

Andreas Hennissen Røsseth

A Break with Traditionalism?

Exploring the European Radical-Right's move
towards progressive politics

Bachelor's thesis in European Studies

Supervisor: Anna Brigevich

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Faculty of Humanities
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Abstract

There is a puzzling phenomenon happening in Western Europe, where some radical-right parties are appropriating liberal rights and progressive rhetoric for their own illiberal ends. The populist radical right has resorted to politicizing gender controversies and instrumentalizing religion and issues like women's and LGBTQ+ rights to further their anti-Islam and anti-immigration campaigns. With this as a backdrop, this thesis aims to investigate this further in a Scandinavian context by examining whether and how instrumentalization of religion and femonationalist traits can be observed within the politics of the Danish Peoples Party (DP) and the Sweden Democrats (SD). This was done by conducting an ideational case study analysis of the parties' election material and manifestos from their respective party websites, as well as statements and interviews made by prominent party figures. The findings of the thesis indicate that both DP and SD inherent traces of femonationalism and instrumentalization of religion, more specifically Christianity. Both parties use traditionally liberal issues advocate for anti-immigration and anti-Islam policies, by framing gender equality and respect for human rights as Western and national achievement under threat from Muslim immigration supported by the corrupt cultural elite. By doing so, radical right populist parties manage to use progressive rhetoric to mobilize voters, without promoting any actual progressive policies.

Abstrakt

Et forvirrende fenomen utfolder seg i Vest-Europa, der noen høyre-radikale partier tilegner seg liberale rettigheter og progressiv retorikk for sine egne illiberale mål. Høyre-radikale populistiske partier har tydd til å politisere kjønnskontroverser og instrumentalisere religion og spørsmål angående kvinners og LHBTQ+ rettigheter for å fremme sine anti-islam og anti-immigrasjonskampanjer. Med dette som bakteppe tar denne oppgaven sikte på å utforske fenomenet nærmere i en skandinavisk kontekst gjennom å undersøke om og hvordan instrumentalisering av religion og femonasjonalistiske trekk kan observeres innenfor politikken til Dansk Folkeparti (DP) og Sverige demokratene (SD). Dette ble gjort ved å gjennomføre en ideell casestudie-analyse av partienes valgmateriale og manifeste fra deres respektive partinettsteder, samt uttalelser og intervjuer fra fremtredende partiskikkelser. Funnene i oppgaven indikerer at både DP og SD besitter iboende spor av femonasjonalisme og instrumentalisering av religion, nærmere bestemt kristendommen. Begge partier bruker tradisjonelt liberale problemstillinger som forkjemper for anti-innvandring og anti-islam politikk, ved å framstille likestilling og respekt for menneskerettigheter som vestlig og nasjonale verdier, truet av muslimsk innvandring støttet av den korrupte kulturelle eliten. Ved å gjøre dette, klarer radikale høyrepopulistiske partier å bruke progressiv retorikk for å mobilisere velgere, uten å fremme faktisk progressiv politikk.

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1. Introduction

The recent surge in electoral success for radical-right populist parties have arguably established them as a new political powerhouse in Western Europe, challenging the political status quo in many countries. Scholars have tried to link Western Europe's sudden turn towards the right to economic hardships, anxieties about the conditions of modernity as well as fears of Europe's civilizational decline (Foster & Kirke, 2022, p. 278). While radical-right populist parties have traditionally been associated with conservatism and opposition to liberalism, economic and social equality, a growing number of scholars have analyzed the rise of some European RRPP's appropriation and instrumentalization of traditional progressive and liberal values (Akkerman, 2015, p.39; Dietze & Roth, 2020, p. 10). Issues like women's rights, social equality, freedom of speech, religious and secular freedoms and LGBTQ+ rights have suddenly become talking points for some radical right parties, suggesting a shift in the traditional political discourse of the radical right. The appropriation of these values can be understood as an attempt by the RRPP to merge attitudes of liberalism, progressivism, tolerance and equality together with the radical rights usual talking points, like opposition to immigration, Islam, multiculturalism and the political establishment, as well as the priority of the nation state.

With this as a backdrop, this thesis seeks to answer why and how some radical-right populist parties instrumentalize religion and use femonationalist tactics in their rhetoric and policies, mainly focusing on radical-right parties in Scandinavia.

There exists limited scholarly works on this phenomenon within radical right parties in the Nordics and Scandinavia. Countries in the Nordics are well known for being forerunners when it comes to issues like gender equality and secularism, as these issues have become an integral part of these countries' national self-image (Molina, 2020, p. 301; Nygren et al., 2018, p. 1). It is argued that radical right populist parties in these countries have increasingly instrumentalized gender equality, gender, secularism and religion to promote and strengthen their anti-immigration and anti-Islam campaigns. This raises the question, how can radical right populist parties, that are by nature exclusionary (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 1-3) frame their political strategy in terms of an equality-based doctrine? By examining how two of Scandinavia's most successful radical right parties – Danish Peoples Party (DP) and The Sweden Democrats (SD) – incorporate themes of gender, equality and religion, this thesis aims to shed light on this phenomenon. I will examine these two cases with a focus on three policy areas: Women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights and religion/secularism.

This thesis will rely mainly on two empirical contributions on the study of radical-right populist parties. Firstly, sociologist Sara R. Farris term *femonationalism*. Farris coined the term femonationalism to better explain how these radical parties exploit feminist rhetoric and issues of gender equality as a political move to defend their anti-Islam and anti-immigration agenda, all while counteracting and rejecting actual policies that encompasses gender equality (Farris, 2017). I aim to investigate if and how femonationalism is present among Danish peoples Party and the Sweden Democrats. Secondly, building on Marzouki et al. (2016) and Brubaker (2017) works on the relationship between the radical-right and religion, I intend to contribute to the research around how radical-right parties' appropriate religion in order to create an identitarian

divide between the Christian “us” and the Muslim “them”. I will examine how Danish Peoples Party and the Sweden Democrats culturize Christianity to advance anti-immigration and anti-Islam agendas.

