

Towards an intersectional approach to populism: Comparative perspectives from Finland and India

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Abstract

Building on a comparison between the Finns Party in Finland, and the BJP in India, the article proposes to understand populist mobilization and performance through its core discursive sequences, rather than by relying upon traditional left-right or radical-moderate axes of analysis. Developing an original methodology, the article suggests to classify populist radical right (PRR) movements depending on whether they include or exclude individuals on the basis of their religious, ethnic, class, caste, age, or gender identity, or several of these axes at the same time. This methodological standpoint allows us to build a matrix for comparing PRR movements, regardless of the specific context in which they develop. Our comparative analysis buttresses Laclau's idea that PRR discourses across different cultural contexts center around the concept of the people as the 'empty signifier', which can be filled with any specific content. However, our intersectional analysis also reveals PRR discourses to be rather complex constructs, building on rather similar intersections, whose meaning and appeal however vary across political and cultural settings. We argue that further examining the discursive sequences that lie at the core of populist political performances and mobilization can bring the study of populism forward and help it go beyond broad generalizations.

1. Introduction

A variant of the broader category of populism, the populist radical right (PRR) has been on the rise in Nordic countries and South Asia, like in many other regions of the world (see e.g. Nordensvard & Ketola, 2015; Subramanian, 2007). This rise has traditionally been analysed through the prism of nationalism, and of anti-migration feelings (see e.g. Brubaker, 2020; van Spanje, 2013). However this angle of analysis tends to overlook some key features of PRR discourses, notably their articulation of various central themes such as gender, ethnicity, or class. If research on populism has started looking at the importance of gender themes and issues in PRR discourses (see e.g. Keskinen, 2013; Barat, 2020; Abi-Hassan, 2017; Bilgiç & Gkouti, 2020; Chacko 2020), it has rarely built on approaches and tools allowing to study how other identity dimensions are discursively interconnected, such as the concept of intersectionality (among rare exceptions, see Kovala, Palonen, Ruotsalainen, & Saresma, 2018; Norocel, Saresma, & Lähdesmäki, 2020; Dietze & Roth, 2020).

Drawing on Laclau we argue that ‘populism is not constitutive of a type of movement or special social base or a particular ideological orientation but is identifiable with structuring political logic—to be precise, the logic of “the people”—rather than an ideology’ (Laclau, 2005, p.117). For Laclau, the notion of ‘the people’ is an empty signifier, which can be filled with any specific content. This is to argue, as Eklundh and Knott write, that ‘populism is akin to a form rather than a content’ (Eklundh & Knott, 2019, p.3). This means that the populist form can attach itself to different historical moments, contexts, crises, and ideologies. It is important to note that an empty signifier has no necessary meaning, but is always ripe to be filled with meaning through the practice and potentiality of politics (Palonen, 2019, p.60). This exercise of meaning making which constructs the political subject ‘the people’, does so by a populist logic that seeks to generate a sense of ‘us’, versus one ‘other’, relies on exclusions, and involves a spatial articulation in which new discursive territories are claimed (see Palonen, 2019; Devenney, 2019).

Expanding on this idea, the departure point for our analysis is that this populist logic is discursively co-constituted, and rests on intersections of various social dimensions and factors such as race/ethnicity, religion, caste, class, or gender/sexual orientation. One of the key hypotheses developed in the article is that it is possible to compare and map PRR movements across different countries and political systems, paying attention to these discursive intersections, in order to unpack populism as a logic of the people rather than as an ideology. Instead of relying upon

traditional left-right or radical-moderate axes of analysis, we propose to classify PRR movements depending on whether they include or exclude individuals on the basis of their religious, ethnic, class, caste, age, or gender identity, or several of these axes at the same time. This methodological standpoint allows us to build a matrix for comparing PRR movements, regardless of the specific context in which they develop, and to provide a preliminary answer to the feminist critique of a ‘populist hype’ (Maiguashca, 2019), by grounding our analysis of PRR on power relations, as they emerge in their discourses about gender, race, class, and so on.

In order to develop and test this approach, we bring together empirical insights from two different regions: the Nordic countries with the case of the Finns Party in Finland, and South Asia with the case of the BJP in India. Comparing political parties located in Finland and India might sound surprising. Finland is a small and wealthy country, relatively homogeneous, whereas India, one of the largest and most populated countries in the world, is heavily divided along religious, ethnic, socio-economic, linguistic, and caste lines. Following the ‘most different’ or ‘contrasting cases’ comparative method (Anckar, 2008), our assumption is that highlighting similar processes in highly different cases allows to avoid the problem of ‘overdetermination’ induced by ‘most similar’ comparative research designs (Przeworski, 1987). The research presented in this article is meant to pave the way for broader studies that could combine ‘most similar’ and ‘most different’ comparative research designs for examining PRR movements.

If the subject of PRR has been increasingly studied from either the standpoint of Nordic countries and South Asia, it has rarely been explored as a global phenomenon, and in a comparative perspective (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014; Sen, 2016, Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018). Nativist, populist, and even white supremacist discourses are increasingly normalized within Nordic political parties. They are reflected in debates on immigration, culture, and the protection of ‘liberal democratic’ values, championed by, for example, the Finns Party in Finland, simultaneously making space for more right-wing radical expressions of nationalism, racism, and authoritarianism. The BJP offers scope for comparison with Western cases both in terms of the construction of ‘the other’, and in how the party reconciles the complexities of caste within its conception of the Hindu ‘people’ (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2018). While scholars like McDonnell and Cabrera set the stage for comparative case studies, they do so by subscribing to the ideational template of populism, which defines populism as a thin-centered ideology (see Mudde, 2004; Mudde, 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018). Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018) argue that the ideational approach to populism

can be ‘employed to undertake empirical research in a cross-national and cross-regional fashion’. While we agree that the ideational approach is significant and does offer scope in terms of ‘distinguishability, categorizability, travelability, and versatility’ (Mudde, 2017), the departure point for our analysis is that this approach still falls short of unpacking the idea of people as it broadly makes a distinction between the people and the elite through the idea of morality¹. Admittedly, it refers to the fact that while populism defines the “people as pure, the accompanying “host” ideology can add an additional dimension—such as class in the case of “social populism” (e.g. March, 2011) and nation in “national populism” (e.g. Taguieff, 1995, as cited in Mudde, 2017). However the ideational approach doesn’t dwell deeper into this additional dimension of host ideology. This is in our view a serious limitation, since we argue that populism (drawing on Laclau, 2005) is not essentially a thin centered ideology but a political logic that hinges on discursive identity assemblages (for instance gender-race; caste-class) that are used for performative political action. Thus, in contrast to tying the analysis of Finns Party and BJP to the ideational approach, we draw on Laclau to probe the idea of the people as an empty signifier, which allows us to explore the process of contingent meaning making within², and across contexts. Interestingly, in both contexts, women’s bodies have become sites for performative control (for example through the politics of Love Jihad, or Romeo Squads, or protecting white 'European' women from the sexual predator of the brown immigrant man³), while men’s bodies are racialized and essentialized as inferior and/or as potential terrorists/rapists. However, not just any woman has to be protected, and not just any man is pictured as a threat. In this context, an intersectional analysis can allow us to unpack the complex identity complexes that lie at the core of PRR discourses, and to highlight their inherent historicity and flexibility, under a veneer of similarity. The principal contributions of this article are the following: Firstly, it uses an innovative intersectional approach for studying PRR parties, instead of foregrounding the left-right or radical-

¹ Mudde (2017, p.4) argues that ‘purity and authenticity are not defined in (essentially) ethnic or racial terms, but in moral terms. It is about “doing the right thing,” which means doing what is right for all the people. This is possible, because populism considers “the people” to be a homogeneous category’.

