

RESEARCH NOTE

Homonationalism and Voting for the Populist Radical Right: Addressing Unanswered Questions by Zooming in on the Dutch Case

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Anti-migration attitudes are at the heart of explaining who votes for Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties (Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Rydgren, 2008). PRR parties appeal to a “native” culture that they say should be protected against outsiders, and more recently, PRR politicians have been including gay citizens among those needing protection, particularly against Islam (Bracke, 2012; De Lange & Mügge, 2015). This strategy echoes what has been labeled “homonationalism”: Considering the acceptance of gay and lesbian citizens as part of what defines a nation and letting this acceptance serve as a barometer for who has a right to belong to that nation (cf. Puar, 2007; Schotten, 2016).

That notion is echoed in the public-opinion and voting literature (albeit labeled differently; e.g., De Koster, Achterberg, Van der Waal, Van Bohemen, & Kemmers, 2014; Lancaster, 2019; Spierings, Lubbers, & Zaslove, 2017; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015a), which shows that substantial groups of citizens combine anti-migration and sexual liberalist attitudes (Lancaster, 2019; Spierings et al., 2017), attitudes generally conceptualized as opposites (Inglehart, 1997). Moreover, homonationalist citizens have been argued to be growing in numbers (Lancaster, 2019) and be the most ardent PRR voters (De Koster et al., 2014; Spierings et al., 2017; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015a).

However, the disproportional PRR vote among homonationalist citizens was not found to be related to the degree that PRR parties use a rhetoric of defending gay rights against Islam. For instance, homonationalist rhetoric is strongest in the Netherlands (see Dudink, 2017), but Dutch homonationalist citizens are not disproportionately inclined to vote PRR, while they are in the more conservative Switzerland (Spierings et al., 2017).

This research note expands on these existing studies empirically. Focusing on the Dutch case, it (a) tests whether the abovementioned results are reproducible on different data; (b) empirically assesses the (untested) competing-parties explanation, which suggest that if another, more mainstream party also combines a restrictive migration platform with a liberal lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) track record, it is likely to prevent the PRR party from capitalizing on its homonationalist rhetoric; (c) deepens this explanation by assessing whether populist attitudes (i.e., supporting the idea that there is a division between good people and evil politicians who do not represent the people's true will (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014)) explain the choice between competing homonationalist parties; and (d) provides a first assessment of whether the initial explanation for homonationalists' voting actually holds for strongly anti-migration gay voters.

These empirical contributions provide a more accurate understanding of the existing theoretical arguments and feed into larger debates on the rise of PRR parties (Dennison, 2019), particularly, the impact of anti-migration sentiments and how these are differently activated across societal groups and contexts.

State of the Field

A multitude of individual-level factors drive the PRR vote, including unemployment, low education, political distrust, populist and law-and-order attitudes, and anti-migration attitudes, with the last being crucial, particularly given migration's saliency the last two decades (Arzheimer, 2009; Dennison, 2019; Harteveld, Van Der Brug, Dahlberg, & Kokkonen, 2015; Lubbers et al., 2002; Rydgren, 2008; Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). This research note thus zooms in on anti-migration attitudes.

Despite the PRR's traditional and even fascist roots, radical right thinkers and parties, particularly in Northern Europe, now voice opinions defending sexual equality against Islam, making sexual liberty a cultural marker and a prominent part of the discourse (e.g., Dudink, 2017; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015b). While this might not signal an actual liberal agenda on sexuality, it does echo the notion of homonationalism (Puar 2007; Schotten, 2016); homosexuality is not seen as a threat but as part of the native culture under threat (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015b).

