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Women's engagement with the far right: A quest for a more holistic understanding

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Abstract

The idea that women do not support the far right endures despite the contemporary resurgence and global electoral successes of the far right in its many guises. The aim of this article is to critically interrogate four dominant assumptions surrounding women's alleged lack of support for the far right and unpack whether they 'tell' researchers anything new about this support or merely consolidate existing blind spots in the scholarly literature on the topic. The article makes the case that for researchers to understand women's far-right support, they must take a more holistic approach to the topic of gender and political behaviour, and pay closer attention not only to the socio-cultural, historical, and political factors which underpin far-right support in this context, but the different ways in which some women 'do' politics in order to make their voices heard.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The far right has emerged from the fringes of the political mainstream over the past 15 years and secured electoral success in countries across Europe and beyond, including the United States, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, and Germany. Reality TV star Donald Trump won the 2016 US presidential election on a wave of reactionary rhetoric which disproportionately targeted Muslims, Mexicans, and women; Viktor Orbán's Fidesz returned to power in Hungary in 2010; Poland's Law and Justice party held a parliamentary majority until 2023; the Sweden Democrats now directly influence government policy for the first time as part of a coalition government; and in 2017, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) won over 90 seats in the German federal parliament, the first time

since World War Two that a far-right party has crossed the 5% threshold of votes needed to secure representation.

The success of far-right parties and candidates such as these has led academic and media commentators to speculate about what it means to be a political subject in an era of global political partisanship, as well as the factors underpinning individuals' far-right support. It also encouraged commentators to reassess long-held assumptions about gender and political behaviour, particularly the idea that women are less likely to vote for the far right. In fact, women appear to support the far right in larger numbers than first thought and have been instrumental to their global electoral successes. 42% of American women, for example, voted for Donald Trump in 2016 (BBC, 2016). Alongside far-right electoral support, the visibility of its high-profile female members such as Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy), Alice Weidel (AfD), and Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National), demonstrates that there is a place for women at what has traditionally been an overwhelmingly male table, or as Mudde (2007) terms it, *Männerparteien* (men's parties).

This article investigates the idea that women do not support the far right. It unpacks four dominant scholarly assumptions in this regard, that is, that women's alleged socio-economic stability, feminism, innate lack of interest in politics, and religiosity leaves them 'immune' to the far right (Barisione & Mayer, 2013, pp. 3–5; Bows, 2018, pp. 171–173). It explores whether these four assumptions help or hinder attempts to understand how, why, and when women come to identify with the far right. It makes the case that scholars' reliance on these assumptions reveals very little about the micro-politics of everyday life or the diverse ways in which women in fact 'do' politics. The article takes a holistic approach in that it examines the 'whole' picture of women's lives and experiences, rather than just its isolated component parts, that is, their vote at the ballot box on polling day. This approach is informed by the practice of feminist reflexivity and committed to 'engaging in new kinds of dialogue [and] producing transformative knowledge' which critically interrogates not only normative boundaries of social inquiry, but recognises the complex intersections of personal biography, history, politics, and culture (Harding, 1991, 1993, p. 57; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2014, p. 560). Such an approach enables researchers to ask new questions about what Fielding (1981, p. 1) terms the 'perennial' issue of subject motivation, as well as challenges the enduring status quo of so-called objective methodological approaches to human behaviour. With all this in mind, taking a holistic approach to ideas surrounding gender and participation ensures that future researchers will be better equipped to identify and unpack the contextual factors which underpin women's far-right support, as well as the role of gender itself.

