

# Women in politics in the EU

## State of play

### SUMMARY

Exactly one hundred years after women won the vote or were first elected to parliament in some EU countries, the data show that women continue to be under-represented in politics and public life, in the European Parliament, national parliaments and governments, and local assemblies.

The arguments for gender balance in politics are numerous, and benefit not only women and female politicians, but also parties themselves and the rest of society. After all, women form half the population and need to be better represented in power structures. However, there is now solid evidence both of obstacles and of the strategies that are effective when it comes to increasing women's participation and representation. Here, political parties and the media can be both barriers and important enablers.

The EU has committed to achieving a gender balance in political representation and participation as a matter of justice, equality and democracy. Concrete recommendations have been made for achieving this goal, including specific action that could be taken by the EU institutions, national governments, political parties, civil society and the media.

In the run-up to the European elections in May 2019, new mandates in the Commission and European Council, and the end of the EU's current strategy for gender equality, there is a particular focus on how a better gender balance (at least 40 %) or gender parity (50 %), could be achieved in the next Parliament and for other high-level posts in the EU institutions, and how the EU and its Member States can move towards true parity democracy.



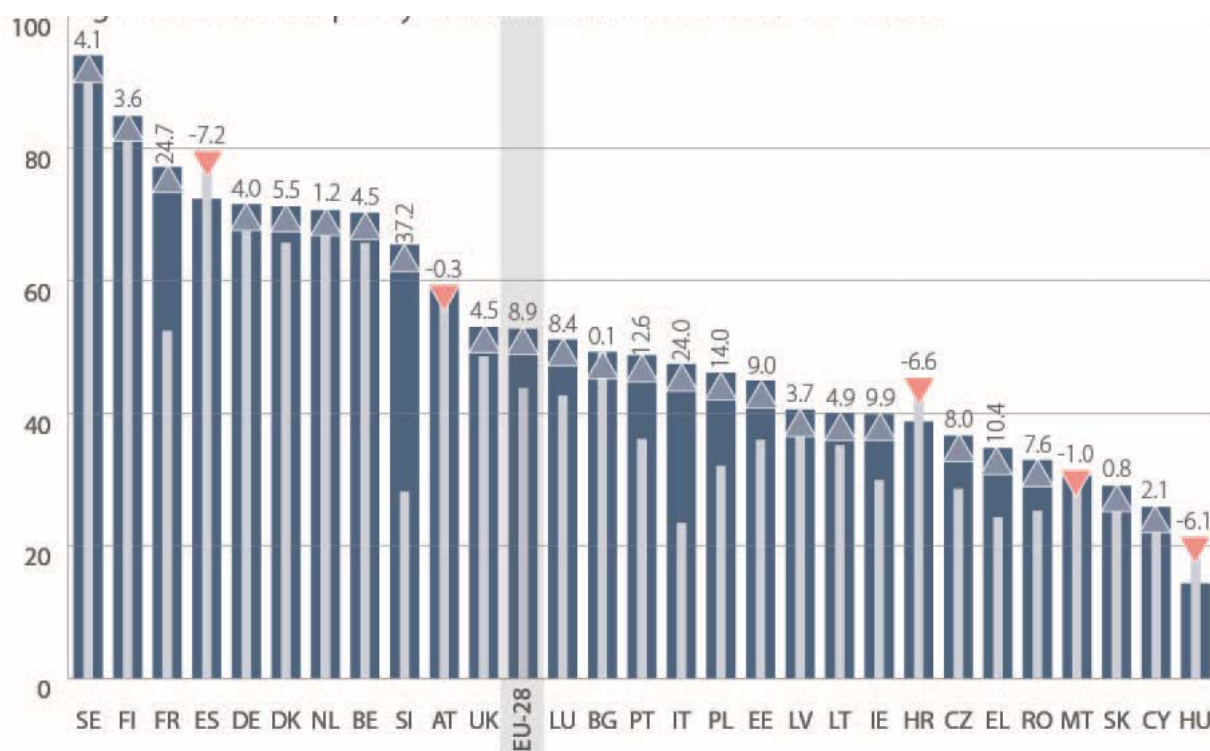
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## Context

In 2019, [several](#) EU countries are marking the centenary of women winning the right to vote in national elections ([Luxembourg](#), [the Netherlands](#)),<sup>1</sup> or the first women being elected to their national parliaments (Luxembourg, [Austria](#)) or holding a ministerial position ([Ireland](#)). Yet, one hundred years on, Europe-wide data show that women are still under-represented in political decision-making at local, national and European levels. The [Gender Equality Index](#) developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) to measure gender gaps over time shows that although 'power' is the area where most progress has been made in the past 10 years, it is also the area where the gender gap remains widest. With a score of 100 equalling [gender balance](#), Sweden is currently the only EU country to score over 90 on the 'political power' indicator, which is based on the share of women ministers, members of parliament and women in regional assemblies. Some Member States, such as Slovenia and France, have made major strides, but the fact that other countries' scores have declined, some from an already low base, illustrates that increases in women's political representation are [not necessarily linear](#) or self-evident (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Gender equality index – political power: 2017 vs 2005



Source: [EIGE gender statistics database: power, 2005 and 2017](#).

