

Different Perspectives on Democracy as an Explanation for the “Populist Radical Right Gender Gap”?

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Abstract

The “radical right gender gap” is an established finding in contemporary research, indicating that women support populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in significantly lower numbers than men. Despite substantial literature dedicated to uncovering the reasons behind this gap, significant questions remain unanswered. This article examines the nature of the radical right gender gap in greater detail, focusing on Switzerland—a country with one of the most established PRRPs in Western Europe, the SVP/SPP (Schweizer Volkspartei/Swiss People’s Party), making it a representative case. A defining feature of PRRPs that sets them apart from other parties is their clear distinction between in-groups and out-groups in society, coupled with the propagation of nativist and anti-pluralist values. While PRRPs emphasize caring for the in-group, they often advocate excluding the out-group from rights and privileges. This article argues that the preferences of PRRPs and female voters are in stark contrast regarding these issues. Building on empirical evidence that women place more importance on certain features of a democratic system than men do, we propose that this discrepancy may help explain the gender gap in support for these parties. Utilizing data from the European Social Survey 2020, which includes detailed questions on various understandings of democracy, we find robust support for our hypotheses within the Swiss context. Compared to men, women consider protecting the rights of minorities and safeguarding all citizens from poverty as especially important for a functioning democracy. These preferences emerge as influential factors contributing to women’s reluctance to support PRRPs.

Keywords

gender gap; minority rights; populist radical right parties; voting; Switzerland

1. Introduction

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) continue to achieve significant electoral success globally. The sustained electoral performance of these parties, which have even been entrusted with governmental responsibilities, has garnered considerable scholarly interest (Coffé, 2019; Oshri et al., 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). This attention is warranted for several reasons. These parties gain traction through intense criticism of the established political system. Studies indicate that a major driving force behind their success is the discontent of voters with the perceived malfunctioning of political institutions (Harteveld et al., 2015; Rooduijn et al., 2016; Schulte-Cloos & Leininger, 2022; Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2024). However, rather than acting as a corrective force to enhance democratic processes and foster vibrant political competition, many experts caution that some of the ideas proposed by PRRPs contradict fundamental democratic principles and may even jeopardize liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023; Urbinati, 2019; Zaslove et al., 2021). Thus, understanding what makes these parties appealing to citizens dissatisfied with the current system is of utmost importance.

It is noteworthy that the appeal of PRRPs does not resonate equally across all societal groups, with systematic disparities evident. Early research identified that women are underrepresented among supporters of PRRPs (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Betz, 1994, Chapter 4; Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005). A prominent explanation, supported by recent empirical evidence, suggests that one primary reason women are deterred from voting for these parties is the perceived risk involved (Oshri et al., 2023). Women are generally more risk-averse than men (Byrnes et al., 1999). Consequently, women may be reluctant to vote for PRRPs, often perceived as inexperienced protest parties.

However, this characterization of PRRPs as inexperienced protest parties is increasingly outdated. Many PRRPs have assumed roles as governing parties at various levels, ranging from supporting partners in minority governments to dominant coalition partners (Capaul & Ewert, 2021; Paxton, 2020). More recent studies, including cases from diverse geographical regions such as Eastern and Southern Europe, have found that the gender gap in voting for PRRPs is not universal and has diminished in some instances (Mayer, 2013, 2015). Nevertheless, a pronounced gender imbalance persists in the electorate of several Western European PRRPs, some of which have been part of their respective governments (Finnsdottir, 2022; Immerzeel et al., 2015; Weeks et al., 2023). This suggests that the risk-aversion theory has limited explanatory power for understanding why women are reluctant to support these parties, prompting the question: What other factors contribute to this reluctance?

Reflecting on the idea that radical populist voting is, at least partly, a response to democratic discontent, it is plausible that the specific democratic ideals propagated by PRRPs do not resonate well with female voters. The core characteristics of PRRPs include populism and a radical right-wing ideology, both influencing their conceptualization of an ideal political system (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020). PRRPs promote a specific understanding of democracy shaped by anti-pluralism and nativism (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). They advocate for a political system where “the will of the people,” as the ultimate source of legitimacy, must prevail over the needs of minorities and out-groups within society (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Plattner, 2010; Urbinati, 2019). The potential influence of this specific democratic notion on the “populist radical right gender gap” has not been thoroughly tested.

Our study aims to address this gap in the literature. We argue that the unique democratic understanding of PRRPs, characterized by a singular “*volonté générale*” coupled with anti-pluralist sentiments, does not align with the preferences of female citizens and discourages their support. This argument builds upon novel empirical insights suggesting that women and men differ in what they prioritize in a democratic system, with women placing greater importance on the protection of minorities and less powerful groups from the “tyranny of the majority” (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021, 2024). This stands in stark contrast to the ideal system envisioned by PRRPs.

To test this hypothesis, we focus on a typical case of the PRRP-voting gap: the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) in Switzerland. The SVP is a conservative, anti-immigrant, right-wing populist party in Western Europe, exemplifying the type of PRRP often associated with a gender voting gap. Despite the SVP’s established presence and governmental experience, a pronounced gender gap persists among its voters. Given the low social and political risk of supporting the SVP, the gender gap in voting cannot be explained by risk aversion alone and requires further investigation. We utilize data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2020 (ESS, 2023) for Switzerland, conducting logistic regression analyses. The ESS 2020 offers a rare module on different understandings of democracy. Our analysis reveals a significant gender gap among PRRP voters in Switzerland, amounting to approximately 5 percentage points, even when controlling for education, age, income, and immigration attitudes. In line with our theory, the gender gap diminishes by 2 percentage points and becomes statistically insignificant when controlling for attitudes on the protection of minority rights. Additionally, women and men with similar attitudes on the protection of minority rights are also equally likely to vote for PRRPs. These findings suggest that the higher importance placed on an inclusive and liberal version of democracy by women partly explains their reluctance to endorse the populist radical right, opening new avenues for research on gender and PRRP voting.

