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Adverse Contagion? Populist Radical Right Parties and Norms on Gender Balance in Political Institutions

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Abstract

How do male-dominated populist radical right (PRR) parties relate to and influence norms around women's political inclusion and leadership in mainstream political parties? While research has focused on describing the male dominance of PRR parties or its influence on mainstream political parties' policies, particularly immigration, we know less about how PRR parties relate to norms on women's inclusion or gender-balanced representation in mainstream parties. In a theory-building effort, we posit that PRR parties may seek to (a) adapt to mainstream parties' norms and include more women in leading positions (positive contagion) or (b) negatively affect or even challenge norms around women's inclusion in mainstream parties (adverse contagion). Seeking to theorize this relationship further, we explore leadership selection in the Swedish Parliament, where gender balance constitutes a strong norm. Yet, following the 2022 elections, the proportion of women parliamentary leaders dipped below 30% for the first time in decades. At the same time, the Sweden Democrats, a male-dominated PRR party, emerged as the second-largest party in Parliament. Drawing on interviews with nomination committees, party documents, and data on leadership, we empirically investigate continuity and change in committee leadership appointments in the Swedish Parliament and the role of the radical right in this process. We do not find signs of adverse contagion in the short run: as of 2023, norms promoting gender balance appear to remain robust and enjoy widespread support among mainstream parties. Yet, neither do we find signs of positive contagion where the radical right adapts to mainstream norms around gender balance.

Keywords

contagion; gender; political leadership; radical right; Swedish parliament

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, women's access to top political leadership positions in government, parties, and parliaments has increased in many countries around the globe. Research shows that informal gender norms, rather than quotas or formal regulations, have played an important role in this development. In countries and political parties where norms around women's inclusion as a representational criteria and gender balance have emerged, women are also more likely to hold political leadership positions (Annesley et al., 2019). Sweden is often mentioned as a role model, with a long history of a high share of women in leading positions and established norms of gender balance in politics. Yet, after the election of 2022, the tradition of gender-balanced leadership in parliament was broken. After the appointment procedures in the fall of 2022, only four of the sixteen parliamentary committees were led by a woman. Among the eight chair positions held by the governing parties, only one was a woman. Counting both chairs and vice chairs, the governing parties appointed one woman and fifteen men. Taken together, women's share of the committee presidium posts dropped to less than 30%—a record low. At the same time, the Sweden Democrats—a populist radical right (PRR) party—became the second-largest party and took part in the governing majority for the first time. What role has this party played in the dramatic decrease in women's representation in leading positions?

In a theory-building effort, this article explores challenges to norms around gender-balanced political leadership. In particular, we focus on the challenges PRR parties pose to such norms. These parties are often heavily male-dominated and, as such, openly challenge norms around gender balance in politics and political leadership. Emerging research has explored radical right parties' influence on mainstream parties' attitudes and policies on immigration, showing how established parties react to radical right success by becoming more anti-immigrant and culturally protectionist (see, e.g., Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020). However, we know less about if and how these parties adapt to and affect mainstream parties' norms around gender equality in political representation. We contribute to filling this gap by asking: How do PRR parties relate to contexts where mainstream parties have strong norms around gender balance in political leadership? And to what extent do PRR parties' views and male domination negatively affect mainstream political parties' norms and selection criteria? Seeking to theorize this relationship further, we develop hypothetical scenarios of how PRR parties adapt to or affect norms on women's inclusion in mainstream parties. Drawing on the Swedish case, we empirically explore these scenarios to increase our understanding of why so few women were appointed committee leaders following the 2022 parliamentary election. In particular, we examine to what extent there are signs of what we label an adverse contagion effect, where male dominance and masculinity norms in the PRR party spill over to mainstream parties.

In the empirical study, we draw on interviews with Swedish party group leaders, nomination committee representatives, and leaders of women's sections in the political parties, as well as data on leadership appointments. We find no evidence that the low share of women committee leaders can be explained by adverse contagion—norms around gender balance in leadership appear strong and uncontested across all mainstream parties. Instead, the mainstream parties point to disrupted appointment procedures and coincidence for explaining the low share of appointed women leaders to these positions. These findings align with a continued commitment to gender balance in other leading party roles. Time will tell, however, to what extent the appointment of men in the governing majority is an initial sign of norm erosion and adverse contagion of male dominance.