## Gender gap in political representation

### European level

From a low 16.6 % of female members in the first directly elected legislature in 1979, the percentage of women has risen after each election up to 35.8 % after the 2014 elections. The [latest figures](#) on gender balance in the European Parliament show that the percentage of women Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) has risen slightly since the 2014 elections and now stands at 36.1 %. This is above the world average for national parliaments and [above the EU average](#) for national parliaments, which stands at 30.2 %. However, there are large differences between Member States, ranging from those with a high percentage of women, such as Finland (76.9 %) or Croatia and Ireland (both 54.5 %) to others such as Estonia and Cyprus (both 16.7 %) and Bulgaria (17.6 %). Interestingly,

Malta, whose gender-equality record in national politics is near the bottom compared to other EU Member States, has gender parity in the European Parliament, with 50 % of its Members being women.

The composition of the [European Commission](#) has also yet to achieve gender parity. Nine of the current 28 Commissioners are women. A female Commissioner, Federica Mogherini, occupies the prominent post of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as well as being the only female Vice-President of the Commission (out of six).<sup>2</sup> The other policy areas run by female Commissioners are digital economy and society, competition, regional policy, justice, consumers and gender equality, internal market, industry, entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises, transport, employment, social affairs, skills and labour mobility, and trade.

## National level

In every EU Member State's [national parliament](#) there are more men than women (See Figure 2). When it comes to the members of national governments of Member States, Spain, Sweden and France lead the way in upholding the standards of equality, with 52.4 %, 52.2 % and 48.6 % of women respectively. Hungary and Malta are trailing with a mere 7.1 % and 12 % of women each. Cyprus and Italy also have very low numbers of women in government, 16.7 %, followed closely by Poland with 17 %. Only three Member States have women as prime ministers: Germany, Romania and the UK.

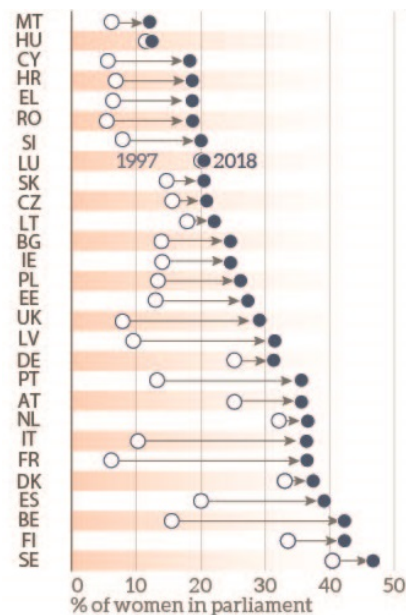
## Local and regional levels

The situation at national, regional and local and regional levels shows similar levels of gender inequality, with on average 33.3 % of women in [regional assemblies](#) in the EU. The high achievers at national level are also the high achievers at regional level, with Spain, France, Sweden and Finland approaching gender parity. At the other end of the spectrum are Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, with the percentage of women not even reaching 20 %. The [local and municipal councils](#) are also short of women, with the EU average equalling 32.1 % of women participating. Sweden and Finland are at the top, though only Sweden has over 40 % of women in local and municipal councils. The bottom has Romania, Cyprus, Greece and Croatia with below 20 % of women participating.

## Appointments to ministerial portfolios and parliamentary committees

[Analysis](#) of EIGE data found significant gender differences in the portfolios held by senior ministers in national governments. Men were most often assigned high profile portfolios such as foreign and internal affairs, defence and justice (42.5 % vs 33.1 %), and finance and industry (24 % vs 15.1 %), while women were more likely to be given socio-cultural portfolios such as health, education or social affairs (43.2 % vs 19.9 %). Country-level analysis for parliamentary committees in [Germany](#), [Sweden](#) and [Portugal](#), points to similar gender differences, but no single pattern of change over time. In Sweden, gender-based differences diminished as the share of women in parliament rose, but this was not the case in Germany. In the [European Parliament](#), women currently chair 12 of the 22 standing committees, including the committees on [budgetary control](#), the [internal market, security and defence](#) and [constitutional affairs](#). At the [start](#) of the current term, women were fractionally less likely than men to be assigned to the committee they preferred, but the difference in success rates was not statistically significant.

