

Women in politics in the EU

State of play in 2024

SUMMARY

One hundred years after women won the right to vote in elections or were first elected to parliament in some EU Member States, they continue to be under-represented in politics and public life. This is true whether looking at the composition of the European Parliament or that of national parliaments, governments and local assemblies. On the other hand, gender balance in politics benefits not only women and female politicians but also political parties themselves and the rest of society. Women form half the population and deserve to be better represented in power structures.

There is now solid evidence about what hinders or enables women's participation and representation, with political parties and the media serving a dual role in this respect. The EU has committed to achieving gender balance in political representation and participation as a matter of justice, equality and democracy. Practical recommendations have been made for achieving this goal, including specific actions to be taken by the EU institutions, national governments, political parties, civil society and the media.

A number of pivotal elections are taking place across the world this year, leading to a renewed focus on gender equality and women's participation in politics. Gender equality is one of the issues expected to take centre stage in political debates. Mainstream parties are pushing for further progress in this area, while some populist and radical political forces are campaigning for a renewed emphasis on family and traditional social roles for women and men. Women's rights (for instance, reproductive rights), could even prove decisive in determining the outcome of certain elections.

This is an update of a [briefing](#) from March 2023 by Rosamund Shreeves and Ionel Zamfir.



IN THIS BRIEFING

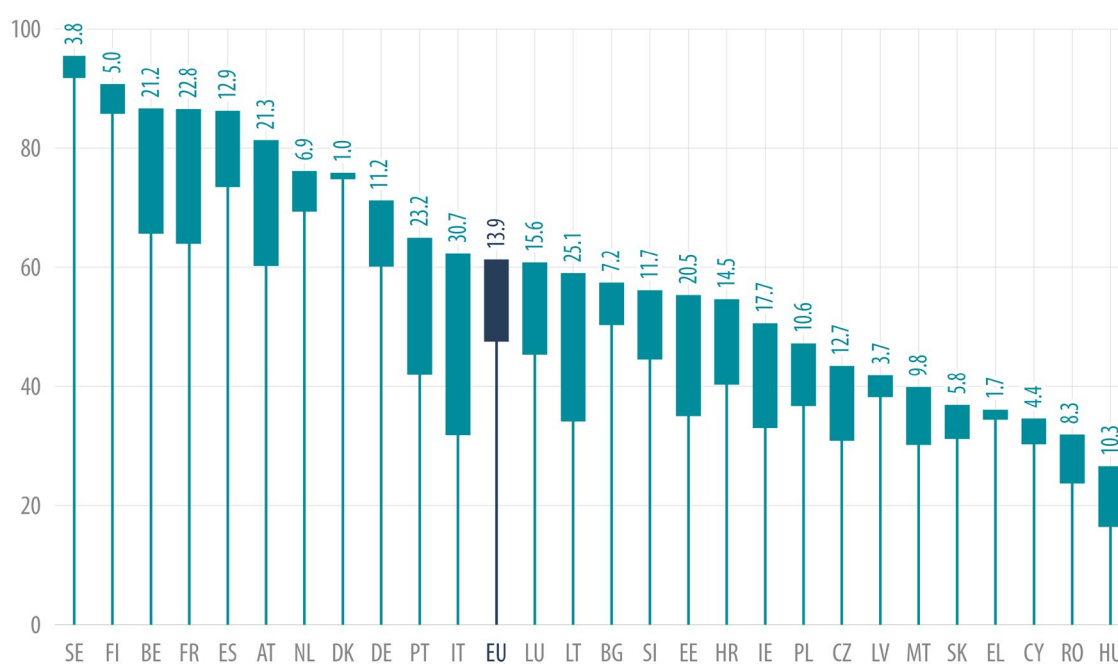
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Context