² This approach opens up space for further research on populist parties in India itself (for instance Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), Tamil Nadu).

³ Love Jihad, also called Romeo Jihad, is an alleged activity under which young Muslim boys and men are said to reportedly target to convert Hindu and Christian women to Islam through trickery and expressions of false love (see Gupta, 2009; Holzberg & Raghavan, 2020). On gendered vigilantism in the Finnish context see Aharoni & Féron, 2020. Worth mentioning, but beyond the scope of this article, is the fact that both parties have been more broadly accused of provoking hatred, bigotry, and violence (see for instance Anand 2005; Pettersson 2020).

moderate cleavages, or restricting itself to the elite-people distinction, as is common in the existing literature. Secondly, it develops a corresponding methodology that highlights how PRR parties articulate various identity complexes to include or exclude individuals from their conception of the ‘people’. Thirdly, this methodology allows us to identify not only the main themes in PRR discourses, but also how they intersect to create specific discursive constellations, which take different meanings in different contexts. The article notably concludes that in spite of being deployed in completely different contexts, a similar intersection, that of race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation, structures the discourses of the Finns Party and the BJP. This intersection is however operationalized in different ways in the two contexts, through a fusion between race/ethnicity and religion, and references to class in the case of the BJP, and through references to religion in the case of the Finns Party. Our analysis therefore suggests that at the core of PRR discourses lies the race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation intersection, which is mediated through other variables, like religion, class, age, and so on, depending on the contingent process of meaning making. The article starts with a rapid overview of the literature on populism, and of the ways in which gender and other intersectional factors have so far been taken into account in the analysis of populist discourses. The concept of intersectionality is also explicated, as well as its potential for unpacking PRR discourses. The second section details our methodology and sources of data, and stresses the experimental and original nature of the research conducted for this article. In the third section, we present our main results, focusing on the major topics and intersections appearing in PRR discourses. These results are further discussed in the last section, where we also consider how our methodological framework could be further applied and refined.

2. Towards an intersectional approach to populism

Populism stands at the center stage of numerous political landscapes, however its conceptual meaning remains highly contested in academic and policy scholarship. The contestation stems from different scholars ‘emphasizing divergent attributes to the concept of populism’ (Weyland, 2001, p.1). For instance, Mudde and Kaltwasser define ‘populism as a thin centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and that holds politics should be the (general will) of the people’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015, p.17; see also Mudde, 2004). Another approach is that of Ernesto Laclau, who argues that ‘populism is not constitutive of a type of movement or special

social base or a particular ideological orientation but is identifiable with structuring political logic—to be precise, the logic of “the people”—rather than an ideology’ (Laclau, 2005, p.117). Laclau’s most important insight in *On Populist Reason* is that the people in itself is a discursive construct, and the political subject of the people doesn’t exist before it is discursively named. In his analysis there is significant emphasis first on ‘the people’ as the ‘empty signifier’, which can be filled with any specific content, and second on a need not just to grasp the political logic but also to determine the discursive sequences through which a social force or movement carries out its overall political performance. This is to argue, to paraphrase Eklundh and Knott (2019, p.3), that populism is akin to a form or to a logic, rather than to a specific content, and thus that it can attach itself to different historical moments, contexts, crises, and ideologies. Similarly, scholars like Taggart argue that populism as a conceptual category lacks core value and is characterized by a ‘chameleonic’ character (Taggart, 2000). And while it appears in different times and places, it is always constituted by aspects of its environment that resonate with the heartland. Further, scholars like Saresma et al. build on Laclau’s work and draw attention to the ways in which the concept of the people, as a floating or empty signifier, is articulated with varying identity categories like gender, but also class or religion, thus calling for an intersectional analysis (Kovala, Palonen, Ruotsalainen, & Saresma, 2018). Scholars working on populist radical right parties like Dietze and Roth (2020, pp.8-9) speak of a right wing-populist complex, which calls for an analysis of intersectional constellations, as this right wing populist complex intersects with categories like race, class, religion, and ethnicity.

Using an intersectional lens seems therefore particularly relevant, as populists tend to construct ‘the other’ through discursive gendered sequences, and not just through nationalist or socio-economic tropes. In the case of Northern Europe, ‘the other’ can be the black *man*, and/or the Muslim *man*, who are portrayed as both ‘foreign’ culturally, and disadvantaged socio-economically. In South Asian postcolonial states, gendered representations in populist discourses are similarly affected by local contexts, by a nationalist rhetoric, but also by the use of religious and cultural idioms. The identity of ‘the other’ can thus mix gendered, religious, and nationalist tropes, for instance in the case of the ‘enemy’ of the Hindu woman in the Hindutva discourse in India.

Born of feminist theorizing, the concept of intersectionality maintains the feminist focus on gender issues, but expands it to look at other identities such as religion, race/ethnicity, caste, class, age, disability, or sexual orientation. Its main aim is to expose how inequalities are produced, ignored, or even strengthened, including and beyond gender differences (MacKinnon, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). By looking at how factors such as social class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or age participate in producing different experiences for gendered individuals, it expands the feminist analyses of power and agency (Marfelt, 2016). Although the concept of intersectionality is primarily grounded in individual experiences, it can be used to analyse social processes at multiple levels, for instance at the interpersonal level (intersubjective praxis), at the state or institutional level, or at the symbolic and discursive levels (Lutz, 2015, p.40). Intersectionality recognizes that universalizing, homogenizing methods and practices have been inaccurate and harmful to research, as well as to the people and societies that have been the focus of research. Rather than privileging one isolated identity category over others, intersectionality demonstrates how the various vectors of identity affect one another and create unique subjectivities and experiences (MacKinnon, 2013). Thus universalizing definitions of gender equality and understanding of gender constructions across all societies are grossly inadequate.