Figure 2 – Share of women in national parliaments



Source: [EIGE gender statistics database: power](#), 2018.

## Diversity of women in politics

There are no EU-wide data<sup>3</sup> on political representation of different groups of women, such as women from ethnic minorities, LGBTI women, older or younger women, or women with disabilities, but the data available suggest that these groups are under-represented. For example, [Roma minorities](#) are one of the most politically under-represented groups in the EU; the [Council of Europe](#) and [OSCE](#) have flagged the particularly low number of Roma women in elected office. A [2018 report](#) finds that European countries follow the global pattern of male parliamentarians outnumbering their female counterparts in every age category, albeit with more gender balance among younger MPs. Interestingly, [research](#) finds that throughout the European Parliament's history, from 1979 until the current 2014-2019 session, more young than middle-aged or older women have been elected.

## Public opinion

Voter attitudes towards women are a key determinant of how many women are elected. According to the [2017 Special Eurobarometer](#) survey on women in politics, 86 % of respondents think that a female political representative can represent their interests, with women being more likely to agree than men (88 % of women compared to 83 % of men). Slightly fewer respondents (82 %) think that a male political representative can represent their interests, with 80 % of them being women and 84 % of them being men.

Views on the existing distribution of power and whether there should be more women in decision-making positions are more nuanced and gendered. Among women, 62 % think that there should be more women in political decision-making positions in their country, while only 44 % of men agree. As regards the question of whether gender equality in politics has been achieved, 51 % of respondents think it has been achieved, more than at work (48 %) or in leadership positions in companies and other organisations (44 %). However, there is again a significant gap between men and women. Among men, 57 % think that gender equality has been achieved in politics, and among women, only 45 % agree. There are also significant differences among Member States, with 75 % thinking it has been achieved in Denmark or 67 % in Latvia or Finland, and significantly fewer people thinking it has been achieved in France (32 %), Hungary (35 %) or Spain (36 %).

The promotion of gender equality as being important to ensure a fair and democratic society is recognised by 91 % of respondents, with almost no gender difference. There is a difference among those who totally agree with this statement, 51 % of them being men and 57 % women.

## Women's political participation

Women's representation in parliaments and other elected political posts is not the only means through which women are politically active and does not give a complete picture of their power. Much has been written on female voter behaviour, for example, as well as other, non-electoral forms of political participation, such as protest participation, political persuasion and campaigning, where it has been [observed](#) that gender differences and inequalities still persist. When it comes to voting preferences, [research](#) has shown that women have been moving toward the left of men in advanced industrial societies, though not in post-communist societies, where women favour the right. Recent [research](#) also notes the increasing popularity of right-wing populist and right-wing extremist parties among women in Europe, in large part because of their ability to satisfy women's practical interests such as social policies focused on family welfare, increased family benefits and similar.

Many [studies](#) have shown that women on average tend to know or claim to know less about politics than men, although some research has demonstrated that other factors, such as question format in surveys where they are asked those questions or the content of the questions, may have an impact as well. This is problematic as political knowledge is crucial for effective participation in politics. Similar results can be seen in the [2018 Eurobarometer](#) survey, which reveals that women are more prone than men to state that they do not know the answer to a politics-related question.



The survey also reveals that women are on average less interested in EU affairs than men, with 49 % of women claiming to be interested compared to 60 % of men. However, when it comes to voting in elections, the gap between men and women decreases, with virtually no differences between men and women in giving importance to personally voting in national or European elections. Indeed, research has shown that traditional gender differences in voting participation [diminished](#) a couple of decades ago in many industrialised countries, although there are recent [studies](#) that show that this may be the case for national elections, but there is still a gender gap in voter turnout in second-order elections (of which the European Parliament elections are an example).

Research in the United States (US) has also [shown](#) that women are consistently less likely to participate in many political activities, such as making campaign contributions, joining political organisations or writing letters to political representatives, and the results were repeated in studies analysing several other democratic systems. There are several explanations for this phenomenon, but the most significant are those that attribute this difference to women's diminished resources compared to men and the societal values that may push women away from political activity. As regards non-electoral participation, research shows that across 18 industrialised democracies, women are more likely to sign a petition or raise money for a political group, but less likely to join a demonstration. Women are more likely to participate in political consumer activities than men, where they may buy or boycott products for political or ethical reasons.