The outline of this thesis consists of the following: section one starts with an introduction that contextualizes the theme and presents the research questions and the outline. Section two provides a literature review that defines the characteristics of radical right parties and populism. Section three lays the foundation for the thesis’ theoretical framework, where I will be covering the empirical works on gender in populism, the instrumentalization of religion and femonationalism. In section four, I will present the methodology and research design. Thereafter, the analysis will cover the two parties’ positions on women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights and religion/secularism. Lastly, I will discuss and conclude my findings, connect it to the aim of the theory, as well as proposals avenues for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Radical-Right ideology

There is little doubt that the radical-right has become a mainstay in modern European politics. While radical-right political actors, on paper, might proclaim themselves as defenders of democratic institutions, there is legitimacy to the notion that the growing electoral success of radical-right parties are causing damage to democratic systems worldwide. The scholarly work on contemporary radical-right has undergone minor changes over the last 20 years, and an argument has been made that the radical-right embody a radical interpretation of mainstream values – a radicalization of the mainstream (Pirro, 2023, p. 102). But with the increased democratic backsliding under radical-right rule combine with an accelerated radical-right mobilization on the grassroots level, many question the nature and evolution of this phenomenon. Has radical-right ideas entered the mainstream and normalized extremist ideology?

The way we make sense of party-political competition has traditionally been through the term of left and right, and even with the emergence of new cross-cutting concerns, the left-right political distinction still prevails as a useful tool to classify political actors (Pirro, 2023, p. 103). The question of economic equality has often been used as the ideological distinction between the left and the right, with the left being defined by its egalitarian drive mostly through state intervention, while the right can be described as more non-egalitarian and wanting to maintain the status-que whereby differences in society are entrenched (Pirro, 2023, p. 104). The reason why referring to this distinction is so important is because, unlike the moderate right, the radical-right is thoroughly exclusionary in egalitarian terms and outright objects to equality and pluralism.

Another discrepancy between the radical-right and the moderate right is the relationship to liberal constitutionalism, which provides a democracy with one or more authoritative documents that ensure individual rights, checks and balances, as well as separation between judicial, executive and legislative branches (Pirro, 2023, p. 104). The radical-right has a bothersome relationship with liberal constitutionalism and can sometimes be hostile towards liberal democracy, and while radical-right politicians often acknowledge the procedural aspects of democracy, contesting political rights and civil liberties has become a mainstay among radical-right parties (Müller, 2016, p. 66). It is, however, important to emphasize that while all radical-right actors are inherently illiberal, not all of them are anti-democratic per se. There is also often confusion around the terminology used when referring to parties on the radical-right, as the terms “far-right” and “extreme-extreme” are often used interchangeably to describe these parties. Extreme and far-right parties tend to be outright anti-democratic – radical-parties, however, usually respect democratic values though still opposing liberal democracy (Fagerholm, 2018, p. 412).

Trying to decipher what attributes one can attach to radical-right politics can be a tricky exercise, as there are many differences amongst radical-right parties across Europe, but the core issue that unifies the entire radical-right is immigration. Radical-right parties are known to push the debate on immigration at any moment, problematizing it as an urgent issue and often bringing it up in debates on other issues.

Their nativist stance on immigration also often shapes their stances on other cases and issues, as this article will showcase.

Another popular attribute that scholars associate with the radical-right movement is populism, as radical-right parties often favor an extensive use of referendums to better represent the opinion of “the common man” (Fagerholm, 2018, p. 414; Mudde, 2004, p. 542). I will go into more detail on the populist aspect of radical-right parties later. In terms of ethical-questions, radical-right parties are usually defined as proponents of traditional and religious (Christian) values, such as support of nuclear families and traditional roles for individual, and skepticism towards gay marriage, LGBTQ+ and abortion rights (Fagerholm, 2018, p. 414; Russell, 2019, p. 45). It’s also worth mentioning that some radical-right parties, especially regarding Islam, proclaim to be defenders of “western values” such as democracy, freedom of expression, emancipation of homosexuals and the equality between men and women (Spierings et al., 2015, p. 9-10)

When it comes to socioeconomic left-right positions, radical-right parties can hold very blurred and ambiguous views as socioeconomic issues do not lie at the core of modern radical-right ideology. While many parties are very neoliberal, supporting deregulations and privatization, you can also find cases of parties supporting strong government governance. A commonality between most radical-right parties, however, is the support of welfare chauvinism – the view that the welfare benefits should be limited to certain groups, usually the natives of a country (Bell et al., 2023, p. 2; Fagerholm, 2018, p. 414). Studies on welfare chauvinism in Europe has shown that there is a strong correlation between the number of individuals who wish to exclude immigrants from the welfare state and the strength of RRPPs, especially in Central-Eastern Europe (Bell et al., 2023, p. 10). Lastly, the radical-right is usually characterized as being strongly anti-globalization and skeptical towards European integration. It is suggested that the radical-right sees the European Union as an elitist and bureaucratic system that undermines national sovereignty. They also see globalization as a contributor to spreading multiculturalism and immigration, as well as a threat to the domestic economy (Fagerholm, 2018, p. 415)

2.2 Populism

Populism has become somewhat of a buzzword in modern politics and has asserted itself as perhaps one of the most popular concepts in the contemporary period. We see that whenever the usage of a concept such as populism becomes highly popular in political academia, writers and scholars tend to expand and stretch it in a manner that dilutes the original meaning of the term. While the concept of populism has become common in the political discourse, the term does have long historical tradition. As Anton Pelinka (2013) points out, populism as a concept can be traced back to one of Abraham Lincoln’s famous quotes, where he describes democracy as “government of the people, for the people, and by the people” (p. 3). The belief that “the people” should govern themselves lies at the core of populism, however modern populism tends to neglect the problem of exclusion and inclusion in politics, and rarely comes with a good and consistent understanding of who does and does not belong to “the people” (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018, p. 179; Pelinka, A., 2013, p. 3).

