

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Masculinity and Sexuality in Populist Radical Right Leadership

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Abstract

Research shows that masculinity and sexuality are pivotal to the leadership and success of the populist radical right (PRR). In particular, normative conceptions of masculinity, as seen in gendered nationalism, have been argued to be important to the appeal of PRR parties. However, the supply side of this dynamic remains understudied. To fill this gap, this article uses critical discourse analysis to analyze the role of masculinity and sexuality in the self-positioning and envisioned hegemonies of the most successful Dutch PRR leaders: Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders, and Thierry Baudet. The Dutch case is particularly insightful as it presents a diverse array of PRR parties in one country context. We found crucial similarities and differences between the discourses of these leaders. Our findings suggest that masculinity and sexuality, while constitutive at the party level, are largely negotiable or nondefining for the larger party family. These findings problematize often-made identifications of PRR politics with a one-of-a-kind conservative ideology of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: gender; sexuality; populism; populist radical right; leadership; masculinity; hegemonic masculinity; radical right; populist radical right leadership

There is an increasing body of research on gender and sexuality in populist radical right (PRR) parties (Dietze and Roth 2020; Engeli 2020), showing that gender and sexuality have an important role in their ideologies (De Lange and Mügge 2015; Dudink 2017; Spierings 2020). Ideologically, PRR parties are often classified as (neo)conservative, although many of them support some sexual liberties (De Lange and Mügge 2015; Spierings and Zaslove 2015). Regarding the

performance of PRR leaders (Eatwell 2002; Sauer 2020), studies argue that masculinity is crucial to understanding the success of populist right-wing politicians. Deckman and Cassese (2021), for example, show that gendered nationalism, largely determined by beliefs about masculinity, is more significant in explaining voting for Donald Trump than voters' gender identities. Similarly, PRR charismatic leadership often relies on masculine traits (Meret 2015; Messner 2007), and PRR parties often equated with their leaders (Taggart 2004, 276). However, systematic analyses on the supply side from a masculinity perspective are rare. Our study addresses this gap by analyzing masculinity and sexuality in PRR leadership discourses.

Following Mudde's (2017, 29) ideational approach, we expect PRR leaders to construct a *vox populi*, juxtaposing "the pure people" with "the corrupt elite." Accordingly, we focus on whether and how their discursive constructions of masculinity and sexuality produce contrasts and overlaps between these contraposed groups. To provide such an understanding, we systematically apply critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk 2015), informed by Connell's (2005) constellation of masculinities. Theoretically, we integrate studies of masculinity and sexuality with an extant body of research on radical right-wing populism. Therefore, our contribution is to provide a requisite assessment of how masculinity and sexuality are essential in understanding these parties (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015; Spierings 2020). This also addresses the lack of critical perspectives on men and masculinities in politics (Bjarnegård and Murray 2018).

Empirically, we analyze the discourses of the three most successful contemporary Dutch PRR leaders: Pim Fortuyn (Lijst Pim Fortuyn), Geert Wilders (Partij Voor de Vrijheid) and Thierry Baudet (Forum voor Democratie). We also address what our findings imply for the PRR party family at large. The Netherlands can be considered a "crucial case" (cf. Gerring 2007) for its comparatively sexually inclusive politics (Hekma and Duyvendak 2011) and multiple successful PRR parties (De Lange and Mügge 2015), which shows there is space for a variety of seemingly different PRR leaders positioning themselves contemporarily as truly representative of the *vox populi*. These qualities of the Dutch case in particular allow for studying variations, boundaries, and shared characteristics of masculinity and sexuality in the discourse of PRR leadership at large, as well as the usefulness of the concept of hegemonic masculinity in studying the PRR. Altogether, this article asks, *When and how do masculinity and sexuality inform the construction of the vox populi in PRR leadership discourses, and how does this relate to populists' self-positioning as leaders?*

Our findings point to crucial variations in the role of masculinity and sexuality in PRR leadership. While PRR leaders' discourses all showcase a gendered nationalism, how this is constructed depends on their hegemonization of different types of masculinity and, accordingly, sexuality. Despite some crucial overlaps, specific forms of masculinity and sexuality thus turn out to be non-defining for the PRR party family's ideology, while being central to the discourse of individual PRR parties. The role of gender (and, specifically, masculinity) and sexuality in PRR ideology is thus more layered than is often suggested in the academic literature and public debates.

Masculinity and Sexuality in Politics

Masculinity Relationally Defined

Following Connell (2005, 76–81), we approach masculinities as a constellation in which masculinity is contrasted with femininity, but different masculinities are also seen to contrast with or reinforce each other.¹ From this starting point, we treat masculinity relationally: as taking on meaning in relation to both femininity and coexisting masculinities. As such, we also follow Sinha's (1999) argument that men need to be analytically delinked from masculinity. The meaning of masculinity is derived from the specific power relations that it is deployed to reproduce or contest in particular historical contexts. For Connell (2005, 77), *hegemonic* masculinity serves as "the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy," affirming and legitimizing existing inequalities in the gender order.

We apply this approach to study how PRR leaders assert themselves in terms of masculinity *and* how they construct a masculinity that they envision as hegemonic in their idealized society, focusing explicitly on detecting differences *and* similarities across these leaders. Similar to Schrock and Schwalbe's (2009) approach, we understand masculinity to be constructed through manhood (here, discursive) acts. In their work, they applied this to individual men, but we argue an acts-based approach is also significant to the study of masculinity in political culture because, referring back to Sinha (1999), masculinity is not about men *per se*, but about social relations in terms of how individuals seek to construct a hegemonic masculinity/sexuality.

Thus, Connell's constellation approach is informative in providing a structured explanation of this (relational) (self-)production of masculinity in tandem with the reproduction of power relations. Beyond contrasting masculinities, however, hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities can also be mutually reinforcing, which can be instrumental in constituting hegemonic power differences—and this is particularly relevant in light of our core question about differently constructed envisioned societies and self-positioning of leadership therein. Using this focus, we also minimize the drawback of focusing on masculinities relationally (i.e., overemphasizing difference) identified by Schrock and Schwalbe (2009). To ground our analysis—conscious of the problematic role of masculinity in this context—we provide a thick theoretical framework informed by contemporary studies on historical and current interpretations of masculinity in politics, the PRR specifically.

