

Can Personal Parties Facilitate Women's Political Seniority? A Study of Internal Rules of Conduct

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Leader-driven personal parties often campaign on a ticket promising elite renewal and novel ways of doing politics. One way of looking apart from the sitting political establishment is to recruit women into visible party positions. This study examines whether personal parties can improve women's access to reelection by institutionalizing performance-based rules of internal promotion, which are necessitated by the lack of organic party cohesion. A site-intensive study of the Slovak Freedom and Solidarity party identifies a number of gendered structural constraints that impede the party's female incumbents from excelling in those tasks that are deemed important by the party.

Introduction

Personal parties are among the many nontraditional party families that are appearing on the world's political map.¹ Founded by a single charismatic leader without the support of any civil-society organization, personal parties are characterized by extreme centralization of power, lack of internal democracy, low party membership, and ideological ambiguity (Arter 2016; Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020; Hopkin and Paolucci 1999; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017; McDonnell 2013). A signature feature of personal parties is their promise to put an end to the informal “ways of doing” in politics and replace the career politicians of old with a new breed of efficient political managers (Katz and Mair 1995; Kopeček 2016; McDonnell 2013). In those contexts where the political elite is largely comprised of men, personal parties are shown to elect more women and put more women into visible party positions as a way of “looking apart” from the sitting establishment (Kostadinova and Mikulska 2017; Rashkova and Zankina 2017). The resilience of these parties warrants a closer examination of whether they can facilitate women's political

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seniority by making the path to reelection and political influence freer of gender bias.

As top-down creations, personal parties lack a large pool of locally trained party cadres from which to recruit political candidates (Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020). As a matter of consequence, most legislators elected on the ticket of personal parties are political novices with limited political experience and dubious ideological leanings (Cirhan and Kopecký 2017; Kefford and McDonnell 2018; Kopeček 2016; McDonnell 2013). To provide these inexperienced and potentially unruly legislators with a blueprint of how to behave and which activities to prioritize, a clear set of rules of conduct is usually put in place by the party leadership (Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020; Kopeček 2016; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017). These serve as the basis for internal promotions as well as renomination decisions. The political fortunes of female MPs elected on the ticket of personal parties therefore lie in their ability to live up to their party's well-communicated expectations.

This article focuses on a Slovak personal party, *Sloboda a solidarita* (SaS, Freedom and Solidarity), founded in 2009 by a former entrepreneur Richard Sulík. In the 2016 election, more women were elected on the ticket of this party than any of its political rivals. This is because women are well-represented within the party's most senior cohort of team leaders. Each team leader is entrusted with a carefully delineated issue domain and acts as the party's spokesperson and expert within the scope of that domain. In return for privileged access to reelection, the team leaders are expected to engage in various visibility- and name-recognition-enhancing activities to strengthen the party's label as a party of experts-turned-politicians. Using legislator shadowing, this study examines how the party's legislators go about fulfilling their party's expectations and whether the path to their fulfillment is gendered.

Building on the insights from feminist institutionalism research, this article anticipates that personal parties' unique attributes might not be sufficient in facilitating a more gender-equal access to political seniority (Lowndes 2020; Mackay and Waylen 2014). This is because personal parties do not operate in isolation from masculinity-infused informal norms that are firmly entrenched in the political domain and make men appear as more suited for those assignments and posts that are politically meriting (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Kenny 2013; Kenny and Verge 2016; Murray 2010). Using the analytical framework of Gains and Lowndes (2014) to study the role of informal rules and norms in producing gendered (political) outcomes, this article shows that the female MPs elected on the ticket of the SaS party encounter a number of structural disadvantages. First, the party's female MPs are disproportionately entrusted with team leader portfolios that are of secondary importance to the party and/or for which they lack the necessary background. While the latter prevents the female team leaders from being as engaged as their male counterparts in name-recognition-enhancing activities, the former puts them at risk of being overlooked by the party's support staff. Finally, the desire of some

female MPs to “trade” the portfolio they have been given for one that better matches their background and skills puts them at risk of being perceived as in-subordinate by the party leader. These findings highlight the limitations of new political institutions that enter a highly gendered political arena to create a working environment where women are not at a disadvantage.

A More Gender-Neutral Path to Political Seniority in Personal Parties?