Populists have a rather vague understanding of democracy, choosing to approach democracy with an emphasis on direct democratic elements rather than a representative

indirect democratic system. However, the weakness of the conceptual framework and political inputs in the populist understanding of democracy has led to significant contradictions. The populists' belief that "the people" are entitled to govern without any restrictions is a rather optimistic, but also deficient and problematic understanding of "majority rule". The problem with this thought, highlighted by Pelinka (2013), is the definition of "the people": who does and who does not belong to "the people"? (p. 4). Here lies the analytical weakness of populist democracies, as the assumption that there exist a "true people" who has the right to rule, is not based on social and cultural developments, but rather based on a dogma that ignores social fragmentations. Populists use national, cultural and race identities to create a divide between "us" and "them", were the differences found within "the people" are ignored (Pelinka, A., 2013, p. 6).

The "enemy" whom the populist movement have been combating have been greatly impacted by the development and stabilization of liberal democracy in Europe. The anti-elitism that populists previously had directed towards the economic elite and/or people with higher education have now been redirected towards a cultural and foreign power. Instead of the rich and resourceful part of society being perceived as threatening, the new perceived threat for populists are international organizations, the cultural elite and political elite who wants to represent people from different ethnic, religious and cultural groups (Pelinka, A., 2013, p. 8). While there is a strong anti-elitist sentiment among contemporary populists, especially towards politicians who appear to be responsible for and/or supporters of globalization and Europeanization, populists also mobilize their voters mostly through ethno-nationalistic rhetoric and policies (Pelinka, A., 2013, p. 8).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Right-Wing Populism and Gender

Populism is widely understood as a thin ideology as it is unable to stand alone as a practical political ideology. Populists lack the capacity to provide rich and coherent plan and program for solving crucial political questions, as they often refrain from talking about solutions and policies, and when they do, they usually propose easy and simple solutions for complex and demanding issues (Stanley, B. 2008, p. 95). This is why populism has traditionally been discussed by people on the left regarding economics, vis-à-vis the poor are poor due to the greed of the rich, or regarding immigration by people of right, who believe that multiculturalism and immigration is the root of the problems in society.

Populists' movements need to tie themselves to a different ideology or political thought to work in practice. The recent success of right-wing populism in Europe is often boiled down to nationalistic, cultural or economic motives and reasons, and is rarely attributed to gender (Dietze & Roth, 2020, p. 7). I argue however, that the increase and persuasiveness of right-wing populist proclivities in Europe can be viewed through a gender perspective.

To expand on the growing body of research on populism, Serdar, Öztürk & Nygren has developed a new framework for looking at populism and the role that gender plays in populist politics. Gender has for a long time been an understudied aspect of populism, but a growing interest in feminist analysis on populism has filled this gap - exploring the role that gender plays in populist politics, especially concerning right wing populist parties. Basing their understanding of populism from both Mudde and Kaltwasser's idea of "exclusionary" and "inclusionary" forms of populism, and Laclau's discursive understanding of populism where "the people" is constructed by empty signifiers (Laclau, 1995; Peters & Pierre, 2020; Serdar et al., 2023). They argue that the discursive construction of "the people" created by populist parties against "the elite", is a gendered process where gender works as a fundamental element for determining who is the included "people" and the excluded "people" (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 1).

Sedar et al. (2023) proposes an alternative theoretical understanding of the dimensions of populism, attempting to develop a typology that explores how gender operates in the intersection between populism and religion. Firstly, a religious and secular populist dimension; does the populist party base their views on a secular or religious understanding. Secondly, an inclusionary and exclusionary populist dimension; are the policies of the populist parties more exclusionary or inclusionary towards different groups in society (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 1-3). Gender has served as a "meta-language" for the radical-right, becoming an arena for opportunistic polarization and these dimensions show us how different populist movements and groups use gender differently in their policies.

Examining gendered populism in two secular exclusionary parties, *Sverigedemokraterna* (SD) in Sweden and *Rassemblement National* (RN) in France, Sedar et al. showcase how both parties re-politicize gendered controversies in issues like heteronormativity, anti-feminism, pro-nativism, and use it to mobilize and construct "the

people” (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 9). Both parties present a narrative where they construct ethnic French and Swedes by their secular Christian and gender equal values, both under attack from the (other) Muslim immigrants who is protected by multicultural elites. While both parties are defenders of the heteronormative family as well as a binary understanding of gender, they often include LGBTQ+ individuals into “the people” when talking about the threat of Muslim men (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 9).

In the case of Sweden, SD instrumentalize both religion and secularism in constructing “the people”; calling for the protection of their cultural Christian heritage and family friendly politics, while also criticizing the Swedish church for becoming both less Swedish and less Christian. SD party leader Jimmy Åkesson described the Swedish church replacing the Holy Trinity with the secular trinity of “feminism, cultural Marxism and multiculturalism”, pitting Christian values and the nuclear family against the feminist elite, who oppress the people (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 6-7).