Masculinity and Sexuality Co-constituted

As stated, we focus not only on masculinity, but also on sexuality. Like masculinities, certain sexualities are marginalized in society while others are normalized/hegemonized (i.e., heteronormativity). Extending Connell's (2005) constellation approach, we similarly address sexuality as relationally defined. Like masculinities, sexualities are enacted and made socially relevant through (discursive) acts and are politically deployed, which again can reproduce or contest power relations.

(Political) masculinity and sexuality co-constitute each other (see Clark 2007; Vandello and Bosson 2013). Sexuality is informative in constructing and reinforcing (hegemonic) masculinity as well as instrumental in the effeminization of others (i.e., by questioning heterosexuality) to disqualify them from the political arena. Masculinity is elusive, and manhood is a precariously achieved status, implying that men constantly need to reaffirm and signify their masculinity, often through (cis-hetero)sexuality (Vandello and Bosson 2013).

Masculinity and Sexuality as Political Discourse

Given of the centrality of masculinity in society, it has important political implications—and PRR politics has a particular proclivity for problematic constructions of masculinity. Yet precisely this *construction* by PRR leadership remains understudied. In this analysis, we look at PRR leaders' own discourses to extrapolate their envisioned gender/sexuality hegemonies, thus providing a more robust assessment of the centrality or marginality of masculinity and sexuality in the visions these leaders have for their society.

As noted earlier, we consider masculinity and sexuality to be relational components of the gender order, and thus phenomena that political actors must engage with. Although this understanding is implicitly shared in much of the literature on gender and sexuality in the PRR, studies often study singular parts of this gender order, such as the role of women and female leaders (Meret, Siim, and Pingaud 2017; Snipes and Mudde 2020), gender differences in PRR votes (Campbell and Erzeel 2018; Coffé 2019), or migration policies (Akkerman 2005; Morgan 2017). Our study, in contrast, uses a broader approach and starts from PRR discourse in general. The meaning of masculinity and sexuality in this discourse is theorized but not assumed, and we study when and how they appear.

Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally exalted form of masculinity in such a constellation of masculinities and exists, at least analytically, on a national level. Political leaders must therefore relate to it, implicitly or explicitly, and construct an envisioned hegemonic masculinity, whether comparable or vastly different, for their idealized society. Logically, we should thus find that PRR leaders discursively contrast their envisioned hegemonies with characteristics of ruling political elites and the current gender order. Similarly, they signify their own masculinity and sexuality. These might embody the hegemonic masculinity and sexuality of the *vox populi* they construct, or differ from it, forming a specific constellation. Analyzing such discursive constructions adds to the understanding of masculinity and sexuality in PRR politics and leadership, and thus the “supply side” of the appeal of these parties.

Masculinity and Sexuality and the PRR

Conscious of the problematic role of masculinity in this context, this section provides an overview of contemporary insights on the PRR specifically in this regard. This overview presents specific constructions of masculinity and sexuality in the PRR found in contemporary studies, which we were particularly attentive to in our initial analysis.

First, masculinity has been consistently linked to nativism in PRR parties (Mudde 2017). They present masculinity as a shield against “foreign” identities and ideologies that are either over- or undermasculinized to cast them as outsiders to nation and nationality (Bracke 2012; Nagel 1998). Based on nostalgic and idealized versions of national history (Schleusener 2020), a desired gender order is culturally and ethnically demarcated (Baiocchi 2020; Sauer 2020), and hegemonic masculinity follows from the construction of the nation as a (White) male-dominated space with clear gender norms (Ralph-Morrow 2022). In this context, masculinity takes on meaning relationally to ethnicity and race.

Further, this gender order is often portrayed as natural, and as currently under attack. This has been referred to as “masculinist logic,” which entails imagining “the nation as vulnerable and in need of (strong male) protection” (Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020, 440). Societal problems are then the result of “modern” White men being forced to appease women and grant privileges to women and non-White men (Baiocchi 2020; Puar 2007). Feminism and de-masculinization are overtly demonized as responsible for the “destruction” of the [White] race, with the “natural order” being under attack (Ferber 2000). As Sauer (2020, 23) put it, right-wing populism is “a gendered movement, which fosters masculinist identity politics at the intersection of gender, class, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality.” Masculinist logic, then, is a specific and exaggerated type of patriarchy that weaponizes masculinity and defines it to function as a shield for the nation.

Specifically, European PRR parties often display anti-Islam discourses, resembling those seen in some feminist and gay rights formulations, casting Islam as intolerant of their rights. This logic is often referred to as homonationalism (cf. Puar 2007), and it normally involves homonormativity: normalizing only the part of gender and sexual inclusivity that fits well in a heteronormative society (Duggan 2002; Norocel 2013, 68–69). This type of anti-Islam rhetoric is similar to “femonationalism” (Farris 2017; Spierings 2021), as both groups identify Islam as foreign and unfitting because of male or sexual oppression. Here, then, sexuality informs the construction of a particular type of masculinity.

While PRR parties thus sometimes articulate gender equality and LG(T) rights, some (sometimes the same) parties partake in global anti-gender movements (Korolczuk 2021; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). These movements include a plethora of anti-feminist, homophobic, heteronormative and gender-essentializing tropes and are mounting worldwide (Korolczuk 2021, 694–95). This phenomenon seems irreconcilable with the previous paragraph and yet both developments are clearly present simultaneously. A backlash against “feminism gone too far” and perceptions of too much sexual freedom, related to gender essentialism, gender traditionalism, and idealization of strong masculine authority as a corrective, might provide an understanding of these paradoxical positions (Connell 2005, xx; Ferber 2012, 69).