2. The Populist Radical Right Gender Gap

With the rise in success of right-wing populist parties, there has been a growing interest in the role of women within these political entities. As a result, research on the topic has examined whether representatives of PRRPs are predominantly male (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Rashkova & Zankina, 2017), how female members differ from male members in their experiences and demeanor (Mayer, 2013), and to what extent “typical” women’s issues are an integral part of right-wing populist rhetoric and discourse (Akkerman, 2015; Mayer, 2015; Norocel, 2011). Furthermore, numerous scholars have focused on characteristics supporters of PRRPs share (Coffé, 2019; Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005; Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018; Harteveld et al., 2015; Immerzeel et al., 2015). Among those, several studies concluded that gender is a factor in the decision of whether to endorse a PRRP and that women are considerably more hesitant than men to do so. Despite ongoing efforts to better understand the so-called “radical right gender gap,” scholars still struggle to fully explain the nature of this phenomenon.

One of the primary questions that arises is whether the programmatic and personal offerings of PRRPs—what they supply to voters—are unattractive to women. De Lange and Mügge (2015), in their comparative analysis of party manifestos and policy proposals of various PRRPs, identified significant variance in political measures affecting women’s lives. These proposals range from traditional to less conservative stances, such as emphasizing the importance of protecting women’s rights against “the spread of Islam in Europe.” Therefore, there is little evidence to suggest that a consistent supply of anti-feminist policies is the main reason for women’s reluctance to support PRRPs.

However, research by Rashkova and Zankina (2017) and Mayer (2015) indicates that PRRPs have historically been “*Männerparteien*” (men’s parties), dominated by male leaders, representatives, and officials. A prevalent theory is that women struggle to identify with these parties and feel alienated due to a lack of descriptive representation. For instance, the gender gap in support for the Rassemblement National (formerly Front National) disappeared after leadership transitioned from Jean-Marie Le Pen to Marine Le Pen. Furthermore, a study by Weeks et al. (2023) demonstrates that PRRPs are aware that a male-dominated personnel base may deter female voters. Weeks et al. (2023) find that PRRPs respond to observed gender gaps in their electorate by nominating more women, particularly after electoral losses and under high pressure.

Nevertheless, in some Nordic countries, a gender gap in support for PRRPs persists despite the presence of prominent female candidates (Finnsdottir, 2022). Immerzeel and Mayer (2015) argue that unique electoral dynamics such as political scandals, dissatisfaction with other parties, and the polarizing nature of the PRRP itself must be considered when analyzing the “radical right voting gap.” Additionally, beyond the supply side of PRRPs’ offerings, another line of inquiry explores whether differences in voter preferences—the demand side—provide further insight into why women may be more hesitant to support PRRPs.

Original demand-side explanations of the radical right gender gap focused primarily on the different socio-economic positions of men and women. For a long time, men and women typically held very different occupational positions, with men constituting many blue-collar workers while women were more frequently employed in the public sector. As blue-collar sectors are most threatened by globalization, numerous scholars reasoned that the opposition to globalization and internationalization proclaimed by many PRRPs resonates well with “working class men” (Coffé, 2012; Givens, 2016; Mayer, 2013, 2015, p. 20; Rippeyoung, 2007). Women, on the other hand, who are more likely to be employed in the public sector and dependent on the state for support, such as childcare, are more likely to disagree with state retrenchment policies advocated by PRRPs (Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005; Ladders & Weldon, 2019). However, despite the intuitive appeal of these explanations, many studies have detected a persistent gender gap in PRRP support even after controlling for the occupational positions of different respondents (Fontana et al., 2006; Givens, 2016; Immerzeel et al., 2015). Additionally, conservative, or market-liberal parties also advocate state retrenchment policies (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Giger, 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Consequently, different socio-economic positions of men and women have little explanatory potential for the radical right gender gap.

Since socio-economic positions of men and women seemed to lack explanatory power, attitudinal differences between men and women regarding immigration, religiosity, gender issues, and risk aversion have come into focus. PRRPs in Western Europe propagate more nativist and sometimes even racist positions compared to other parties (Arzheimer, 2015; Hartevelde & Ivarsflaten, 2018; Mughan & Paxton, 2006; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). Although many mainstream parties have become more critical after the 2015 refugee crisis, their proposals for dealing with immigrants are still much more liberal than the approach promoted by right-wing populists (Akkerman, 2012; Arzheimer, 2015; Boswell & Hough, 2009). Several scholars (Kuran & McCaffery, 2008; Ladders & Weldon, 2019; Rashkova & Zankina, 2017) argue that PRRPs’ nativist, sometimes even xenophobic, rhetoric discourages women from supporting PRRPs since women are seen as having more open and liberal attitudes in this regard. Here, the values communicated by PRRPs and supposed women’s preferences do not coincide, suggesting that this may be one reason why fewer women voters support PRRPs. However, empirical support for this theoretical claim has remained very low. A variety

of studies has found that women are at least as skeptical towards immigration as men are (Akrami et al., 2000; Coffé, 2019). Even today, scholars remain divided in their assessments of the significance of anti-immigrant sentiments in explaining the phenomenon of the populist radical right voting gap. Finnsdottir (2022), for instance, demonstrates that variations in attitudes toward immigration significantly influence the extent to which citizens are inclined to support PRRPs. Conversely, Hansen (2019) finds, in a study that includes a broader sample of PRRPs beyond the four Northern European countries examined by Finnsdottir (2022), that the differences between men and women in their views on immigration are minimal. However, Hansen (2019) notes that women are considerably more reluctant to translate such sentiments into actual voting behavior.