Political parties have a major say in determining who the elected politicians will be and who will get access to political seniority (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Hazan and Rahat 2010; Rahat 2007; Siavelis and Morgenstern 2008). Most political parties continue to be gendered organizations in which deeply entrenched stereotypical conceptions about gender and gender roles permeate the “rules of the game”—both formal and informal, in ways that disadvantage women (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016; Kenny and Verge 2016; Lowndes 2020). Women are less likely to be seen as “promising” legislators by their party superiors, who cling onto their gendered preconceptions of an “ideal” politician (Bjarnegård 2018; Verge and Claveria 2018). Party selectors are shown to overlook female MPs’ political experience, hold them to a higher qualification standard, or belittle their political victories (Anzia and Berry 2011; Bauer 2020; Fulton 2012; Niven 2006; O’Brien 2015). As a result, female politicians are less likely to be selected for those senior political posts and assignments that come with meaningful political influence (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Verge and Astudillo 2019; Verge and Claveria 2018). What is more, female MPs often find themselves on the outside of the informal “gentlemen’s clubs” that complement the party’s formal structures (Bjarnegård 2013; Kenny 2013; Niven 2006). In these mostly homosocial informal circles, future party insiders learn the “tricks of the trade” from their superiors by, for instance, getting to co-sponsor high-profile bill proposals or being privy to informal discussions in which insider information is shared (Erikson and Josefsson 2019; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008). The networks’ primary function is to provide a safety net for the party seniors who trade access to valuable political goods for the loyalty of their younger cadres (Bjarnegård 2013; 2018). Excluded from the networks, female politicians are often disproportionately concentrated in those posts that are not in high demand and come with a heavy administrative workload (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Kenny 2013; Lowndes 2020; Murray 2010; Verge and Claveria 2018).

If women’s political career progression is adversely affected by institutionalized informal rules that date back to the times when the political profession was almost exclusively a men-only affair, then new political parties might help to de-gender the political arena (Evans and Kenny 2020; Gains and Lowndes 2014; Kenny 2013). Free of any institutional legacies at the time of their

formation, new parties can institutionalize a model of party organization that does not put any gender in an arbitrarily disadvantageous position (Mackay and Waylen 2014). While the new party family of women's parties has recently attracted scholarly attention (Cowell-Meyers, Evans, and Shin 2020; Evans and Kenny 2020), another party family of personal parties has evaded scrutiny. Personal parties, also referred to as "business-firm" (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999; Kopeček 2016; Krouwel 2003; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017) or "entrepreneurial" (Arter 2016; Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020; Kopeček 2016) parties, have become a commonplace in Europe and beyond (Kefford and McDonnell 2018). These extremely leader-dominated political parties share a number of features that might help to facilitate women's political empowerment.

An important characteristic of personal parties is their adherence to the "anti-politics" discourse (Arter 2016; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017; McDonnell 2013). Personal parties often brand themselves as an alternative to the sitting political establishment that will put an end to the informal "ways of doing" in politics, eradicate political corruption, and cut back on the burgeoning public sector (Kefford and McDonnell 2018; Kopeček 2016; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017). One way of embodying this brand is to recruit party cadres who differ from the sitting elites in terms of background and/or identity. By controlling the candidate selection process, the party leader is in a good position to decide who the party's elected representatives will be (Hinojosa 2009; Kopeček 2016). This enables the recruitment of political newcomers straight into top party positions. New candidates are often selected from outside the party structures for their proven managerial skills rather than a track record of loyal party service (Cirhan and Kopecký 2017; Kopeček 2016; McDonnell 2013). In political systems where the sitting political elites are predominantly men, selecting women into visible party positions can be an effective strategy to be seen as a visual alternative to the political establishment. Existing evidence suggests that some personal parties do indeed recruit more women in male-dominated political settings. Kostadinova and Mikulska (2017) show that personal parties in Bulgaria and Poland field more female candidates and place them in more electable ballot spots (see Jankowski and Marcinkiewicz (2018) for a rebuttal of their findings in Poland).

Investigating whether personal parties can create a working environment where female MPs have the same chances as their male colleagues to progress in their political careers must take us beyond their documented readiness to recruit more female candidates and promote more women into visible party positions. The important question is whether the women elected on the ticket of personal parties get to stay long enough to establish themselves as relevant political players and gain political influence. The most natural gateway to political seniority is through reelection (Luhiste 2015; Murray 2008; Rahat

2007). In order to get a chance to seek reelection, sitting incumbents must first be renominated by their political parties. While incumbent renomination is often a formality in most majoritarian systems, it can be a challenging hurdle to clear in proportional representation (PR) systems (Shair-Rosenfield and Hinojosa 2014). In these systems characterized by strong party identification, unruly or underperforming incumbents can be quietly demoted by their parties, often without the risk of alienating the core party electorate (Rahat 2007). It is in PR systems where personal parties have been shown to make swift and lasting inroads (Arter 2016; Kopeček 2016; McDonnell 2013).