Finally, all PRR parties display anti-elitism. This is considered habitual to populism, which constructs the world as a Manichean contrast between intrinsically good people and corrupt elites that do not represent the *volonté générale*. The populist leader instead embodies or voices that general will, the *vox populi* (Mudde 2017). This “elite” encompasses political leaders, but it is opaque and

flexible: it can also, for example, include feminist elites (Meret, Siim, and Pingaud 2017) and intellectual and scientific elites (Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020). In the PRR, this is substantially gendered as well: the nuances inherent in academia are perceived as a lack of strength (i.e., masculinity) (e.g., Engeli 2020), and in contrast with nuanced and scientific attitudes to ontological insecurity, reactionary and masculinist responses take precedence (Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020). Such responses include name-calling, othering, and demasculinizing leftists, scientists, the media, mainstream politicians, and immigrants (e.g., Smith and Higgins 2020). Here, masculinity is clearly constructed in relation to femininity as stronger, more determined, and more audacious. Elites are effeminized and the PRR leaders' own masculinity is underscored and exaggerated.

Methodology

Approach and Coding

We follow Van Dijk's (2015) approach to critical discourse analysis. First, we created a coding schema informed by our research question and theoretical framework. We defined categories for our main topics: gender, masculinity, sexuality, leadership (current versus envisioned), and hegemony (current versus envisioned). Within these, we nested specific but nonetheless broad concepts from our theoretical framework about masculinity and sexuality in the PRR and the Dutch context (e.g., masculinist logic, homonationalism, gender traditionalism, and sexual modernity). Next, we added codes representing specific expectations about the ideology of these parties (e.g., anti-elitism, anti-immigration, nationalism, strong leadership, and defending Dutch identity). Moving through the data, the coding was done in a context-sensitive manner, assigning our codes to quasi sentences (cf. March 2017, 288).

Given our explorative approach, we sought to map out masculinities and sexualities for each leader as they became apparent from confronting the data with our theoretical framework. While coding, we used a reciprocal design: we updated and restructured the coding schema continually, accommodating and systematically connecting (new) codes and findings. Specifically, we updated or split up codes, and added more precise subcodes, to better represent the contextual dimensions of the statements. For example, when we first encountered an argument about Islam representing a threat to homosexuality, vilifying Muslim men especially, we added a subcode "Islam threatens homosexuality" to "sexual modernity," and "overmasculinizing Muslim/immigrant men" to "masculinist logic." We also added codes for assertions or features we encountered in the leaders' discourse that seemed relevant to their visions for society or their leadership, again nested under the initial categories. For example, "essentializing roles" (under "gender"), "mansplaining" (under "masculinity"), and "social cohesion" (under "hegemony (envisioned)"). Supplement A shows the final coding schema with counts per leader. This approach allowed us to assess the role of masculinity and sexuality in their leadership, and how they constructed, both explicitly and implicitly, national (and elite) hegemonic masculinities and sexualities, as well as their envisioned alternatives.

Sources

Formative events for the career and leadership of the three politicians under study were first identified from secondary literature (see Supplement B). This event-driven selection of sources is integrated with a baseline of other primary sources covering the political career of each leader. Direct analysis was conducted exclusively using readily available primary sources, as our focus is how these leaders position themselves publicly. Sources were thus also selected based on their prominence in public view (i.e., referenced in news media and biographies) as well as their societal importance (i.e., major television debates). We contextualize these findings by reference to secondary sources, as our critical discourse analysis methodology requires. The data set consists of interviews, primary authored books, blog posts, columns, tweets, speeches, and debate contributions. For a full list of over 600 sources and more than 2,000 tweets assessed, see Supplement C. Since availability and popularity of different media shifted over time, the relative inclusion of different media varies for each political leader. For each, we sought to include a comprehensive sample across the available material. Using this approach, we reached saturation of possible variety in the selected time periods for each leader, finally arriving at a coding scheme that remained consistent as we analyzed more data.

Case Studies

Our findings are first summarized in three case studies. Thereafter, we present a systematic comparison. Primary sources are referenced as (S_x), where *x* refers to the first column in Supplement C.

Pim Fortuyn

Before his political career, the openly gay Pim Fortuyn (1948–2002) was a sociology professor at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. He was also a public intellectual, writing books and columns and appearing on national talk shows. Until 1989, he was involved with the labor party (PvdA, Partij voor de Arbeid/Labor Party) and later became member of the liberal-conservative party (VVD, Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie/Party for Freedom and Democracy). In 2001, a new national party, LN (Leefbaar Nederland/Livable Netherlands), asked Fortuyn to be their leader. He was criticized for his controversial statements about Islam but helped the new party gain support in polling. After internal disagreements over his anti-Islam rhetoric, he was ousted from the party. He then formed the LPF (Lijst Pim Fortuyn/List Pim Fortuyn) and continued his bid for the May 2002 elections. Nine days before the elections, Fortuyn was assassinated. His party would go on to become the second-biggest party, with most of those votes cast for Fortuyn.

Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemonic Masculinity

Fortuyn identified the Dutch political system as “patriarchy” on the way out (S₂). “Rule by stale old men,” he argued, was (and should be) making way for an extension of what he referred to as Dutch (sometimes European) “modernity” (S₄). Especially women and gay men would occupy a more central role in politics

and society. Modernity, for Fortuyn, encompassed secularism, individual responsibility, emancipation, and sexual liberty (S4). Through centuries of “maturation,” he asserted, the Netherlands separated church and state and became a “beacon of light” for other nations (S2). Pivotal for Fortuyn, normalization of nonheterosexual relations enabled individual emancipation, divorced from old “tribal” affiliations with church and family. Further, the sexual revolution had “separated sex from having children, ... undermining the reproduction of traditional social structures” (S4). In his vision, popular modernity contrasted with the existing (elite) hegemonic masculinity that still had patriarchal tendencies, and he instead called explicitly for a complete and unapologetic political embrace of modernity: normalizing marginalized, more empathetic, nonheterosexual and nonpatriarchal masculinities. While traditional family values are often invoked by PRR parties, this was not central for Fortuyn.