The PRR's homonationalist rhetoric¹ implies they perceive the general public to pride themselves on their tolerance toward homosexuality. In the Dutch case, this holds for PRR leaders Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders as well as Thierry Baudet, who actually draws from naturalist and racist theories while also using gay-equality rhetoric (FvD, 2019). Having said this, this rhetoric mainly focuses on anti-Islam politics and symbolism and is often not reflected in (parliamentary) behaviors. Only recently, for instance, PVV and FvD voted against laws protecting LGBT citizens on hate crimes and gender neutrality in public transport (Kafka, 2019; Spierings, 2020). However, some counter examples exist. Most notably, Geert Wilders' PVV voted in favor of forbidding civil servants to refuse to marry same-sex couples (see Spierings et al., 2017). Crucially for this research note, PRR parties now argue for the need to protect the "native" society against (Muslim) migrants, whereby the presumed equality of gay citizens is among the notions that need protection, regardless of whether the parties actually support gay rights.

¹Towards transgender equality they remain very traditional and even hostile (Spierings, 2020).

In terms of public opinion, the main data on how homonationalism and voting behavior might relate were highly unscientific internet polls that nevertheless made newspaper headlines. For instance, during the 2010 Dutch parliamentary elections, Wilders was proclaimed the winner among gay voters, based on a *GayKrant* poll (AD, 2010), and Baudet's FvD was most popular for the 2019 European Parliament elections according to a *Gaysite.nl* poll (Kafka, 2019). By now, however, at least four scientific studies have shed light on the issue, revealing a different picture.

The first study only touched upon this issue. Using ESS 2010 data on seven countries, it mainly showed that, in some countries, holding anti-migrant *and* pro-sexual liberation values positively interact to encourage voting PRR (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015a). Next, Spierings et al. (2017) further explored this using ESS data covering 10 countries and 29 elections (1999–2012), showing that the prevalence of homonationalism among citizens is not negligible but does vary across Western European countries; this was also found by Lancaster (2019), who added that “liberal nativism” (which encompasses homonationalism) seems to be on the rise.

Spierings et al. (2017) theorized the potential disproportional support for the PRR among homonationalist voters using conflict theory. They argue that scarce resources—including cultural norms—are subject to competition, whereby outsiders are considered a threat. With Islam and homosexuality being generally considered opposites, they claim it likely that LGBT citizens and people who strongly support equal rights feel more threatened by migration. Consequently, the impact of anti-migration attitudes was expected to be stronger among voters who are more liberal on sexuality.

This expectation held for four countries but had to be dismissed for six. The “homonationalist vote” was found in Austria, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland, but not in countries with more homonationalist PRR parties, including Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands (see also De Koster et al., 2014). Spierings et al. (2017) suggest that homonationalist voters only disproportionately choose to vote PRR if there is no other (more) credible anti-migration but homo-liberal party. However, many European multi-party systems have such parties, for example, the Dutch Conservative-Liberals (VVD), which has a track record of support for equal rights for LGBT citizens but has also moved to the right-wing end of the migration spectrum (De Lange, 2012). This explanation, however, has not yet been tested.

The above raises two questions. One is whether the more homonationalist public does indeed vote for the Conservative-Liberal alternative, which would confirm the competing-parties claim. For the claim to hold, however, it is also pivotal to ask the underlying question: Is the absent homonationalist bonus (i.e., a larger vote share because pro-gay emancipation citizens also vote PRR) in Dutch politics reproduced in other data than the ESS?

Next, we can formulate two additional questions based on claims that are more implicit in the above. The third question specifies the first: Which homonationalist voters prefer a mainstream pro-gay and anti-migration party over the populist pro-gay anti-migration PRR? This phrasing immediately highlights a core difference: populism. The competing-parties claim seems to be formulated without considering that strongly populist homonationalists are unlikely to consider non-populist, anti-migration, sexual-liberal parties as viable alternatives (while others may). With the development of populist attitudes, this is testable, particularly for the Netherlands (see Akkerman et al., 2014).

Fourth, the threat mechanism that Spierings, Lubbers, and Zaslove theorize from, actually applies most strongly to those who are most likely feel subject of the threat: People who identify as gay and hold nativist attitudes. For them, Islam is no vague threat, but directly threatening their safety. In other words, if there is any empirical backing for the homonationalist bonus for PRR parties, it should be found among this group.