2. Previous Research on Parties and Gender Balance in Political Leadership

Political parties are responsible for appointments to many leading political positions—including party leaders, cabinet ministers, and parliamentary leaders—and parties vary in how much they value and prioritize gender equality. In contrast to women's representation in parliaments, which in many countries has increased due to gender quotas (Hughes et al., 2019), there are seldom such regulations for leadership positions. Instead, women's representation in political leadership often hinges on informal rules, including norms and practices related to appointment and qualification criteria (Annesley et al., 2019). While norms of gender-balanced representation in some contexts are a feature of broader political arenas such as parliaments (Erikson & Freidenvall, 2021) or cabinets (Annesley et al., 2019), there is often significant variation across political parties. In addition, the lack of formal regulations gives parties leeway to deviate from such norms even in gender-balanced contexts.

To understand the variation in women's representation in leadership positions and norms around gender-balanced leadership appointments, political parties are thus crucial. While early research highlighted a connection between a leftist ideology and a higher number of women in office (Caul, 1999), more recent research has found that European social democratic parties are no more likely to select women as party leaders than other parties (O'Brien, 2015). Communist parties are, in fact, significantly less likely than other party families to break with male dominance at the highest level of the political party (O'Brien, 2015). Instead, parties belonging to the "new left"—green and radical left-wing parties—prioritize gender equality in political representation, have a higher proportion of women MPs in parliament, and are more likely to select women as party leaders in comparison to other party families in Europe (Keith & Verge, 2018; O'Brien, 2015; Weeks et al., 2023). In contrast, PRR parties are, in several studies, pointed out as most reluctant to include women in leading positions. These parties have traditionally been male-dominated, led by male leaders, and many such parties have been associated with a distinctly masculine image (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Mudde, 2019; Weeks et al., 2023). While some studies indicate that PRR parties negatively influence women's representation on an aggregate level, knowledge is limited about whether and how radical right parties' male dominance affects women's representation in mainstream parties. At the same time, while women are still poorly represented in PRR parties, the share of women MPs in European PRR parties has significantly increased in recent decades (Weeks et al., 2023). Moreover, women PRR leaders, such as Marine Le Pen in France, Siv Jensen in Norway, and Ayelet Shaked in Israel, are increasingly visible figures in radical right politics (Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; Chueri & Damerow, 2023).

3. Theorizing the Role and Impact of Radical Right Parties on Gender-Balanced Leadership

We posit that the entrance and growing strength of a male-dominated radical right party can be considered a critical moment that potentially challenges gender equality norms in political leadership in mainstream parties. In a first attempt to advance theory around the relationship between PRR parties and norms around women's political inclusion in mainstream parties, we theorize three possible scenarios on how a radical right party might affect or be affected by mainstream parties' norms on gender equality in representation.

In the first possible scenario, PRR parties adapt to mainstream political parties' norms around gender balance in politics and seek to increase their share of women in the legislature and leading positions. Here, contagion theory provides a helpful starting point. It suggests that parties feel pressured to include more women if

other parties have started doing so, thus causing a positive contagion effect. Commonly, traditional mainstream political parties have been induced to increase their share of women in response to women's inclusion by a smaller leftist party (Matland & Studlar, 1996). Following this reasoning, PRR parties competing with mainstream parties with strong norms around women's inclusion and gender balance should adapt and include more women on their ballots and in leading positions to attract voters. While strategic or more genuine concerns might drive changes in how PRR parties approach women's inclusion, research on radical right feminization has primarily focused on such parties' strategic incentives for including more women. Indeed, scholars have found that many PRR parties soften their radical discourse over time and seek to appear as a more standard competitor in the party system. Erzeel and Rashkova (2017) argue that including more women in their ranks to appear less male-dominated can be understood as such a standardization strategy. By increasing the visibility of women within their parties, these parties can appear more mainstream and acceptable to the general public without having to change their core programmatic standpoints (Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; Chueri & Damerow, 2023). Seeking to understand the increased inclusion of women in radical right parties in recent decades, Weeks et al. (2023) develop a theory of strategic descriptive representation, arguing that PRR parties strategically increase their share of women MPs when they are losing votes and when women are underrepresented among their voters. In contrast, successful PRR parties with a predominantly male vote base should continue to strategically exclude women. Based on data on women's representation in 22 European PRR parties across three decades, they find support for this strategic story (Weeks et al., 2023). We add to this by emphasizing the importance of context and, particularly, the level of women's inclusion in mainstream parties. If women's political inclusion constitutes a strong norm in mainstream parties, we argue that the PRR parties should be more likely to adapt and strategically promote women. In contrast, in cases where mainstream parties are also male-dominated, including more women is a less probable standardization strategy.