Fortuyn did, however, articulate a concern for social cohesion, which he deemed necessary for society and the nation, claiming that authoritative structures like church and family no longer served this purpose. In his view, this cohesion necessitated nationally shared customs, norms, and values. In a column titled “The Orphaned Society” (S10), he argued that social cohesion is under duress from immigration and the current political order. His envisioned modernity was incompatible with religion and “foreign” cultures, especially Islam, which he considered “backwards” (S2, S161). He called for vigilance against the oppression and harassment of women and gay men—which, he argued, was perpetrated historically by Dutch men, but contemporarily only by (orthodox) Christians and Muslims—and he hypermasculinized the latter as predatory and un-Dutch. Consequently, he wanted Dutch borders closed, and he proposed forced emancipatory schooling for “non-original Dutch communities,” who should also “no longer be allowed to import foreign brides” (S2). Additionally, Fortuyn was in favor of conscription for 18-year-old boys and girls. Besides military conscription, he proposed a social service program in which self-regulating, mixed (gender, class, race, and ethnicity) youth units would learn to work together to serve local communities (S2). More broadly, Fortuyn argued for state-led emancipatory education, enforcing shared social norms to facilitate social cohesion.

Although Fortuyn consistently pronounced his support for gender equality and supported applying state power to enforce modernity, he was against affirmative action. He alleged that, already, too many women were in top positions only because of their gender (S15, S59). On more than one occasion, he also invoked traditional stereotypes and used women-unfriendly slurs to describe women he disagreed with, like “old hag” (S4) and “go home and cook” (S169). Despite his strong pro-emancipatory discourse, this rhetoric resembles the “feminism gone too far” assertions of contemporary anti-gender movements that normalize stereotyped gender preferences (i.e., women simply like to cook), while simultaneously normalizing the idea that most men do not have to change for emancipation to proceed. This stance also resembles homonormativity, because it normalizes traditional gender roles in heterosexual relationships and sets comparable expectations for nonheterosexual couples. For Fortuyn,

in our analysis, essentialized gender roles may thus require that women (with children) nonetheless turn over leadership to men—who “more often prefer such a role and are therefore often better at it” (S112).

Leadership and the Political Arena

Fortuyn presented himself in a somewhat messianic fashion, as he regarded his ideas as unique and his political leadership as essential. He portrayed himself as an intellectual who could put things (back) in order. In so doing, he positioned himself as the savior of the nation: the archetypical charismatic PRR leader defending the people against elites and foreign enemies. However, he resisted being called a “strongman,” along with any association with authoritarianism or the extreme right (S112). Instead, he insisted that his aim was to break the paternal rule of elitist career politicians and (re)introduce “real democracy” (S4). Fortuyn acknowledged that the Dutch consensus-based democracy necessitates compromise (S157). His critique, however, was that heated debate is often mistaken for a quarrel in Dutch politics, while to him, passion represented dedication. Fortuyn instead explicitly embodied his politics, which he contrasted with the bureaucratic detached political style of other Dutch political leaders. He strategically applied his identity, rooted in marginalized masculinity, to call for a change in leadership: he sought to replace the “old” patriarchy of church and state with more empathetic (gay) masculine leadership. His campaign slogan, “at your service,” often accompanied by a military-like salute, serves as an example here. The phrase represents a strong but attentive and submissive attitude to voters, and the salutary gesture was a campy reference to military service (S169).

Fortuyn was very open about his upbringing and identity. In the LPF’s 2001 highly autobiographic party program, he writes about strong male figures in school and church—often intertwined in his Catholic upbringing—who were “both father and mother” to him and his friends, and whose authority (sometimes physically violent) he considered necessary (S4). He explains how he looked up to these male figures and wanted to follow their example. In his childhood and adolescence, female interruptions were unwanted, like that of a psychologist “hag [who] came to test us” (S4). (Male) authority and masculinity were thus pivotal for Fortuyn’s development as a political leader—which he embraced in his policies as a promise that a charismatic leader (whom he himself embodied) could similarly provide stability and confidence to subordinated (nonelite) masculinities.

In conclusion, Fortuyn’s alternative to paternal rule by the old boys’ network was an embodied politics of modernity for which he was the perfect candidate. He sought to mainstream (but not hegemonize) a traditionally subordinated nonheteronormative masculinity that he considered to be pivotal to modernity. He explicitly criticized the patriarchal nature of society and wanted to infuse hegemonic masculinity with the qualities of more empathetic masculinities. He explicitly positioned himself still as a sexual outsider—thus at least partially, and strategically, affirming the subordination of his sexuality and masculinity in the gender, and the political, order. In his view, the Dutch *volonté générale* already

encompassed a liberal notion of gender/sexual equality, but political elites lagged behind, and foreign identities posed a threat.

Fortuyn's ideological narrative thus resembles the masculinist logic ("the nation under threat") found in academic literature on the PRR, projecting fear and the need for protection and strong leadership. While this masculinist logic is often presented in literature as violent strongman rhetoric, Fortuyn contrasted the hypermasculinized threat of foreign bodies with his idea of emancipatory modernity. Although his solution of closing borders can be seen as a strongman policy, he discursively framed his proposals as a defense of social cohesion, to be protected by a less masculinist, less heteronormative, leadership. His own position is that of an exemplary leader who represents his followers, but also combines the qualities of a strong and decisive visionary with a marginalized sexual identity. He positioned himself as an outsider to the political elite in terms of gender and sexuality: more empathetic than straight men, but more decisive (and hardened) than women. Through allusions to his sexuality, he articulated his unique qualifications.

Geert Wilders

Geert Wilders (1963–) leads the PVV (Partij Voor de Vrijheid/Party for Freedom). He started his political career with the liberal-conservative party (VVD) as a city council member (1997) and member of parliament (1998). Wilders left the VVD after internal disagreements (2004), among which was a dispute over the party's (to him) weak stance on the alleged Islamization of the Netherlands. Although initially critical of Fortuyn's "too extreme" stance on Islam (Fennema 2011, 55), Wilders exerts a similar and increasingly radical anti-Islam discourse. He has received multiple death threats and has had a permanent security detail since 2002. In 2010–12, his party backed a right-wing minority government.

Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemonic Masculinity

Central to Wilders's envisioned hegemony is an archetypal Dutch couple he constructed to exemplify his politics. "Henk and Ingrid" own a modest home in the suburbs, have children, work for a living, and aspire to live their lives without much hassle. He centers this "typical Dutch couple" as the proper object of politics and argues that "they are humiliated and cast aside" by political elites (S467). Although Wilders does not seek to question or diminish the rights of same-sex couples through this fictitious couple, their centrality in his political discourse reveals a heteronormative image in his envisioned hegemony. A nonheteronormative couple is absent from his discourse, although "they can also be blue or brown" (S329).

The biggest threat to Henk and Ingrid is Islamization, and the 2017 PVV program proclaimed that the PVV was for Henk and Ingrid and not "Ali and Fatima" (S363). Wilders argues that the Netherlands has a purpose: "being free, prosperous, and independent" (S179), referencing the Dutch golden age, which he contrasts with Islam. In this context, Wilders emphasizes "Judeo-Christian humanist culture" more than ethnocentrism, the latter of which is arguably less

acceptable to mainstream society. To him, this humanism includes “ideological achievements” like women’s emancipation and gay rights.² Wilders’ pro-emancipatory discourse appears at least partially substantive, but affirmative action is out of the question—that is, men do not need to change, and women and nonheterosexual men are tasked with their own emancipation. Further, Wilders’s conditional support for sexual inclusivity does not extend to gender fluidity and trans rights. Although he stated that “if people want to change genders, be my guest” (S279), he has called gender-inclusive policies such as nongendered bathrooms “crazy” (S522) and said that educating children about nonbinary identities amounts to a “woke totalitarian dictatorship” (S279). In our analysis, Wilders’s envisioned hegemonic (gender) order centers a hegemonic masculinity of the average man, whose averageness is contrasted with a presumed excess associated with transgender politics.

Crucially, Wilders uses both emancipatory and anti-emancipatory arguments in anti-immigrant discourse. He portrays Muslim men as habitually polygamous, which he sees as resulting in the oppressed position of Muslim women that he deems un-Dutch. This view informs his stance against chain migration, which, at the same time, hypermasculinizes immigrant men for wanting multiple wives. Wilders also refers to Muslims (and especially the Prophet Muhammad) as pedophiles, rapists, and (child) murderers (i.e., S442, S466, S481), while calling non-Muslims who defend Muslim rights *dhimmi*—a trope common in conspiracy theories that pit the “weak” West (men) against “strong and predatory” Muslim men.³ Thus, his envisioned hegemony represents a stronger masculinity, although not necessarily centering the patriarchal family, and not as hypermasculine as that which he assigns to “foreign” identities.

In contrast, Wilders has never criticized Christian parties or organizations for similarly discriminatory practices or views. In fact, Wilders has aligned the PVV with conservative Christian organizations that emphasize traditional family values and are often anti-abortion and homophobic.⁴ Wilders’s PVV also has ties with other European PRR parties that are highly conservative in terms of sexual inclusivity and gender equality rights like abortion. He does not invoke similar sentiments himself, but he also does not publicly distance himself from such positions—and conservative positions on gender and sexuality are clearly no dealbreaker for him in forming alliances. Wilders’s support for sexual inclusivity should thus be regarded, at least at times, as instrumental and not always substantive in his hegemonic vision for the Netherlands.

Leadership and the Political Arena

Wilders positions himself as a strong leader who can defend “Dutch values” against the threats posed by (Muslim) foreigners, leftists, and elites. Although he has a permanent security detail, he rarely makes use of it rhetorically to underpin his political positions. Rather than assume a victim role, as other PRR leaders have done, Wilders instead emphasizes his strength. He portrays the threats to his life as the result of “saying what most Dutch people think”—a burden he bears willingly to prevent others from undergoing the same (S309). In doing so, he implicitly and explicitly questions the strength and courage of other

political leaders and normalizes his own position as representing/protecting “regular Dutch people” (S462, S522).

In sharp contrast with the traditional Dutch member-based party, the PVV does not accept membership, which de facto makes Wilders the only PVV party member, and he resists (public) calls for democratization from other men in his party who have leadership aspirations. Rather than publicly demonizing them, however, Wilders reprimands them internally. Further, in response to public scandals involving high-placed PVV faction members, some of which concerned sexually promiscuity (in one case, allegedly taking place inside government buildings), Wilders publicly defended these party affiliates. In all cases, he sided with men who had wronged women, sometimes severely.

Wilders’ peroxide-white hairdo has been a topic of ridicule and attention in the national media, but this has rarely prompted any serious response by him. This matches his demeanor in debates, where he defends his often comparatively divergent political positions in an almost stoic manner, calmly and often sarcastically. This enacts a normative rationality, or “reason”—a masculine trait that he habitually employs as a defense of “normal” Dutch people, those “cast aside” by political elites (S467, S278)—and showcasing his proximity to Henk.

In conclusion, Wilders’s vision for the Netherlands in terms of sexuality and masculinity is varied. He asserts support for women’s emancipation and gay rights, but his hegemonic masculinity appears heteronormative, with some space for sexual inclusivity. Wilders’s position on gender/sexual inclusivity at times appears genuine, but it is present in his discourse predominantly when combating “Islamization.” Wilders seems to appreciate that sexual modernity is part of the Dutch hegemonic gender order, which he does not normally seek to contest, but his strategic alignment with European parties and organizations that are decidedly trans- and homophobic and anti-abortion shows these topics are not pivotal to his ideology. Henk’s masculinity obtains a hegemonic position in Wilders’s idealized society. This type of masculinity, we argue, resembles complicit masculinity (cf. Connell 2005) in the current gender order. Wilders seeks to displace (subordinate) the “weak” hegemonic (elite) masculinity, as he argues it is too far removed from the everyday male virtues embodied by Henk—and incapable of defending these.

Wilders positions himself as a regular guy, similar to Henk, but not quite the same because of Wilders’s unique strength in fighting against Islam despite threats to his life. He presents himself as stronger than others in society, yet at the same time fighting for and representing the men whose currently complicit masculinity would have hegemonic status in his ideal society.