Some scholars have raised that this disparity between traditional conservative parties and PRRPs regarding religious ties might explain why women are well-represented among the supporters of center-right parties while being very few in the electorates of PRRPs (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Betz, 1994, Chapter 4; Schnabel, 2016). PRRPs in Western Europe overwhelmingly promote a secular image. Women on the other hand are notably more religious than men (Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Schnabel, 2016). Even in times when the importance of religion is in decline, one must not overlook this factor. Therefore, several researchers have stressed that women are less attracted to PRRPs because of deeper ties to religious groups. Yet, most of them found that gender differences persist once one incorporates variables such as church attendance or religiousness (Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005; Hartevelde et al., 2015).

Despite the efforts made, these explanatory approaches have yielded limited results. Thus, the literature has moved on to pay more attention to how PRRPs talk about women, how they treat them, and which gender roles they exactly propagate. A common theory in the literature is that women reject certain gender values promoted by PRRPs. Often, PRRPs espouse rather traditional gender roles and a hierarchical societal structure as such (Hartevelde et al., 2015; Ladders & Weldon, 2019; Rippeyoung, 2007). From these conservative orientations, the policy plans advocated by PRRPs are not very attractive to women. Indeed, many of the newer works in this strand of research document that sexism, more masculine personality traits, and traditional views on gender issues perform quite well in explaining the populist radical right gender gap (Campbell & Erzeel, 2018; Coffé, 2019; Coffé et al., 2023; Hartevelde & Ivarsflaten, 2018; Ladders & Weldon, 2019; Ralph-Morrow, 2022).

However, it is worth noting that this characteristic, claimed to discourage women from voting for PRRPs, is also present in mainstream conservative parties. Mainstream conservative parties and PRRPs alike promote traditional family images (Giger, 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Thus, there is doubt (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017) that this factor is the main and single explanation for the discrepancy between men and women in supporting PRRPs. Notably, in recent years, many PRRPs have seen an increase in female support and have portrayed themselves as champions for women's rights, particularly concerning immigrants who may uphold more traditional gender values (Akkerman, 2015; Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; de Lange & Mügge, 2015). Thus, the question of what exactly it is that women find so deterring about the rhetoric of PRRPs persists. Therefore, one needs to take a step back and reflect again on what sets PRRPs apart from the rest of the party spectrum, thereby triangulating potential supply- and demand-side explanations.

One approach in this vein is the argument that the openly hostile stance towards the established political system PRRPs often take might be too radical for women (Coffé, 2019; Fontana et al., 2006; Immerzeel et al.,

2015). Several scholars thus reasoned that anti-elitism could help explain why these parties seem to be so unattractive for women (Mayer, 2013; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015, 2017). Previous works pointed out that women are less likely to vote for protest parties and join confrontational forms of participation (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Roth, 2004). Thus, many infer that the behavior of anti-system parties might deter women from supporting them because of their greater aversion to radicalism. While anti-elitist sentiments measured via political distrust have been frequently incorporated in existing studies on the radical right gender gap (Fontana et al., 2006; Gidengil et al., 2005; Off, 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017), little support for this line of reasoning has been found. However, most recent insights demonstrate that women are indeed more concerned about potentially wasting their vote and the social stigma of voting for inexperienced outsider parties. Oshri et al. (2023) convincingly show that women, therefore, are less likely to support outsider parties in risky electoral contexts, which also explains the variation of the populist radical right gender gap in voting across time and contexts.

While socio-economic and attitudinal differences between men and women have been explored, most of these discrepancies struggle to explain on their own why PRRPs are unappealing to women. The most decisive explanation seems to be women's more pronounced risk aversion in combination with PRRPs' outsider status (Immerzeel et al., 2015; Oshri et al., 2023). Additionally, recent studies (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017) also emphasize the importance of populist views on democracy for PRRPs' identity and citizens' decision to vote for these parties. While authoritarianism does very little to explain the radical right gender gap (Immerzeel et al., 2015; Lodders & Weldon, 2019; Mayer, 2013), populist attitudes can explain at least part of the gender gap in PRRP voting across Europe. However, the gender gap in voting for PRRPs persists in some contexts where PRRPs have become established parts of the political spectrum. Hence, we believe that it is of utmost importance to investigate additional factors. We argue that the very specific views on democracy propagated by PRRPs carry considerable explanatory potential in this regard.

Recent research shows that women and men differ in their understanding of what a properly functioning political system ought to look like (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021, 2024). Women and men are not alike when it comes to opinions about what a political system needs to prioritize and achieve to be considered a democracy (Afsahi, 2021; Konte & Klasen, 2016; Walker & Kehoe, 2013). Among other factors, women are more likely to prioritize the protection of minority rights in their characterization of an ideal democracy (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021). While recent studies test populist attitudes in general, authoritarianism, and anti-elitism, the gender differences in attributing importance to the protection of minority rights have remained unaddressed.

Building upon the specific approach of PRRPs to democratic decision-making, rooted in the radical right-wing host ideologies of these parties, which is hardly compatible with protecting minority rights, we develop an argument as to why the mismatch between PRRPs and female voters concerning what is most important in a democratic system could help explain the reluctance of women to support these parties.

3. Gender, the Populist Radical Right, and Different Views on Democracy

The ideational approach to populism introduced by Mudde (2004) is the most established definition of populism. In this article, we follow it and define populism as a thin ideology. Building upon the propositions of Mudde, populists view society as consisting of two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite." As a key part of their populist character, PRRPs rely on highly

confrontational “us versus them” rhetoric. In so doing, they do not simply criticize political elites but communicate a “Manichean worldview” and proclaim a constant struggle between the “pure and homogeneous people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2002, 2007). They also convey a strong people-centered view about how political decisions should be made. In their understanding, there exists just one *volonté générale* (general will) of the people which should be expressed and implemented as directly as possible (Mudde, 2004). Yet, the definition of the people is rather abstract, and its boundaries are not clearly defined.