The lens of intersectionality can, in our view, offer crucial new insights for the study of PRR, by highlighting how PRR parties articulate identity categories such as gender, class, caste, religion, or sexual orientation in order to include or exclude certain individuals from their understanding of the ‘people’. Elaborating on Laclau’s, Eklundh and Knott’s, and Taggart’s insights, our aim is to show that the chameleonic character and flexibility of populism, hinged on the concept of the people as ‘an empty signifier’, are accompanied by a relative similarity of its core discursive constellations (as traced through its main discursive intersections), which however take different meanings in different contexts. The next section proceeds to detail how we have developed an intersectional method for comparing the cases of the Finns Party and of the BJP.

3. Developing an intersectional framework to analyse populism

In order to develop our analytical framework, we examine two cases of PRR parties, located in India and in Finland. The BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) was founded in 1980 from the remnants of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh party (BJS) which had been launched in 1951. The BJP won 282 (52 percent) of the Parliamentary seats with 31.3 percent of the vote share in the 2014 elections. Further

the BJP received 37.4 percent of the votes in the 2019 Parliament (*Lok Sabha*) elections. The BJP has been characterized as a PRR party based on its conceptions of ‘the people’, ‘elites’, and ‘others’ (McDonnell & Cabrera, 2018; Basu, 1993). The BJP mixes a strong development narrative with ideas of Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot, 2007), and lays emphasis on an organic (maternal conception) of citizenship that rests on the notion that Hindus were the original and thus the most legitimate inhabitants of India (Basu, 1993). The discourse of the BJP rests on the ideology of Hindutva, which promotes the idea that Hindus are not members of disparate religious sects but instead comprise a single distinct people - one which has been the victim of powerful foreign elites in the form of Muslims, and then British conquering forces (Jaffrelot, 2007). The ideology of Hindutva is also shared by affiliate organizations that are referred to as Sangh Parivar, which includes professional associations, economic, educational, and religious organizations and think tanks (Andersen & Damle, 2018). Many groups in the Sangh Parivar, like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (1925), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (1964), Bajrang Dal (1984) articulate a far more radical right discourse and also have female wings like Rashtriya Sevika Samiti (RSS) or Durga Vahini (VHP), which provide interesting insights on the female subject, and its gendered characterization in PRR discourses. These various organizations are also related to one another. For instance, of the 53 BJP ministers in the Modi government in 2019, 38 have a Sangh background — 71 percent of the total.

The other case we are interested in, the Finns Party (in Finnish, *Perussuomalaiset*) known until 2011 as the True Finns, was established in 1995 after the dissolution of the Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen maaseudun puolue*). Since 2011, the Finns Party has consistently scored at least 17 percent in parliamentary elections, and it has figured among the main Finnish political parties, in a quite heavily divided political scene. It is currently the second largest party in the Finnish Parliament, but its share of votes in municipal, presidential, and European elections is usually lower. In the academic literature, the party is often characterized as a PRR party (see e.g. Arter, 2010; Jungar & Jupskäs, 2014), although its leaders and members describe themselves as centrists⁴.

⁴ Worth noting here is the fact that the former leader of the Finns Party Timo Soini identified himself both as a centrist and as populist, but not as a radical right populist, a view he develops in his book *Populism* (Helsinki: Pole-Kuntatiето, 2020).

The Finns Party's line mixes a nationalist, anti-EU, and anti-immigration stance, a call for left-wing economic policies, social conservatism, with a strong skepticism towards gender equality and sexual minorities' rights. Other smaller and Finnish-based groups share a largely similar ideology, although often articulated in far more radical discourses and practices, and attracting a partly different membership. This is the case for instance of the anti-immigrant group Suomen Sisu (founded in 1998), the vigilante organization Soldiers of Odin (founded in 2015), or the political party Suomen Kansa Ensin (founded in 2017), among others. There is some evidence that these smaller organizations are related to one another through personal connections and a partly overlapping membership, and some are directly connected to the Finns Party too, although with varying degrees of closeness. The current leader of the Finns Party, Jussi Halla-aho, is for instance a member of Suomen Sisu too. Altogether, they constitute a sort of radical right populist network that has its own news outlets and social media channels, like Suomen Uutiset which is the Finns Party official news channel, or MV-Lehti, which is more radical, and which has been accused of racism and of spreading fake news.

In order to study and compare these two cases, the article is grounded on an analysis of four types of PRR publications, namely electoral pamphlets and speeches, social media posts (notably on Twitter and Facebook), public discourses available on official websites and official mouthpieces like newspapers, magazines, and radio programs, as well as different types of images and visuals like posters, pictures, videos, etc.. In total, we have compiled more than 2,400 sources covering our two case studies, over the period 2014-2019⁵. This period is particularly relevant for both the BJP and the Finns Party: in 2014 general elections took place in India, and in 2019 in both Finland and India. In Finland, the 2014-2019 period also saw a sharp increase in populist and anti-migration discourses, in which the Finns Party played a major role. All in all, the 2014-2019 period can be considered as central for the crystallization and rootedness of both the BJP's and Finns Party. We have analyzed the collected documents using a discursive method⁶, tracing and

⁵ The breakdown of compiled sources is as follows: for the BJP, 2 election manifestos (2014, 2019), 52 Mann Ki Baat Speeches, 36 Yogi Adityanath (*Lekh*) Essays, and approximately 1,100 Facebook Images/BJP Official Handle; for the Finns Party, 209 candidates' profiles and personal statements on the 2019 Finnish parliamentary election compass, 7 election manifestos (parliamentary elections 2019; municipal elections 2017; 5 manifestos for the 2015 parliamentary elections), 3 official videos, 5 public statements by party leaders, and approx. 1000 posts on various FB pages and Twitter accounts, notably the Perussuomalaiset Facebook page and Twitter accounts. For a more detailed account, please refer to our data availability statement.

⁶ Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis (2000, p.4) states that the 'discursive can be defined as a theoretical horizon within which the being of objects is constituted. In other words, all objects are objects of discourse, as their meaning depends upon a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences'. The discursive method creatively works with

highlighting their main themes, topics, issues, and symbols. Such an approach doesn't simply look at discourses as ideas or beliefs, but analyzes raw material and information as discursive form, and treats empirical data as a set of signifying practices that constitute a discourse (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000). This method is particularly relevant as we employ Laclau's idea of 'empty signifiers' to unpack the idea of people, and the differing identity complexes that constitute it. For Laclau (2005, p.68), discourse doesn't mean something that is 'essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it'. Building upon a discursive analysis paying specific attention to intersections (e.g. gender/sexual orientation and class, religion, gender/sexual orientation and age, etc.) appearing in these discourses, we have proceeded in three steps: 1) after conducting the discursive analysis on the collected documents, we have 2) mapped the use of various themes such as gender, race/ethnicity, or religion in PRR discourses, before eventually 3) assessing the extent to which PRR narratives are built upon particular intersections between two or several of these factors. We have mapped all intersections, but we have also paid specific attention to how gender/sexual orientation is articulated (or not) to a number of issues and topics, and in particular to race/ethnicity, but also to class and/or caste, religion, and age. For instance, we have looked at how the notion of the 'Finnish people' at the core of the Finns Party's political project and the idea of 'Hindutva' in the case of Modi-led BJP in India are constructed, and whether they rely on a co-construction of issues related to gender/sexual orientation, class, caste, ethnicity/race, religion, or age. It is worth noting here that for purposes of simplicity we have merged the analytical categories of gender and sexual orientation, that are usually separated in studies on intersectionality. We have also adopted a slightly different classification for the Finnish and the Indian cases, in order to factor in the important differences in contexts: first, in the case of Finland we have not used the caste dimension as it is not present at all in Finnish political discourses, and second in the case of India we have fused the religion and race/ethnicity dimensions, because the BJP discourses merge them completely. This, in itself, confirms previous studies that have shown how the BJP builds (on) a fusion between Indianness and Hinduism, thereby de facto excluding Muslims from their representations of the Indian nation (Basu, 1993; Jaffrelot, 2007).