RN in France has a similar relationship to religion, wanting to protect Christian heritage, but using religion first and foremost as identitarian marker to distinguish between the bad “them” and the good “us”. However, partly due the catholic church support for certain progressive politics, RN appropriates secularism when it assembles anti-elitism against the Christian elite, as well as the Muslim other (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 5). RN party leader Marine Le Pen has repeatedly presented RN as the only true defenders of women’s rights, and repeatedly stated that secularism is sacred, but under threat by Islamism that wants to destroy the fundamental freedom of women. Here we see a gendered hierarchy, where “women” does not include all women, but ethnic French working women, mothers and daughters. Redefining secularism as ideology of the right has become a strategy for Le Pen to weaken the accusations of xenophobia and racism (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 6)

3.2 Instrumentalizing Religion

As mentioned above, many scholars have noted how many RRPPs in Europe have increasingly politicized both Christianity and secularism with intent to use it as leverage to achieve political support for their nationalist and anti-Islam agenda (Sedar et al., 2023, p. 2). In the work on religion and populism, Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy’s sheds light on the instrumentalization of religion by the populist movement in *Saving the People: How Populists Hijacked Religion* (2016). In their book they argue that RRPPs in the West are not genuinely Christian, but rather hijacks the religion to legitimize their rejection of Islam; producing Christendom, but without actual Christianity (Marzouki et al., 2016). For populist parties, “religion matters first and foremost as a marker of identity, enabling them to distinguish between the good us and the bad them” (Roy, O. 2016, p. 186). Sociologist Brubaker (2017) adds on this and suggests, apart from some cases, RRPPs in secular dominated Northern and Western Europe tend to construct a broader “identitarian Christianity” combined with secular liberal rhetoric (p. 1194).

The constant referencing to Christianity has not always been central in national-populist rhetoric. In the 1980s and 1990s, both the French National Front and the Italian Northern league were known for using paganist ideas and symbols in their campaigns, however these parties have, in line with many RRPPs, turned away from paganism and now embraced Christianity (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1198; DeHanas & Shterin, 2018, p. 177). The timing of this turn towards Christianity can look perplexing at first, given that Western Europe is highly secular and general church attendance in Europe has fallen significantly (Kaufmann et al., 2012, p. 72). The way Christianity is appropriated by

RRPPs has little to do with actual Christian belief, but rather a constructed Christian identity and culture – a matter of defining “us” (white Europeans) in relation to “them” or “the other” (Immigrants, non-Europeans). There exists a paradoxical relationship here; as Christianity has slowly lost its grip in Europe and fewer people practice and participate in Christian rituals, it has subsequently made it easier for RRPPs to instrumentalize it since there’s less focus on the actual belief and practice of worship. (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1199; Roy, 2016, p. 67).

There are several ways in which the culturalization of religion plays out in practice. Firstly, when Christianity is treated as more of a culture than a religion, it enjoys certain privileges that it previously did not have, especially considering how committed liberal democracies are to neutrality in religious matters. This means that, for example Christian symbols like the cross can be displayed in classrooms, public buildings and so on, because it can be defended first and foremost as a symbol of European culture and identity. Muslim symbols and practices on the other hand, if re-defined as cultural, can be restricted and limited in ways that otherwise would be protected by religious freedoms (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1200). This has seen a massive surge in Europe over the last 15-years, and a striking example of this can be seen in countries like France who have banned women from wearing burqa or niqab in public (Diamant, 2019). In a report measuring various types of governmental restrictions on religious practices and activity on a scale from zero to 10 found that limitations of religious activity in Europe increased from 1.5 in 2007 to 3.0 in 2017 (Diamant, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019).

It is also worth mentioning how the processes of referring to “Muslim” as a category of immigrant integration and the overall “othering Islam” has evolved. While this process is by no means a new phenomenon, the construction of the Muslim category and the construction of “Muslim subjects” has become more prominent in public discourse (Mattes, 2018, p. 188). We can see this in Germany where large populations of immigrants who previously were addressed as “guest workers”, are now incorporated under the category “Muslim”. Even though many immigrants and their descendants have become German citizens, they are still categorized as “Muslim”, instead of viewing them as German, in order to problematize these populations in political and public debate (Mattes, 2018, p. 189). The association between the categories “Muslim” and “immigrant” blurs the status of non-immigrant Muslims and non-Muslim immigrants, furthering the “othering” process of these groups (Johansen & Spielhaus, 2012, as cited in Mattes, 2018, p. 189).

3.3 Femonationalism

The mobilization of anti-immigration attitudes is by no means a new phenomenon in European politics, and the recent electoral success of RRPPs has arguably sparked more debate over immigration than ever. Many scholars have recently noticed how topics like women’s rights and gender equality has increasingly made its way into debates on immigration, often pushed by RRPPs. After carefully studying what she calls a pattern of feminist support for radical-right parties in Europe, scholar Sara Farris coined the term “femonationalism” which describes the intersection between feminism and nationalism (2017, p. 4). On the one hand, femonationalism refers to the exploitation and instrumentalization of feminist ideas and themes by radical-right nationalists for the purpose of anti-Islam political campaigns. They do this by elevating women’s rights to the status of revered national values of said country – a sort of non-negotiable pillar of

the nation, while also mobilizing voters by constantly depicting Muslim migrants of having incompatible culture with that of European nations (Farris, 2017, p. 3-5). On the other hand, femonationalism also refers to the increase of well-known and profile feminists directing criticism towards Islam, labeling the religion as quintessentially sexist and hierarchical. Farris does however, stress that feminists and women's organizations, in contrast to RRPPs, do mostly direct their criticism towards Islam, not migrants generally (Farris, 2017, p. 4).

We can look at a case from Germany, where the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), who usually form the opposition in German politics, have increased their focus on gender and antifeminism in relation to immigration and Islamophobia. In a campaign poster from the 2017 we can see a portrait of two white women wearing bikinis with the tagline "Burqas? We prefer bikinis". While AfD might argue the intend of the campaign is to free women from oppressing clothing, the actual message contributes to the othering Muslim women. Another poster reads "New Germans? We'll make them ourselves" with an accompanying image of a pregnant white woman (Wildman, 2017). The usage of the phrase "New Germans" mocks the migrant who might want to self-identify as a German, while also being eerily similar of old Nazi propaganda that encouraged German woman to produce "true German" children (Wildman, 2017).