The first step toward understanding whether personal parties can facilitate women's political seniority is therefore to examine the formal and informal rules that govern access to the party ballot for sitting incumbents. On this front, another crucial characteristic feature of personal parties comes to the fore. The legislator cohort of personal parties often consists of political novices with little to none political experience and unclear ideological leaning (Cirhan and Kopecký 2017; Kopeček 2016). In order to make sure that this diverse group of MPs remains cohesive, a comprehensive set of rules of expected conduct is often put in place by the party leader (Cirhan and Kopecký 2017; Kefford and McDonnell 2018; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017). These rules reflect the nature of personal parties by encouraging the legislators to engage in various visibility- and name recognition-enhancing activities, the aim of which is to help to strengthen the party's brand as a party of hardworking political managers (Kopeček 2016). Though relatively unconstrained in his/her power over the party, the party leader must enforce these rules or else risk that the whole structure might fall apart. Those who live up to the expectations set out by these rules are likely to be rewarded in the form of renomination and/or internal promotion.

On paper, the path to political seniority is straightforward in personal parties. The rank-and-file legislators are provided with a comprehensive list of dos and don'ts that gives them a clear idea of what they need to do to be able to climb the party's career ladder. This sets personal parties apart from their more traditional counterparts where access to promotion is regulated by formal rules that are ambiguous and often hijacked by informal, and often gendered, rules and norms about who is a "prospective" politician. But even in the case of personal parties, there is reason to be apprehensive (Gains and Lowndes 2014; Kenny 2013; Lowndes 2020). First, despite their newness, personal parties enter a unique social domain governed by an intricate web of institutional rules, norms, practices, and rituals that are gendered (Lowndes 2020; Mackay and Waylen 2014). In many parliamentary workplaces, a clear informal delineation exists between roles, tasks, and duties that are "masculine" and those that are "feminine" (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2016; Rosenthal 1997; Schwindt-Bayer 2006). These informal norms

can make quick inroads into personal parties and cause an asymmetric distribution of politically meriting tasks and duties between female and male legislators. Second, the potential role of key actors in gendering institutional rules by creating, interpreting, and implementing them should not be underestimated (Lowndes 2020). The extreme centralization of power that characterizes personal parties gives the party leader a prime role in shaping the party's organizational structure and institutional rules. If this critical actor holds gendered views about the political competence of men and women, then these are likely to make their way into the party's institutional rules. Evans and Kenny (2020) study the rules that govern the UK Women's Equality Party, a women's party established in 2015. They find that, despite the founders' efforts, the party has put in place an organizational structure that is similar to those that characterize traditional male-dominated parties (see also Kenny 2013). Finally, the ideological fluidity that characterizes personal parties might also jeopardize their capacity to foster women's representation. While many personal parties remain ideologically ambiguous, some establish themselves in the radical-right corner of the ideological spectrum (Arter 2016). Those are unlikely to put in place an organizational structure that does not disadvantage women (see, however, Rashkova and Zankina 2017).

The goal of this study is to examine whether the unique combination of attributes that characterize personal parties can create a working environment where women have the same chances as their male counterparts to reach political seniority. This paves the way for an institutionalist analysis of the rules of expected conduct that serve as the basis for renomination- and internal-promotion decisions. As a tool for analyzing these rules as well as the path to their fulfillment, the feminist institutionalist analytical framework of Gains and Lowndes (2014) is used. The four analytical categories encompassed in this framework enable an in-depth analysis of the potentially gendered nature of rules as well as their unintended gendered consequences. The first analytical category, *rules about gender*, encompasses formal and informal institutional rules that implicitly target gender. Rules about gender can, for instance, stipulate how many women are to be represented in a particular institution. Second, *rules that have gendered effects* are those that are seemingly gender-neutral but might have gendered effects if they interact with norms, rules, practices, and symbols outside or inside the political domain that are gendered (Gains and Lowndes 2014, 528). Third, *actors can be gendered* too. Political actors' interpretation and enactment of institutional rules can have gendered consequences even if institutional rules appear to be gender-neutral (Gains and Lowndes 2014, 529). Moreover, actors can adapt, resist, or reform institutional rules in ways that might have gendered consequences (Lowndes 2020). The final category of *gendered outcomes of action shaped by rules* highlights the possibility that even a whole new system of rules might not produce the expected outcomes. This holds true especially if the new institutional rules

interact with traditional gender norms that prescribe appropriate roles and behavioral styles to women and men.