In a second scenario, we posit that the entrance and emerging strength of a PRR party negatively affect the representation of women in mainstream political parties. While contagion theory is commonly used to explain increases in the overall share of women in politics, less attention has been paid to potentially adverse contagion effects: how norms around gender balance in mainstream political parties may be challenged and erode as a consequence of successful and heavily male-dominated radical right parties. Mainstream political parties on both the left and the right have been found to shift their policy positions towards more anti-immigration and cultural protectionism in response to successful PRR contenders (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020). Yet, little is known about mainstream parties' responses concerning other issues. A possible explanation for such adverse contagion effects on women's representation is that mainstream parties come to perceive male domination and a masculine image as a successful electoral strategy if the goal is to regain voters from the radical right—i.e., they strategically masculinize. Other potential mechanisms behind adverse contagion are that norm perceptions change within mainstream parties or that the power balance within mainstream parties is affected. In a new political landscape where the radical right and their conservative ideals gain ground, opponents to gender-equal representation within mainstream parties may become empowered. Especially in mainstream right-wing parties, which have been more reluctant to accept gender equality in representation, opponents to gender balance likely remain. In such situations, ideals and criteria other than gender balance may start to regain influence in appointment procedures.

Finally, it is certainly also possible that the PRR party is not affected by and does not affect mainstream political parties' norms on gender equal representation. In this third scenario, the PRR party continues to select few

women to their electoral lists and appoint few women to leading positions. In contrast, mainstream parties continue to elect and appoint as many women as before. In this case, mainstream parties' norms around gender balance in politics are not affected.

How a PRR party is affected by and affects norms around women's inclusion and gender equality in mainstream parties is an important and understudied question. We posit that the tentative scenarios outlined above should be further developed and explored in different contexts. In this article, we take advantage of a critical case on the micro level—committee leadership appointments in the Swedish Parliament—to explore the role of a successful PRR party in a context with historically strong gender-balanced norms. This empirical analysis lays the ground for further theory-building on the relationship between PRR parties and gender equality norms.

4. Gender-Balanced Leadership in the Swedish Parliament

Political gender equality has been a stated goal in Swedish politics since the 1990s. A principle of gender-equal representation has become established within political parties (Freidenvall, 2021), reflected in the high share of women in parliament and parity governments in the past three decades. Moreover, previous research finds that the Swedish parliament has featured "gender sensitivity" in many aspects (Wängnerud, 2015) and that a shared "legislative gender equality norm" has emerged in the mainstream parties (Erikson & Freidenvall, 2021). Yet, the Swedish advancements in political gender equality rely on informal practices, norms, and agreements. Neither the political parties nor the parliament have adopted formal gender quotas, and consequently, there are no formal sanctions tied to non-compliance (Freidenvall, 2021). According to Erikson and Freidenvall (2024, p. 30), it is "remarkable that no hard measures to secure a gender equal representation in parliament's committees, or leading positions, have been adopted during this period [1994–2022]." Against this backdrop, the significant decrease in women's share of the presidium posts of the standing committees after the 2022 elections calls into question the strength of Sweden's established and informally institutionalized political gender equality. While women's share in the presidium posts, on average, has followed women's representation in parliament since the 1990s, that is no longer the case. Currently, women hold less than 30% of these positions. The governing majority has only appointed one woman in their sixteen committee chair and vice chair posts (see Figure 1).