## Why gender balance in politics matters

There are several arguments in favour of equal representation of women in politics. However, before addressing them, attention must be given to [two types](#) of representation that are expected to be achieved through gender equality measures: descriptive and substantive.<sup>4</sup> According to descriptive representation, which refers to achieving the requisite numbers of women in political leadership, the presence of women in political leadership is important in and of itself because it helps lend legitimacy to governing institutions and provides female role models. For example, [research](#) has shown that in some European countries, descriptive representation narrows gender differences in political participation, although this link may not be as straightforward in other contexts. Substantive representation, meanwhile, looks at the effects that could be achieved through better representation of women and postulates that the participation of women increases the likelihood both that women's interests will be adequately represented and that governing institutions will function more effectively owing to women's distinctive backgrounds and governing styles.

There have been several attempts to systematise the arguments into meaningful groups. The [United Nations](#), for example, summarised the arguments for more women in politics into six groups: the **justice** argument, according to which women account for approximately half the population and therefore have the right to be represented as such; the **experience** argument (women's experiences are different from men's and need to be represented in discussions that result in policy-making and implementation); the **interest** argument (the interests of men and women are different and even conflicting and therefore women are needed in representative institutions to articulate the interests of women); the **critical mass** argument (women are able to achieve solidarity of purpose to represent women's interests when they achieve certain levels of representation); the **symbolic** argument (women are attracted to political life if they have role models in the arena), and the **democracy** argument (the equal representation of women and men enhances democratisation of governance in both transitional and consolidated democracies).

The [OSCE](#) talks about the benefits of supporting women's political participation, and focuses on the main beneficiaries. It distinguishes between **traditional** benefits (based on the human rights instruments and international standards for democratic institutions), benefits for **political parties** (women and men bring different perspectives, and parties can reap benefits by including more women, as it improves party image and electoral strategy and combats decline in party membership), benefits for **women politicians** (enabling them to play a more prominent role in the political process and change perceptions regarding women's capacities) and benefits for **society**

(more women in power will raise awareness of policy issues affecting women and gender-based discrimination and increase public trust in the political system, because it is perceived as more representative of the electorate).

However, some of these arguments and assumptions have also been evaluated as [problematic](#).<sup>5</sup> The argument that claims that men's and women's experiences are different and need to be represented by men and women respectively is evaluated as problematic because it treats women as a homogenous group and assumes that there is a 'female' way of doing politics. Some research has found few gender differences in political leadership style or approach. There are many cases of female political leaders who belie the stereotype of women as more collaborative and conciliatory. However, there is research that proves otherwise: there have been reports that in the US Congress female style legislators are more collaborative than men and that women have an approach that is less confrontational and less partisan. It is also not entirely correct to assume that the advancement of issues important to women takes precedence over party affiliation or party loyalty in women politicians. Women politicians also have multiple identities, and their identity as a woman may not always prevail in identifying priorities. Some early female politicians had a tendency to minimise their identity as women and their association with women's issues.

## Obstacles to gender balance

While research initially attributed women's continued under-representation in politics to a lack of political ambition, it is now [recognised](#) that other more structural and societal barriers continue to hinder women from seeking office and from fulfilling their mandates or accessing leadership positions once they are elected. There are also concerns about [additional or specific barriers](#) that can face different groups of women on account of their age, class, ethnic background, religion, disability, or sexual orientation.

Since they are closely connected with different cultural, economic and political contexts and electoral systems, the obstacles that women politicians encounter are not identical across the EU. However, analyses find that [three inter-related](#) sets of factors contribute towards women's under-representation. First, there are **barriers that block the 'supply' of women entering politics**. These include women's individual perceptions of their own abilities and of the costs and risks of running for office, together with [broader factors](#) that can shape their choices and discourage them from doing so, such as: **unequal access to key resources** such as time, money, and political networks; **unequal family responsibilities; male-dominated political cultures** in parties and parliaments; **gender roles and stereotypes** in wider society; and an **absence of female role models**. Under the influence of [gender stereotyping](#), obstacles to women's participation in politics can start at a very young age, with the shaping of different career aspirations for girls and boys in school. Part of this stereotyping can be a message that women 'are not made for' politics or are not 'legitimate' political actors. Although women now sit alongside men in parliaments and government, powerful women – and the association of women with power – [continue to elicit](#) strong, negative reactions, which remain a barrier to women wishing to enter – and thrive – in politics and other areas of leadership. The **level of abuse and violence** directed at women in politics and public life because they are women, and sometimes because of their increased presence, is a [growing concern](#) in itself. There is also a risk that it will deter women from engaging in politics because they find the environment too toxic. A [survey](#) conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2018 found an alarming level of sexism, harassment and violence against women members of parliament (MPs) in Europe. Those aged under 40 were more frequently subject to psychological and sexual harassment, and MPs taking a strong stance on women's rights and gender equality were singled out for attack. A majority (79.2 %) of MPs who had been victims of harassment and violence were determined to stay in office and run for another term, but 33.3 % said that it had affected their freedom of expression and scope for action during their term of office. The high level of abuse against female parliamentary staff is also a concern, not least because this can be a starting point for a career in politics.