Data and Methods

Data

For the first three research questions, three LISS (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences) modules administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, the Netherlands) are used:² the National Referendum Survey (see [Jacobs, Akkerman, & Zaslove, 2018](#)),³ the National Liberation Day Survey,⁴ and the Politics and Values Study.⁵ Each of these was sampled randomly from the LISS panel, and combining them best enables answering the first three questions through a unique combination of items on sexual discrimination, party preference, anti-migration, and populist attitudes, while cross-validating the earlier studies' outcomes using other data than ESS. The attitudes toward sexual discrimination were measured earlier than the other data, but they are generally stable over short time spans or even lifetimes. The overlapping set encompasses 1,571 respondents.

The LISS data do not include sufficient information on sexual orientation. This *n*-issue is a problem across datasets, but the eight pooled Dutch ESS datasets (2002–2016) ([ESS, 2018](#)) cover 106 people in a same-sex relationship. ESS data include partner information, anti-migrant attitudes, and voting behavior. Moreover, by using the ESS data, this note's results on nationalist gay voters are directly comparable to the earlier studies. In total, we can include at least 6,859 respondents. Despite limitations, these data provide a first look into this issue.

Dependent Variable and Model

Both datasets include respondents' party choice during the last elections. In line with existing research, I consider the PVV and LPF to be right-wing populist, just like the smaller LN, TON, and FvD. For the elections covered, over 80% of PRR votes in the data are for PVV and another 14% for LPF.⁶ The Conservative-Liberal party of Prime Minister Rutte (since 2010, VVD) is the PRR's main electoral competitor when it comes to anti-migrant, pro-gay emancipation positions. I distinguish between these two choices (PRR and VVD) and all others, and thus estimate multinomial regression models.

The final LISS sample includes 162 PRR voters (12%), 257 for Conservative-Liberals (16%), and 1,152 who voted otherwise (73%). For the PVV, this was three percentage points below the election results, but very close to the PVV's vote share in the

²More information about the LISS panel can be found at: www.lissdata.nl.

³Wave 3, collected in March and April 2018.

⁴Collected in April 2014.

⁵Wave 10, collected from December 2017 to March 2018.

⁶Eighty-eight percent of the PRR votes in the LISS data in [Table 1](#), the rest being FvD. Seventy-eight percent of the PRR votes in the ESS data are for the PVV, 20% LPF, and 2% LN and TON.

polls at the time of the survey. In the ESS data, 6% said they would vote PRR (388 respondents), which is below the actual election results across these years, but the number is still substantial. For the LISS data, however, underreporting means that the smallest category of the dependent variable has an n lower than ten times the number of independent variables.⁷ The final models have therefore been re-estimated bootstrapped, as reported in [Supplementary Appendices 2 and 3](#). The presented results are robust.

Independent Variables

A factor analysis was conducted on ten *anti-migrant* items in the LISS data (see [Supplementary Appendix 1](#); Cronbach's $\alpha > .8$), leading to a selection of five Likert items: It is a good thing if a society consist of people from different cultural backgrounds; it should be easier to get asylum in the Netherlands; foreigners with a permit to be in the Netherlands should have the same rights on social security as the Dutch; there are living too many allochthonous people [i.e., first- or second-generation migrants]⁸ in the Netherlands; and, a neighborhood does not benefit if many allochthonous people live in it. Six similar ESS items were used. Three asked people about letting many or few immigrants into the country, varying the type of immigrants: from poorer countries; of a different race or ethnicity; and of the same race or ethnic group. Another three items asked whether immigrants contribute to the country's general state, culture, and economy. The mean of the available items was rescaled to an interval running from 0 to 1, with 1 equaling the strongest anti-migrant position.