To understand the current situation, some background information on the Swedish parliament and the political landscape is needed. The Swedish parliament is a unicameral parliament consisting of 349 members elected through a system of proportional representation, with eight political parties being represented: the Left Party, the Social Democrats, the Greens, the Center Party, the Liberals, the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats. Throughout the 20th century, parties collaborated along a left-right divide, with the Social Democrats and the Moderates (conservative/liberal) as the main adversaries, shifting in governing power. In 2010, the PRR party, the Sweden Democrats, entered parliament for the first time. Since then, the party has steadily increased its seat share to 20.5 % in 2022, currently being the second-largest party after the Social Democrats. Despite the Sweden Democrats' pivotal position between the right and left bloc in parliament, the party has been treated as pariah by the mainstream political parties who have refused to collaborate or negotiate with the party (Backlund, 2020; Leander, 2022). Yet, after the 2018 elections, the mainstream right opened up to abandoning its previous cordon sanitaire towards the Sweden Democrats, and after the 2022 elections, a minority right-wing government was formed. This government is constituted by the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberals, and rules with support from the Sweden Democrats—
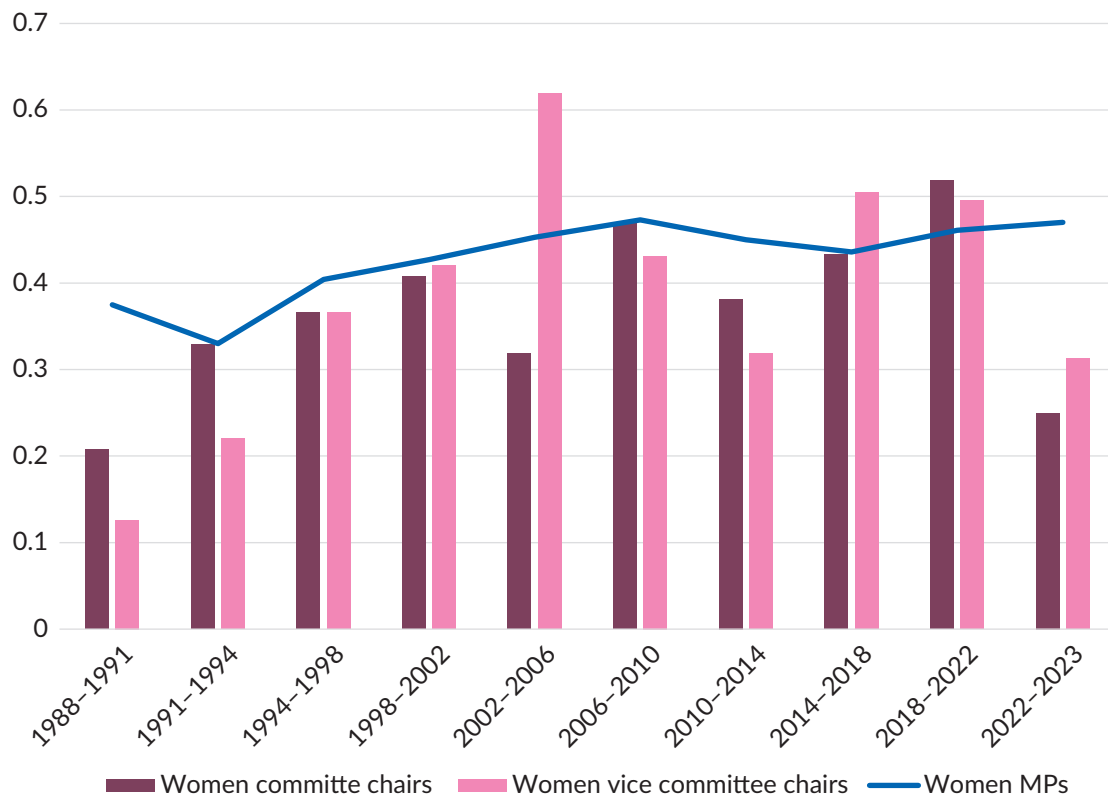
Figure 1. The proportion of women in parliamentary committee leadership positions (1988–2023). Note: The proportion of women leaders is calculated as the proportion of days when women have held a leading position.

a collaboration regulated in a comprehensive agreement (the so-called Tidö Agreement) that gives the PRR party ample influence over government policy and representation in the Prime Minister's Office. Since Sweden is a highly party-centered parliamentary democracy, the Sweden Democrats' shifting status from pariah to collaboration partner also influences the work in parliament to a large extent, including the appointments to leading positions.