The Slovak “Liberals”: A Personal Party in a Male-Dominated Context

To investigate whether personal parties can harbor a working environment that facilitates women’s political seniority, the Slovak SaS party has been chosen. The Slovak Republic has a flexible-list PR system with a 5 percent threshold for securing parliamentary representation. The country’s three-decade-old democratic system is still plagued by rampant political corruption and a sluggish pace of reform. This is a breeding ground for new parties that, campaigning on “anti-politics” and anti-corruption platforms, can relatively quickly gain parliamentary seats. In the 2016 election, eight parties secured parliamentary representation, three of which can be classified as personal parties: SaS of Richard Sulík, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) of Igor Matovič, and We Are Family of Boris Kollár. The SaS party is primarily of market-liberal leaning and is also an example of a resilient personal party, having defended its parliamentary presence in three consecutive elections (by 2019). This means that the party is likely to have institutionalized its “ways of doing” and is a good candidate for an institutionalist analysis. The study focuses on the 2016–2020 parliamentary term, which was the party’s third term in the national parliament. During this term, the party had the highest share of female legislators among its competitors (35 percent at its highest) and appointed women as a deputy speaker of the house and as chairperson of the influential parliamentary committee for economic affairs.

The SaS party is extremely centralized and has a vertical party organization. The founder and leader, Richard Sulík, controls the party’s decision-making bodies and takes most personnel- and program-related decisions on the party’s behalf. From its formation in 2009, the party built its electoral appeal on the pledge to replace the corrupt political establishment with a new class of experienced political managers and streamline the burgeoning public sector. To strengthen this brand, the party leader founded an elite corps of “team leaders” who are each entrusted with a clearly delimited portfolio, such as foreign affairs, transport, business environment, or culture. This cohort of party seniors is a visual embodiment of the party’s mission to train and supply for office a new class of experts-turned-politicians. As Slovakia is one large electoral district with a district magnitude of one hundred and fifty seats, political parties only need to prepare one national party ballot with a rank-ordered list of up to one hundred and fifty candidates. The lack of regional party lists allows the party leader to unilaterally decide who will occupy the most electable ballot spots. Though voters can express their preference for up to four individual candidates, a candidate’s ballot position is still the main determinant of their election fortunes. As of 2015, the most electable section of the SaS

party's ballot is reserved for the team leaders. In return for this privileged access to (re-)election, the team leaders need to abide by a comprehensive set of rules of conduct. These encourage the team leaders to engage in various visibility-enhancing activities that improve their name recognition and boost the party's signature brand as a party of experts. Those team leaders who live up to the party leader's high expectations are also likely to be offered senior legislative or executive positions that are available to the party. Being a team member can therefore be a gateway to meaningful political influence.

The Slovak political arena continues to be extremely male-dominated. While the country has seen a female prime minister and, more recently, a female president, the share of women in the parliament has been stagnating at around 20 percent since Slovakia's independence in 1993. This status quo makes the recruitment of female candidates a viable tactic to look apart from political rivals. While the SaS party does not usually field more female candidates than its competitors, it did place more female candidates into electable ballot positions ahead of the 2016 election, mainly due to the party leader's decision to reserve the upmost section of the ballot for the team leaders. In 2016, when this study was initiated, there were fifteen team leaders who were placed in positions two to seventeen on the ballot (five women and nine men). By the time the study was concluded (2019), there were seven female and eight male team leaders.

The SaS party succeeded at electing more female MPs than its political rivals in 2016 because of the relatively high share of women among the party's team leaders. Studying the political fortunes of these women is thus the key to understanding whether the SaS party can facilitate women's political seniority in Slovak politics. This study proceeds by mapping out the rules of conduct that embody the party leader's ideas about being a successful team leader and by analyzing whether the path to fulfilling these expectations is gendered.

Empirical Strategy

Institutionalist approaches urge scholars to take seriously the interplay between formal and informal institutional rules when studying institutional outcomes. The central challenge faced by all empirical inquiries into informal rules is that they often operate on the subconscious level (Helmke and Levitsky 2006). In other words, informal rules and norms are such a natural part of peoples' social reality that they become virtually "invisible" to those actors that encounter them on a daily basis (Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). There is a growing consensus in the literature that participant observation is a suitable method for studying both formal and informal institutional rules and their interaction (Schatz 2009). Recent contributions of Miller (2018) and Galea (2018) demonstrate the usefulness of participant observation as a way of studying the interplay between formal and informal rules in male-dominated environments.

This study has proceeded in two stages. In the first stage (October and November 2016), the formal rules of conduct used by the SaS party were mapped out. To this end, a series of elite interviews with the party leader as well as the party's rank-and-file legislators were conducted. Realizing that open-ended questions about the internal rules of conduct could put the study at risk of social desirability bias, the party leader was presented with party ballots from two consecutive elections and asked to reason why pairs of similarly performing legislators ended up in different ballot spots. His answers facilitated a more open discussion about the expectations a party leader has of "his" legislators. The party leader's account was then compared with those provided by rank-and-file legislators for the purposes of corroboration.

