# A Report on "When Do Männerparteien Elect Women? Radical Right Populist Parties and Strategic Descriptive Representation" by Weeks et al. (2023)

Reviewer 2

February 13, 2026

v1

isitcredible.com

# Disclaimer

This report was generated by large language models, overseen by a human editor. It represents the honest opinion of The Catalogue of Errors Ltd, but its accuracy should be verified by a qualified expert. Comments can be made here. Any errors in the report will be corrected in future revisions.

> I am wiser than this person; for it is likely that neither of us knows anything fine and good, but he thinks he knows something when he does not know it, whereas I, just as I do not know, do not think I know, either. I seem, then, to be wiser than him in this small way, at least: that what I do not know, I do not think I know, either.
>
> Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 21d

> To err is human. All human knowledge is fallible and therefore uncertain. It follows that we must distinguish sharply between truth and certainty. That to err is human means not only that we must constantly struggle against error, but also that, even when we have taken the greatest care, we cannot be completely certain that we have not made a mistake.
>
> Karl Popper, 'Knowledge and the Shaping of Reality'

# Overview

**Citation:** Catalano Weeks, A., Meguid, B. M., Kittilson, M. C., and Coffé, H. (2023). When Do Männerparteien Elect Women? Radical Right Populist Parties and Strategic Descriptive Representation. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 117, No. 2, pp. 421–438.

**Abstract Summary:** This paper examines the conditions under which radical right populist (RRP) parties, traditionally male-dominated, increase their proportion of women Members of Parliament (MPs). The authors develop and test a theory of strategic descriptive representation, arguing that electorally struggling RRP parties with large gender gaps in voter support increase women MPs to attract untapped women voters.

**Key Methodology:** Multilevel random intercept models using a comprehensive cross-national, time-series dataset (187 parties in 30 European countries, 1985-2018) and qualitative case studies (Swiss People's Party 2015, Dutch Party of Freedom 2017).

**Research Question:** Under what conditions do we see an increase in women MPs in radical right populist (RRP) parties?

# Summary

## Is It Credible?

This article addresses a compelling puzzle in comparative politics: why do Radical Right Populist (RRP) parties, often characterized as *Männerparteien* (parties of men), increasingly elect women to parliament? Catalano Weeks et al. propose a theory of "strategic descriptive representation," arguing that these parties are rational actors that deploy women candidates as a tactic to attract previously untapped women voters. Specifically, the authors claim that when RRP parties face the dual conditions of electoral decline and a significant gender gap in their support base, they increase the proportion of women MPs to broaden their appeal without the costs associated with moderating their policy platforms. This argument is supported by a multilevel analysis of 22 parties and qualitative case studies of the Swiss People's Party and the Dutch Party for Freedom.

The credibility of the headline claim is challenged significantly by the fragility of the quantitative evidence used to support it. The central independent variable driving the model is the "Male/Female (M/F) voter ratio," derived from general population surveys. Because RRP parties are often niche actors with small vote shares, the subsamples of RRP voters in these surveys are minute, leading to high volatility and potential measurement error. The authors report a maximum M/F ratio of nearly 18.5, a figure that suggests extreme instability in the data rather than a genuine demographic reality (Table A2, supplementary materials, p. 3). While the authors attempt to control for outliers in robustness checks, the reliance on such noisy data to construct an interaction term—the core of their causal argument—introduces substantial uncertainty. Furthermore, the statistical analysis is conducted on a very small sample of 58 party-election years (p. 429). Fitting a complex multilevel model with interaction terms to such a limited dataset creates a high risk of overfitting, rais-

ing concerns that the results may be driven by a handful of idiosyncratic cases rather than a systematic trend.

There is also a conceptual tension between the study's theoretical mechanism and its dependent variable. The theory posits a change in party *strategy*—the deliberate decision to nominate and promote women. However, the dependent variable measures an *outcome*: the "proportion of women MPs" elected (p. 426). The authors acknowledge this limitation, noting that ideal candidate list data is unavailable and arguing that the proportion of elected women captures efforts to place women in winnable seats. Nevertheless, the number of women elected is a function not only of candidate placement but also of the party's overall vote share—which is itself a component of the independent variable (vote change). If a party loses votes, the composition of its parliamentary delegation may change due to the mechanics of the electoral system (e.g., losing marginal seats) rather than a strategic pivot. By using the electoral outcome as a proxy for strategic intent, the analysis risks conflating the party's deliberate actions with the vagaries of the election results.