2 | TERMINOLOGY

While there is no consensus among researchers regarding the typologies and terminologies which loosely guide the field, it is nonetheless necessary to explore them here. Broadly speaking, 'far right' is an umbrella term used to describe a range of political ideologies which fall to the right of mainstream politics. This, according to Miller-Idriss (2020, pp. 15, 16), is 'the best bad term' academics have in their toolkits; there is 'no single term currently in use [which] captures the broad range of ideologies, frameworks, and actions espoused by the far right in one phrase'. Academics can agree, however, that 'far right' incorporates two distinct groups under its umbrella: the radical and extreme right (Mudde, 2018; Pirro, 2022; Rydgren, 2018). As Lamour (2022, p. 8) points out, these different 'currents' can be liberal, that is, operate within the democratic norms of a given country in the case of the radical right, or err towards nativism and authoritarianism in the case of the extreme right. It can be difficult to make concrete distinctions between the two, given their associations with one another (Rydgren, 2018, pp. 2, 3). A pertinent example of this relates to a now-defunct nationalistic faction within the AfD called Der Flügel (The Wing) whose activities and association with right-wing extremists raised concerns about its 'compliance' to Germany's democratic principles (Pirro, 2022, p. 8). As discussion will outline, epistemological waters are further muddied when the populist agendas of far-right parties are considered.

Despite conceptual ambiguity, distinctions are important as they give researchers a framework by which to assess the ideologies and activities of the far right. Adding to the confusion, however, is the idea that parties 'may decide to recycle [themselves] as something totally new, something which goes beyond the traditional [distinctions]' of left or right (Bobbio, 1996, p. viii). In a canonical work, for example, von Beyme (1988 cited in Mudde, 2019, pp. 12–20) conceptualised the ebb and flow of post-WWII populist activism as three distinct 'waves': the period between 1945 and 1955 is characterised by 'neofascism,' 1955–1980 by 'right-wing populism,' and 1980–2000 by 'the radical right'. A potential fourth wave is heralded by the events of 9/11, the 2008 global financial crisis, and the ongoing Syrian civil war (Ibid., p. 20). Resultantly, the far right today can also be populist in the sense that they owe their recent electoral successes to their strategic instrumentalisation of voter anxieties surrounding issues such as immigration and terrorism. In contrast to 'full' ideologies—fascism, liberalism, or socialism—populism is regarded by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 6) as a 'thin-centred' ideology. This means that parties can incorporate other ideological elements, for example, Islamophobia, enabling them to appeal to broader audiences.

It is a truism that context matters, but it is essential for researchers to engage in debates surrounding the location of parties, groups, and movements under the broader far-right umbrella and contribute to broadening understandings of the far right in all its guises. With all of this in mind, the term 'far right' is used throughout this article to describe a diverse and ever-evolving range of actors who currently occupy the global political stage.

3 | WOMEN AND THE 'LOSERS OF MODERNISATION'

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the socio-economic transformations which ensued, the idea that members of a predominantly male workforce are more susceptible to far-right ideology became prominent in academic debates. The 'losers of modernisation' thesis claims that because male workers are at most risk of unemployment due to the overhaul of traditional industries, they are more vulnerable to radicalisation (Betz, 1994; Ford & Goodwin, 2010; Givens, 2004; Hochschild, 2016; Kriesi et al., 2006). This overhaul, as well as the spread of market economics during this period, is said to have resulted in consequences both in terms of workers' socio-economic status and class identities (Beck, 1987). In other words, the dismantlement of the Soviet Union and the processes of modernisation which followed are perceived by men as challenging a 'traditional' values system which privileges masculinity and centres the heteronormative family. Under these conditions, scholars argue that male blue-collar workers are more likely to support the far right because men's understandings of the world and their place within it are destabilised by widespread social change. It is, however, important to remember that while the collapse of communism was indeed the catalyst for large-scale socio-economic and political change at this time, the potential for far-right radicalisation already existed, for example, in the UK, France, Denmark, Canada, and India. This is considered by some scholars to be a 'normal' or 'pathological' part of how democracies already work (Betz, 1994; Scheuch & Klingemann, 1967).