Thierry Baudet

Thierry Baudet (1983) started his public career as an organizer and lecturer in academic-adjacent circles, focused on building an international, right-leaning conservative network. He had a brief academic career and wrote columns for a national Dutch newspaper (*NRC Handelsblad*). After leaving both positions, Baudet founded the Forum voor Democratie (FVD, Forum for Democracy) as an

anti-European Union (EU) think tank in 2015. Earlier, he swore never to become a politician—“too restrictive for changing the system” (S679)—but in 2016, FVD was recast as a political party under Baudet’s leadership. He often expressed admiration for Fortuyn, whose assassination reportedly shocked Baudet and shaped his politics (S790, S698).

Discourse, Ideology, and Hegemonic Masculinity

Baudet argues that supranational institutions and multiculturalism are debilitating for democratic nation-states (S523, S537), but arguments that immigrants are threatening sexual freedoms are infrequent to Baudet’s discourse. Baudet’s assertions of a need to “defend the nation” instead come more often from biopolitical arguments. He blames “weakening national identity” on the dissolution of “traditional” (European) families, declining “native” (White) birthrates, a waning Western (Christian) identity, and the “feminization” of Western men (S525, S577). He prefers that “White people remain dominant” in Europe. Further, he accuses left-wing progressives and, recently, conservative liberals of conspiring with foreigners to “dilute” European identities through immigration and marriage (S729).

In *Oikofobie* (published in 2013; S524; the title loosely translates as “repudiation of one’s own culture” in political contexts), Baudet argues that Dutch politics and media conspire to depict national history as something to be ashamed of. Baudet uses a skewed reading of Dutch history for his alternative envisioned hegemony, and he habitually invokes references to classical antiquity, selectively and out of context (S523). His imagined history is contingent upon a legacy of White male thinkers and conquerors whom he admires, as evidenced by a YouTube series (e.g., S717, S718). He theatrically displayed this admiration by laying flowers at a statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, figurehead of Dutch colonial history and slave trader, in response to Black Lives Matter protests (S790). His invocation of historical figures entails an idealization of particular family structures and normalizes a particular masculinity as desirable. These historical figures are portrayed in history books as strong men fighting for what they thought was right, with caring, supportive wives. This idealized traditionally gendered family facilitates the same masculinity that Baudet has publicly said to long for and that he considers under threat from feminism, individualism, and nonheteronormativity (S577, S525).

On occasion, Baudet has publicly supported gay rights (S645), but his discourse shows a discernible pattern of preferring “traditional families,” using a vocabulary that was previously exclusive to orthodox Christian parties in Dutch politics.⁵ FVD is also aligned with orthodox Christian groups. For example, FVD and the ultra-orthodox Christian SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij/Reformed Political Party) are the only two Dutch members of the European Conservatives and Reformists group, a conservative, anti-federalist party alliance in the European Parliament that lists “the importance of the family as the bedrock of society” as a founding principle.⁶ Moreover, Baudet uses gay slurs to demasculinize his political opponents and defends the right of Christian schools to fire teachers for being gay.⁷

In fictional and nonfictional work, Baudet brandishes fear of the feminization of masculinity, arguing that women “need” strong men. In his 2014 novel *Voorwaardelijke Liefde* (Conditional Love, S525), for example, protagonist Gregor detests feminism and the changing gender relations in Dutch society. Fictional Gregor is not Baudet, but with its many real-world citations, the novel clearly promotes a substantial critique of feminism and liberal sexuality, which aligns with Baudet’s nonfictional work. For example, in a review of Michel Houellebecq’s *Serotonin*, he writes that it “describes exactly the woes of feminism and weak masculinity in West-Europe” (S577), and he unprovokedly supported controversial “sex-guru” Julien Blanc, who argues that women need strong, coercive men and that “no” often means “yes” (S566). Lastly, Baudet habitually simplifies and essentializes gender differences. In 2017, for example, he contended that women are naturally more left-wing and empathetic, but “then they meet a man who explains how the world really works, and then they rationally become more realistic, more right-wing” (S687).⁸

Leadership and the Political Arena

Baudet started his parliamentary maiden speech in Latin (S585), and he still habitually uses this language, even after being repeatedly criticized for it. While Baudet presents himself as a champion of the people, his manner of speaking, full of historical and philosophical references, seems elitist. In debates and interviews, Baudet often invokes historical thinkers, abstracting from the discussion and subsequently arguing that what he is talking about is what is actually important. He refers to his colleagues in parliament as “simple people” and questions their resolve and mental capabilities (S687). Baudet thus projects his own intellect and influence to be beyond that of the “mundane politicians” who merely address the here and now. As such, in our analysis, he demasculinizes his interlocutors, questioning their reason and rationality.

Baudet detests humility, because “others... will already hold you back” (S38). Accordingly, he has described himself as a “French intellectual” (S696) and the most important Dutch thinker of his time (S746, S695). He also frequently “doubles down” when he misrepresents data or facts. For instance, he backs his denial of climate science using selective or questionable publications and taking scientific findings out of context, while strategically appealing to common sense or reason (“this is only logical”). When journalists exposed racist and misogynist remarks that he had made in private chats, he suggested that all journalists henceforth share all their private chats, insinuating that everyone shares unfortunate jokes in private settings (S795). In doing so, he also normalizes toxic discourses for his followers: he champions a strong, unapologetic, “rational” masculinity for himself and his followers, opposed to “weak” and submissive elites. For example, Baudet called a journalist “gay” for not wanting to shake hands during the COVID-19 pandemic, not only questioning science but also implying that “real men” question ordinances that are only for the “weak.”⁹

When critiqued, Baudet assumes a victim role for himself and his followers (“the real Dutch people”), switching from being intellectually superior to being “one of them.” He organizes rallies at which he complains about “unfair”

critiques of his party (S742, S743). At the same time, he positions himself as a savior, fighting for what used to be normal but has now been taken away by the elites. In FVD's periodical news journal on YouTube (an alternative to what Baudet calls the "fake news media"), Baudet is a news anchor, often effectively interviewing himself, further solidifying his image as the architect and exemplary arbiter of a society that favors "real Dutch people." He embodies "what used to be normal": a heteronormative society of White families with closed borders, where men can unapologetically do what they want.