Laclau and Mouffe, and is particularly useful when studying issues of 'identity formation, the production of ideologies, the logics of social movements' (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis 2000, p.2).

As mentioned above, our mapping of social stratifications used in PRR movements' discourses, as well as of intersections and co-constructions, relies mostly upon discursive analysis. In order to prepare our narrative case study analysis, we have reviewed all compiled written documents and sources, except social media posts⁷, and checked whether they referred to the issues at hand (to reiterate: gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, class, caste, and age) explicitly, frequently and prominently, implicitly and moderately, or not at all. We have also systematically traced the existing intersections and co-constructions between these issues, in order to highlight the most frequently used (e.g. gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and religion).

In order to help visualize our results and comprehend the complexity of PRR discourses, we have prepared two types of graphs and diagrams that illustrate what importance the themes of gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, class, caste, and age have in PRR discourses - in the case of radar graphs -, and how these themes intersect and are co-constructed - in the case of Venn diagrams-. It is worth underscoring the fact that these graphs and diagrams are meant as representation tools and not as summaries of our findings. Contrary to our narrative case study analysis, they are built upon a mostly quantitative assessment of the presence of these themes in PRR discourses, including images, videos, social media content, and posters. As such, they neither sum up our approach, nor imply judgment on the content and meaning attached to these themes. For instance, in order to prepare the radar graphs, when an issue figured prominently and explicitly, for a given PRR movement, in its electoral pamphlets, in its social media posts, in its public discourses, as well as in the images and visuals, we gave it the maximum score. When the issue was only implicitly or moderately referred to, we granted it a medium score, and when the issue was not present at all it got the minimum score. If the issue figured only in some supports but not in some others (e.g. in social media and images but not in public discourses or in electoral pamphlets), it got intermediate scores. Our decision to aggregate scores in this way is based on the hypothesis that each support targets and reaches an at least partially different type of audience, thus indicating a more or less broad presence of the issue in the party's discourses. For creating the Venn diagrams (overlapping circles), we have counted the number of instances where the written and visual sources under study mentioned or referred to each theme (gender/sexual

⁷ We have excluded social media posts from our detailed narrative analysis on the grounds that an analysis of PRR discourses on social media would have required specific tools and methods. See for instance Gerbaudo, 2018; Postill, 2018.

orientation, race/ethnicity, class, caste, religion, and age) alongside one or several others. The more the analyzed discourses were using some themes alongside others, the more imbrication between the overlapping circles. To reiterate, these tools help us to visualize the commonalities and differences between the two cases covered in this article, but are not meant to faithfully reproduce all the nuances captured in the narrative analysis.

Instead of relying upon notions such as left and right, or radical and moderate, which are always the result of very specific local histories and therefore only partially comparable, and which do not in any case capture the complexity and diversity of populist movements, this intersectional approach allows to compare PRR movements first on the basis of various social stratifications identified in intersectionality theories, and second on the basis of the strongest intersections that appear in their discourses. This mapping allows to highlight similarities across very different political spaces, but also potentially differences across populist movements operating within the same space.

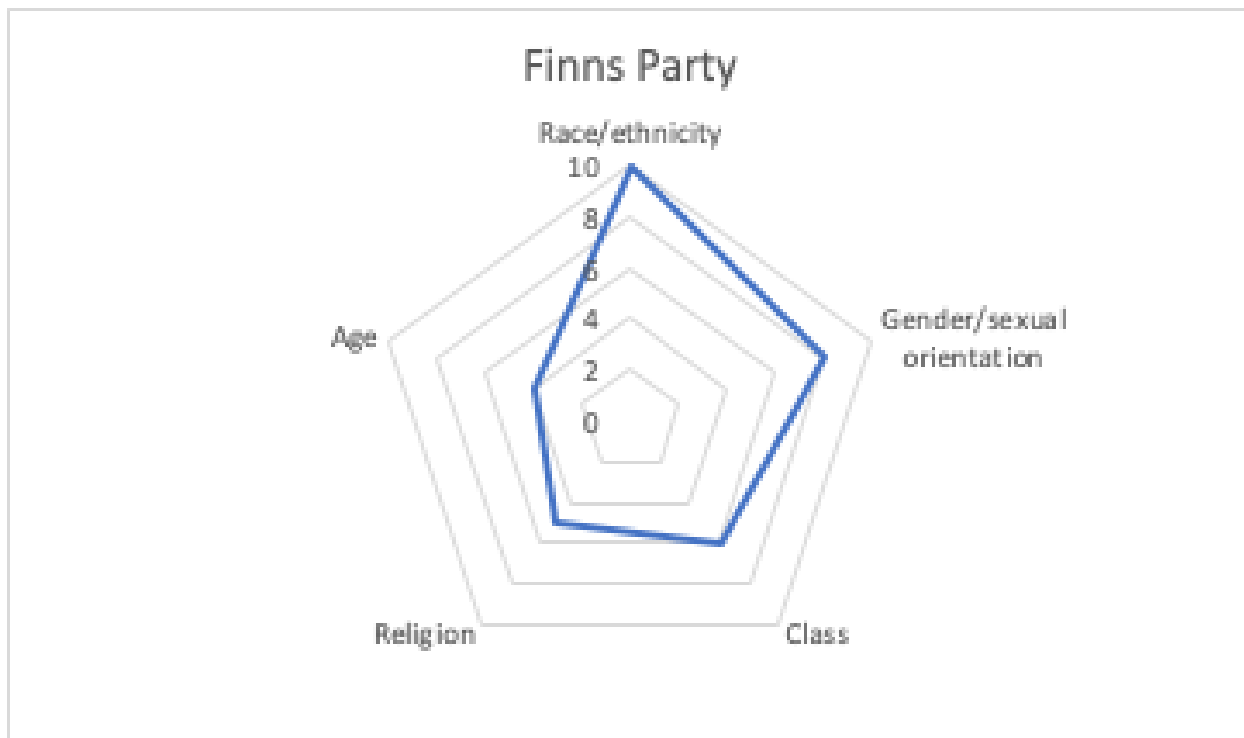
4. An intersectional analysis of the Finns Party and of the BJP

Building on our two specific case studies, this section shows that although these movements share a lot of similarities, in particular in terms of the intersections they build their discourses on, these discursive sequences take meaning in specific contexts and histories, a process through which populism as an ‘empty signifier’ acquires its strength and appeal. We detail below how these patterns play out in the case of the Finns Party and of the BJP.