There are several different types of populist parties, for instance, radical right, radical left, or technocratic populists. Depending on whether populism is coupled with radical right-wing or left-wing ideological stances, the conception of who belongs to “the good and pure people” changes. Right-wing populists emphasize the importance of nativism and often promote anti-pluralism. Consequently, they define the people based on cultural criteria, usually resulting in very strong opposition to immigration (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

Several scholars have concluded that some of these elements might harm democracy (Canovan, 2002; Guasti, 2020; Huber & Schimpf, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). However, the theoretical debates about this issue, as well as the empirical findings, paint a much more complex picture, with PRRPs being at odds with some aspects of democracy while being perfectly compatible with others (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Plattner, 2010; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023). Insights derived from works such as Heinisch and Wegscheider (2020) show that the respective left-wing or right-wing ideology coupled with the populist “core ideology” exerts a large influence on which facets of democracy a given populist party affects negatively. In the remainder of this theoretical argument, we will elaborate on which aspects of democracy populism coupled with radical right-wing ideologies—which is the distinguishing feature of PRRPs—might come into conflict with.

Right-wing populist parties are not anti-democratic per se, as they clearly state that the will of the people should determine the course of action in a state. They are strong proponents of political participation and direct decisions by citizens. In so doing, PRRPs emphasize the importance of one of the foundational pillars of democracy: rule by the people for the people. Nonetheless, their relations to other facets of democracy are a bit more complicated, especially regarding out-groups in society (Urbinati, 2019; Zaslove et al., 2021). Although emphasizing that the people are the source of political power and that only decisions taken by them should be viewed as legitimate, “the people” are viewed as a uniform mass. However, this does not reflect reality, as in no system are all citizens alike or think alike (Adamidis, 2021; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Plattner, 2010). Most societies are quite diverse, and even if there exists a political majority for certain decisions, there most likely exist several groups opposing it. The political system favored by PRRPs does not account for this. They push for the immediate implementation of the will of the people without being blurred by opposing demands (Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Mudde, 2004; Urbinati, 2019).

Importantly, given the anti-pluralist and often nativist orientations of PRRPs, the interests of minorities and other marginalized groups in society do not necessarily have to be considered equally in political decisions, according to the democratic concept proposed by PRRPs. This is at odds with the defining features of liberal democracy, stressing that all parts of the population have certain rights which must be taken care of and protected against an unconstrained “tyranny of the majority” (Canovan, 2002; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023; Zanotti & Rama, 2021). This tension is illustrated and emphasized by findings yielding that radical right-wing

populist rule has particularly negative effects on certain aspects of democracy, such as minority rights (Huber & Schimpf, 2017).

Novel findings by Hansen and Goenaga (2021) demonstrate that, unlike men, women place more emphasis on the equal protection of civil, political, and social rights and value democratic institutions that prevent the violation of those rights. In contrast to their male counterparts, they value all precautions a political system takes to protect the rights of minorities and weaker groups in society. While women are number-wise not a minority, such preferences are rational and in line with female interests. For a long time, women had faced structural marginalization and are still frequently subject to discrimination nowadays (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018). Thus, one might argue that women can better relate to how unfair treatment concerning rights and privileges feels and thus perceive this as more of a priority in a well-functioning democracy. Several studies (Afsahi, 2021; Hansen & Goenaga, 2024; Konte & Klasen, 2016; Walker & Kehoe, 2013) corroborate this claim and suggest that women are more likely to reject political practices and institutions that might restrict barriers to what extent the majority population can prevail over less powerful groups in society.

Going back to the vision of democracy PRRPs promote, certain tensions with what women appreciate particularly about a political system become obvious. In the view of radical right-wing populists, there is a uniform will of the good people that ought to be implemented as directly as possible (Mudde, 2002, 2004). Hence, everything that delays this process and all institutions promoting anti-majoritarian procedures are considered unbeneficial and even threatening to the implementation of the people's will (Canovan, 2002; Plattner, 2010; Urbinati, 2019). As shown by previous studies, this starkly contrasts with the features characteristic of a liberal democracy, where the rights of all groups, no matter how small and powerless, should be well protected (Adamidis, 2021; Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023; Zanotti & Rama, 2021; Zaslove et al., 2021).

Yet, it is particularly the strong protection of weaker groups, such as less resource-endowed individuals and minorities, that is crucial for women in a democracy. This highlights where the democratic ideals of PRRPs and women are incompatible. Even though women might be as skeptical about the impacts of immigration and the accompanying economic and cultural repercussions, they will still be more likely to advocate that the rights of such groups need to be protected against the rule of the majority. Findings (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018) emphasize that women, stemming from their own negative experiences with prejudice, are more eager to make sure that societal dynamics that harm weaker groups are kept in check. We argue that this disconnect between what women value about a democratic system and what PRRPs offer in terms of the structural design of a system is a decisive factor in explaining why women are so often hesitant to endorse those parties. Thus, we hypothesize:

H: Citizens who attach great importance to the protection of minority rights are less likely to vote for PRRPs. As women attach greater importance to such features of a political system than men, they are less likely to support PRRPs.

4. Research Design

4.1. The Populist Radical Right Gender Gap in the 2019 Swiss National Elections

We selected the SVP to test our hypothesis because this PRRP represents an established PRRP in a consolidated Western European party system. According to scholars concerned with the logic of meaningful case selection techniques (Gerring, 2006; Herron & Quinn, 2016), choosing a case with a *typical* set of values against the background of the general understanding of the phenomenon can provide valuable insights into a broader phenomenon. In our case, this concerns the pronounced gender voting gap in the electorate of PRRPs in stable democracies in Western Europe and North America. Moreover, the 2019 Swiss national elections present a suitable examination period, as several potential rival explanations to our theory can be ruled out. For instance, protest party image and anti-feminist rhetoric are unlikely to have played a significant role in the disparity in votes cast by men and women for the SVP in this election. Please see Figure 1 for a graphical illustration of this imbalance.