Taken together, the strong norms around gender-equal representation in mainstream parties, the electoral success of the PRR, and the current decrease of women in leading positions produce somewhat conflicting expectations with regard to the three scenarios outlined above. On the one hand, the strong and longstanding norms around gender parity in the Swedish mainstream parties should entail strong incentives for the radical right party to adapt and feminize if it wants to appear as a standard competitor without having to change its radical standpoints on immigration. On that basis, we would expect the scenario of positive contagion to be a likely outcome in which the Sweden Democrats involve more women in leadership over time. On the other hand, we need to account for the fact that the Sweden Democrats have been very successful in electoral terms, significantly increasing their vote share in the most recent elections. From that point of view, the party has few incentives to change its masculine image, suggesting that one of the other two scenarios is more likely. Worth noting, in this case, is the fact that norms around gender balance are firmly established in the Swedish mainstream parties, and that makes it unlikely that they are easily affected by the male domination in a new radical right party. This leads us to the third scenario, in which the radical right party does not aim to feminize and where norms regarding women's inclusion remain robust within mainstream parties. Still, the question

remains: Why did mainstream right parties appoint so few women to parliamentary leadership positions after the 2022 elections? Is this a first sign of adverse contagion?

5. Methods and Material

The process of appointing leaders in parliament is a complex puzzle that primarily takes place within the political parties. As with candidate selection, these processes are hidden from public insight and shaped by a combination of formal rules and informal norms and practices that often favor male overrepresentation (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016). To capture these processes, we draw on different sources of material, including formal regulations such as party statutes from all eight political parties, their national guidelines and policies for nomination and selection (for a list of these formal documents see the Supplementary File), as well as interviews with key actors. Between April 2023 and January 2024, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with persons with experience and insights into their parties' appointment processes (see Supplementary File, Table A1). Several respondents also had insights into their parties and the parliament's gender equality work. We interviewed at least two persons from each of the three mainstream right-wing parties in the governing coalition and the radical right support party (nine interviews in total). The interviews lasted approximately 30–60 minutes, and most were conducted through online video calls. The questions that guided the interviews revolved around four themes: (a) general principles for selecting leaders in their party, and more specifically, the importance of gender balance in this process; (b) the parties' standard procedures for appointing leading positions in parliament; (c) the process and outcome of the appointments to committee presidium posts after the 2022 election; and (d) the relation between the Sweden Democrats and gender equality norms in parliament. In addition, we included data on the political parties' actual appointments to different leading positions.

6. The Parliamentary Context: Principles for Appointments to Standing Committees

The Parliament's 16 committees are headed by a chair and a vice chair. The presidium posts are highly important and visible as these leaders plan and lead the committees' work and serve as the Parliament's highest representatives in their respective issue areas. According to the parliamentary statutes, the committee members elect their chair and vice chair (The Riksdag Act, 2014, chapter 12). In practice, however, according to an informal agreement between the party groups, the parties distribute the positions between themselves before the committees make the formal decision. Although the largest party in government has the formal right to occupy all presidium posts, as per custom, the opposition gets half of these leading positions: eight chairs and eight vice chairs. Consequently, each committee has a presidium consisting of one representative from the government and one from the opposition (R1). Part of this informal agreement is that the largest governing and opposition parties share their leadership positions with the smaller parties. The individuals who are to be appointed to a party's committee leadership positions are prepared by the individual parties according to party-specific procedures and criteria (R5, R8, R2). Here, the parties do not coordinate with each other (R2, R4, R5, R7). To take gender balance into account in this process is thus "up to the individual parties" (R2).

Until recently, the Social Democrats and the Moderates have been the main actors in this game, shifting governing power and holding most of these committee posts. While the smaller mainstream parties each have been given a few posts, the Sweden Democrats have, as mentioned above, been excluded from such

negotiations until 2022. After the 2022 elections, when the mainstream right started collaborating with the Sweden Democrats, they were rewarded with eight committee presidium posts in Parliament—four committee chairs and four vice committee chairs—including some of the most prestigious posts, such as the chairs of the committees on justice and foreign affairs. While the Sweden Democrats nominated eight men to their eight committee presidium posts, the three mainstream parties in the right-wing governing bloc were not much better, nominating only one woman in their eight positions. The fact that women's share overall in these positions did not decrease more is thanks to the opposition parties in the center-left-wing bloc, which nominated nine women and seven men to their sixteen positions. Taken together, women were appointed to 10 of the 32 committee leadership positions.