In LISS, *attitudes toward homosexuality* are measured by asking whether "it is unacceptable/justified that homosexuals cannot marry because civil servants refuse to wed them", which runs from 0 (completely justified) to 9 (completely unacceptable). This item taps into an important Dutch debate and is more selective than general items (e.g., [Kuyper, 2016](#)).

Anti-migrant attitudes and attitudes toward homosexual people are included as interval variables, and an extra dummy is added to the models in order to assess homonationalism's impact on top of to the two scales. This approach replicates previous studies and provides interpretable results. For the *homonationalism* dummy, I follow [Spierings et al. \(2017\)](#): People who score above 0.6 on anti-migration and 8 or 9 on pro-LG equality (lesbian and gay) are coded 1, all others 0.

Populist attitudes are measured by the validated index of six items introduced by [Akkerman et al., \(2014\)](#); see also [Lancaster, 2019](#)). The mean is taken of the available items per respondent, running from 0 to 4; 4 being most populist. To assess whether populist attitudes steer homonationalists' voting choices, this variable is interacted with the homonationalism dummy.

For the fourth question, the respondents' (and their partners') sex is used to determine whether they are in a same-sex relationship, assuming these to be *gay women and men*.

⁷That is if all dummies and interactions are counted separately.

⁸This term has been used in the public debate and policies in the Netherlands for many years. As part of a survey item, the general public will most likely read it as referring to people of color with a migrant background and their (grand)children, particularly Dutch citizens with a Moroccan, Turkish, or Caribbean background.

Control Variables

Based on the PRR-voting literature (see above), the following core controls are included in the models of [Table 1](#): education, employment status, age, gender, household situation, urbanization, law-and-order attitudes, political trust, political interest, and party identification. The ESS-based models in [Table 2](#) are controlled for education, employment status, age, gender, law-and-order attitudes, political trust, political interest, political self-placement, religiosity, and gay-emancipation attitudes. For clarity and brevity, I present the core variables' coefficients in the tables below, and the control variables' results in [Supplementary Appendices 2 and 3](#),⁹ which also include the robustness tests.

Empirical Analysis

The Competing-Parties Claim

[Table 1](#) presents the core results regarding homonationalist attitudes. Model 1a replicates previous studies' results using an entirely different data source. In line with those studies, it shows that anti-migrant and populist voters are far more likely to vote PRR, but attitudes toward homosexuality and homonationalism do not have an independent additional (statistically significant) effect, and this is replicated across models ([Supplementary Appendix 2](#)).

Model 2a introduces the mainstream competitor as an alternative vote choice. This shows that the Conservative-Liberal VVD is indeed a main competitor on anti-migrant attitudes: Voters scoring higher on anti-migrant attitudes are (far) more likely to vote for either party family ($p < .001$), also in the bootstrapped models ([Supplementary Appendix 2](#)). Moreover, in some of the models, people who are more positive toward homosexual people are marginally significantly more likely to vote VVD than other non-PRR parties.

Drawing our focus to the homonationalist bonus, Model 2a shows no indication that homonationalist voters are significantly more likely to vote VVD than PVV. However, Model 3a crucially shows that populist attitudes are a core piece of the puzzle. Two clear statistically significant effects appear (also after bootstrapping): (a) Homonationalists are disproportionately more likely to vote VVD, but not significantly more likely to vote PRR and (b) this disproportional VVD voting is strongest among homonationalists who are not strongly populist, while being absent among strongly populist voters.

Applying the sample-averages approach to Model 3a¹⁰ illustrates the above: People who score 3 or 4 on anti-migrant attitudes (0–4) and are the most supportive of homosexuality have a 81–88% probability of voting for the Conservative-Liberals, if they fall into the least populist category. Those who hold the same attitudes but fall into the strongest populist category only have VVD voting probabilities of 3–5%.

To summarize: The PRR receives no homonationalist voting bonus in the Netherlands because the lion's share of these votes is attracted by their mainstream but rather homonationalist competitor—the Conservative-Liberals; the exceptions are the most populist voters.