In conclusion, Baudet's discourse exposes a biological essentialism in terms of gender and sexuality. His overt fear of the feminization of masculinity particularly stands out; he considers the EU and Dutch elites to be the culprits of this feminization, which poses a threat to the nation. He positions himself as a unique genius with all the answers, who is also a "regular Joe" in terms of wants and desires in daily relations. His nostalgic representation of history encompasses both politics and positionality, as he seeks to represent a "return" to a political history selectively constructed from the national past.

Comparative Analysis

Comparing the findings in the case studies, we assess the differences and similarities in the discourses of these three Dutch PRR leaders. We first analyze their envisioned hegemonic masculinity and sexuality, after which we address their positions as leaders.

Envisioned Hegemonic Masculinities

How Fortuyn, Wilders, and Baudet evaluate current Dutch hegemonic masculinity and what their alternative envisioned hegemony entails show crucial overlaps, which, at least in our sample, appear non-negotiable or pivotal to their PRR ideology. All three leaders explicitly contrast Dutch identity with foreign identities, which they present as a threat to the nation. They do so using discourses involving both masculinity and sexuality. Immigrant men are hypermasculinized as predatory, unemancipated, and barbaric, and they are contrasted with "more civilized" European or Dutch men. Immigrants are also portrayed as un-Dutch, especially in terms of their stance toward women and nonheterosexual men (the latter less common/explicit for Baudet). Their envisioned society is one in which (their) masculinity serves as a shield against the threat of immigration, and they homogenize Dutch masculinity as a modern or empathetic masculinity (whether genuine or not).

Put in terms of our analytical framework, all three leaders respond to this construct of a nation under threat by contrasting their envisioned hegemonic masculinity with that of the political elite, which they portray as inadequate to address the perceived threat of foreign hypermasculinity. They explicitly address the importance of national identity or cohesion, which is informed by their ideas about hegemonic masculinity and sexuality (i.e., gendered nationalism). To them, protecting (and enforcing) a hegemonic national gender order and hegemonic sexuality also serves as a measure of Dutchness. Interestingly,

however, this is also where the role of sexuality and masculinity in their discourses begins to diverge.

Fortuyn hypermasculinized both foreign identities *and elites*, whereby the latter are cast as being too detached, calculating, and bureaucratic, as well as invested in “upholding patriarchy.” He projected his own more feminized masculinity as a modern alternative better representing, in his vision, existing modern Dutch hegemonic masculinity. Wilders similarly hypermasculinizes and hypersexualizes foreign identities to cast them as un-Dutch, but he demasculinizes current leadership as weak. He represents a more traditional masculinity in terms of acting stronger against foreign threats and (re)normalizing gender binaries.¹⁰ Baudet’s allegations of weakness in elite hegemonic masculinity instead stem from his anti-feminism and include instances of homophobia. More so than Wilders and Fortuyn, Baudet rails explicitly against the de-masculinization of society and the political elite who, in his view, have succumbed to feminism and nonheteronormativity. His anti-immigration rhetoric is much more ethnocentric and biopolitical, invoking “dilution” of the (Whiteness of the) Dutch people.

Their discourses diverge further when it comes to the hegemonization of particular constructs of masculinity and sexuality. Baudet overtly defends and idolizes strong (White) men, both in national history and in the bedroom (where women “like” to be oppressed). The hegemonic masculinity that Baudet envisions shows biological essentialism, both in politics and in traditional families, which we did not find for the other two leaders, and his ties with orthodox Christian groups are more substantive than Wilders’s. Similarly, anti-empiricatory sentiments are overtly present in his discourse, while rare and often opaque in Wilders’s. Wilders’s prototypical heterosexual Dutch man, Henk, is tolerant of certain nonheterosexual identities. Moreover, Wilders and Baudet frame advances in sexual inclusivity as feminist (or “woke”) projects whenever they consider them gone too far, but Wilders is again more accepting of sexual inclusivity than Baudet. Fortuyn instead criticized the political elite for marginalizing nonheterosexual masculinity, arguing that society had already progressed beyond this, and elites did thus not represent the *vox populi* adequately.

In conclusion, for all three, masculinity and sexuality are interwoven into their populist and nationalist discourses. There is overlap insofar as elite hegemonic masculinity is presented as inadequate, and their envisioned masculinity serves as a corrective. The substance of these claims, however, differs by leader. For Baudet, hegemonic masculinity is a heroic masculinity steeped in historical achievements, in which men can be men again. For Fortuyn and Wilders, hegemonic masculinity revolves around hetero- (or homo-) normative family life but not necessarily conquest or domination. Fortuyn’s vision is also more liberal in terms of male sexuality. Fortuyn’s modernity in fact makes sexual freedom pivotal (though still societally marginal) to his envisioned post-patriarchal hegemony. Although Wilders rhetorically represents similar policies, they seem more instrumental as they are most often stated as reactionary statements in the context of immigration debates. For Baudet, despite his admiration for Fortuyn, Dutch sexuality is decidedly heteronormative and masculinist, and he at times uses homophobic discourse.

Leadership

We also found both crucial similarities and significant differences in how the three political leaders position themselves as leaders, in terms of sexuality and masculinity. First, all three leaders position themselves as strong leaders able to defend the nation against threats, foreign (immigrants, Muslims) and domestic (political elites, media), but how they do this varies in terms of masculinity and sexuality. Fortuyn's leadership represented a marginalized masculinity and sexuality crucially positioned at the crux of leadership. Wilders's leadership instead represents modern, but still masculinist heteronormativity. Baudet's leadership is more traditionally masculinist: he explicitly positions himself as the successor of historical White male leaders and embodies a sometimes homophobic, conservative masculinity.

Accordingly, their relation to their envisioned hegemony also varies. Wilders is the closest to his envisioned hegemony, and only his willingness to lead in the face of death threats sets him apart from Henk. Baudet is difficult to pinpoint as he changes his self-image depending on context. He often explicitly identifies himself with his voters, certainly, in terms of "us versus the elites," but his self-professed unique genius and grandeur are at odds with this assessment. Contrastingly, Fortuyn consistently positioned himself in terms of his (sexually) marginalized identity, which he considered crucial for his unique qualifications as leader. He also embraced his academic and intellectual achievements, but not as superciliously as Baudet.