Despite these methodological limitations, the qualitative evidence provided lends plausibility to the authors' logic. The case studies of the Swiss SVP and Dutch PVV explicitly link campaign tactics—such as the "Swiss Girls Vote" campaign and "Geert's Angels"—to the strategic goal of courting female voters during periods of stagnation (p. 431). This suggests that the mechanism of "strategic descriptive representation" exists, even if the quantitative models struggle to capture it robustly across the entire party family. Ultimately, the article offers a theoretically innovative explanation for the modernization of the radical right, but the statistical confirmation of this phenomenon is less definitive than the narrative suggests.

## The Bottom Line

The claim that Radical Right Populist parties strategically promote women to counter electoral losses and gender gaps is theoretically persuasive and supported by compelling anecdotal evidence. However, the statistical confirmation of this strategy is weak, relying on a small, noisy dataset that struggles to distinguish between deliberate party strategy and mechanical electoral outcomes. Readers should view the findings as a strong, plausible hypothesis regarding the behavior of specific modernizing parties, rather than a proven universal law governing the entire party family.

# Potential Issues

**Reliability of the core independent variable:** The article's central causal claim rests on an interaction between electoral performance and the gender composition of a party's electorate, measured as a Male/Female (M/F) voter ratio. The reliability of this M/F ratio variable is a significant concern. It is derived from general population surveys where Radical Right Populist (RRP) parties, as niche actors, often have very few self-identified supporters. This small subsample size can lead to extreme volatility and large measurement error in the calculated ratio. The authors' own summary statistics for the RRP sample show a standard deviation (2.397) larger than the mean (1.926) and a maximum value of 18.471, indicating high instability (Table A2, supplementary materials, p. 3). The authors acknowledge this, noting that outliers are "most likely due to survey sampling issues" (p. 429). While they conduct a robustness check by excluding the most extreme values, this does not resolve the underlying issue that even non-extreme values may be too noisy to reliably support the complex interaction effect that is foundational to the article's theory.

**Conflation of strategy and outcome in the dependent variable:** The article's theory explains a party's *strategy*—the decision to recruit and promote women candidates into winnable positions. However, the dependent variable measures the electoral *outcome*—the final "proportion of women MPs" in the legislature (p. 426). The authors justify this choice by arguing that the proportion of elected women "allows us to capture party efforts to get women elected by placing them in winnable seats" and validate this with case studies examining list placement (p. 426). While this justification has merit given data limitations, it remains a notable constraint because the number of women elected is a function not only of party strategy but also of the party's overall electoral performance. A party could strategically place women in key positions but fail to elect them if its vote share collapses. By using an outcome as a proxy for a strategic decision, the model may not be capturing the causal process

as precisely as the theory suggests.

**Reliance on inferred elite beliefs as a causal mechanism:** The theory of strategic descriptive representation hinges on the assumption that party elites believe electing more women will attract more female voters. The authors state that their argument holds "so long as party elites believe that women are more likely to vote for women," even if the real-world effect is small (p. 424). This makes the core causal mechanism an unobserved belief held by party leaders. The quantitative models test for a correlation between observable conditions (electoral loss and gender gaps) and outcomes (women MPs), but they cannot directly test whether this belief is the actual motivation for the observed behavior. While the authors provide qualitative evidence from case studies—such as Geert Wilders explicitly stating the placement of women was a tactic to draw a broader electorate—within the quantitative analysis itself, the mechanism is inferred from the outcome (p. 431).