The Finns Party - Main themes and intersectional analysis

Gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, age, and class all appear in the Finns Party discourses that we have reviewed, although with different frequencies and intensity. Not surprisingly, references to ethnicity and/or race play a central role in the party’s ideology, insofar as they underpin its nationalist and anti-immigration stance. Its 2015 Immigration Policy Manifesto stated for instance: 'Immigration will change, irreversibly, the host country's population profile, disrupt social cohesion, overburden public services and economic resources, lead to the formation of ghettos, promote religious radicalism and its consequences, and foster ethnic conflicts' (Finns Party, 2015a, p.1). Similarly, gender is central to many proposals defended by the Finns Party, although it is often related to other themes, such as immigration, religion, and age.

The party claims to defend gender equality, but it tends to support policies which can be interpreted as anti-feminist (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2017). On parental leave for example, almost all Finns Party's candidates for the 2019 parliamentary elections argued that the government should leave the choice to concerned families instead of legislating (Yle, 2019a). References to class are not as frequent as could be expected for a party that often claims to defend the most-deprived, and mostly relate to the need to fight poverty amongst Finns by cutting down taxes amongst the poorest sections of the population (Finns Party, 2015b, p.2). In fact, like many other populist parties, the Finns Party tends to repeatedly refer to 'ordinary people' (Finns Party, 2019, p.7), or to 'ordinary Finnish citizens' (Finns Party, 2015c, p.1), asserting that their 'focus is neither on any particular professions nor "interest groups" but on the Finnish nation as a whole' (Finns Party, 2018b, p.1). In these discourses, 'ordinary people' are systematically opposed to migrants, whose arrival in the country is associated with higher taxes and insecurity. Comparatively, religion and age receive less attention. Religion is for instance rarely tackled as an issue of its own, but almost always related to the issue of immigration, and often conflated with ethnic belonging. Similarly, age mostly comes to the fore in discourses related to elderly care or to education, and to the need to use education as a means to fight marginalization (see .g. Finns Party, 2018a). The question of age is also sometimes discussed in relation to the integration of adult immigrants. The radar graph below summarizes the use of these different themes in the Finns Party discourses for the period 2014-2019.



A review of Finns Party’s speeches and political manifestos published in both Finnish and English over the period 2014-2019 shows a clear salience of the race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation intersection, as illustrated in the Venn Diagram below. This intersection is around three times more present than any other, and it appears in more than 70 percent of the documents and speeches reviewed. The association of the themes of race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation buttresses the idea that the future of the Finnish nation and of its people depends first and foremost upon the maintenance of certain gender roles and values. Gender issues are in particular central to discussions pertaining to migration, to education, or to social policies. Finnish women are pictured as in need of protection from migrant men, who are presented as likely to harass and sexually assault them. Laura Huhtasaari, one of the Finns Party’s most well-known politicians, explained for instance during the 2019 parliamentary pre-election debate that ‘certain groups here as a result of humanitarian migration are overrepresented in sexual and violent crime’ (Yle, 2019b). This echoes numerous other Finns Party’s statements, making it one of the party’s central claims: ‘Sexual offences have increased significantly - and the share of these involving the recent flow of immigrants is indisputable’ (Finns Party, 2017, p.9). Immigration is also consistently presented as threatening gender equality achievements. Jussi Halla-aho, the Finns Party leader, has for instance declared: ‘There are now more and more people in Finland who have perceptions of women,

children and physical contact that are very different from traditional Finnish values' (Halla-aho, 2018). The Finns Party campaign video 'Ketutus' (Finns Party, 2019a) ominously announces: 'The country that once proved to be a safe haven for women and children was now a thing of the past'. As notably shown by Lähdesmäki and Saresma (2014) or Keskinen (2013), this strong articulation between immigration and gender equality is a key characteristic of nationalist discourses in the Nordic countries, which build an opposition between supposedly backward migrants, and progressive Nordic societies.

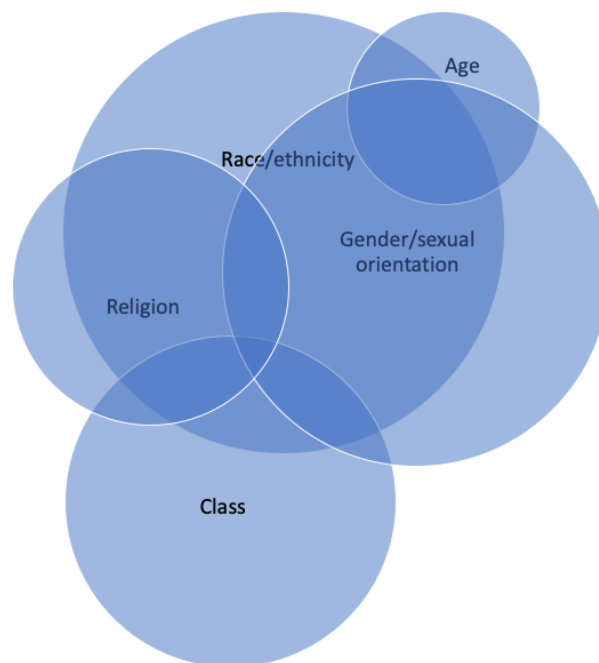
Not surprisingly, issues related to race/ethnicity are usually also associated with religion, and often intersect with gender/sexual orientation too. This includes for instance identifying the presence of 'hijabs, niqabs and burkas' and of 'halal butcher shops' as a sign of a disappearing Finnishness (Purra, 2019). Several publications stress the importance of maintaining Finnish-Christian traditions such as Christmas parties and singing the summer hymn⁸. Refugees visiting their home countries are suspected of 'Jihad Tourism' (Finns Party, 2015a, p.5).

The race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation intersection is complemented in around 20 percent of the documents that we have reviewed by a focus on age. Several Finns Party's publications underscore problems related to the integration of young (male) migrants, for instance in relation to female staff in schools: 'Making the situation even more difficult is the recent immigration from the refugee crisis. These young people in that group are having even more troubles – and there is the additional difficulty of the lack of respect for female staff in the schools' (Finns Party, 2018a). Issues related to the integration of adult male foreigners are also frequently mentioned.