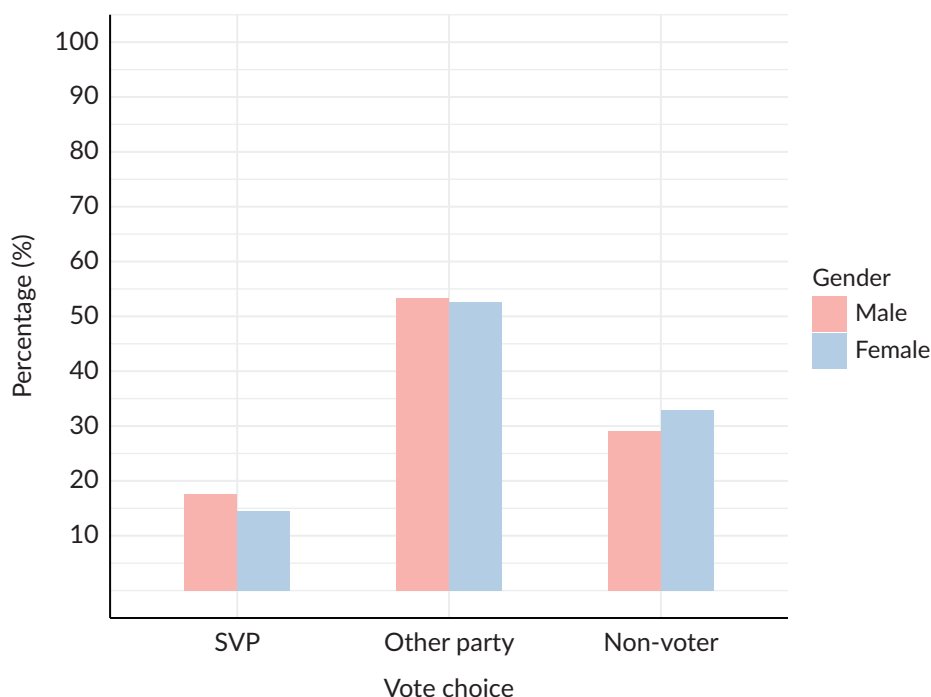


Figure 1. Vote choice in the Swiss national elections of 2019 ($N = 1032$).

While this disequilibrium is striking, some popular explanations found in the literature for similar phenomena do not apply to this case. The SVP is an established party that secured 25.59% of all votes in the 2019 national elections (Federal Statistical Office, 2023). It has been represented in the Swiss national government since 2003 and is also the Swiss party that has received the most votes in national elections since 1999. This renders the party one of the most experienced and successful PRRPs in Europe (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016; Mazzoleni & Skenderovic, 2007). While deploying an anti-elitist rhetoric, it did so from within the government, already established as part of the Swiss political elites. Consequently, women should neither perceive the SVP as an unpredictable and inexperienced party nor fear that it is socially undesirable to vote for the party.

Furthermore, Switzerland is still a rather conservative country concerning gender values in public and private life. The last communes in Switzerland granted women the right to vote only in 1991 (EJPD, 2021). In 2019, the SVP increased the number of women on their party lists in Switzerland. Notably, the SVP increased its share of women by 7.6 percentage points, surpassing the average increase among other parties of 5.8 percentage points (Giger et al., 2022). This is in line with literature claiming that even PRRPs are currently trying to appeal more to women, rendering arguments about traditional gender values prompted by PRRPs less relevant today.

4.2. Data

We test our hypothesis using individual-level data from the most recent ESS, Round 10 (from 2020). This survey offers cross-national micro-level data. As Switzerland is included in the most recent round, it provides us with extensive information on individual-level data about Swiss citizens. This data source is ideal for the application of our research interest as democratic attitudes are rarely polled in surveys.

Our dependent variable measures a respondent's vote choice in the 2019 national elections. It captures whether an individual endorses the SVP, a different party, or did not vote at all in the last election. We operationalize this by using respondents' stated vote choice in the 2019 national elections. In our analyses, we code the vote choice for a party other than the SVP as a reference group relative to voting for the SVP and abstaining from the vote.

The main independent variable of this article is *gender*. We assign the value 1 to all respondents who identify themselves as *female*. *Males* are coded as 0. To find out whether we can find empirical support for our hypothesis, namely that the gender gap in PRRP-voting is driven by different understandings of democracy between men and women, we construct a minority rights index by calculating the mean value of respondents' answers to three questions included in the ESS Round 10. The questions are part of a larger question box on democracy attitudes and ask on a scale from 0 to 10 if respondents consider it important that the government protects minority groups, the poor, or combats income inequality. Table 1 provides an overview of the wording of each component of our minority rights index. We selected these items based on the findings of Hansen and Goenaga (2021), which highlight gender differences in the perceived importance of minority rights for democracy. A correlation coefficient of 0.68 indicates that these three items tap into the same theoretical concept and can be combined into an index. Importantly, Swiss women in our sample assign higher importance to minority rights compared to men even if the gender differences are small (see Figure 2). Considering the low variation on the minority rights index, we consider even this small difference relevant.