In her article about femonationalist alliances, Julia Roth explains how women (preferably native and white) have become an important part of the electorate for RRPPs. We saw during the 2016 presidential election in the U.S. that, despite numerous outright sexist and misogynist remarks, plenty of women publicly supported and campaigned for Donald Trump, e.g., "Women for Trump". Roth notes that a common argument for these groups is that gender equality as already been achieved, while believing that the real discrimination happens towards men from feminists (Roth, 2021, p. 67-68). In addition, female groups have been gaining more political positions and general recognition through their alliances with nationalists, as they (right-wing populists) believe that white women are demographically crucial for "the reproduction" of the nation (Roth, 2021, p. 68).

Roth points to a study by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) that highlights how RRPPs claim to be defenders of Women's rights, while simultaneously advocating for anti-emancipating policies. The study shows the interesting phenomenon of how RRPPs are still mostly dominated by men, both in members and voters, but that more and more women have become prominent in leadership positions (Roth, 2021, p. 68) Women like, previous prime minister Beata Szydlo in Poland, Alice Widel in Germany, Marine Le Pen in France, and maybe most notably Georgia Meloni, who just became Italy's first female prime minister (Gijs, 2022; Gustche, E. 2018, p. 9). These women are often strong opponents of feminist and gender politics, while also supporting their party's bid to protecting national identity and values by limiting immigration (Roth, 2021, p. 68). The intent of having females in high-profile positions might be to make the party seem more friendly towards female voters, and thereby increasing their voter base.

4. Case Selections

Based on previous research and the theoretical framework, I've picked out two policy areas that are instrumentalized by RRPPs. These are women's rights, including gender equality policies, LGBTQ+ rights. I've also included a section on the parties' stance on religion vs secularism.

To narrow down the scope of the analysis, I've singled out two RRPPs that in various degrees position themselves in favor of/or appeal to the above-mentioned rights. The parties I've chosen are the Danish Peoples Party (DP) and the Swedish Democrats (SD). The rationale for selecting the specific cases of DP and SD is rooted in both pragmatic and theoretical reasons, as they have in the past decade, enjoyed electoral success. Both parties have, at some point, been the second biggest party of their country, and achieved governmental influence in the form of external support for coalitions (Crouch & Eriksen, 2015; Crouch, 2022). The two parties have been known to blur the lines of their political support for things like women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality and views on religion and secularism in society, which is something I want to highlight in the analysis.

4.1 Methodology

The design choice for this thesis is a comparative case study analysis, as this design is effective for creating generalizable knowledge when "why" and "how" questions are asked.

Party politics can be a two-fold story, as what a party say they support vs what their policies say can be quite different. To better understand what positions these parties have on the different issues, I will collect data based on both what the party has said in public and their what their concrete policies say, as there can be discrepancies between these two. Regarding selecting data and material for the thesis, there is no clear answer to what the best option is, as well as there being obvious practical limitations for gathering reliable information. Interpreting data from secondhand sources like media coverage and news articles can result in drawing wrongful or insufficient conclusions. However, based on the limited amount of scholarly works on these parties, I've chosen to still include these sources keeping in mind that there might be biases present.

I will be collecting data from party manifestos, official election material and policy documents provided on the parties' websites. I will also be looking at statements and interviews made by party leaders and prominent party figures. The reason behind this is to possibly expose how these parties use equality and human rights rhetoric to gain support, while policy-wise not actually supporting the groups they say they are fighting for. Noteworthy, for the purpose of this thesis, nearly all the data from both DP and SD has been translated from Danish and Swedish into English.

5. Results and Analysis

In the following segment I will analyze excerpts from party manifestos and election programs, as well as interviews and statements made by key party figures and leaders to see how DP and SD instrumentalize religion and use femonationalist rhetoric to mobilize support.

5.1 Women's rights

5.1.1 Danish People Party

We are all equal in the kingdom of Denmark... Women in Denmark are generally self-aware, modern women who make their own choices and define their wishes, goals and living conditions themselves. It is definitely a good thing and something that distinguishes our society from a large number of the world's other and less equal societies. As adults, women – and men, must decide for themselves how they want to distribute work tasks inside and outside the home (Danish Peoples Party, 2023a).

The DP advocates for equality and argues that women should make their own choices and define their goals and living conditions themselves. They also emphasize the overall state of equality in Denmark, highlighting that the living conditions for women in Denmark is something that separates them from other societies. This can be understood as a femonationalist trait in the way that Denmark has, unlike other societies, achieved equality between the sexes.

The biggest challenge to equality in Denmark today consists of the lack of opportunities for immigrant girls. Therefore, the fight for equality is of course not over yet either, until we have ensured that everyone has equal opportunities... Social control, rumors, gossip, domestic violence, etc. are unfortunately not unknown in immigrant environments, where women have a completely different status than among Danes. We must help these young girls and women in immigrant environments so they can choose for themselves, for example, whether they want to be in the labor market, what career they want, or whether they want a Danish man. (Danish Peoples Party, 2023a).

As the quote above implies, DP believes that the living situation for immigrant women in their country is the biggest obstacle for equality, listing a series of problem areas that are allegedly prominent in immigrant environments. DP implies that immigrants are causing damage to the equality in Denmark, saying that their immigrant women's living conditions is the *biggest challenge* to equality. The way in which DP positions themselves as a potential savior for these women, helping to liberate them from oppression, while at the same time portraying immigrants as backwards and unfriendly towards women is very characteristic of femonationalism. They exploit feminist themes like liberation and emancipation, while combining it with xenophobic rhetoric.