The second stage of the study (November–December 2017) took the form of a month-long on-site observation of legislators in their place of work (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Schatz 2009). An agreement was made with one of the party's legislators that involved doing assistant tasks for him/her in exchange for the chance to shadow her in her/his work (on shadowing while being an assistant, see Schumann 2009). The legislator as well as her colleagues were informed about the nature of the study and consented to taking part.² The point of this legislator shadowing was to get an undiluted glimpse at legislators' professional lives and study whether female and male legislators are equally likely to excel in the tasks embodied in the party's rules of conduct (Schatz 2009). Direct observations were complemented by ad-hoc and scheduled interviews with SaS parliamentarians and supporting staff as well as party documents. Only at this stage has it come to the author's attention that many of the rules of conduct identified in the first stage of the project are written down in a *legislator guidebook*. Getting a glimpse of this guidebook largely corroborated the results of the first stage of data collection. The total number of interviews conducted for this study was twenty-six, some of which were conducted with party leaders and ordinary legislators of other parties. The latter strategy served the purpose of contextualizing the results.

As with any study that involves direct observation, a brief note on how the author's own identity might have affected his ability to study the social reality in as objective manner as possible is needed (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). While a longer discussion is available in this study's [Online Appendix](#), it needs to be stressed that the researcher's ability to speak Slovak, being of the same sex, and of similar age as the rest of the assistant staff, helped to ease the process of blending into the parliamentary environment.

Results

The presentation of the results is organized into two sections. In this first section, the SaS party's rules of expected conduct that serve as the basis of party leader's renomination- and ballot-placement decisions are presented.

The second section is an analysis of whether the fulfillment of the expectations that the rules embody is gendered.³

Legislator Guidebook: Professionalism, Visibility, and Sticking to Your Portfolio

As mentioned earlier, the topmost section of the party's ballot has, at least since 2015, been reserved for the elite corps of team leaders. In return for this privileged access to reelection, the team leaders are expected to follow a set of clear and well-communicated rules of conduct (Interviews 1–3, 16, and 21). The satisfactory fulfillment of these rules serves as a basis for decisions about ballot placement and internal promotions. In 2019, the party had fifteen team leaders and a track record of volatile voter support. This meant that ending up on the bottom of the ballot section reserved for the team leaders was no certain ticket to reelection, and the team leaders needed to work hard to secure a safe ballot position. All the team leaders interviewed for this study expressed their interest in being reelected and were motivated to do their best to live up to their party's high expectations.

The rules of conduct for the team leaders center on measurable attributes of their political performance and are assessed in a systematic fashion by the party leader and his staff (Interview 1). The criteria can be classified into three categories: *professionalism*, *ability to attract media attention*, and *staying within the boundaries of one's portfolio*.

The team leaders are expected to work tirelessly on enhancing their name recognition by being active on social media, organizing press conferences, writing blog posts (each team leader is required to write at least ten blog posts per year), or publishing op-eds in the national press. Exposing government corruption is particularly welcome as it can enhance the party's carefully crafted brand as an anti-corruption party. The team leaders are discouraged from outgrowing their party leader in terms of popularity and are therefore expected to stay within the boundaries of their respective portfolios. At least one team leader has disregarded this explicit expectation. Martin Poliačik, a former team leader for education, has publicly expressed his opinion on a number of issues not related to his portfolio. As his popularity grew, the party leader issued public warnings that the continued surpassing of his portfolio would cost him his team leadership (Tódová 2017a). After these were ignored, Poliačik was stripped of his team leadership, which hampered his prospects of getting a safe ballot spot in the future and prompted him to leave the party. Another team leader left the party after having challenged the party leader to a leadership contest (Tódová 2017b).

Succeeding as a Team Leader: Is the Path Gendered?

Distribution of expert portfolios and their resonance. The distribution of expert portfolios is firmly in the hands of the party leader who can assign

and reassign them at his discretion (Interviews 1–2, 14–17, and 21). Two clearly gendered aspects of the distribution of expert portfolios have been identified. Women are allocated portfolios that do not always match their educational or professional backgrounds and are disproportionately entrusted with those portfolios that are not directly connected to the party's main issue profiling. On the former front, a number of female team leaders expressed dissatisfaction with the portfolios they have been allocated. One remarked: "I do not feel at home in this area and I have no background in it" (Interview 21). She went on to explain how the portfolio was allocated to her: "They found no one else for [it] so I got stuck with it. . . . But as I already said, this is not my field" (Interview 21). At least two other female team leaders have been allocated portfolios that do not match their educational or professional background: "I have no training in [this area] so I am not the same kind of an expert as others in the party. There are people who would be better suited for this post but, until we find someone, I am happy to go on" (Interview 17). She also felt that the first few months in her role as team leader were challenging: "I felt lost and it took me a really long time to make decisions" (Interview 17). All in all, three of the four female team leaders interviewed for this study expressed an opinion that their educational profile or professional experience were not directly meriting for the portfolio with which they have been entrusted. At the same time, none of the male team leaders mentioned facing the same predicament.