In a number of EU Member States, more than a century has passed since women won the [right to vote](#) in national elections, were elected to national parliaments or first held a ministerial position. Nevertheless, EU-wide data show that women remain under-represented in political decision-making at local, national and EU levels. The [gender equality index](#), developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) to measure gender gaps overtime, 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. On a scale where 100 equals [gender balance](#), Sweden and Finland are currently the only EU countries to score over 90 on the 'political power' indicator, which is based on the share of women ministers, members of parliament or members of regional assemblies. Over the past decade, some Member States, such as France, Austria and Belgium, have scored further progress from an already high starting point. Others, such as Estonia, Italy, Lithuania and Portugal have made significant progress even though their starting point was lower. Most of those at the bottom of the ranking (under 50 points) have not made major strides (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – How political power, as measured by the gender equality index, changed between 2013 and 2023



Note: The subdomain of political power looks at the representation of women and men in national parliaments (member of the parliaments (both houses), government (senior and junior ministers) and regional/local assemblies).

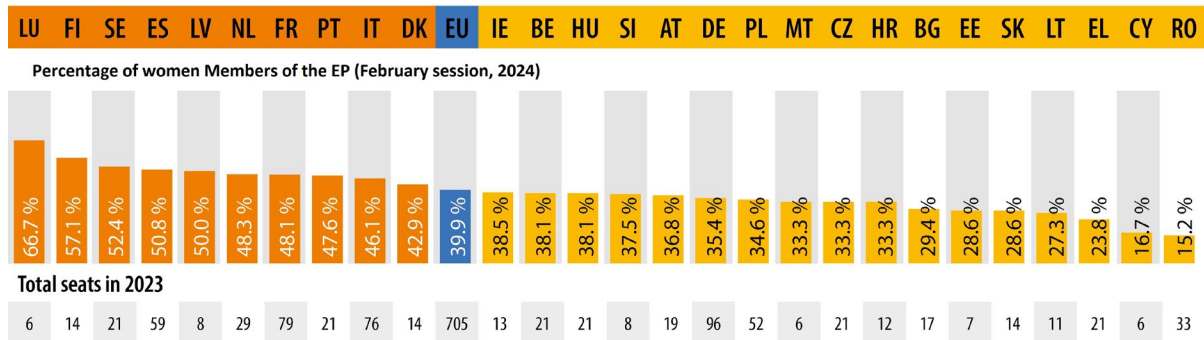
Data source: [EIGE gender equality index: political power, 2013 and 2023](#).

Gender gap in political representation

EU level

From a low 16.6% in the first directly elected legislature in 1979, the percentage of female Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) rose continuously after each election, reaching 41% following the [2019 election](#). This figure now stands at [39.9%](#) – above the world average for national parliaments ([26.9%](#) at the beginning of 2024) and above the European average for national parliaments (31.6%). However, there are large [differences](#) between Member States. At one end of the spectrum, a growing number of countries are at or around parity. At the start of 2024, the number of women MEPs from Luxembourg, Finland and Sweden even surpassed that of men. At the other end – in Romania, Cyprus and Greece – women make up less than a quarter of MEPs, with Romania at the lowest end with a meagre 15%.

Figure 2 – Share of women – Members of the European Parliament, beginning of 2024



Data source: European Parliament, [Facts and figures](#), February 2024.

The proportion of women in the European Commission has [fluctuated](#) over time. In 2019, the first-ever female President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, set a goal of constituting a gender-balanced College of Commissioners. At the start of the current Commission term, 12 out of 27 the Commissioners were women, compared to 9 out of 28 at the end of the [previous term](#). The [College](#) is now made up of 13 women (48.1%) and 14 men. One of the three executive vice-presidents and two of the other five vice-presidents are women. The female Commissioners hold a spectrum of portfolios: the digital age; values and transparency; democracy and demography, health; transport; home affairs; cohesion; energy; innovation, research, culture, education and youth; financial services; international partnerships and a new portfolio on equality. Ursula von der Leyen has also [committed](#) to achieving full equality at all levels of Commission management by the end of 2024. At the end of 2022, the Commission was close to this target with [46 %](#) of management posts held by women.