**Risk of overfitting due to small sample size:** The main statistical analysis for RRP parties is conducted on a small sample of N=58 observations (party-election years) drawn from 22 RRP parties (Table 1, p. 429). The final preferred model includes 11 predictors plus random effects for party and country. While the authors correctly use a multilevel model to account for the nested data structure and include robustness checks in the appendix, fitting a model of this complexity to such a small number of observations creates a substantial risk of overfitting (p. 428; Tables A4 and A5). The model may be capturing random noise specific to this sample rather than a generalizable underlying relationship. The authors have assembled "the most comprehensive dataset to date," and the small sample size is an inherent challenge of studying this particular party family (p. 421). Nonetheless, the low ratio of observations to predictors means the statistical power is likely low and the results should be interpreted with caution.

**Omission of ideological heterogeneity within the RRP family:** The article treats the RRP party family as a single group for the purposes of its main statistical analysis.

However, this party family contains significant ideological variation, particularly on social issues and the role of women in society. The article's core assumption—that promoting women is a "relatively low-cost" tactic—may hold for more economically-focused or modernized RRPs but could be a very high-cost, brand-damaging move for parties with an explicitly patriarchal or traditionalist ideology (p. 425). While the authors control for specific characteristics like female leadership and acknowledge variation, pooling all RRP parties averages over this potentially crucial ideological diversity (p. 423). It is possible the observed effect is driven primarily by a subset of RRPs for whom the strategy is ideologically palatable.

**Contestable assumption of a "low-cost" strategy:** The theoretical framework is built on the premise that increasing the number of women MPs is a "relatively low-cost" tactic for RRP parties compared to moderating core policy positions (p. 425). This assumption is debatable for parties often defined as *Männerparteien*, whose identity and appeal may be tied to traditional gender roles. For such parties, a visible campaign to elect more women could be perceived by core supporters as a significant ideological shift, thereby incurring substantial political costs by alienating the existing base. While the authors frame the cost as relative to programmatic change, the absolute cost of this strategy for this specific party family may be higher than assumed.

**Theorized boundary conditions are not fully specified:** The authors propose several scope conditions for their theory, suggesting it is most applicable to parties with centralized candidate selection and less applicable to parties that already have a high proportion of women MPs (p. 426). The authors argue that their research design, by focusing on RRP parties, "largely controls for" the factor of centralization because most RRPs are highly centralized (p. 428). While this is a reasonable design choice, other proposed conditions are not empirically operationalized or tested. For example, the article does not define the "threshold" of female representation beyond which the strategy becomes ineffective. The absence of such empirical specification

leaves the precise boundaries of the theory's applicability partially undefined.

**Tenuous logic of the "strategic exclusion" hypothesis:** The theory posits a symmetric "strategic exclusion" hypothesis, where a successful party with a male-dominated electorate will "double down on the exclusion of women" (p. 425). The article reports a negative and significant interaction effect consistent with this hypothesis (p. 428). However, the causal mechanism for this active "doubling down" is not well-developed. A more parsimonious explanation for successful parties not increasing their share of women MPs would be simple inertia—maintaining a winning formula—rather than an active strategy of exclusion. While the statistical results show a negative effect when RRPs are doing well, the article does not provide a compelling theoretical reason why a party would expend resources to actively reduce or suppress the number of women in its ranks, making this part of the theory less convincing than its "strategic inclusion" counterpart (Figure 5, p. 430).

# Future Research

**Disaggregating nomination strategies:** Future work should test this theory using candidate list data rather than the proportion of elected MPs. By analyzing the placement of women in "winnable" versus "unwinnable" positions on party lists prior to the election, researchers can isolate the strategic intent of party elites from the confounding effects of the final vote count. This would directly address the conflation of strategy and outcome present in the current design.

**Validating the gender gap metric:** To overcome the issue of small sample sizes in survey-based measures of the gender gap, researchers could utilize pooled survey data or administrative voter records where available. Constructing a more stable, long-term measure of the gender composition of niche party electorates would reduce measurement error and provide a more reliable basis for testing interaction effects in quantitative models.

**Investigating elite decision-making:** Future scholarship could employ elite interviews or analysis of internal party communications to verify the causal mechanism. Confirming that party strategists explicitly view women candidates as a "low-cost" tool to attract female voters—rather than as a response to internal pressure or external normative shifts—would substantiate the rational choice assumption that underpins the theory of strategic descriptive representation.

isitcredible.com