It should also be emphasized that recent empirical evidence (Goenaga & Hansen, 2022; Hansen & Goenaga, 2024) clearly shows that women are less likely to answer questions about democratic evaluations. The Swiss ESS reports 38 respondents who did not answer at least one of the questions constituting our minority rights index; among them, 31 women and only 6 men. This implies that our sample is affected by this observation. Given their lower levels of internal efficacy, they are more hesitant to answer questions about the actual or ideal functioning of various dimensions of political systems. When women are unsure whether they have sufficient knowledge to answer correctly and competently, they tend to refrain from answering survey questions about such issues altogether. For our study, this implies that by drawing on public survey

Table 1. Overview of ESS questions used to construct the minority rights index.

Category	Survey item	Coding
Protection of minority rights	Please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general that the rights of minority groups are protected.	Range: 0–10 0 = <i>unimportant</i> 10 = <i>important</i>
Protection against poverty	Please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general that the government protects all citizens against poverty.	
Protection against inequality	Please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general that the government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels.	

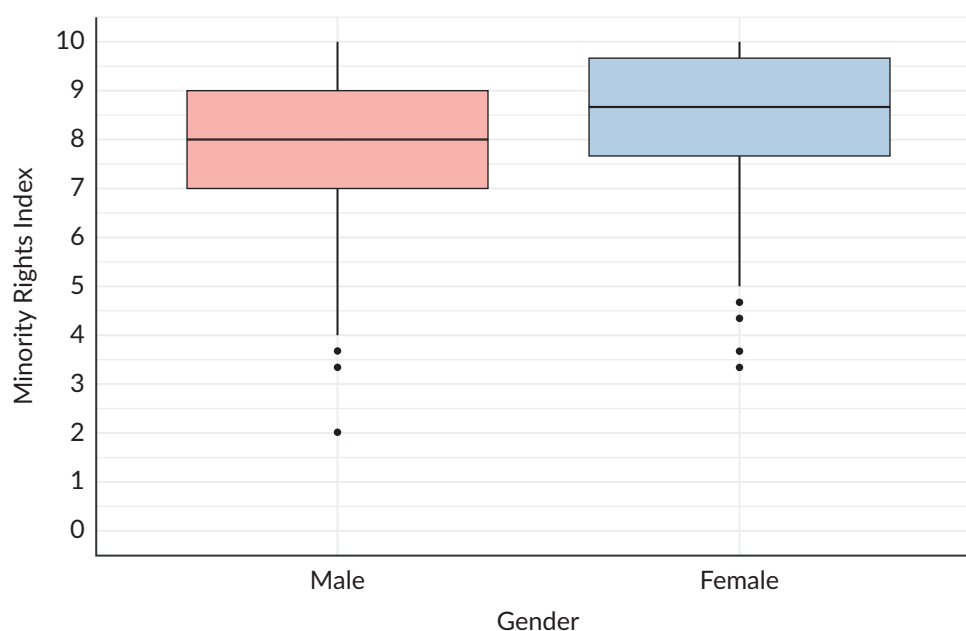


Figure 2. Boxplot on the distribution of male and female respondents on the minority rights index.

data, we are more likely to *underestimate* rather than overestimate the potential effect of different perspectives on certain democratic features.

We control respondents' education status, age, and income to account for the most important socio-demographic characteristics. We do not use objective household income as this leads to a very high number of missing values. We prefer to capture individuals' perception of whether they can comfortably live on their present income, which we also view as the more appropriate and interesting question when it comes to assessing the socio-economic situation of individuals. Furthermore, we account for anti-immigration sentiments, as an important alternative explanation for the radical right gender gap, by using a question targeted at whether respondents are worried about the economic impact of immigration. We do so to make sure that the omission of this potential rival explanation for the radical right gender gap does not affect our key findings. The question's focus on economics is aligned with PRRPs focusing on the economic consequences of immigration, which the SVP also deploys. For example, it proclaims that open borders lead to an inflow of unskilled labor and family reunions instead of a skilled labor force. In addition,

this question is less sensitive to social desirability biases compared to questions that capture nativism and racism more directly, which may deter respondents from providing honest answers.

5. Empirical Findings

To test our hypothesis, we conducted a set of nominal logistic regression analyses (see Table 2). The purpose of the first regression model is to test whether there is a gender gap between supporters of mainstream parties and supporters of the PRRP. To this end, we only include gender and our control variables in Model 1. Model 2 tests our central argument and includes a variable that measures the importance a respondent attaches to minority rights in a democracy. The last model, Model 3, includes an interaction term between gender and the minority rights index displayed in Figure 3 (see Appendix A2 in the Supplementary File for the respective regression table). We repeat this analytical approach with the individual components of the minority rights index to check if our results are robust (see Appendix A3 in the Supplementary File).

We now take a closer look at the results of the first set of regression analyses. Table 2 displays the results of the regression analyses designed to test our hypothesis, which states that women are less likely than men to support the SVP as they perceive minority rights as an integral aspect of democracy which does not match with what the SVP offers. The coefficient for *female* in Model 1 for SVP vote choice is statistically significant at a 0.05 level and the odds ratio is smaller than 1. We do not report a statistically significant difference between

Table 2. Nominal logistic regression models displaying respondents' vote choice in odds ratios.

Predictors	Vote choice			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	SVP	Non-voters	SVP	Non-voters
Female	0.67*	1.00	0.74	0.99
	0.19	0.16	0.20	0.17
Education	0.76***	0.67***	0.77***	0.67***
	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.05
Age	1.00	0.95***	1.00	0.95***
	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01
Income	1.15	0.45**	0.99	0.45**
	0.38	0.27	0.39	0.27
Immigration	0.66***	0.76***	0.68***	0.77***
	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.05
Minority rights			0.75***	0.96
			0.07	0.06
(Intercept)	18.35***	427.21***	133.35***	507.62***
	0.65	0.53	0.84	0.72
Reference group		Other party		Other party
Observations		1,013		994
Residual deviance		1,697.016		1,639.507
AIC		1,721.016		1,667.507
R ² /R ² adjusted		0.172/0.171		0.200/0.199

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

men and women who did not vote and those who voted for other parties. This indicates that in 2019, Swiss women were less likely to vote for the PRRP compared to men, but not more or less likely to vote in the national elections. To help interpret the regression coefficient, we calculate the predicted probabilities for both men and women, holding all included control variables at their means (see Figure 3, SVP, Baseline). According to the model, the predicted probability of supporting the SVP is 18.4% on average for a man and 13.1% on average for a woman. Hence, we observe a significant gender gap, with a 5.3-percentage-point difference between the predicted probabilities.