In contrast to men, women are said to dominate secure public sector jobs and therefore do not appear to share men's socio-economic concerns or feel insecure about their place in the world (Bows, 2018). In her analysis of far-right support in France, Denmark, and Austria, for example, Givens (2004, p. 37) posits that women's jobs are 'less vulnerable to redundancy'. This leads Givens to contend that women not only find the far right unattractive, but that it would have to radically change to attract them. Even though the far-right parties explored in Givens' study had—at the time of writing—already achieved degrees of electoral success, the study falls short in its exploration of gender in that it inadvertently consolidates the view that women's political behaviour begins and ends at the ballot box. Ford and Goodwin (2010, p. 1) similarly explore the gender gap in terms of support for the British National Party (BNP) in the UK and argue that 'older, less educated working-class men living in the declining industrial towns of the North and Midlands region' comprise the largest support base for this party. However, the exclusion of Wales and Scotland from this analysis is a missed opportunity. Wales for example, has experienced high levels of deindustrialisation and the decline of mining towns and villages. As per the 'losers of modernisation' thesis, this would surely represent the ideal

conditions for far-right mobilisation. Concordantly, the idea that only white, working-class, and unemployed men support the far right has caused scholars to 'underestimate' how the far right in fact appeals to different demographics (Blee, 1996). Perhaps inadvertently, such discussions also bypass important studies which outline women's active and enthusiastic involvement in a range of historic fascist movements (Blee, 1991; Durham, 1998; Gottlieb, 2021; Koonz, 1987).

The 'losers of modernisation' thesis does not adequately explore how gender intersects with issues of socio-economic inequality beyond the idea that male blue-collar workers are more susceptible to far-right ideology. In contrast, Mayer (2015, p. 397) argues that women in France comprise a large part of the manual workforce and '[account] for one-third of the unskilled blue-collars and some 80% of the unskilled employees'. While it is claimed that women generally occupy 'safe' jobs, their pay is lower due to them working part-time to accommodate caring responsibilities. In theory, the often-precarious position of women within the broader workforce could also see them turn to the far-right, though more research is needed on this. Furthermore, while the assumption that working-class men are more likely to support the far right has gained currency, they, like women, are not a monolithic voting bloc. Focus group discussions held in three BNP strongholds, for example, revealed that working-class participants were extremely 'hostile' towards the party and would not consider supporting them under any circumstances (Boon, 2010, p. 28). It is thus essential for researchers to critically interrogate assumptions such as the 'losers of modernisation' thesis and recognise the context-specific factors which contribute to the success (or failure) of the far right.

Given what is known about the demographics instrumental in securing victory for Donald Trump in the 2016, the 'losers of modernisation' thesis is further destabilised. Analysis reveals that 'far from being purely a revolt by poorer whites left behind by globalisation [...] Trump's victory also relied on the support of the middle-class, the better-educated, and the well-off' (Henley, 2016). Among the 64% of US voters who earn over $50,000 per year, 49% voted for Donald Trump (Ibid.). In Germany, between 10% and 12% of individuals who voted for the AfD in 2017 are those in the civil service or private industry (Glaser et al., 2018, pp. 29, 30). Rama and Cordero (2018, p. 13) suggest that in the countries worst affected by the 2008 global financial crisis such as Greece and France, supporters of the far right appear to be younger and better-educated (Stockemer, 2017; Teperoglou et al., 2015). These examples demonstrate the need for researchers to unpack dominant assumptions surrounding gender and far-right support; individuals' understandings of politics and their place in the world are constantly changing. While the 'losers of modernisation' thesis does not adequately consider women's socio-economic experiences, it led to the establishment of another assumption, that is, that a 'loosening' of traditional social ties during this period caused women's wholesale embrace of Western feminist ideals and rejection of the far right, as the following section investigates.

4 | WOMEN AND FEMINISM

Women are not only seen to benefit from modernisation in terms of their alleged job security and socio-economic stability, but also because of what Inglehart and Norris (2003, p. 79) term 'the structural revolution'. Underpinning this 'revolution' is the idea that women have turned away from so-called traditional values, embraced left-wing politics, and accepted 'the gradual diffusion of feminist ideas across all levels of society' (Ibid., p. 88). The transformation of post-industrial Western European nations throughout this time not only resulted in profound socio-economic change, but '[a] gradual erosion of class-based politics' and a greater value being placed on one's own personal freedoms (Inglehart & Norris, 2003, p. 91). Issues once considered taboo, that is, access to abortion, gender equality, and confronting workplace sexual harassment, came to the forefront. Gender, the socially-constructed characteristics of women, men, and non-binary persons, is thus said to reflect the distinct personal and political interests of women as a group. The assumption arises, then, that all women, regardless of their

background, circumstances, and experiences subscribe to Western feminist ideals, and because of this shift, do not support the far right as it is perceived as being incompatible with these values.