7. Political Parties' Selection Criteria and Appointment Processes

Turning to the parties' criteria for selection and appointments, our analysis shows that the three biggest parties in Parliament—the Social Democrats, the Moderates, and the Sweden Democrats—differ on the extent to which gender is considered in their selection procedures. Both the Social Democrats and the Moderates explicitly mention that gender-equal representation is an aim and a guiding principle for all nominations and appointments in their party documents (statutes and congress decisions). According to the respondents in these parties, support for gender-balanced representation (defined as a 60/40 principle) in the party is strong—the norm is "never discussed or questioned within the party" (R1, Social Democrats), described as "unbreakable" (R3, Social Democrats), or as "unquestioned within the party" (R4, The Moderates). While the Social Democrats appointed four women and six men to their presidium posts in 2022, following their internal 40/60 principle, the Moderates only appointed one woman in their four presidium posts. This is described as an "unfortunate outcome" (R4, R13) and a result of a combination of factors, such as the negotiation of committee chair positions with the other governing parties, where the Moderates ended up with fewer presidium posts than usual; experienced women who got cabinet minister posts who would otherwise continue as head of committees; and men with merits making them "reasonably and logically" suited to lead the particular committees in question (R4, R13). Yet, in appointing committee frontbenchers (MPs tasked to lead the party's work in a committee) the Moderates followed their principle of 40/60 and appointed seven women and nine men. Moreover, examining the top leading positions in the entire party (including the party leader, the party secretary, the group leader, and the two vice group leaders), as of January 2024, three out of five were women.

The PRR, the Sweden Democrats, in contrast, disregard gender balance as a relevant criterion in their appointment processes and do not mention gender in any official party document included in this analysis. According to our respondents, the party instead cherishes the principles of competence and experience in nominations and appointments: "The main thing is that we have the right person in the right place, the right people in the right positions; we don't have to have gender-balanced statistics like it is for other parties" (R6). Still, the respondents admit that more women in leading positions is desirable because it reflects the electorate and can attract more women voters (R6, R7). In the words of one respondent: "Of course, we want a balance and a mix" (R6). They are convinced, however, that women's representation will increase naturally over time (R6, R7). The party leader and the party group leader handle the appointments to parliamentary leadership positions. After the 2022 elections, the party appointed fifteen men and one woman as committee frontbenchers. Among these, eight men and no women were appointed to the party's committee chairs and vice chairs. This overwhelming male dominance was not raised as a problem in internal

discussions (R6, R7)—these men were simply seen as the most suitable for these tasks (R7). Also, the top leading positions in the party are dominated by men; in January 2024, three out of four are men.

The extent to which gender is considered in nomination procedures also varies across the smaller mainstream parties. While the Left Party and the Greens explicitly emphasize the importance of gender-equal representation in their party statutes, neither the Centre Party nor the Liberals do so. The Christian Democrats' statutes state that nomination committees should "consider different ethnic backgrounds, genders, age, competence, experience, profession, place of residence, interests, etc." when appointing party candidates. After the 2022 election, the Left Party was the only party that displayed perfect gender balance in their committee presidium posts—one woman and one man. The Greens and the Center Party appointed two women each to their two committee presidium posts, contributing to a gender-balanced distribution among the opposition parties. In contrast, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals appointed two men each, further strengthening the male dominance in committee leadership among the mainstream right-wing governing parties. Despite that, the respondents claim that these parties still maintain a norm of gender balance as an important criterion in appointment practices, although none favor quotas or fixed numbers (R10, R11, R12, R14). Notably, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats have a majority of women in the other top leading positions in their political parties—three out of four leading roles in each of the parties were held by women in January 2024.

8. Understanding the Sweden Democrats' Impact on Gender-Balanced Leadership

Based on our study, we see few apparent signs of positive contagion. The Sweden Democrats do not appear to seek to increase their representation of women in leading positions to adapt to the other parties' strong norms around gender balance. The party has not adopted a language or norm of gender balance, neither when it comes to political representation in general nor for leading positions. In contrast, even their women's section dismisses gender balance as a goal in itself (R6), and in practice, the party continues to be heavily male-dominated. The fact that this male dominance is not even discussed in the party might appear surprising, given that it operates in one of the world's most gender-equal political contexts. One explanation for this, in line with the findings of Weeks et al. (2023), might be the electoral success of this party. Since the party entered the Parliament in 2010, it has increased its vote share in every election, from 5.7% of the votes in 2010, 12.9% in 2014, 17.5% in 2018, to 20.5% in 2022. Notably, although the proportion of women MPs has increased over time (there are currently 27% women in a group of MPs), women are still almost entirely absent in leading positions in the party.