As shown in the below Venn Diagram, in the Finns Party's discourses class issues do not often intersect with others, and when they do, it is mostly to reassert a principle of 'national priority': 'We must care for the Finnish population - we are not here to be some kind of social and health center for the world' (Finns Party, 2015b, p.2). The class issue also appears in relation to higher taxes generated by migration: "This immigration is not bringing new taxpayers to Finland - or providing resources to face future challenges. These high costs fall on the taxpayer - regardless of whether the immigrant comes to Finland as an asylum-seeker or as a provider of cheap labour. Very few well-educated and highly qualified people come to Finland at the moment" (Finns Party,

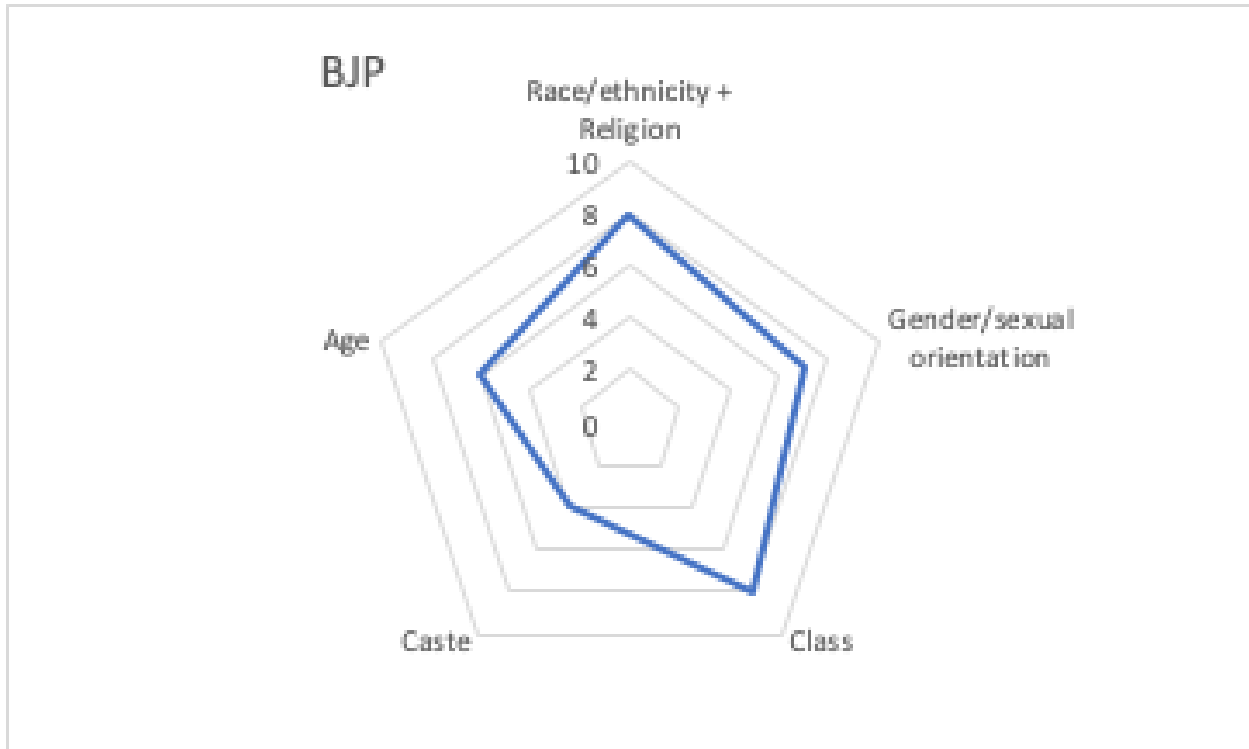
⁸ On the contentious issue of the summer hymn, conflating issues of ethnicity/race, gender, and religion, see for instance Ylä-Anttila, 2017.

2019, p.3). This intersection is sometimes buttressed by specific references to age – migration threatening the well-being of those identified as the most vulnerable among the Finnish population, that is the children and the elderly: “Finnish taxpayers see that the resulting expenditures for immigration mean that elderly Finnish citizens are not properly cared for – Finnish children must go to schools plagued by mould and bad indoor air - wages of Finnish workers are no longer sufficient. At the same time, migrants are living comfortably on Finnish social security payments and other benefits” (Finns Party, 2019, p.5). The gender and class intersection also appeared in a few sources, putting the focus on working class masculinities, an intersection also identified in Norocel and al.’s work (2020). The relatively low number of intersections between class and other issues is not entirely surprising considering the tendency of Nordic populist parties to build upon the notion of 'the people' and to gloss over internal cleavages and dissensions based on wealth. Clearly, the race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation intersection structures the Finns Party discourses, and it frequently acts as a proxy for discussing other issues such as religion, but also age.



The BJP - Main themes and intersectional analysis

Like in the case of the Finns Party, gender/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity/religion, class, caste, and age all appear in the BJP discourses that we have reviewed, although with different frequency. The race/ethnicity/religion nexus plays a central role in the party's ideology, as it underpins its narrative on nation (nationalism) and development, and determines its position on gender issues. For instance, the BJP's 2014 manifesto lays emphasis on 'India as a continuum of civilizational consciousness, which made India one country, one people, and one Nation' (BJP Election Manifesto, 2014, p.1). This is reflected in the party position on the Citizenship Amendment bill first introduced in the Parliament in 2016, or its pitch for Uniform Civil Code. The 2014 manifesto states, 'BJP believes that there cannot be gender equality till such time India adopts a Uniform Civil Code' (BJP Election Manifesto, 2014, p. 41), and the 2019 Manifesto lays emphasis on the need to legislate a bill to prohibit and eliminate various Muslim personal laws pertaining to marriage and divorce (BJP Election Manifesto, 2019). In BJP discourses, references to class are nearly as frequent as race/ethnicity/religion, and the 2014 Manifesto states, 'Our Government will be a government of the poor, marginalized and left behind' (BJP Election Manifesto, 2014, p. 16; see also Mann Ki Baat Speeches April 26, 2015; June 26, 2016; August 28, 2016; March 26, 2017). This is followed by references to caste with an emphasis on the principles of *Samajik Nyay* (social justice) and *Samajik Samrasata* (social harmony) with a focus on the lowest castes in India, such as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC's), and other weaker sections (BJP Manifesto 2014). The caste dimension is also used to frame a 'us' and the 'other' narrative in the development discourse. For instance in PM Modi's campaign speech in Fatehpur (2017): 'he stressed that there should not be any injustice on the basis of religion or caste and said that if a village gets a graveyard, it should get a cremation ground too, and if there is electricity during Ramzan, power supply should be ensured during Diwali as well. He also spoke about discrimination at length, discrimination against the Dalit, OBC and Yadav, and how Samajwadi Party (SP) in more than one ways was focused only on the Muslims-in relation to all other identified categories.' Finally, age features more prominently than in the case of the Finns Party, with a focus on youth as a vector of development. The radar graph below summarizes the use of these different themes in the BJP discourses for the period 2014-2019.