Second, there are **barriers limiting 'demand' for women candidates**. These include the way in which **political parties – as key gatekeepers to political office – recruit, select and champion candidates**, and **voters' preferences or attitudes** towards women's engagement in public life or as politicians. The relative influence of parties and voters [varies](#) in different electoral systems. In the most 'closed' systems, where voters vote for a party rather than individual candidates, parties have the greatest influence over which candidates are elected, but voters have more influence in 'open list' systems, where they are able to vote directly for specific candidates.

Third, it has been [established](#) that systems that are based entirely on proportional representation, or that include an element of proportional representation are more effective in promoting the election of female candidates than plurality/majority systems based entirely on single-member constituencies,<sup>6</sup> making electoral systems themselves a potential **institutional barrier**.

A [report](#) on women's experiences of selection and election to the UK Parliament highlights the cumulative impact these kinds of obstacles can have at different stages of the journey to political office and beyond.

## Specific obstacles to gender balance in the European Parliament

An [analysis](#) of the outcome of the 2014 elections found that women had been popular with the electorate and, where voters could express a preference for individual candidates, they appeared more likely to select women. In countries with a low proportion of female MEPs, one key reason was the low share of women in the candidate base. Party processes had been a significant contributing factor. Survey respondents felt that, owing to a reluctance on the part of [European political parties](#)<sup>7</sup> and EU actors in general to intervene in national political party decisions, European political parties had missed an opportunity to encourage their national parties to promote gender balance on party lists. Only two of the six largest European political parties had mentioned gender equality in their election manifesto and none had called specifically for the adoption of gender quotas. For future elections, the report called for a more complete and comprehensive dataset on candidates, electoral systems, gender and age of candidates, and quota or zipping systems applied, as a basis for more robust analyses of the factors that affect women's chances of election.

## Strategies for closing the gender gap

The [EIGE](#), the [expert committee](#) that advises on gender equality policy at EU level, the European Women's Lobby ([EWL](#)), the [Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly](#), and [research](#) for the European Parliament promote a holistic approach and have identified a number of good practices and steps that legislators, governments, parliaments, political parties and civil society can take to improve gender balance in political representation. These range from **'hard' measures** such as changing electoral systems and requiring legislated gender quotas, to **'soft' measures** such as introducing voluntary party quotas and providing training, mentoring, funding and other support for women candidates, particularly young women and women from under-represented minority groups.

From the broadest perspective, to **build a pipeline into public life and politics**, governments, political parties, civil society, the media and the European institutions can challenge the gender stereotypes that delegitimise women's participation and proactively encourage girls and women to get involved. Grassroots activism can lead to involvement in local politics, and then to politics at national level.

One Europe-wide survey<sup>8</sup> found that a sizeable minority of young party members have a longstanding desire to enter politics. A [survey](#) of women's political careers has also shown that many women wish to enter politics later in life, when they have fewer family responsibilities. Here, [political parties](#) can reach out proactively to **expand the pool of women candidates**. Women MPs [surveyed](#) in the UK said that being directly asked to run by their political party or a political mentor was a key factor in their decision to seek selection, a finding echoed in the global survey of women's political

careers. Political parties are also [urged](#) to give prospective women candidates a clear message that they are wanted, by adopting a statement on gender equality in their founding documents and putting it into practice, for example, by setting targets for female participation in party conventions, establishing women's sections and ensuring that gender is included in all of the party's policies. [Research](#) also suggests that **women's parties** have been successful in increasing women's representation in a number of EU countries, by 'embarrassing' other more mainstream and more powerful parties for not putting women forward as candidates, including women in party leadership, or addressing women's concerns.

Various forms of gender quotas (see box 1) have been found to be an effective way of **boosting the share of women candidates** – and getting more women elected. Research has [shown](#) that in some EU countries, the introduction of gender quotas led to immediate major leaps (increases of more than 10 percentage points) in women's representation in national parliaments, but in others, the results were slower or less successful. It concluded that quotas can increase women's representation but, to be effective, they must be designed to fit the electoral system, and include rules on the placing of candidates in 'winnable' seats and effective sanctions for non-compliance. In addition, [further steps](#) must be taken to reach a diverse range of women.