Model 2 focuses on the first test of our main hypothesis. According to our theoretical expectation, women deem minority rights more important for a functioning democratic system and thus abstain more often from supporting the PRRP, as they demand a restriction of minority rights. The model empirically tests our hypothesis by including a variable that measures respondents' perceptions of the importance of minority rights. The coefficient of the variable *minority rights index* is significant at a level of 0.001 and the odds ratio is smaller than 1. As anticipated by our hypotheses, the inclusion of this variable renders the coefficient of gender insignificant. The predicted probabilities show that the gender gap in this model is 3.6 percentage points, and thus considerably smaller than in Model 1 (see Figure 3, SVP, Minority). This implies that controlling attitudes on the importance of minority rights for democracy can reduce the populist radical right gender gap, which is not visible for voters of other parties or non-voters independent of the model specifications.

Besides including a measure for attitudes on the importance of minority rights for democracy in Model 2, we also deploy an additional nominal logistic regression model with an interaction term between gender and

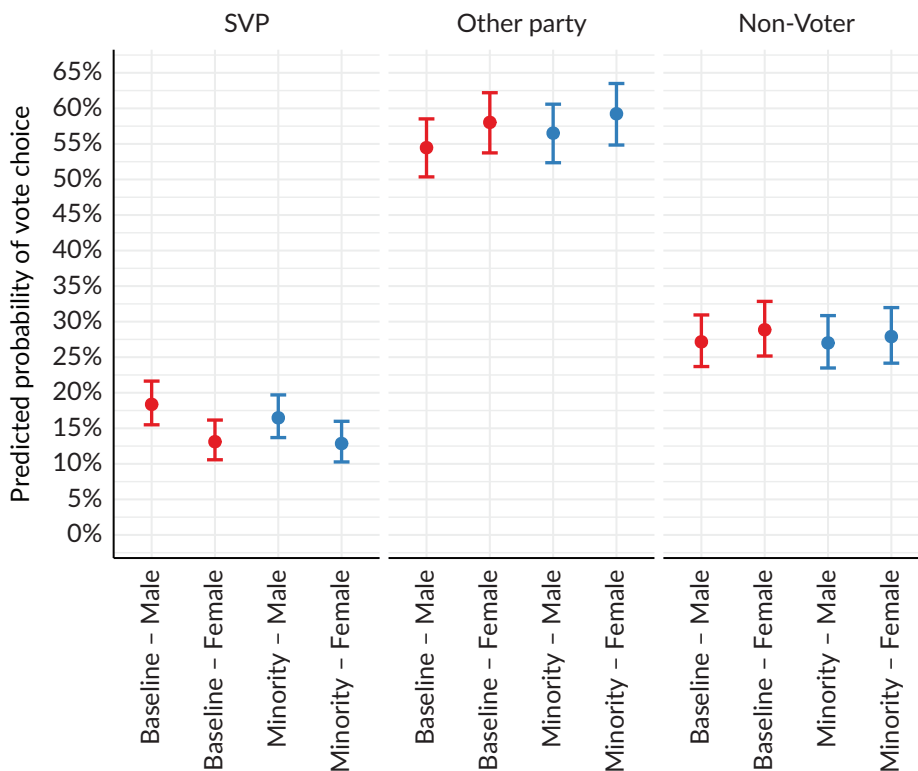


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of vote choice for Model 1 (Baseline) and Model 2 (Minority) based on gender.

our minority rights index. The purpose of this is to examine whether women and men who score similarly on our minority rights index display a similar likelihood of voting for the SVP. Women and men with similar attitudes on the importance of minority rights for democracy display similar voting behavior which implies that, as expected, these attitudes and not gender explain differences in voting behavior. To avoid extrapolation of predictions based on a limited set of observations, we distinguish between respondents that scored low, medium, and high values on our minority rights index, which is skewed towards higher values (Hainmueller et al., 2019). Higher values imply a higher importance of minority rights for democracies. We report the results of this approach as predicted probabilities in Figure 4. The results aligned with our expectations. Men and women with similar scores on the minority rights index display a similar likelihood to vote for the SVP that is not statistically significantly different (see Figure 4, SVP). This implies that the gender differences we identified in Model 1 were likely driven by women placing more importance on minority rights protection in democracies. Summing up, we can empirically demonstrate that there is a gender gap between the support bases of the PRRP and other Swiss parties and that this gap is moderated by different understandings of what matters in a well-functioning democracy between the genders. Our robustness checks based on the individual components of the minority rights index reemphasize this finding (see Appendix A3 in the Supplementary File).