This section argues, however, that one of the greatest obstacles to understanding women's far-right support is the idea that all women are predisposed towards feminism. As Mudde (2007, p. 92) points out, this 'erroneous' assumption reinforces the idea that the far-right regard women as bearers of children first and foremost and not active political subjects (see also: Downing, 2018). This is reductive given that 'there is not a single consistent attitude to the family and its social relations among far-right movements' (Kofman, 1998, p. 91). Consequently, researchers cannot just assume that every far-right party holds the same stance on women and families. Some parties, for example, the Dutch Freedom Party, seemingly take a more 'flexible' approach to the family, same-sex marriage, and gender equality (Akkerman, 2015, pp. 38–39). However, this liberalisation must be taken with a pinch of salt; it is likely a response to what they perceive as the threat of Islam to Western European culture and values. Farris (2017) terms this femonationalism, that is, the far right's cynical co-option of women's rights to bolster their Islamophobic platforms; gender is a central tenet of the far right's ideological and programmatic remit and boosts their electoral appeal. Setzler and Yanus (2018, p. 1), for example, demonstrate how the 2016 Trump campaign was able to unite diverse female voters, from so-called 'soccer moms' to diehard Christian evangelicals. Similarly, scholars have identified the different ways in which the far right and its adherents instrumentalise gender across several country contexts to achieve their political objectives (Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; Deckman, 2016; Leidig, 2023; Miller-Idriss & Pilkington, 2019; Pearson, 2023; Pearson et al., 2020).

With all this in mind, it makes more sense to think of the far right and its members as 'gender-conscious political actors' (Schreiber, 2014, p. 276), rather than in binary terms, that is, whether they adhere to Western-centric feminist ideals or not. While the far right is often anti-feminist, they nonetheless campaign on related issues which directly affect themselves and their core demographic, that is, white cis-gender men and women. Invariably, the situation becomes more complicated when the far right make quasi-feminist statements, albeit ones situated within distinctly anti-feminist discourses (Félix, 2015; Gwiazda, 2020). Leidig (2023), for example, explores how some far-right women use social media to construct an ideal of a 'traditional' womanhood which is not only portrayed as idealistic and aspirational, but in its own way, empowering for women who find modern feminism at odds with their strictly codified views on the roles of women and men in society today. However, these women are helping to 'mainstream the ideas of what was previously a fringe phenomenon by tapping into practices of influencer culture to reach wide audiences' in their quest to normalise far-right ideas and values (Ibid., p. 9).

Furthermore, far-right women often live their lives in ways that can be very different from their party's own stance; this is especially confusing when far-right women appear to campaign against their own 'interests'. While Rassemblement National is found by Akkerman (2015, p. 46) to be the most conservative party over time in terms of its manifesto pledges, the party itself has attempted to moderate its image in recent years. Since taking over leadership of the RN from her father Jean Marie Le Pen in 2011, Marine Le Pen 'has sought to modernise the party's image by declaring a de-demonisation (dédiabolisation) strategy' (Snipes & Mudde, 2020, p. 439). Part of this involves marketing herself as a 'woman of her times […] free […] modern […] divorced, a mother of three' (Sénac & Parodi, 2013, p. 232). However, the RN's ideological profile has changed very little. Another example relates to Alice Weidel, AfD parliamentary co-leader; Weidel is a lesbian who shares two adopted children with her Sri Lankan heritage partner. The AfD itself opposes same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ couples' adoption of children. This raises questions as to the extent to which the AfD 'cares' about the sexuality or gender identity of its members, ignores this aspect of Weidel's life because of her professional background, or uses her to fight back accusations that the AfD is homophobic. At any rate, Weidel herself has said in interviews that her sexuality is incidental to her political activism (Berg & Muschel, 2017; Welt, 2018), and despite holding a privileged position in AfD party hierarchy, does not campaign on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community in Germany; Weidel conveniently disregards, or blatantly ignores, the structural and institutional barriers facing LGBTQ+ people. While Le Pen and Weidel have seemingly 'emancipated' themselves from patriarchal party hierarchies, they do not advocate the same freedoms for other groups of women.