### Box 1 – Spotlight on gender quotas

[Gender quotas](#) are numerical targets stipulating a number or share of women – or candidates of either gender – that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women or either gender in a legislature. Mainly considered as temporary measures, to be discontinued once equality of opportunity and treatment has been achieved, they aim to reverse discrimination and hidden barriers preventing women from being selected as candidates and to level the playing field for women and men in politics. Advocates argue that, beyond increasing the overall presence of women in political institutions, they can create the kind of political system that allows both men and women to participate and gives the electorate real choices about who will represent them.

In Europe, there are [two](#) main types of gender quota: **legislated quotas** (implemented through reforms to electoral laws or constitutions, requiring that all parties nominate a certain proportion of women candidates on their electoral lists); and **voluntary party quotas** (commitments made by individual political parties to include a certain percentage of women party members among candidates for election). Both legal and voluntary party quotas may target any of the three stages in the candidate selection process: aspirants, candidates and elected representatives. Numerical quotas may also be supplemented by other measures, such as 'zipper systems' (mandated alternations of women and men on party lists), or [all women shortlists](#), aimed at ensuring that the measure is not purely symbolic and that women are selected in 'winnable' positions or seats.

The use of quotas is [controversial](#), as some have concerns that they violate the principle of merit, could lead to a decline in the quality of politicians, undermine the credibility of women politicians, or provoke hostility from the electorate. Nevertheless, across Europe,<sup>9</sup> including in [Central and Eastern Europe](#), where quotas were also delegitimised owing to their use under state socialism, there has been a move to introduce them and a shift from voluntary party quotas (adopted primarily by green, left and social-democratic parties), to legislated quotas that are binding for all political parties. For the 2014 European elections, [more than a third](#) of the 145 national parties surveyed in a European Parliament study imposed some form of gender quota and some parties also had quotas for ethnic minorities. For the 2019 European elections, legislated quotas will apply in 11 countries (Belgium, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia).

Aside from gender quotas, when it comes to **ensuring that more women are elected**, provision of **targeted support and training to run for office, including equal access to campaign funding**, have been found to have a direct impact on women's success, especially since women have been [shown](#) to rely relatively more than men on party sponsorship and support. Here, governments can take steps to **create a conducive institutional framework**. In France and Portugal, regulations linking [public funding](#) to parties' levels of gender equality strengthened the role of women within political parties in the medium term and may have been one factor behind big increases in the number of women elected to parliament.



Once women are in elected office, parliaments can take a number of steps to ensure that the environment is '[woman-friendly](#)', by changing androcentric working practices and combating harassment.

## Specific recommendations for the European Parliament and the European elections

[Research](#) conducted following the 2014 elections concluded that findings on the impact of quotas were nuanced, but their use appeared to have had a positive effect on women's chances of being elected. It recommended that European political parties use their influence to encourage member parties to adopt quotas or zipping and that women's NGOs and other advocates of quotas and zipping should demonstrate the benefits of using these systems. A [study](#) for the forthcoming elections stresses that, since there are fewer seats available in European than national elections, political parties play a particularly key role in promoting candidates, urging them to consider lists that will improve gender balance in the next Parliament. The [European Electoral Act](#) could also require quotas for European Parliament elections. This possibility was [called for](#) by Parliament, but [rejected](#) by the Council and not taken into account when the Act was [reformed](#) in 2018.

## The influence of media coverage

Research on the influence of media coverage of women candidates and politicians, both [globally](#) and in Europe shows that under- and misrepresentation of women in media has a negative impact on women's aspirations and electoral success, but higher media visibility can help to get more women elected. Longitudinal [analysis](#) of European elections found that women candidates are under-reported in news media, and between 2004 and the 2014 elections, there was little improvement. Findings from eight 'new' EU Member States (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Poland) show that during the 2014 European elections, women got less attention than their male counterparts and below their relative share of those standing as MEPs. In Lithuania, women made up 30 % of candidates, but received only 3 % of the news coverage. In Croatia, the figures were 50 % of those standing, but 20 % of coverage. Women were also four times more likely to have references made to their appearance, and less likely to be challenged on issues. Use of social media by women candidates was one factor that increased their visibility and coverage in other media. Crucially, where female candidates had higher visibility in the media, more women were elected. Higher media visibility would also shape future opportunities, by influencing women's decisions to run for office, political parties' choice of candidates and young people's perceptions of politics as a suitable career for women. [Research](#) using data from the [Global Media Monitoring Project](#) has found that, since individuals' ambitions are formed over long periods of time, sexist portrayals of women in everyday media reporting also stifle ambition among women who would be willing to stand as political candidates in a less sexist media environment.