Given the general and significant decrease in women's representation in committee presidium posts in parliament, a more pertinent potential scenario is that of adverse contagion, where Sweden Democrats' male dominance spills over and negatively affects women's representation in the mainstream parties, especially those in the right-wing governing coalition. However, our analysis shows no immediate signs that norms around gender-balanced leadership are challenged in the mainstream parties. Not even the conservative Moderates display signs of adverse contagion in this regard. In fact, the Moderates is one of the parties with the most explicitly stated and formally regulated aim to strive towards gender balance in representation and other leading positions. Although the Moderates failed to achieve gender balance in their committee presidium posts, the party did appoint an equal share of men and women frontbenchers in the committees. Moreover, their party leadership comprises three women and two men, and the Moderate-led

cabinet includes twelve men and eleven women, conforming to the Swedish tradition of gender-balanced governments. In the government, the Moderates hold twelve ministerial posts (six men and six women), the Christian Democrats six posts (four men and two women), and the Liberals five posts (two men and three women). As for the other center-right parties, our analysis indicates that these parties still support the norm of gender balance. Thus, at this point, we see no direct signs of adverse contagion where male dominance in the electorally successful Sweden Democrats spills over to the other parties. Moreover, most respondents experience that representatives from the Sweden Democrats seldom directly challenge or oppose gender equality in different venues of parliament (R1, R4, R5, R8, R, 9, R10, R12, R13), not even in the Speaker's gender equality group where the party occupies one of the two chair positions (R9). Nevertheless, a few respondents experience that MPs from the Sweden Democrats downplay the importance of gender in policy discussions, for example, concerning labor market investments targeting women (R14) or in relation to appointments (R8).

In contrast, many respondents share the view that gender balance has been and still constitutes a strong norm in the Swedish Parliament and the mainstream political parties (R8, R4, R9, R3, R5, R1, R10, R11, R13, R14), that has not been affected by the entrance and growing support of the Sweden Democrats. Support for gender equality is described as "strong and increasing when it comes to values...the challenge lies in realizing them practice" (R9).

Nevertheless, to the knowledge of our respondents, there has not been any discussion about the current low share of women in committee presidium posts, neither within the parties nor on the parliamentary level. Notably, very few respondents were fully aware of the meager share of women in committee presidium posts. However, some had noted a tendency of male dominance, especially in the Sweden Democrats (R3, R8, R9). When informed about the gender composition in committee leadership positions, the respondents reacted with surprise and indignation: "This was news for me" (R5), "I am a bit surprised that it goes for all the governing parties" (R9), "there has been no discussion, yet...this is a bomb in terms of news value" (R3), and "that is 'to hell'" (R2). This lack of awareness might indicate that gender equality issues have ended up in the background of public attention, although the respondents' reactions indicate strong support for a gender balance norm. At this point, it is difficult to say whether this is the first sign of an erosion of such norms or a temporary decrease in attention due to turbulent political times.

In sum, male dominance in the Sweden Democrats does not appear to have affected norms around gender balance in the mainstream parties, at least not in the short run. Neither do we find clear signs that the Sweden Democrats have adapted to the other parties' norms or high levels of women in parliament or leadership. Instead, our findings are more in line with scenario three. The decrease of women in committee presidiums resulted, to a large extent, from continued male dominance in the Sweden Democrats, which appointed eight men, a considerable part of the committee presidium posts. As for the appointments in the other parties, the Moderates' failure to achieve gender balance is, according to them, the result of a combination of factors mainly related to the government formation process (R4, R13). The Christian Democrats and the Liberals, which only have two committee chair positions each, explain their appointments as part of a larger puzzle that included other leading positions (where women are in the majority). Also, the Liberals' prioritization of parliamentary experience in appointments and the fact that the Christian Democrats have a male-dominated group of MPs and many newly elected women were mentioned as part of the explanation for these parties' all-male nominations (R10, R11, R12, R14).

The sudden decrease in women's share of committee leadership positions showcases the importance of the institutional context in understanding the impact of radical right parties on gender-balanced representation. Much of the procedures in the Swedish Parliament are based on shared agreements and informal practices—no formal regulations safeguard gender balance. The Parliament's gender equality group (led by the Speaker and composed of MPs from all parties) is mentioned as a potential actor that could oppose or react to an uneven gender distribution in committee leadership positions (R8, R1, R13). Historically, this group has provided statistics on gender distribution across various positions in the parliament (Swedish Parliament, 2015; Erikson & Josefsson, 2021). However, to our knowledge, they have never critiqued individual party appointments. For this mandate period, the group plans to collect statistics on the share of men and women in different parliamentary positions to stimulate discussions within the parties on how to address any potential issues they identify (R9). Yet, the group has not (yet) reacted to the present situation (R9).