It is evident that normative conceptualisations of what in fact constitutes 'women's issues' is a barrier to effective analysis; the interests of women are not homogenous, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity. To adequately gauge the factors underpinning women's far-right support, Schreiber (2014, p. 276) suggests that researchers stop conflating 'women's issues' with those most associated with Western feminist activism, that is, gender equality, LBGTQ+ rights, and advocating for disadvantaged groups. In her work on female Tea Party members in the US, for example, Deckman (2016) explores how the perceived right to bear firearms informs women's political activism and their ideas surrounding motherhood. Evidently, women's political interests and potential activism is dependent on a range of context-specific factors and, put simply, not all advocacies undertaken on behalf of women by women are egalitarian in scope. If anything, this section has demonstrated that it is not enough for researchers to simply assume that all women are feminist and are thus repelled by the far right. This support is complex and multifaceted in terms of the issues which engage individual women. The general assumption that women are not interested in politics at all, however, endures, as the following section explores.

5 | WOMEN AND POLITICAL INTEREST

As Randall (1987, p. 79) observes, 'of all the charges brought against women's political behaviour, apparently the most solidly founded is that they know less about politics, and are less interested, and less psychologically involved in it than men'. On the face of it, empirical research on the topic of gender and political interest appears to confirm this claim (Mayer, 2013; Mudde, 2007, 2019; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015; Verba et al., 1997). Indeed, historically, 'it has been widely argued—and demonstrated empirically—that the political socialisation of women, as distinct from that of men, tends to produce a lack of concern with the sphere of politics, a sense of distance between one's daily concerns and political events' (Andersen, 1975, p. 440). If, as Inglehart and Norris (2003) argued, the 'structural revolution' which flourished following the collapse of the Soviet Union did indeed usher in an era of unprecedented socio-cultural and political opportunities for women in post-Industrial Western European nations, how can this seemingly persistent gender gap be explained?

Verba et al. (1997) concede in their study of women's voting behaviour in the US that this issue ultimately finds provenance in the historical exclusion of women from political life, yet fall short in naming the elephant(s) in the room today, that is, a gendered division of labour and socialisation. As Campbell and Winters (2008, p. 64) reflect, it is a 'well-known fact' that girls are socialised into displaying 'an interconnected sense of self' while boys are encouraged to be 'autonomous actors'. Furthermore, the idea that women typically organise in a more 'democratic' way reinforces the notion that they 'favour intergroup relations to be equal rather than hierarchical' (Stasu-lane, 2019, p. 59). The assumption that women are less interested in politics also haunts work on gender and the far right. Mayer (2013, p. 163) suggests that 'women are late comers on the electoral scene, they still pay less attention to politics, seen as a man's world, and would be less prone to support outsiders than established parties'. Spierings and Zaslove (2015, p. 135) conclude that 'it remains unclear why more men than women vote for populist radical right parties'. Similarly, Mudde (2019, p. 161) argues that not only do women's 'lower levels of political self-confidence (efficacy)' set them apart from their male peers, but that they also have lower levels of tolerance for violence. While writing women into a political history which has overwhelmingly focused on male participation is not an easy task, it is nonetheless an urgent one; the lack of scholarly attention paid to women's activism in this context simply allows them to disappear into the annals of history 'unobserved', 'unscrutinised', and thus potentially regarded as pursuing a 'legitimate form of dissent' by future scholars (Gottlieb, 2021, p. 6). Such women, then, have fallen 'through the historian's sieve, unclaimed by feminists and unnoticed by men' (Koonz, 1987, p. 3). One way to counter this then, involves eschewing the idea that Woman has an essential character and is predisposed to peace and collectivity. The 'choices' women and men make across the political spectrum are complex, and require researchers to disentangle the intersections of power, politics, and the conditions which make these choices possible in the first place.