The party profiles itself primarily as a party of experts on the economy (Interviews 1, 2, 13, 15, 16, 18, and 22). Many of the interviewees argued that economy-related issues continue to define the party (Interviews 13–17 and 20–23). Such a clear profiling means that some of the portfolios are seen as more central to the party than others (Interviews 15–17 and 22). Women hold a disproportional number of portfolios that are not directly related to the economy. These include integration of marginalized communities, social affairs, culture, health care, and the environment. Only one female team leader held an economy-related team leadership in 2019. At the same time, most male team leaders hold portfolios that are directly linked to the economy, such as transport, energy, education, taxation, or the "thin" state. Some of the interviewees reflected on this apparent disadvantage: "I will be honest, [my area] is on the very margin of this party's interest. It is an issue domain, similar perhaps to the environment, that is not prioritized at all" (Interview 21). Another female interviewee concurred: "Many people, both inside and outside the party, believe that we at first need to tackle the big challenges and these [other issues] will be dealt with later" (Interview 16). This sentiment, in one form or another, was expressed by all -female team leaders interviewed for this study (Interviews 5, 16–17, and 21). The overarching feeling was that the portfolios held by women are treated as being of secondary importance to the party.

Analytically speaking, we note that two dynamics are at play as far as the distribution of expert portfolios is concerned. As the party leader alone is responsible for assigning the expert portfolios, this is likely to be the case of *an actor maneuvering the institutional setup in ways that have gendered consequences*. While the party leader clearly has an agenda of making the team leader cohort gender-balanced, he stops short of providing the female team leaders with the same opportunities that their male counterparts have. The likely explanation is that while the party leader wants to signal the party's readiness to recruit more women than its competitors, he is reluctant to entrust those portfolios to women that are of primary interest to the party (Interviews 1, 16, and 23). Furthermore, the dynamic surrounding the distribution of the portfolios can also be viewed as an example of *gendered outcomes of action shaped by rules*. The allocation of expert portfolios might be influenced by stereotypical views that prescribe suitable political roles to men and women. This means that women end up with typically "feminine" portfolios, such as culture or social affairs, regardless of whether these portfolios match their particular background or not. The party leader might also fear that women might be ill-equipped to gain influence in traditionally masculine political domains. On this note, one of the interviewees has speculated that the party leader is more interested in showcasing women than empowering them (Interview 16).

Gendered Access to Output Promotion and Visibility. The structural disadvantages identified above prevent the female team leaders from engaging in visibility- and name-recognition-enhancing activities on a par with their male colleagues. One of the recurrent complaints was that the lack of an organic link between their professional background and the portfolio they have been assigned limits the female team leaders' ability to come up with new ideas. One team leader complained: "I don't want to embarrass myself [at press conferences]. That's why I don't do press conferences so often" (Interview 17). Another one believed that the insufficient knowledge she has of her portfolio impedes her ability to deliver press conferences: "... this is not my home turf, I have no background in it. I know there are potential corruption cases that are bigger [than those currently pursued by the party] ... I just need to start working on them" (Interview 21).

The secondary status of the portfolios held by female team leaders makes it more challenging for them to come up with ideas that would be of interest to the party. One female team leader remarked:

[I]t's always about the topic, the party has its priority topics, some kind of profiling – and, naturally, those themes that are organically linked to this profiling are prioritized. So yes, it has happened to me that my topic was perceived as too technical and too difficult [to grasp] to be presented in the form of a press conference. I did complain, but they didn't change their minds. (Interview 16)

A comprehensive system was put in place to determine whether an idea/issue should be presented in form of a press conference (Interviews 14, 16, 20, and 22). Each proposal needs to first be approved by the party leader or both of his deputies (Interviews 16 and 22). The press aides have an advisory role in this process, the aim of which is to help the leadership to evaluate the suitability of the proposed topics. This is where holding a less “prestigious” portfolio might turn out to be a disadvantage. One of the senior party press aides admitted that issues related to the economy, corruption, health care, or education tend to take precedence over other topics (Interview 22). Since the majority of the less prestigious portfolios are held by women, gendered imbalances can arise. The press aides’ mandate to evaluate whether an idea is to be given a green light or whether further fact-checking is needed is another potential source of gender bias. The press aides have the power to delay certain topics for a number of reasons: there are too many press conferences in the pipeline, the topic is not sufficiently interesting or researched, or the initiator has recently held too many press conferences. Female legislators find it harder to “sell” their ideas, which affects their willingness to approach the press aides. On this front, one interviewee noted:

I have a feeling that [the press aides] prefer to work with men—they [are more likely to] brainstorm with men and suggest topics to them. [One of the male team leaders] is recording a vlog about a topic that I came up with. No one asked me if I wanted to join . (Interview 16)

If we consult the typology of [Gains and Lowndes \(2014\)](#) typology, we note that the dynamic can be best explained as a combination of *rules that have gendered consequences scenario* and *gendered agents working with rules*. Female team leaders are disadvantaged on three mutually reinforcing fronts. First, the mismatch between their educational/professional background and the portfolio they have been entrusted makes it more difficult for them to identify potential issues as dynamically as their male colleagues. Second, the particular profiling of the party adds to the challenge by making it challenging to frame the issues in a way that is consistent with the party’s overall profiling. Finally, the very existence of a particular profiling makes the supporting staff react differently to male and female team leaders’ press initiatives. The intention is not sexist in nature, but the consequences are gendered.

Gendered Aspects of Portfolio Trespassing. As mentioned earlier, the party leader is very clear about his expectation that all team leaders stay within the boundaries of their respective portfolios (Interviews 1, 16, and 22). Being entrusted with a portfolio that does not match one’s professional background can wake a desire to venture out of the portfolio’s boundaries. Since it is much more common for female incumbents to be given a mismatching portfolio, they are at a greater risk of surpassing their portfolios. Coincidentally, one such case has been observed in the course of this study, which can be

classified as a *gendered outcome of action shaped by rules* (Gains and Lowndes 2014).

One female team leader expressed her desire to change her portfolio for a different one. The portfolio she was interested in would better match her background and make it easier for her to deliver the kind of output that is expected of her (Interviews 16, 21, and 23). The author encountered a number of instances when the legislator in question shared her desire to change her portfolio with her colleagues. One such encounter was at a lunch where three other legislators, one man and two women, were present. Here, the team leader asked her colleagues to advise her on how she should go about changing her portfolio. The female legislators offered practical advice: they argued that she should just informally take on the agenda and start behaving as if she was already given the team leadership. The only male legislator in the room disagreed. He advised his colleague to first check with the sitting team leader and then take up the matter with the party leader. The tone of his voice was discouraging and skeptical, differing profoundly from the helpful and encouraging tone of the female legislators. The difference between the recommendations received from the male and female fellow legislators shows the different degrees to which the legislators are acquainted with some of the unwritten rules that govern the party. The plight of the female legislator was spontaneously brought up by another male legislator in an interview. He was very skeptical that she could achieve her aim: “She simply does not have what it takes to drive such a big agenda. And we already have an expert on this within the party, so she cannot just take it” (Interview 23). The team leader in question never managed to achieve her aim of changing her portfolio.

Concluding Discussion

Personal parties appeal to voters by branding themselves as a new type of a party that will bring an end to the “old ways of doing” in politics, and supply for office a new class of political managers (Kefford and McDonnell 2018; Kopeček 2016; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017). This political strategy requires novel ways of doing politics as well as new styles of “performing” politics in order to visually embody a new breed of politicians (Cirhan and Kopecký 2017). Some personal parties that emerge in political systems dominated by men are shown to elect more women and nominate more female politicians into visible party positions—likely as part of their strategy to look apart from their political competitors (Kostadinova and Mikulska 2017). To provide their legislators with a blueprint of how to behave and which activities to prioritize, a set of clear rules of expected conduct is put in place by the leadership of personal parties. The satisfactory fulfillment of these rules often serves as a basis for internal promotions. This study investigated whether this unique feature of personal parties can help to facilitate women’s political seniority by making

access to reelection and political influence less dependent on belonging to the right gentlemen's club or having the right set of (masculine) virtues (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016).

The possibility that personal parties could facilitate a more genuine inclusion of women in politics is not all too unrealistic. In 2017, Andrej Babiš's ANO in the Czech Republic has initially nominated four women to fill the ten ministerial positions available to the party, an unusually high number within the Czech context. In 2016, Virginia Raggi of the Italian Five Star Movement became the first woman to be elected mayor of Rome, and in 2011, the Palikot Movement (RP) made international headlines when the first trans woman in Polish history was elected from the party's ballot.

The results of this study, however, challenge the idea that personal parties might be better than traditional parties at facilitating women's political seniority. While the SaS party does indeed have an unusually high number of women within its most prominent party cohort of team leaders, these women face very similar structural impediments to those found in other parties by previous research. The party's female team leaders are entrusted with portfolios that are of secondary importance to the party or for which they lack the necessary background, while their male colleagues are given positions that come with greater visibility and better assistance from the support staff. Moreover, the mismatch between the portfolios held by some of the female team leaders and their primary areas of expertise puts them at a higher risk of surpassing their portfolios, which is explicitly discouraged.