⁹The operationalization syntax for the control variables can be obtained from the author.

¹⁰Based on the regression equation, voting probabilities are calculated for different values on attitudes toward migrants, homosexuality, and populism, keeping all other variables constant at their sample average.

Table 1
Regression Models Explaining Voting Choice (Full Models in Supplementary Appendix 2)

	Model 1a: logistic regression	Model 2a: multinomial model	Model 3a: multinomial model, including interaction
Logged odds		Logged risk ratios	Logged risk ratios
Ref = other parties	Ref = other parties	Ref = other parties	Ref = other parties
Voters PRR	Votes PRR	Votes conservative-liberal	Votes conservative-liberal
Variables of interest			
Anti-migrant attitudes (0-4)	1.194***	1.282***	1.276***
Pro LG equality attitudes (0-9)	0.011	0.018	0.019
Homonationalist (dummy; 1 = yes)	0.389	0.378	0.951
Homonationalist * populist attitudes			-0.215
Populist attitudes (0-4)	0.743***	0.367*	0.412*
Controls variables	Demographic controls included	Demographic and political controls included	Demographic and political controls included
			0.906***
			0.056 [#]
			1.612*
			-0.858**
			-0.292*

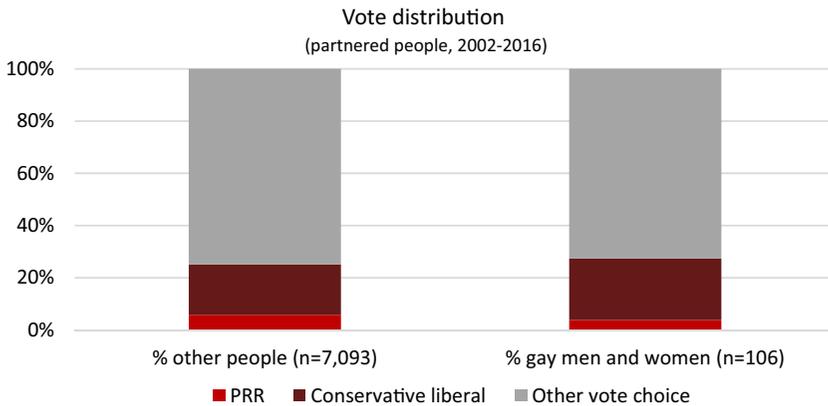
Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, [#] $p > 0.10$; $N = 1,571$.
 Data source: LISS.

Table 2
Regression Models Explaining Voting Choice (Full Models in Supplementary Appendix 3)

	Model 1	Model 2a: Model 1, including controls	Model 3: Model 2a, including interaction term
Logged risk ratios			
Votes PRR	0.232	Votes conservative-liberal	Votes PRR
Ref = other parties		Ref = other parties	Ref = other parties
Variables of interest			
Same-sex relationship (1 = yes)	-0.395	0.197	1.048
Anti-migrant attitudes (0-1)		3.949***	3.966***
Anti-migrant attitudes*Same-sex relationship			-1.754
Control variables	None	Demographic and political controls included	Demographic and political controls included
N	7,199	6,847	6,847

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, # $p < .10$.
 Data source: ESS rounds 1 through 8.

Figure 1
Vote distribution among gay and straight people



The Nationalist Gay Vote

Using the Dutch ESS data, the voting behavior of the anti-migrant gay public can also be explored. Descriptively, Figure 1 shows rather similar patterns between gay and straight (partnered) voters. In these data, people with a different-sex partner are slightly more likely to vote PRR and same-sex partnered people are somewhat more likely to vote Conservative-Liberal (see also Table 2, Model 1).