Conventional measures of political interest pay little attention to what 'politics' means to individual people and reinforces the idea that politics is only about 'institutional, partisan, or national politics' (Coffé, 2013, p. 324). This removes the personal from the political and disregards individuals' own lives and experiences; politics does not begin and end with the casting of a vote at the ballot box. Despite women's alleged lack of political efficacy, empirical studies have demonstrated that women engage with the far right and its ideas in diverse ways. Berg (2019) shows how German women utilised social media to plan protests following the rape and murder of several young German girls at the hands of their Muslim boyfriends; an issue relentlessly instrumentalised by the AfD and its supporters. Marczewska (2019, p. 108) demonstrates how the far right in Poland have coopted zines, 'handmade, self-published, non-commercial, small-run periodicals', and made it an increasingly popular way of exploring one's own political affiliations. Deckman (2016, p. 117) explores how Tea Party women adopted a form of 'kitchen table conservatism' to bolster their political activism, including blogging. Influential female figures from the so-called alt-right have carved a niche for themselves online via their YouTube channels or even their own TV stations (Darby, 2020; Leidig, 2023; Mattheis, 2018). Miller-Idriss (2020) shows how the far right have infiltrated digital and real-world spaces to attract potential new members, including YouTube cookery shows, college campuses, mixed martial arts gyms, and online forums like Reddit. With all this in mind, can scholars really make the claim that women are less interested in politics? Or is it the case that they sometimes articulate their political interests in different ways and through the most convenient outlets? What are the narratives behind the numbers and what do these accounts reveal about women's far-right support? Asking new questions about women's far-right support involves scratching beneath the surface of dominant discourses, as this section has shown.

6 | WOMEN AND RELIGIOSITY

As this article has explored so far, the processes of modernisation which ensued following the dissolution of the Soviet Union not only had an impact on a male-dominated traditional workforce, but class-based social identities, particularly, men's status and place in a changing world. It is for these reasons that men are considered more likely to support the far right than female counterparts. Another important element of this debate concerns the role of religion in the post-modernisation era and the assumption that women's higher levels of religiosity see them again turn away from the far right. Somewhat paradoxically, the contemporary reemergence of the far right has been successful in part due to parties' instrumentalisation of religion and attempts to legitimise their ideological stance by situating their activism within discourses surrounding Christian values in the face of the perceived 'Islamisation' of Western Europe (Bows, 2018, pp. 171, 172). As this section demonstrates, this reassertion of Christianity among the far right today functions as 'a relevant context factor and frame for political mobilisation' (Minkenberg, 2018, pp. 366, 367), and raises questions as to whether the far right's anti-Islam platform is more likely to pique women's support irrespective of their religiosity, as well as the role and influence of the Christian Right.

The secularisation of post-industrial Western European society is perceived by scholars as one of the catalysts behind the resurgence of the far right; the idea is that individuals 'detached' from churches are more likely to support the far right as they are not sufficiently integrated into community life (Billiet, 1995, pp. 320, 321). According to Montgomery and Winter (2015, pp. 380, 381), it is possible that individuals are attracted to the far right precisely because they lack cohesion in other areas of their lives. On the other hand, the authors suggest that while the far right is going to considerable lengths to defend 'Christian identity and values', religious voters, particularly older women, will be 'vaccinated' against far-right ideas (Ibid., p. 398). Similarly, Arzheimer and Carter (2009, p. 988) argue that the relative 'stability' of the religion cleavages means that religious voters remain 'unavailable' to the far right. Billiet (1995, p. 303) suggests that Belgian churchgoers are less likely to hold 'negative ideas' about immigrants than non-religious or non-Christian individuals. However, as Mudde (2007, p. 115) observes, an individuals' religiosity may strengthen far-right beliefs and gives the examples of Croatia, Slovakia, and Poland, countries which have experienced a profound turn to the right in the post-WWII era. With all this in mind, it is not

entirely clear where women stand on this issue, given what is now known about the contextual factors which have bolstered far-right support in recent years, as well as the steady decline of church membership and religious participation across Western Europe (Deutsche Welle, 2022; Russell & Farley, 2022).