5.1.2 Swedish Democrats

In 2022 SD-women, a branch within the SD consisting of the female representatives of the party, posted an article where they presented a list of 10 points where the Social

Democrats have failed women. In their article, the SD-women criticize the Social Democrats self-proclaimed "feminist government", arguing that the government had dismantled women's well-being, security and basic rights. Most of the points were about violence and rape on women by non-Swedish immigrants, and that the Social Democrats were too soft on these issues (Lindberg et al., 2022).

While violence and rape against women are no doubt serious issues, SD seems to be under the impression that immigrant men are the biggest threat towards women's rights and well-being, and that an irresponsible immigration policy is the main cause of oppression towards women. Here SD instrumentalize feminist and women's rights rhetoric for their anti-immigration campaign. They criticize the Social Democrats for not protecting women, calling their feminist politics for purely symbolic.

There being differences in how most men and most women choose to live their lives does not have to be a problem, a result of discrimination or the result of an oppressive gender order. Collective characteristics such as skin color and ethnicity are irrelevant for the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraternas Principprogram, 2019, p. 5).

When talking about how men and women choose to live their lives differently, SD believes that how women live their lives are not affected by discrimination or things like gender roles and institutionalized gender orders. In addition, SD thinks that social factors like skin color and ethnicity are irrelevant and don't affect how women live their lives. Sweden is, in the eyes of SD, a heteronormative society where gender, or the color of your skin apparently does not affect how people's life experience.

While SD has no problem with pointing out hierarchical discrimination against women in Islam, they ignore there being any oppressive factors caused by gender norms in Swedish society. SD blatantly ignores the struggles people experience due to their gender or skin color, even though its beyond well documented that intersectional challenges still greatly affect women in society today. SD claims to support gender equality in debates on immigration and multiculturalism, but the party is avid critics of gender equality in all other contexts.

5.2 LGBTQ+ rights

5.2.1 Danish Peoples Party

DP acknowledges the fight for equality for LGBTQ+ individuals in Denmark, writing on their website that "Danes have for generations fought to give homosexuals space and recognition in society on par with heterosexuals. It's amazing to see how far we've come in that fight" (Danish Peoples Party, 2023). It doesn't take long however, before DP problematize LGBTQ+ issues through a debate on immigration. DP goes on to write "DP is aware that homosexuals have come under pressure from especially young men from the Middle East... The possibility of deportation must also be included in connection with such crimes (hate crimes)" (Danish Peoples Party, 2023). On their entire information page discussing DP's views on LGBTQ+ issues and equality, tougher punishment for Muslim individuals who commit hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals is the only policy they advocate for. According to DP, Denmark's biggest LGBTQ+ issue is also an immigration issue. This falls in line with femonationalism and the instrumentalization of LGBTQ+ issues to further anti-immigration and anti-Islam campaigns.

In an interview about the future of DP in Danish politics, Chairman of DP, Morten Messerschmidt said the party would focus on the fight against identity politics and "woke-sim", stating that it "will be as central as immigration policy" (Løvkvist, 2022). Messerschmidt stated that DP were supporters of the newly founded Danish Rainbow Council, a political organization fighting extreme gender activism. DP wants to remove what they call identity politics in schools; "we want this movement out of primary school,

so that you only teach two genders not 71”, as well as the inclusion of new pronouns in the Danish language (Løvkvist, 2022). Here the chairman of DP openly admits that gender serves as a “meta language” for DP, politicizing gender and identity politics against the cultural elite who wants to decide what is ok to say and not. Messerschmidt says that the cultural elite harass and bully those who disagree with them, stating that “You have to redefine yourself, make yourself specific, distinctive, particular via your identity, skin color, gender, sexuality or something else. Basically, it is destructive to society” (Løvkvist, 2022). In other words, DP wants to present themselves as a party that supports progress and equality, but at the same time claiming that equality has gone too far.

5.2.2 Swedish Democrats

In SD’s 2022 election platform, there is an entire page dedicated to SD’s views on current LGBTQ+ issues and rights. SD begins with praising Sweden for being progressive over this issue, “Sweden has been a leading country when it comes to everyone’s right to sexual integrity and freedom” (Sverigedemokraterna, 2022, p. 53). SD claims they want to protect these rights, first stating that “The Sweden Democrats want to preserve the progressive view of sexual life and the secularized view of private life...” however, in true populist radical-right fashion they frame this through a debate on immigration, further stating “...in defense against reactionary forces that are taking an increasingly large place in society” (Sverigedemokraterna, 2022, p. 53).

SD goes on to claim that hate crime in Sweden has increased due to extensive immigration from countries with negative and reactionary views on gender and sexuality, and that honor oppression and certain cultural norms are a hindrance for many young people in Sweden. While SD do propose concrete policies like special efforts to prevent, counteract and treat mental illness and suicidal thoughts, most of the page is used to describe how immigrants make the living conditions for LGBTQ+ people worse, portraying them as the biggest issue facing LGBTQ+ individuals, while coming with very few policy proposals on how to take better care of these individuals.

One of SD’s policy suggestions were to “strengthen the judicial system’s efforts against violence, threats and honor oppression that limit the lives of LGBT+ people”, but SD does not believe this apply for their own politicians, like Simon Pettersson who criticized homosexuality, writing an editorial calling homosexuals “a group of people who have such a destructive lifestyle and that is celebrated by the establishment” (Sverigedemokraterna 2022, p. 53; Vergara, 2022). SD seems to struggle with having a clear view on LGBT issues, as they want to promote their party as progressive on these issues, all while their politicians spew out hateful rhetoric that cause more discrimination. When SD says they want to protect LGBTQ+ against other minority groups, mainly Muslim immigrants, they are only pitting groups against each other, creating more division and polarization.