9. Concluding Discussion: The Challenge of Radical Right Parties and the Sustainability of Norms on Gender Balance

While previous research has explored how radical right parties influence mainstream parties' stances on immigration, less is known about how such parties influence mainstream rules, norms, and practices around gender equality. We argue that more research is needed on how radical right parties relate to and potentially challenge norms around women's inclusion and gender-balanced representation in mainstream parties. This knowledge is crucial to better understanding the foundation and sustainability of women's political representation. The Swedish case demonstrates that a strong track record of women's representation does not guarantee future success in this area.

In this article, we have outlined three scenarios to describe the potential role and impact of PRR parties in relation to gender balance in political representation. In a first scenario, we hypothesize that radical right parties adapt to gender balance in mainstream parties by increasing their share of women candidates and leaders. This is similar to what previous research has labeled positive contagion to describe how small progressive parties might incentivize larger parties to include more women in their ranks. Yet, researchers must also be open to the second scenario—that radical right parties may adversely affect women's representation in mainstream parties. What we label "adverse contagion" captures the negative influence that radical right parties may have on women's representation in mainstream parties. In such cases, conservative gender norms and male dominance spill over and affect women's inclusion in mainstream political parties. Given radical right parties' advancements in many countries worldwide and their quest against gender ideology, we see this adverse contagion as an apparent risk also to gender equality politics more broadly.

In the case under examination, committee chair assignments in the Swedish Parliament, we see no immediate and apparent signs of adverse contagion, where radical right male dominance is spilling over to mainstream parties. In contrast, norms around gender-balanced representation in leadership appear to remain strong and unquestioned in the mainstream parties. Nevertheless, there are no apparent signs of positive contagion either—that the Sweden Democrats adapt to the norms around gender balance in the other parties. Instead, we find that the Swedish case is most in line with the third scenario that we outline—where the radical right party neither adapts to nor affects norms around women's representation in

mainstream parties. This is somewhat expected due to the strong and longstanding norms around gendered balanced representation in the mainstream parties, on the one hand, and the electoral success of the radical right party, on the other hand. Thus, norms in the mainstream parties seem robust and sustainable, but the radical right party has few incentives to adapt to such norms when they are doing well electorally. Instead, the decrease in women's share of these leadership positions primarily appears to be a direct consequence of the Sweden Democrats' all-male appointments and unfortunate circumstances in the other parties. Yet, while the mainstream parties' failure to achieve gender balance might be temporary, the long-term impact of the radical right on norms on gender-balanced representation needs to be closely examined in the future.

Although this study's empirical findings depend on this specific context, and the extent to which they travel ultimately is an empirical question, the theoretical contribution of this study applies to any context where PRR parties are gaining ground. More research that probes the relevance of these scenarios in other political contexts is warranted, particularly with respect to how variation in PRR parties' electoral success and mainstream parties' support for women's inclusion matter for how PRR parties relate to and affect rules and norms around women's representation in mainstream political parties. There is, for instance, a possibility that in contexts where gender-balanced representation is more contested, intensified competition with a male-dominated PRR party may incentivize some mainstream parties to emphasize women's political inclusion and gender equality even more to distinguish themselves from their main competitors.

A final point worth highlighting is the potential institutional vulnerability that the Swedish case showcases. Despite strong norms of gender-balanced leadership across parties, few formal regulations on the party level and none on the parliamentary level safeguard gender balance in leading positions. Instead, these practices are entirely based on informal agreements and practices. Moreover, the parties do not coordinate to secure a gender-balanced outcome in the committee presidiums. While such informal arrangements based on goodwill may have taken Sweden far, it remains to be seen whether such institutional informality harms the sustainability and resilience of gender balance in the long run. In a world where anti-gender actors increasingly challenge gender equality, researchers must attend to questions of how the level of institutionalization and formality contributes to sustainable gender equality that persists even in the face of explicit threats.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study's findings are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. However, due to privacy restrictions, the data are not publicly available.

Supplementary Material

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

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