As Arzheimer and Carter (2009, p. 986) point out, despite the steady decline in church membership, organised religion continues to occupy a privileged position in Western European life, particularly following 9/11. While scholars argue that the far right does not appear to offer religious voters 'credible alternatives' (Immerzeel et al., 2013, p. 946), an approach which identifies how the far right instrumentalises religion to potentially attract both religious *and* non-religious individuals may reveal additional insights into the changing dynamics of this political cleavage. This is particularly salient given that the far right has capitalised on anti-Islam sentiment in recent decades (Akkerman, 2015; Allen, 2014; de Lange & Mügge, 2015); underpinning all of this is the far right's idea that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with Western European norms and values. The pro-Christian stance of the far right across Europe has been consolidated in the years following the so-called Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, as well as high-profile sexual abuse and exploitation cases involving young white women and girls and Muslim men, for example, the Rotherham case in the UK or 2015 New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne (Jay, 2014; Sprengholz, 2021). In contrast to the idea that the far right does not offer religious voters a 'credible alternative', these events have shown that the far right has been able to successfully instrumentalise anti-Islam sentiment and that this resonates with individuals regardless of their religiosity. Additionally, despite Donald Trump's political flip-flopping during his 2016 presidential campaign, he secured the support of several anti-choice and women's Republican groups such as the National Federation of Republican Women, and Concerned Women for America, giving them an extremely powerful stake in US political life. As Lo Mascolo and Stoeckl (2023, loc. 649) point out, 'it should not be overlooked that this development [the mainstreaming of the far right in liberal democracies] has created a new political home for fundamentalist Christians who were already critical of the political establishment and their churches for gradually becoming too liberal, reformist, or compromising'. This has had a real-world impact, for example, the overturning of Roe versus Wade in 2022, US citizens' constitutional right to access abortion. As Durham (2000, p. 36) observes, 'gender, it can hardly be doubted, is crucial to major segments of the American right'. However, the author cautions that this is not a catch-all strategy; the American right in this context has been particularly adept at mobilising both men and women in different ways and this warrants careful future investigation.

With all this in mind, the idea that religious voters are 'vaccinated' against the far right falls short. This section makes the argument that the far-right's use of religion has enabled them to effectively exploit hot-button topics, for example, access to abortion or the perceived threat of sexual violence from racialised Others and remains an essential component of the far right's ideas surrounding Eurocentric socio-cultural and political identities. Furthermore, the global far-right is appealing both to male and female religious voters in diverse ways and embeds itself in global networks of Christian evangelicals to further its reach potential supporters on the ground.

7 | CONCLUSION

Drawing together the four dominant assumptions discussed throughout this article, it becomes clear that a reappraisal of how women come to identify with the far right and its ideas is long overdue. Assumptions regarding women's alleged socio-economic security, feminism, lack of interest in politics, and higher levels of religiosity reveals little about their motivations for supporting the far right or the contextual factors which may underpin this support. It is not enough to rely on outdated assumptions or stereotypes. The far right has been particularly adept at securing female support in recent decades and maintaining their interest in diverse ways which do not always conform to dominant understandings of gender and political behaviour. While the scholarly works explored here have contributed to understandings of why some people come to support the far right at specific moments in time, it nonetheless remains essential to recognise that individuals' political behaviour is never static, particularly during times of heightened global political partisanship. Practices of feminist reflexivity, as outlined in the introduction,

can empower researchers to recognise the different ways in which the social world is 'known' by its inhabitants, how this knowledge is both shaped by relevant social conditions, as well as subject to different forms of power. Who gets to say what, when, where, and how? This article suggests that a more holistic approach to the topic at hand that pays due attention to this 'whole'—women's lives, experiences, and histories—will reveal additional insights as to why they support the far right, as well as the contextual factors which make this support possible in the first place. This article encourages researchers to view this support from a different perspective, that is, women's own. This approach will reveal new insights into a hitherto underexplored area of critical scholarship and deepen understandings of women's far-right support in a given locale.

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