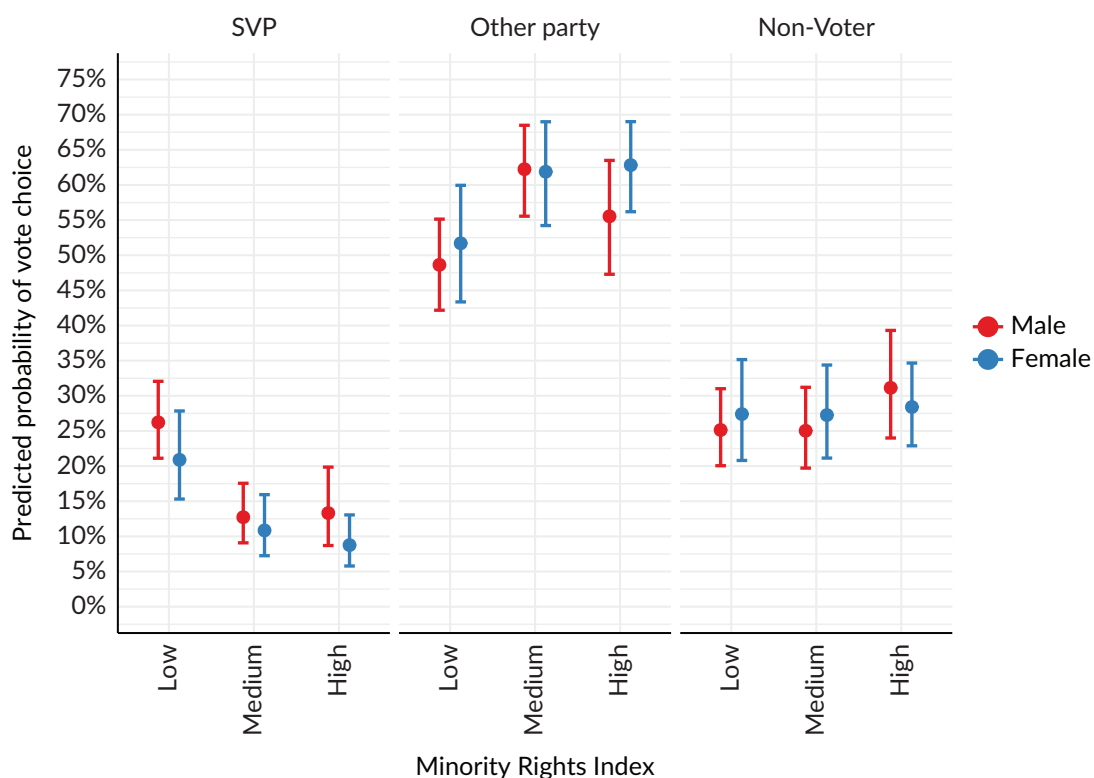


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of vote choice for the interaction between gender and the minority rights index.

6. Conclusion

When comparing the electorates of PRRPs and other parties in Western Europe, it is evident that women often vote for PRRPs in significantly lower numbers (Coffé, 2019; Off, 2023; Oshri et al., 2023; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). Recent insights attribute these effects to the protest and outsider stigma associated with

PRRPs. However, there are several cases where such explanations fall short. In many countries, PRRPs have been established for over two decades and have even assumed governing responsibilities. Therefore, the increased reluctance of women compared to men to vote for these parties can hardly be explained by a heightened risk aversion to inexperienced protest parties. A typical case for a PRRP in consolidated Western Europe is the SVP in Switzerland. Despite efforts by the SVP to appear more women-friendly, a considerable gender gap persists in their electorate (Federal Statistical Office, 2023). Here, too, a potential deterring outsider status carries very little explanatory power, as the SVP is one of the most experienced PRRPs.

Since the success of PRRPs is believed, at least to some extent, to be rooted in discontent with the current (mal)functioning of democratic institutions and practices, the question arises whether some of the responses and solutions proposed by PRRPs resonate less well with women than with men. We developed a theoretical argument stating that gender differences in democratic attitudes play an important role in explaining the persistence of the gender gap in PRRP voting, particularly in cases where established theories fall short. While recent empirical insights suggest that women and men prioritize different aspects of a democratic system, the extent to which this factor influences gender differences in PRRP voting has not been thoroughly explored. Women consider the equal protection of political and social rights particularly important for a functioning democracy and therefore attach great significance to safeguarding the rights of minorities against the majority's will (Hansen & Goenaga, 2021). This is in direct contrast to the PRRPs' vision of what a perfect democracy should look like (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Plattner, 2010). The radical right-wing ideology propagated by such parties, especially their integral components of anti-pluralism and nativism, is hardly compatible with the orientations and stances of many women on these issues. We argue that the preferences of women and PRRPs do not align in this regard, causing lower levels of support for these parties among female voters. Therefore, we expect that this factor can explain at least part of the "populist radical right gender gap."

To test this argument, we utilize individual-level data from the ESS 2020 (ESS, 2023), which includes detailed questions about varying understandings of democracy. By analyzing this dataset, we can compare the importance of minority rights across genders and between SVP voters and mainstream party voters. This will help us determine to what extent diverging understandings of what constitutes a functioning political system contribute to the observed gender gap in the Swiss context. While minority rights and democracy are not identical concepts, the equal treatment of weaker non-mainstream groups in society is a crucial feature of the liberal version of democracy.

Our results strongly corroborate the argument that the different degrees of importance men and women attribute to the protection of minority rights cause the pronounced misalignment between female voters and the SVP. While the SVP has repeatedly advocated that objections against the majority's will from unwanted out-groups such as minorities need to be overruled, women are more likely to emphasize that minorities and groups with different opinions need to be protected from the "tyranny of the majority." These two viewpoints seem to be hardly compatible, which constitutes a powerful explanation for what discourages women from voting for PRRPs.

While we are convinced that examining gendered misalignments between what PRRPs offer in terms of democratic ideas to address prevalent grievances among citizens is a fruitful avenue for future research, our study is just one stride in this direction. Moreover, given the focus on one typical case for PRRPs, the

external validity of our findings is somewhat limited. Most importantly, by focusing on Switzerland, a consolidated democracy in Western Europe with a stable party system, we cannot generalize the extent to which the patterns observed in this study apply to other geographical and political contexts, such as Eastern Europe, where the presence of a populist radical right voting gap is much less established.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

Supplementary Material

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

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