Once controlled for other factors in Model 2a (also 2b and 2c in Supplementary Appendix 3), lesbian and gay citizens are significantly more likely to vote VVD (an increase from 14% to 23% using the sample-averages approach), but not more likely to vote PRR (an increase of only 0.3 percentage points). As can be derived from Models 2a and 2b in Supplementary Appendix 3, however, this voting for the VVD is not specifically due to voters' position on gay or equal rights, suggesting that this might not be the most salient political issue for (partnered) gay citizens. Model 3 displays the impact of being a so-called nationalist gay voter, but the impact of anti-migrant attitudes does not differ between people in a same-sex and different-sex relationship, and direct effects of being gay on the likelihood to vote PRR were not found either.

Thus, when a competing anti-migrant, pro-gay party is present, the gay vote does not mainly go to the PRR (despite its homonationalist agenda), but to that competitor.

Implications

That idea that a homonationalist vote exists and mainly benefits PRR parties is not far-fetched given their rhetoric on this issue. Empirical studies found such effects in some countries, but not in the most likely case, the Netherlands, which has seen homonationalist discourse since the 2002 rise of the LPF (Bracke, 2012; De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Dudink, 2017; Spierings et al., 2017). This lack of a homonationalist bonus has been *post hoc* theorized to be due to an anti-migrant, pro-gay emancipation mainstream party drawing the homonationalist vote from the PRR (Spierings et al., 2017). That explanation was empirically assessed in this research note.

First, using a different data source, I also found no homonationalist bonus for the PRR in the Dutch case. Next, analyses show that most anti-migrant, pro-gay emancipation voters do indeed vote for the mainstream Conservative-Liberal competitor. Only the most populist homonationalist voters tend to vote PRR. Lastly, gay anti-migrant voters do not flock to the PRR either, even though they could be expected to experience the (perceived and framed) ethnic threat most. The VVD might be somewhat less extreme on anti-migrant issues, but it does seem to be more credible on gay rights.

Validating and expanding prior conclusions, these results underscore that, to understand the connection between public opinion and PRR voting, party systems should be considered, not just the PRR parties' platform. Furthermore, the results draw attention to the P in PRR. A considerable majority of voters are not strongly populist (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014), and for them, the competing-parties logic might be pivotal. This logic is likely to extend to other issues than homonationalism.

More generally, this note highlights that the impact of anti-migration attitudes as a main explanation for voting PRR is partly activated by additional ideological attitudes (i.e., sexual liberalism, populism). This observation not only aligns with conceptual discussions of populism as a thin-centered ideology (e.g., Mudde, 2007) and empirical studies on the interlinkage between economic and migration factors (e.g., Arzheimer, 2009; Dennison, 2019), but it also raises a crucial public-opinion question: Under what conditions (i.e., saliency and party system) and among which groups do PRR parties manage to activate anti-migrant sentiments? And what buffers a translation of these sentiments to voting PRR?

Lastly, I would argue that the data limitations of this note and its results have at least two crucial implications for future research. First, data on sexuality are highly limited. Homonationalist attitudes are measured indirectly, and voter studies hardly contain sufficient subsamples of lesbian, gay, and bisexual citizens. Future elections studies should include representative samples of LGBTIQ citizens and more direct measures on whether people particularly fear Islam for threatening the position of gay citizens.

Second, I used the Dutch case to test the more general competing-parties logic that was raised to explain differences across Western Europe. The focus on homonationalism as part of the PRR rhetoric does not extend to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with its far more homophobic citizenries (Spierings, 2018). In CEE countries, Islam and its supposed hostility toward homosexuality would not resonate with a populist focus on the "common man's interest". This note's results can, however, be translated to CEE and Latin American countries at a more abstract level: Which threats are highlighted, which threatened group is instrumentalized, and which parties are viable, all moderate whether a populist rhetoric of threat is electorally successful. To test this logic more generally, cross-national datasets would benefit from including questions on populist attitudes and attitudes toward the various supposed outsiders threatening the native culture as well as toward the insiders being threatened.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

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Biographical Note

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