What is likely to explain these gendered dynamics? The existence of gendered norms that define politics as a masculine domain that is inhospitable to women most likely bears part of the responsibility (Gains and Lowndes 2014). These informal norms are likely to make inroads into personal parties regardless of their relative newness via critical actors or through interactions with other political parties (Evans and Kenny 2020; Pruyssers and Blais 2017). The party leader's willingness to recruit women into the team leader cohort might have more to do with political tactics than his desire to empower women. His subsequent hesitation to nominate women into the "key" team leader positions might be driven by fear that such a move could put the party at a disadvantage in important political battles. Since women are allocated portfolios that are on the fringes of their party's interest, it is more challenging for them to live up to the expectations set out for them by the party. This might, in turn, reinforce the party leader's conviction that women are not suitable for the "top party jobs" that come with meaningful influence over agenda-setting. These findings demonstrate that female politicians elected on the ticket of the SaS party face similar structural impediments as their counterparts in traditional parties despite the clarity of the rules of expected conduct that help to illuminate the path to political promotion and the party leader's apparent commitment to recruiting women.

How do these results travel? In-depth qualitative studies are always stronger on internal validity than their generalizability potential. Even though the SaS party is a textbook example of a personal party, the dynamics described here might not necessarily travel to other personal parties. It is worth remembering that one of the signature features of personal parties is the dominant role of the party leader in forming and reforming the party organization and institutional rules. This means that each personal party is likely to be unique in terms of party organization, degree of institutionalization, as well as ideological alignment. In many ways, the SaS party provided nearly ideal conditions for fostering women's representation, including a fairly gender-balanced cohort of party seniors and a political context where promoting women into senior party positions can indeed help to enhance the party's elite-renewal brand. The evidence that the female legislators elected on the ticket of this party are met with various gender-specific structural constraints sheds doubt upon the expectation that personal parties could facilitate women's political seniority. The gendered dynamics identified in this study are, nevertheless, likely to be of analytical relevance in other political contexts. The results add to the existing evidence that the heavily gendered informal rules and norms that are deeply entrenched in the political domain can quickly find their way into new political institutions (Evans and Kenny 2020; Gains and Lowndes 2014; Kenny 2013; Mackay and Waylen 2014). The added value of this study is that it examines a new political institution that has a number of institutional features that could limit the influence of gender bias on the way this institution operates. This study's results suggest that any serious efforts at degendering the political arena and its institutions must account for and actively target all the gendered informal rules and norms that are entrenched in it. If unchecked, these informal institutions might continue to shape institutional outcomes in ways that disadvantage women long after changes to the formal institutional structure have been made.

List of Interviews

October–November 2016: Study of the Rules of Conduct

SaS

Interview 1: Party leader

Interview 2: Male team leader

Interview 3: Male incumbent without team leadership

Interview 4: Male incumbent without team leadership

Interview 5: Female team leader #1

Most-Híd

Interview 6: Party leader

Interview 7: Female incumbent

SMER-SD

Interview 8: Male incumbent

Interview 9: Male incumbent

Interview 10: Male incumbent

Interview 11: Female incumbent

Interview 12: Female incumbent

November–December 2017: Site-Intensive Study of the SaS Party**SaS**

Interview 13: Male team leader

Interview 14: Male team leader

Interview 15: Female team leader

Interview 16: Female team leader #2

Interview 17: Female team leader

Interview 18: Female team leader

Interview 19: Male team leader

Interview 20: Male team leader

Interview 21: Female team leader

Interview 22: Party press aide

Interview 23: Male incumbent without team leadership

SMER-SD

Interview 24: Female incumbent

OLaNO

Interview 25: Male incumbent

Interview 26: Male incumbent

Notes

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1. Political parties that share a number of key characteristics are interchangeably referred to in the literature as *entrepreneurial* (Arter 2016; Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020), *personal* (McDonnell 2013; Kostadinova and Mikulska 2017; Mazzoleni and Voerman 2017), *business firm* (Krouwel 2003), and more. This article uses the concept of “personal party” when referring to this party type, but any other aforementioned label could have been used instead. Forza Italia of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, ANO 2011 of Czech Prime Minister Andrej

- Babiš, or OĽaNO of Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovič count among the representatives of this party family.
2. More information about the methodological approach, anonymity, and reflexivity can be found in the [Online Appendix](#) (sections 3–5).
 3. A more detailed description of how the SaS party's candidate ballot is organized and background information on how the party's rules of conduct came into being can be found in section 2 of the [Online Appendix](#).

Supplementary data

[Supplementary data](#) are available at *SOCPOL* online.

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