A review of the BJP’s election manifestos, *Mann Ki Baat* speeches (radio communications), speeches by key leaders, and social media (official handle Facebook/BJP) posts published over the period 2014-2019 shows a clear significance of the race/ethnicity/religion and gender/sexual orientation intersection, as well as of the class and gender/sexual orientation intersection, as illustrated in the Venn Diagram below. The intersection appears in more than 51 percent of the documents and speeches reviewed.

The intersection of the themes of race/ethnicity/religion and gender/sexual orientation are central to the idea of ‘*Hindu*’ nation. The 2014 Election Manifesto (BJP Election Manifesto, 2014, p.22) refers to ‘women as nation builders’. In the *Mann Ki Baat* speeches (Radio Communications 2014-2019), and in PM Narendra Modi’s speeches there are frequent references to Hindu Goddesses, like ‘*Skandamata*’ the Goddess of the solar system, when important schemes are initiated related to the safety and lives of women (Prime Minister Speech, September 25, 2017). The use of Hindu imagery is particularly interesting as the imagery is used to portray the idea of ‘*Shakti*’ (power) through the female body, exemplified through the imagery of the ‘Goddess’.

It is interesting to see how the gender/sexual orientation and race/ethnicity/religion intersection plays out differently for instance in the ‘protection’ narrative for Hindu and Muslim women. While

the BJP makes a pitch for gender equality in the case of Muslim women, the same cannot be said in terms of their position on Hindu women, which highlights their contradictory gender ideological views, when analysed through the lens of intersectionality. Scholars like Chacko (2020) very rightly underline how in the case of Hindu women this ‘authoritarian populism’⁹ construes their ‘sexuality as a threat (thus in the need of protection), and thus restricts their religious freedom and autonomy in the public sphere’ (p.218). In the social media posts/narratives and speeches of key leaders, the Hindu woman is symbolically constructed as the embodiment of the Dharma (religion), Sanskriti (culture), and nationalism, and thus the woman, who bears the progeny of the nation, needs to be protected from the Muslim man-the other, who by marrying a Hindu woman would threaten all three: Dharma, Sanskriti, and Nationalism. A close review of the 36 listed Lekhs (essays), on Yogi Adityanath personal website indicate how the words Hindu, Hindutva, nationalism, threats, attacks and danger are used to instill the emotion of fear, insecurity and anxiety, and consequent need to guard against the enemy-the Muslim ‘other’. This in many ways then provides legitimacy for moral policing and militant vigilantism, evident through the activities of youth militia groups like Hindu Yuva Vahini, which was set up by Yogi Adityanath in 2002.¹⁰ In the discourse of ‘love jihad’ (reflected mostly in social media posts, visual images, pictures, and videos), the Hindu woman needs protection from the enemy. For the period 2014-2019, one can discern how through evocative symbols, pamphlets and images -the idea of love jihad was propagated, and a sense of fear, anxiety was instilled among the people who were mobilised with an aim to ‘protect’ the Hindu woman (see, e.g., Kalpana Wilson, Jennifer Ung Loh & Navtej Purewal, 2018, p.119). Interestingly Muslim women are characterized as in need of protection too, but from the regressive practices of Islam, particularly reflected in BJP’s discourse on triple talaq bill (The Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill 2018. During the period 2014-2019, the issue of triple talaq and that of gender equality have featured in 90 percent of the Independence Day speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For instance Modi’s underlines in his Independence Day Address (2018), ‘that the practice of Triple Talaq has caused great injustice among Muslim women’, and assured Muslim women that he will work to ensure that justice is

⁹ Chacko states (2020, p.206): “The notion of authoritarian populism here refers to the use of populist strategies to legitimize coercive and exclusionary state practices” (Hall, 1980, as cited in Chacko, 2020).

¹⁰ For details on Lekhs (essays), see Yogi Adityanath: Official Portal: <http://yogiadityanath.in/>

done to them. While this by itself can be considered as progressive, it only targets Muslim personal law.

The gender/sexual orientation and class intersection is as significant in the BJP discourses as the gender/sexual orientation and race/ethnicity/religion intersection, and it appears across 51 percent of the documents reviewed. The BJP Election manifesto 2019 stresses women-led development, with a particular focus on poor and marginalized women (BJP Election Manifesto, 2019). A strong emphasis is put on strategies to increase women's participation in the workforce, as well as on social, educational, and health security schemes. For instance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urges every brother to gift his sister a toilet on *Raksha Bandhan*¹¹. This indicates an effort to address the interests of the poor, marginalized women (Mann Ki Baat Speech, 26 July 2015). Further, special emphasis is given to maternity benefits for working class women, for instance the change in maternity leave from earlier 12 months to now 26 months (Mann Ki Baat Speech, 26 March 2017).

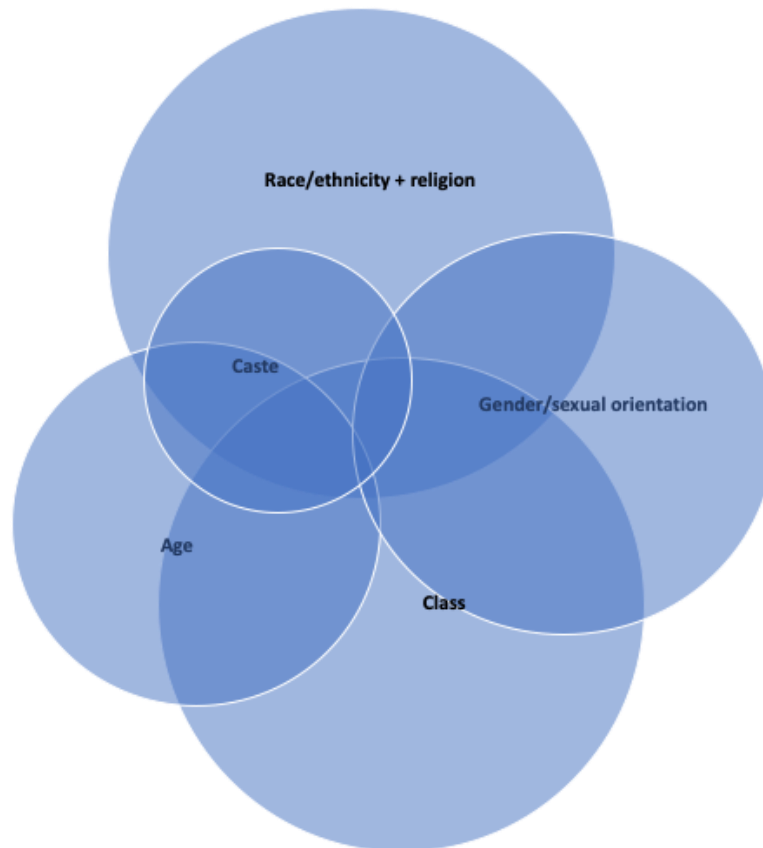
The gender/sexual orientation, class, and ethnicity/race/religion intersection can be found in approximately 12.5 percent of the documents reviewed, for instance in the case of the scheme where the Prime Minister urges brothers to give their sisters a toilet as a gift (Mann Ki Baat Speech, 26 July 2015). An analysis of the images used on the party's official Facebook page also shows that poor and/or marginalized women are sometimes represented as Muslim women.