Social media platforms such as Twitter can give women candidates and politicians a direct channel to reach the public and avoid gender-biased media coverage, but they can be far from 'women-friendly'. The IPU's 2016 [survey](#) of women parliamentarians confirms that, 'social media have become the number one place in which psychological violence – particularly in the form of sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats – is perpetrated against women parliamentarians'. Moreover, 60.5 % of the respondents said that such acts are 'strongly motivated by the clear-cut positions they had taken on particular issues' and that taking a stance on 'controversial subjects, such as defending women's rights and human rights in general' had made them particular targets of sexist behaviour and acts of violence.

## International standards

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)), the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) and the [2030 Agenda for](#)

[Sustainable Development](#), all set internationally recognised standards and targets for achieving equality between women and men in decision-making and participation in public life, and these apply to the EU Member States. In addition, the Council of Europe calls on governments to achieve balanced participation in political life ([defined](#) as achieving a minimum representation of 40 % of women and men) and [urges](#) local and regional authorities to encourage women to stand for election.

## EU action on gender balance in political decision-making

In 2001, the European Parliament [argued](#) that women's inclusion in decision-making strengthens democracy and is a necessary condition for women's interests and concerns to be taken into account. In 2012, it [welcomed](#) the parity systems/gender quotas introduced in some Member States and urged others to consider legislating to facilitate gender balance in political decision-making. For the [2014](#) and [2019](#) European elections, it has urged Member States and political parties to support gender-balanced electoral lists. In this term, Parliament has also [called](#) for measures to prevent and combat sexual harassment in political life, [taken](#) a strong position on the current backlash against women's rights and gender equality, targeted, inter alia, at the presence of women in decision-making positions, and called for a strong gender equality focus in the next term. Prior to the elections, the European Parliament is highlighting the theme of women and politics during its [events](#) around International Women's Day.

Since the 1990s, the EU has pursued the objective of promoting the balanced participation of women and men in decision-making at local, regional and national levels as part of its broader [commitment](#) to gender equality.<sup>10</sup> The European Commission's [strategic engagement for gender equality for 2016-2019](#) includes this as a priority objective, setting out 'soft law' measures, including data-collection and funding, to support the Member States and civil society. The Council has [urged](#) the Commission, the European Parliament and political parties to prepare for the European elections and the nominations to high-level positions in the EU institutions by promoting gender-balanced representation, including consideration of 'zipped systems'.

## Spotlight on the May 2019 European elections

### Voter turnout and issues motivating male and female voters

The [post-electoral survey](#) after the 2014 elections revealed that men were more engaged in the electoral campaign and that their turnout was higher (45 % of men voted compared to 41 % of women, an increase of two percentage points from 2009).

When it came to the issues that made people vote in the [2014 elections](#), both men and women ordered them in the same order of importance: unemployment, economic growth and immigration. However, more women chose unemployment (47 % as opposed to 42 %), and more men chose economic growth (42 % of men as opposed to 39 %). Immigration was chosen by 23 % of both genders.

For [the 2019 European elections](#), there have been some slight changes in the selected order of importance, but women and men again put the same priorities at the top: the fight against terrorism (51 % of women and 47 % of men), combatting youth unemployment (50 % of women and 47 % of men) and immigration (44 % of women and 46 % of men). Among other issues, economy and growth was again more prioritised by men (45 % of men and 40 % of women).

Women are more critical than men towards the direction that their country is taking, with only 33 % of women thinking it is going in the right direction, as opposed to 38 % of men. There is almost no gap between men and women among those who think that things are going in the wrong direction (48 % of women and 47 % of men) and those who think that the true answer is neither one nor the other (11 % of women and 9 % of men).

Women are less critical than men towards the direction that the EU is taking, with 40 % of women thinking that the EU is going in the wrong direction, as opposed to 45 % of men. There is almost no

difference among those who think that the EU is going in the right direction (31 % vs 32 %) and those who do not think that the direction is either good or bad (13 % of women and 12 % of men). More women than men do not know whether the direction is good or bad (16 % vs 11 %).

## Gender equality in the European Parliament's election campaign

Parliament is basing its campaign around the priorities [expressed](#) by the public and has adopted a new model of partnering with civil society, including the [European Women's Lobby](#) (EWL), and contacting others, such as the [European Women Alliance](#) (EWA) [Women Political Leaders](#), [Business and Professional Women Europe](#) and [Make Mothers Matter Europe](#), to ensure that their constituencies are informed about the election campaign. It is also teaming up with high-profile women, such as Swedish footballer [Nilla Fisher](#), to raise awareness of the elections and encourage women to vote.