Lastly, looking at how SD voted on LGBTQ+ issues during the last mandate period tells us how to what extent the party really want to improve LGBTQ+ individuals living conditions. An election report by RFSL that looks at how parties in the Swedish parliament voted on LGBTQ+ issues over the last four years, as well as a survey on various LGBTQ+ issues that 279 out of 603 candidates answered, provides a detailed breakdown on the different party’s stances. The results showed that the Green and the Left Party were in favor of most policies, while SD only voted in favor of 5 out of 23 policies, significantly less than all the other parties (Andersson, 2022). One of these issues dealt with improving and promoting the mental health of LGBTQ+ people, something SD in their electoral platform promised to fight for, however, SD was the only party in parliament that voted against this policy (RFSL, 2022, p. 19). These examples highlight how SD’s words and actions don’t match and how SD’s support for the LGBTQ+ community is mostly performative.

5.3 Religion and Secularism

5.3.1 Danish Peoples Party

In a news article covering a national survey on the ban of burqa and niqab in public spaces, DP's immigration spokesperson Martin Henriksen was asked to comment on the results of the survey. Henriksen said "if it were up to the DP, we can easily discuss a prison sentence", while rejecting critics saying a ban would further isolate immigrant women from Danish society (Larsen & Glud, 2017). DP calls the use of burqa and niqab an expression of a medieval and oppressive view of women. Here we can see how DP portray the use of burqa and niqab as an involuntary and oppressive culture, and not a religious practice; creating a narrative where this is in opposition to Danish culture and values. A majority of the Danish house of representatives voted eventually for this ban. The ban is not a burka ban per se, but a cover-up ban, as a ban towards only Muslim clothing would be a breach of the constitutional right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Henriksen from DP, who put forward this proposal all the way back in 2009, said:

Officially Denmark distances itself – not just in words, but also in action – from political Islam. In this way, the Folketing makes it clear to everyone that the kind of extremism and brainwashing that the burqa and niqab represents is unacceptable in Denmark. It is incompatible with Danish culture... the DP should then continue to work with new initiatives against the Islamization of Denmark. (Mansø, 2018).

DP is advocating against religious Muslim practices that, in their words are at odds with Danish culture. Moreover, DP want to punish the same immigrant women that they wish to help and liberate, calling their religious clothing extremist and brainwashed. It's interesting to see how these politicians can bend and outright ignore the laws that protect religious freedom and freedom of expression by using vague language in their policies, hence a "cover-up ban" and not a burqa and niqab ban, even though that's the target of the policy. This is an example of the politization of religion and Islam, as the criminalization showcases how freedom of religion must not outweigh the fundamental values of the Danish society. By using the word "Islamization", DP tries to create a narrative where Islam is a political force, the "other" who wants to take over "us" the Danish Christian people.

In an interview regarding the role of the Danish church in society, Henriksen noted how being Danish is the same as being Christian. Henriksen stated that "being Danish requires you to celebrate Christian holidays and go to church on Christmas Eve" (Holbek, 2017). He also added that "we believe that those who come to this country should, as much as possible, become like most Danes, and in doing so you need to know Christianity and its importance to the Danish people." (Holbek, 2017). Immigrants coming to Denmark must, in Henriksen's words, embrace and gain knowledge about Christianity. DP implies that Christianity is an integral part of Danish culture, furthering the culturalization of Christianity in order to create an identity for Danish people that separates them from Muslim immigrants. Another evidence of DP's performative Christianity was highlighted in a survey that showed that the people who attended the fewest church services in Denmark, were those who voted for DP (Holbek, 2017). This shows how DP hijacks Christianity and uses it solely as an identity, without any actual Christian belief.

5.3.2 Swedish Democrats

I am obviously deeply concerned that the church of our fathers has suddenly become just one religious' community among all the others and now it can be equated to Islam or Scientologists. In these tumultuous and insecure times, we need a fixed point in life to fall back on. Here the Swedish Church has an important role to play (Åkesson, 2005 as cited in Norocel, 2013, p. 14)

SD has for many years claimed that the Swedish Lutheran Church and Christianity is a cornerstone of Swedish society. The statement by party leader Åkesson was made regarding the move to separate state power from the Lutheran Church, a move SD were vocal critics of. Åkesson and SD constructs a hierarchy of religious respectability, where they view Swedish Lutheranism as the supreme while also appealing to a greater past of Christian forefathers whose Christian legacy must be upheld and respected. At the same time, Åkesson demotes Islam to the level Scientology, comparing the world's second largest religion to a small and rather controversial sect – enforcing the thought that Christianity equates to Swedishness, while Islam is less than and represents "otherness".

While Åkesson heavily promotes the Lutheran Church, he has also made remarks on how the liberal and socialist political elites have changed and transformed the church beyond all recognition. The Church of Sweden is a democratic run entity, were the church's 5.7m members can cast votes for the governing *synod*. Political parties don't run in church elections like they do at the state level, but synod candidates from the "nomination groups" are mostly linked to political parties. Much like the case of DP in Denmark, SD appropriates Christianity while not being popular among Christians, as the party only garnered 8% of the votes in the last church election – less than half their result in the parliamentary election (D'Urbino, 2021).

SD has also been critical of Swedes commitment to being religiously neutral, stating in their program that "In order to be strictly religiously neutral, the state would have to alienate a significant part of Swedish cultural heritage from public activities and public space... this is not something that the Swedish Democrats see as desirable" (Sverigedemokraterna, 2019, p. 17). SD are under the impression that religious neutrality is a threat to Christianity, and thus a threat to Swedish heritage, arguing that "By virtue of its history, Christianity should be allowed to hold a special position in relation to other religions in Sweden" (Sverigedemokraterna, 2019, p. 17). This is arguably, in line with the culturalization of Christianity, as SD views Christianity as synonymous with Swedish culture and identity.