The gender/sexual orientation, class, and caste intersection appears in approximately 6 percent of the documents reviewed, although as we have seen the overall class-caste intersection is nearly 51 percent in the overall documents examined. For instance, Prime minister Modi's discourse on health, and particularly nutrition and maternity benefits for working class women is further qualified by references to women from rural, SC, ST, and other backward classes (BJP Election Manifesto, 2014, p. 21).

Finally, the gender/sexual orientation and caste intersection can be found in only about 3 percent of the documents reviewed, with reference to the welfare of the SC, ST, and OBC women (BJP Election Manifesto, 2019, and BJP Election Manifesto, 2014). There is also emphasis on Adivasi (tribal) women and their role in the conservation and protection of environment/forest resources

¹¹ Raksha Bandhan is mostly celebrated by the Hindus where the sister ties a cotton thread on the hands of the brother. On the occasion the brother promises to protect her, and also gifts her something to mark the occasion.

(Mann Ki Baat Speech, 28 Jan. 2018). All in all, our analysis of the BJP’s discourses reveals a Venn diagram with differences, but also similarities with the Finns Party’s one.



5. Discussion and preliminary conclusions

Rather than comparing “most similar” cases of PRR parties, or PRR parties with non-populist parties, this article has set out to compare two “most different” or contrasted cases. This comparison of the Finns Party and the BJP buttresses the idea that PRR ideologies across different cultural contexts center around the idea of the people as the ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 2005, p.117), which can be filled with any specific content. Our intersectional analysis reveals PRR discourses to be rather complex constructs, building on surprisingly similar intersections in the very different contexts of Finland and India, but whose meaning varies across political and cultural settings. We argue that our analysis further qualifies the analogy of the ‘empty signifier’ offered by Laclau, by explaining how PRR parties manage to mobilize supporters in very different settings, while using

rather similar tropes. Our intersectional method not only allows to compare cases that are located in very different contexts and that look, at first sight, totally different; it also allows to unpack this idea of ‘political logic’, or rather the logic of ‘the people’-rather than an ideology. In addition, it confirms recent research by highlighting how these discursive intersections are also gendered.

More specifically, our intersectional analysis shows that in spite of being deployed in completely different contexts, the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation lies at the core of both the Finns Party and BJP discourses. It is however operationalized in different ways in the two contexts, through a fusion with religion as well as through references to class in the case of the BJP, and through references to religion in the case of the Finns Party. Our analysis therefore suggests that at the core of PRR discourses lies the race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation intersection, which is mediated through other variables, like religion, class, age, and so on, depending on the contingent process of meaning making. In India for instance the association of the themes race/ethnicity/religion and gender/sexual orientation is central to the idea of the ‘Hindu nation’. As indicated in the previous section, the Hindu woman is symbolically constructed as the embodiment of the Dharma (religion), Sanskriti (culture), and nationalism. However, while female Hindu iconography is employed to deploy civilizational superiority, or Shakti (power) of the Hindu nation, Islamic practices and iconography are used to deploy threats to this Hindu nation. In the case of the Finns Party, the race/ethnicity and gender/sexual orientation intersection plays the central role of structuring responses to immigration, as well as to changes in societal and cultural norms. By constantly building on and strengthening this intersection, the Finns Party deploys a discourse whereby gender has become an actual boundary marker for the Finnish nation, pointing at a series of social, cultural, religious, and political thresholds beyond which the (masculine) national order is put under threat.

Our analysis also demonstrates that PRR discourses are not monolithic. Neither the BJP nor the Finns Party focus exclusively on one theme, or even on one intersection. Their discourses build on quite complex associations and references, which cannot be understood by treating populism as a unified category or a thin-centered ideology, and without taking the historical and cultural context into account. For instance, the BJP gives more importance to age than the Finns Party, because the BJP lays emphasis on the idea of ‘Yuva Bharat’ (Young India), and on the significance of demography to build a stronger nation. This is also related to the fact that the youth constitute a significant support base for BJP. Conversely, age tends to only appear in Finns Party’s discourses

about education and training, or when alluding to migrants' age. One major difference between our two cases seems to lie in the importance given to class in these intersections. While class does not constitute a predominant theme in the Finns Party's discourses¹², for the BJP, the race/ethnicity/religion and class intersection is a major structuring element. The BJP lays a strong emphasis on both the idea of the Hindu nation, and on the idea of '*Sabka Vikas*' (development of all), with a particular focus on poor and marginalised class/caste women.

It is important to repeat that in both cases, gender is not peripheral but on the contrary strategically located in discourses building the figure of both the people and the enemy. This shows that, as Saresma has already shown with the concept of 'gender populism' (2018), analyses neglecting gender are overlooking an important mechanism through which populist discourses are constructed. However, gender is always locally constructed and intersecting with other identity categories, and our intersectional analysis shows how PRR movements build their strength and appeal on these locally grounded discursive intersections. For instance in the BJP's discourses the woman, who bears the progeny of the nation needs to be protected from the Muslim man-the other/the enemy. Further, women's bodies become sites to sort people into 'us' and 'them'. Constructions of the 'other' - the stranger, the enemy - are crucial in that respect. In that sense, our research confirms well established feminist insights, notably regarding the way gendered bodies and sexuality play pivotal roles, as territories, markers, and reproducers of the narratives of nations and other collectivities (see e.g. Yural-Davis & Anthias, 1989).

In terms of lessons learned, this experimental study primarily shows that PRR, while hinged on the idea of the 'people' as an empty signifier, draws on intersectional categories to construct discursive sequences for political performances and mobilization. We argue that further examining these discursive sequences can bring the study of populism forward and help it go beyond broad generalizations. Our study also underscores how important taking the context into account is for understanding and analyzing PRR discourses: while some dimensions, like class, may be central in one setting, they are not necessarily so in another. In addition, the meaning associated with each of these dimensions varies from context to context, drawing our attention to the dangers and limits of a disembodied comparative analysis. For instance, 'religion' as a category needs to be unpacked

¹² Although it constitutes a key characteristic of its leadership style. See Norocel et al., 2020.

and contextualized, as it has ties with race/ethnicity in both our cases, but also with class and caste in India.

We envisage this study only as a first step, which could be complemented by exploring whether different kinds of channels and media disseminate different types of discourses. For instance are PRR discourses on social media, targeting youth, structured in a different way than those targeting older audiences? Complementary analysis is also needed to assess the weight given to these themes, and the scope of their intersections, at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Analyzing PRR discourses at various levels is primordial for understanding their degree of penetration in everyday debates. Finally, it would be interesting to assess whether PRR discourses evolve in time, and if yes whether these changes are reflected in the intersections that lie at their very core, and that structure their key discursive sequences.

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