descriptive representation can be seen in the behaviour of the Dutch RRP party, the Party of Freedom (PVV), in 2017. The PVV had lost votes in the previous 2012 parliamentary elections (10.1 per cent in 2012 compared with 15.5 per cent in the 2010 elections) and they faced an underrepresentation of women in their electorate. In line with our argument, in 2017, the PVV presented a party list top-heavy with women MP candidates: the second and third spots on the list were both occupied by women. Party leader Wilders acknowledged that the placement of the women was part of a tactic to draw a broader electorate to the PVV. While the PVV did not increase the share of women candidates on the list (28 per cent in 2012 compared with 26 per cent in 2017), more women were placed higher on the list – in winnable positions – in 2017. As a result, the share of elected women MPs increased from 20 per cent in 2012 to 30 per cent in 2017.

Conclusions and avenues for future research

The study of gender, parties and issues has evolved over time from describing trends in women's support for parties to considering the causes and consequences of gender differences in party support. However, existing work has downplayed the role that parties can play in building and exploiting gender gaps. Our review highlights the tools with which parties appeal to women

voters and explores the strategic considerations behind party decision-making related to the representation of women and their interests.

Numerous questions remain about how gender affects voter preferences and behaviour and, in turn, party strategy. However, our exploration of these questions is hindered by data availability and measurement. For instance, women have entered the labour force rapidly over recent decades, but we have seen a much smaller shift in the gender gap in household labour or in top leadership roles. Yet we lack cross-national time series data on support for specific policies that women in particular would benefit from like child care, shared parental leave, gender quotas and also policies related to violence against women. When the rare survey does ask questions about these topics, large gender gaps are often revealed. We cannot fully understand women's preferences, or how parties do or do not address them, without expanding data collection to a broader scope of issues. Similarly, to date, most work has focused on gender as a binary identity. Only recently has path-breaking research begun to measure gender as a continuum, offering new opportunities for understanding gendered lived experiences, attitudes and political behaviour using finer-grained measures of gender identification (e.g. Hatemi et al. 2012; McDermott 2016; Coffé 2019; Wängnerud, Solevid and Djerf-Pierre 2019; Solevid et al. 2021; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2021; Gidengil and Stolle 2021).

Future research should also explore intersections of gender and other forms of marginalisation such as race and ethnicity, class, religion, age and sexual orientation. Women are not a monolithic category, and differently situated groups of women have different issue priorities, policy positions and vote choices (Crenshaw 1991; Bejarano 2013; Bird et al. 2016; Junn and Masuoka 2019; Wolbrecht and Corder 2020). Consequently, parties may adapt certain strategies to attract specific groups of women. Following the idea of strategic descriptive representation, parties facing an underrepresentation of ethnic minority women in their electorate may increase the proportion of ethnic minority women. Focusing on changes in programmatic appeals, parties might choose to highlight a specific set of policy stances to attract underrepresented groups of women voters. For example, RRP parties could highlight conservative stances on ethical issues to attract conservative women voters often supporting Christian Democratic parties.

Finally, in line with most research on gender, our chapter has mostly focused on women. We introduced the theory of strategic descriptive representation arguing that electorally struggling parties with an underrepresentation of women among their voters will increase their proportion of women MPs to attract previously untapped women voters. An interesting avenue for future research would be to explore to what extent and how the argument of strategic descriptive representation holds for men. In other words, do parties that have an underrepresentation of men as voters and that are facing electoral decline increase their descriptive representation of men, with the hope of gaining men voters? In addition, many emerging issues that women are said to prefer also affect *men's* lives in important ways. For example, more countries are passing paid paternity leave and shared parental leave policies with dedicated fathers' quotas. More research is needed that considers men's attitudes towards these policies and the social pressures that prevent them from taking a more hands-on role in caring (e.g. Tanquerel and Grau Grau 2020), in order to make real progress towards gender equality in the future.

Note

- 1 Using historical data on voter turnout, Morgan-Collins and Teele's 2018 study, however, challenges this wisdom, concluding that women's suffrage generally favoured left-leaning parties, and this was driven by lower and middle-class women.

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