## Women's organisations' platforms for the elections

Women's organisations, including Europe's largest umbrella organisation, EWL and the more recently established EWA want to see a higher turnout among women voters. They are calling not only for more women to be elected as MEPs and to top level jobs in the EU institutions, but also for a new impetus for gender equality at EU level and the funding to support it. EWL's [50/50 Campaign](#) for gender parity in the European Parliament is backed by concrete action including [advice](#) and [mentoring](#) for individual women candidates. Its [manifesto](#) for the 2019 elections calls for an EU Commissioner with sole responsibility for women's rights and a robust new EU strategy on equality between women and men. EWA's [#anotHer Europe manifesto](#) urges parties to focus on gender balance in their lists and Member States to nominate a man and a woman for each Commissioner post and to set up a Council of Ministers for Gender Equality. [Gender Five Plus](#) is taking its [recommendations](#) for achieving parity democracy to voters across the EU.

## Initiatives by the political groups and European political parties

The European Parliament's current political groups will be [presenting](#) their strategies for gender equality and empowering women at a media event for International Women's Day on 6 March. With party lists not yet finalised, it is too early to speak about the degree of gender balance in candidate selection. However, some European parties have internal party rules on gender balance, while others have longstanding support programmes for women candidates and a number are including gender equality in their manifestos.<sup>11</sup>

- The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe ([ALDE](#)) has a longstanding [Women's Academy](#), which supports women intending to run for office. Their [manifesto](#) includes combating violence against women and promoting sexual and reproductive rights as key priorities.
- The [European Greens party](#) has a [manifesto](#) commitment to gender equality and will be running a mini campaign on this topic as part of their broader campaigning. Its national parties [must](#) apply gender balance principles in their party structures and the European political party adheres to a 50 %+ gender ratio rule in favour of women in all its elected and appointed bodies and representations. Its [gender network](#) is supporting women candidates in the elections and the party is fielding a man and a woman as '[lead candidates](#)' for Commission President.
- The Party of European Socialists ([PES](#)) is [committed](#) to achieving gender equality in Europe. Its [manifesto](#) mentions a feminist Europe with equal rights for all among its seven points in the new Social Contract for Europe and calls for a binding EU gender equality strategy to continue the fight against pay and pension gaps, sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and to ensure access to full sexual and reproductive rights. [PES Women](#) promotes women's issues in the PES and [ensures](#) gender mainstreaming in any planned policy.

- The European People's Party (EPP) is calling for the inclusion of women in the digital transformation of society and the economy to be made a key priority in the next EU budget. The party has a [women's section](#) and its statute includes a commitment to strive for gender balance in all party bodies.
- The platform of the [Party of the European Left](#) highlights increasing inequalities between men and women and proposes to combat precariousness and unemployment and promote work life balance policies and sexual and reproductive health and rights. They also advocate for the introduction of legal gender recognition, civil marriage and child adoption rights for LGBTQI couples. They too are fielding a man and a woman as '*Spitzenkandidaten*'.
- The Alliance of Conservative and Reformists in Europe (ACRE) has set up a [Women's Movement](#) ahead of the elections to push for gender balance in the new Parliament and promote gender mainstreaming in all party policies.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In 1919, Belgium and Sweden also accorded a limited right to vote to some groups of women. In Belgium, the vote was accorded to all women in 1948. In Sweden, the law came into effect in 1921. Finland was the first EU country to give women the right to vote, in 1906.
- <sup>2</sup> When the current Commission took office in 2014, there was a second female Vice-President, Kristalina Georgieva (thus 2 women of 7 VPs). Following her resignation in late 2016, although she was replaced as Commissioner by a woman, her Vice-President post was not filled.
- <sup>3</sup> For further information on what kinds of disaggregated equality data are collected for sexual orientation, gender identity and racial and ethnic origin in the EU Member States, see the [reports](#) issued by the European Commission in 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> D. L. Rhode, *Women in Leadership*, 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> For European elections, proportional representation applies in all EU countries, but they can use either open or closed lists. For details, see [2019 European elections: National rules](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> European political parties are pan-European political parties formed by members of national political parties with similar political standpoints and manifestos, which campaign during European Parliament elections and have been assessed as having significant power within the European Parliament and the European Council.
- <sup>8</sup> M. Bruter and S. Harrison, *The future of our democracies: Young party members in Europe*, Palgrave, 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> For EU Member States where some form of gender quotas are in use (i.e. all except Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia and Finland), further details for European, national and sub-national levels, as applicable, are available on the International IDEA [gender quota database](#).
- <sup>10</sup> For a detailed historical overview, see for example 'Gendering political representation in the European Union' in J. Kantola, *Gender and the European Union*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 50-75.
- <sup>11</sup> This information is indicative only, based on publically available information and responses to an information request. International IDEA will shortly be issuing a discussion paper assessing how European political parties work towards inclusive representation and participation for women and young people.

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