According to the Sweden Democrats, Islam and especially its strong political and fundamentalist branch is the religious view that has proven to have the most difficulty harmoniously coexisting with Swedish and Western culture. The influence of Islamism on Swedish society should therefore be counteracted to the greatest extent possible and immigration from Muslim countries with strong elements of fundamentalism should be very strongly limited (Sverigedemokraterna, 2019, p. 17).

This statement proposes a two-part understanding. Firstly, SD describes Islam as both political and culturally incompatible with Swedish and Western culture. Secondly, because of the supposed incompatibility between Islam and Swedish culture and the negative influence Islamism has on Swedish society, immigration from Muslim countries must be strongly restricted. Apart from using unapologetically xenophobic rhetoric, SD's views on Islam as a religion and Muslim immigration can be regarded as femonationalist, since Western values are promoted as superior and described as being threatened by increased immigration. SD statements also contribute to the "othering" of Muslims, using cultural identity and beliefs to separate between the good Swedish Christians and the bad Muslims who must be stopped from further influencing Swedish society.

6. Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to examine femonationalist traits and expressions, as well as instrumentalization and culturalization of religion and secularism within the rhetoric and politics of the Danish Peoples Party and the Sweden Democrats. The literature has established a paradoxical phenomenon in which some exclusionary RRPPs increasingly incorporate and appropriates traditionality progressive and liberal values in their rhetoric and politics. While this change in rhetoric and sometimes policy might suggest a shift from traditional conservative views, I argue that such language and rhetoric should not be taken at face value, but rather help us understand why RRPP adapt liberal ideas of tolerance and equality to further their political influence and electoral gains. With the aim of contributing more knowledge of how radical-right parties operate, specifically focusing on a Scandinavian context, I have tried to comprehend how radical-right populists, an exclusionary ideology, utilize inclusionary rhetoric for mobilizing motivations.

To arrive at an answer, I have investigated two cases of RRPP in Scandinavia in the form of the Danish DP and the Swedish SD – using Sara R. Farris’ theory on femonationalism and Marzouki et al. and Rogers Brubaker’s theory on instrumentalization and culturalization of religion as theoretical framework. To create more nuance, the theoretical framework also includes Sedar et al. literature on how gender and religion affects the dimensions of populism. The theoretical framework is based on conceptual literature on populism and radical-right ideology. I have examined the parties’ own material provided on their own websites, as well as interviews, statements and parliamentary voting history from secondary sources.

After examining the parties’ positions on three policy areas – women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights and religion/secularism, several results were uncovered. With regards to women’s rights, both DP and SD were found to be femonationalist in their description of the state of gender equality in their countries. Both parties highlight gender equality as a part of national and western values, while viewing Muslim culture as a threat to these values. DP portray the effects of Muslim immigration as the biggest challenge for gender equality in Denmark, depicting Muslim men as the oppressors and positioning themselves as liberators of women. SD highlights how Muslim culture enhances challenges to women’s security and well-being, while also proclaiming that women don’t face challenges based on institutionalized gender expectations or racial prejudice, rather viewing women’s rights challenges as an immigration issue. Both parties are shown to praise and promote gender equality, but as Farris (2017, p. 2) states, they invoke women’s rights to stigmatize Muslim men in order to advance their own political objections.

Concerning LGBTQ+ rights, DP and SD also expressed femonationalist traits here. DP constructs LGBTQ+ individuals as a part of “the people” regarding threats from Muslim immigrants, but exclude them in other debates, constructing them as a part of the “cultural elite” who’s identity politics is destructive to society. SD promotes Sweden’s openness to sexual integrity and freedom but also portrays Muslim immigration as the biggest threat to LGBTQ+ individuals. As Sedar et al. highlighted, both parties politicize gendered issues to construct the people and the elite/other in ways that best ensure political support. Lastly, both DP and SD promote Christianity as a part of their national identity and culture, using Christianity as identitarian marker to separate between the

Christian native (us/the people) and the foreign Muslim immigrants (other). By culturizing Christianity and elevating it as part of their national culture, they view Islam as a culture instead of a religious practice and deem it incompatible with Danish/Swedish culture.

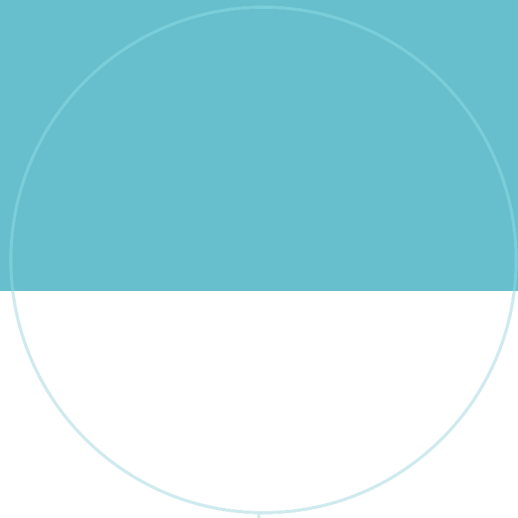
Given that this analysis only covers two parties, the generalizability of these findings is limited, therefore I will abstain from drawing too grand conclusions, however, I believe there is one general conclusion one can draw from these findings. The radical-right's recent success in European politics, especially in the case of western Europe where questions of equality and human rights are more present, may lead many RRPPs to double down on controversial policies. The reason behind this move is to achieve more legitimacy in the current climate of respect for human rights and tolerance, and to not alienate the likes of LGBTQ and women voters who traditionally haven't been their target voter-base. Implications for further research on femonationalism and religion within the radical right could be testing a different analytical framework, including a wider range of material to analyze, as well as increasing the sample size to include more parties from different countries to see if there are any regional differences.

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