Finally, all three leaders construct masculinity as preferential for leadership, but in different terms. Least overtly, Wilders, through his hegemonization of traditionally complicit masculinity, represents a normalization of common sense (i.e., regular Joe masculinity) as naturally suited for leadership, contrasting his own "normal" and "logical" policy positions with elitist ("woke") policies that he calls "sick," "crazy," or "outlandish." Baudet and Fortuyn more overtly employ masculinity to position their natural suitability for political leadership, showing self-messianism. Fortuyn embraced impassioned politics as an alternative to technocratic rule by the "stale old men" with whom he contrasted himself, and he envisioned himself representing a *populus* that was already more modern than their current leadership. His gay identity was both genuine and instrumental in asserting a more feminine touch, as he often equated gay leadership with female leadership as the modern successor to historically hegemonic straight male leadership. Nevertheless, he invoked his own masculinity to position himself as more viable for political office than women, who are "just less interested" in such positions. Baudet's messianism instead relies on masculinist boastful self-positioning, overarticulating his own achievements and refusing to apologize or correct mistakes. He presents anti-emancipatory discourse as empathy and understanding, while his increasingly scarce pro-emancipatory discourse strategically serves to instrumentalize a victim role for his—and his followers'—masculinity.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our main question was, *When and how do masculinity and sexuality inform the construction of the vox populi in PRR leadership discourses, and how does this relate to*

populists' self-positioning as leaders? We found that all three leaders explicitly contrast their visions with those of existing political elites, and they explicitly question the current gender/sexuality order, confirming the pivotal nature of these topics for PRR parties. Various concepts deemed central to PRR ideology in academic literature are interwoven with gender and sexuality in these cases, both in their nativist/nationalist anti-immigration discourse and their anti-elite discourse. Our analysis also shows that, similarly, masculinity and sexuality are pivotal in untangling how these leaders contrast or identify their leadership with both their envisioned hegemonies and other political actors. Their self-positioning as uniquely qualified leaders in fact appears to partly rely specifically on gendered and sexualized constructs of politics, the nation, other political elites, and themselves.

However, the way that masculinity and sexuality are present in their discourses differs significantly among the leaders we studied. Beyond similarly using masculinist logic (nation in need of protection), masculinity and sexuality thus turn out to be nondefining for PRR ideology at the party-family level, but crucial for the ideologies of individual PRR parties. In terms of the ideological padding that furnishes populist thin ideology, next to the radical right padding (cf. Mudde 2017), masculinity and sexuality are crucial complements in each party individually. Yet, they are largely disparate and thus nonconstitutive at the level of cross-party comparison, at least in the Dutch context. The ideological vacuum of populist thin ideology thus extends to gender and sexuality: these themes (crucially) furnish the party programs beyond their core ideologies—and can thus differ by party (cf. Spierings 2020). This observation deviates from the commonly assumed overlap of radical right ideology and conservative positions on gender, masculinity, and sexuality for PRR parties (e.g. Abi-Hassan 2017; Akkerman 2015). In fact, in our analysis, we only found explicit concerns with the alleged feminization of masculinity in Baudet's discourse, and not the other two.

Methodologically and substantively, this study also showcases the power of critical analysis identifying various masculinities, like those proposed by Connell (2005), as a lens to analyze (political) discourses. We show that this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of gender and sexuality's role within PRR politics—especially when conscientious about both differences and overlaps between masculinities. For example, Fortuyn's hypermasculinization of political elites projects them as old-fashioned and patriarchal, which is a type of hypermasculinization that is not often picked up on but may turn up in other PRR parties. Moreover, we shed light on the paradox of finding both anti-gender sentiments and pro-emancipatory anti-immigrant statements in the PRR at the party-family level (Connell 2005, xx; Ferber 2012, 69). Our comparative critical discourse analysis approach shows that anti-immigrant sentiments based on pro-emancipatory arguments may be more common in those parties that show less (or narrower) overt anti-gender discourses and, relatedly, less biological (ethno-)essentialism—explaining why both turn up at the party level.

In the broader debate about masculinity and populism, our study adds important knowledge about supply-side dynamics. For example, charismatic

leadership in PRR parties has often been connected to specifically masculine traits, but we show that which traits are important depends on how masculinity and sexuality are hegemonized differently in PRR discourses, even within one country. Future studies may link this variation in discourses to dominant societal discourses and see if this helps explain the success of the PRR and different parties therein. Moreover, our approach can be extrapolated to party politics broadly, to understand how other parties' construction of gender and sexuality interact with the PRR and how similarities and differences impact support.

Finally, our focus on the Dutch case carries the possibility of a specific construction of (hegemonic) masculinity and sexuality, especially regarding "Islamization" and sexual inclusivity. Similar studies across contexts could provide further understanding of masculinity and sexuality in PRR discourse. At the same time, given the different nature of the three parties and leaders, the gender nationalism and hypermasculinization of foreigners we found for all three provide strong evidence that this is central to PRR parties' discourse broadly. Our comparison also underlines that gender, masculinity, and sexuality are central to the PRR parties' envisioned *vox populi*, but there is no evident common ideology regarding the gender order within the party family. It is more a vehicle or trope than an ideology (cf. Spierings 2020), which is also consistent with how gender and sexuality are contextually constructed but also central to daily life across countries.

Supplementary Materials. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000265>.

Notes

1. We expect PRR leaders to assume that gender is binary; therefore, we operationalize it as such.
2. The PVV introduced pro-emancipatory legislation, too (e.g., gay military personnel's right to participate in prides; S16).
3. *Dhimmi* is translated as "protected person" and refers historically to certain protected non-Muslims living in Islamic states.
4. Edmund Burke Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Heritage Foundation (Rietveld 2021).
5. Secondary source (Rietveld 2021).
6. Secondary sources (Botje and Cohen 2020; Rietveld 2021).
7. Secondary source (Botje and Cohen 2020).
8. He complicates this by sometimes feigning a more feminized role, but the tendency to essentialize biological differences remains throughout.
9. Secondary source (NU.nl/ANP 2021).
10. Gender fluidity was not politicized in Fortuyn's historical window.

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