

Populism and feminist politics

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Populism is everywhere in Europe today: in politics and in research. In politics, both (radical) right populist parties in Northern and Eastern and Central Europe and left populists in Spain and Greece have had sustained electoral successes. These successes have both shaken the traditional structures of party politics – for instance the two-party system in Spain – and heightened the importance of political parties as a site of solutions to economic, social and political crises. Most research on populism has neglected the relationship between gender equality and populism. In contrast, feminist research has argued for the centrality of gender issues in populist politics and has documented the effects populism has on gender relations, gender equality policies, and feminist politics (Dietze 2020; Kantola and Lombardo 2019; Caravantes 2019; Köttig et al 2017; Mayer and Sauer 2017; Abi-Hassan 2017; Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Norocel 2013).

The aim of this symposium is to scrutinize one crucial topic in relation to gender and populism, namely the relationship between feminist politics and right and left-wing populist parties in Europe. The key questions launched in the symposium are: What is the relationship between populism and feminist politics? How is feminist politics articulated in left and right-wing populist parties? What are the differences for feminist politics between left and right-wing populist parties?

Both populism and feminist politics are contested concepts. Contributions in this symposium consequently adopt a multiplicity of understandings. Populism can be defined with reference to Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira's (2013: 151) 'minimal definition', where populism is argued to be a 'thin ideology' that comprises three features: attacking 'the elite'; defending the interests of 'the common people'; and proclaiming 'popular sovereignty as the only legitimate source of political power'. Populism has also been defined through discursive approaches that show how the (empty) signifier of 'populism' is filled with a variety of contents, as in Ruth Wodak's (2015) analysis of the rhetoric of radical right populist leaders. Jonathan Dean and Bice Maiguascha (2020) similarly suggest we examine 'populism' as a signifier focusing on the politics of using the label 'populist'. Second, they argue for analysing the affective relationship between leaders and the people and its connection to the epistemic injustice, whereby ordinary people have felt themselves to be voiceless. Populism presents some specific analytical problems for feminist scholars. These relate to the ways in which, first, mainstream academic scholarship focus on 'the people' and 'the elites' in essentialist and homogenising ways that are unable to conceptualise gendered and racialised structures of power within them (Maiguascha 2019). This same tendency is of course found in populist discourse (Sawer 2020). Cognisant of such analytical challenges, we deem it important to employ the concept of populism both to study the phenomenon empirically and to engage with mainstream scholarly debates to show what gender approaches contribute to such debates.

Feminist politics can be defined in many different ways too. In this symposium, contributors variously understand it as actions aimed at transforming unequal gendered power relations, norms and practices (Ferree 2006) and at achieving equality and social justice through the politicization of gender issues and the empowerment of women. Politicization refers to the role of feminist politics in ongoing political contestation around the meaning of gender, and its intersection with other inequalities. This contestation allows for the expression of a multiplicity of claims about gender equality and the

inclusion of new issues in the political agenda. Such contestation plays a critical role in democratizing the public sphere: it allows the empowerment of marginalised actors and increases the probability of moving the content of policies towards gender equality. The empowerment of women refers to being present and active in decision-making processes and having women's demands recognized as legitimate.

Articles in this symposium empirically investigate the relationship between feminist politics and populism and analyse the place of feminist politics within populist parties, the descriptive and substantive representation of women, and the parties' gendered discourses and practices. The symposium makes two main contributions. The first is to include articles on both left and right populism to provide a more holistic picture of their impact on feminist politics. Anna Gwiazda's article 'Right-wing populism and feminist politics: The case of Law and Justice in Poland' explores the relationship between right-wing populism and feminism in the case of Poland's PiS, a party that is critical of feminist politics and hostile to what it calls 'gender-ideology.' The article untangles the complexities of a right-wing populist party whose conservative ideology supports anti-feminist politics and simultaneously represents conservative women's claims.

Whilst right populism's detrimental impact on gender equality has been documented in feminist research, few studies exist on left populism's opportunities and challenges for feminist politics. Paloma Caravantes' article 'Tensions between populist and feminist politics: The case of the Spanish left populist party Podemos' addresses the interplay of left populist and feminist politics. It argues that, although left populism represented by the Spanish party Podemos is a better ally of feminist politics than right populism, central tenets of populism contradict the feminist project of political transformation. These include: oversimplification of the political field; exclusionary and homogenizing appeals to the people; masculine and personalistic logics of charismatic leaders; the

prioritization of electoral success over other forms of political transformation; and the tendency to reproduce a masculine political culture.

The second contribution of this symposium is to focus explicitly on political parties both at the national level and at the level of European Parliament. Neither levels have been adequately researched in political science. In this respect Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo's article 'Opposition strategies of right populists against gender equality in a polarized European Parliament' addresses the discursive strategies adopted by right populists in the European Parliament to oppose gender equality. In dialogue with scholarly debates on populisms and on gender and politics, it suggests to the former the need to dedicate attention to gender equality as a central component of populist ideologies, and to the latter the importance of considering a variety of strategies of radical right opposition to gender equality. It finds that radical right populist strategies are both direct and indirect; they result in polarizing debates on gender and make gender equality and feminist politics more contentious. Overall this symposium shows that by integrating gender approaches in the analysis of populist parties from different ideological positions and different levels of government, we attain a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of populism.

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