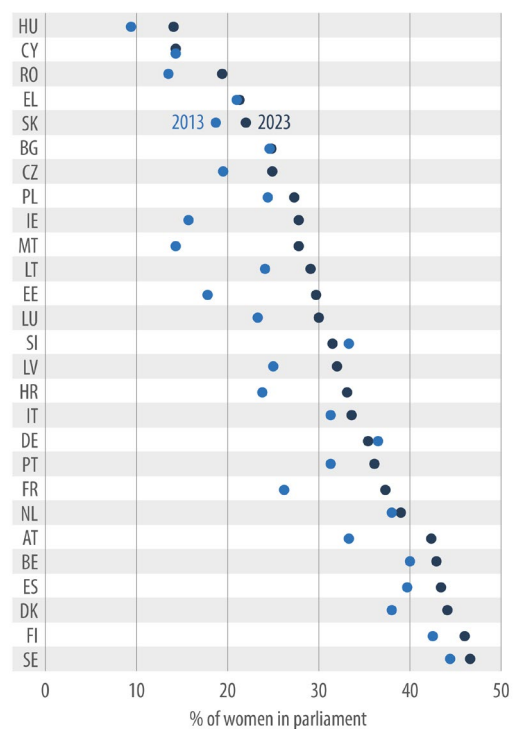
National level

Overall, men outnumber women in the Member States' national parliaments (see Figure 3). In the past decade, however, the share of women has increased in all national parliaments but two (Germany and Slovenia, where there was a slight regress). When it comes to senior ministerial posts at the [national governments](#), at the end of 2023 the share of female ministers in comparison to male ministers ranged from being higher in Finland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Belgium and Spain, to being identical in Portugal and France, to being very low – less than 20% – in Malta, Czechia, Greece, Poland and Slovakia, and to being non-existent in Hungary. Five Member States – Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Latvia and Lithuania – have female prime ministers as at February 2024.

National, local and regional levels

The [situation](#) at the national and subnational levels shows similar proportions of gender inequality, with an average of 35.3% of women in [regional assemblies](#) in the EU. Progress has been slow.

Figure 3 – Share of women in EU-27 national parliaments (both houses) between 2013 and 2023



Data source: [EIGE gender statistics database: power](#), 2022 (data from the last quarter of 2023).

women's representation in regional assemblies has improved by an average of just 0.3 % per year since 2005, when it stood at 29.6 %. The high achievers at national level are also the high achievers at regional level, with Denmark at gender parity (100 %), followed closely by Finland, Sweden, France and Spain. At the other end of the scale are Latvia, Slovakia and Hungary, at under 20 %. [Local and municipal councils](#) are also short of women representatives, with the EU average equalling 34.5 %. While Sweden, France, Spain and Finland have over 40 % of women on local and municipal councils, Romania, Cyprus, and Greece trail behind with under 20 % of women councillors.

Appointments to ministerial portfolios and parliament committees

[Analysis](#) of EIGE data collected in 2018 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, or finance and industry, while women were more likely to be given socio-cultural portfolios such as health, education or social affairs. While women are still under-represented in traditionally male decision-making positions, their share has been rising. In March 2023, a [quarter](#) of senior defence ministers in the Member States (7 out of 27) were women, a significant increase from a meagre 4 % in 2007 (1 minister). This gender-specific distribution of leadership positions is also to be found in many national parliamentary committees. In the [European Parliament](#), there has been a gradual break with this pattern: women currently chair 7 of the 24 standing committees and subcommittees, including in some traditionally male-dominated areas, namely the Committees on Budgetary Control, Internal Market, Economic and Monetary Affairs, Transport, Culture and Petitions, and the Subcommittee on Security and Defence.

Diversity of women in politics

There is no EU-wide data¹ on the 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 the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe ([OSCE](#)) have flagged the particularly low number of Roma women in elected office as a concern. [Analysis](#) by the European Network against Racism (ENAR) following the 2019 European elections found that ethnic minorities made up 5 % of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and 10 % of the overall population. Following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU, the share of ethnic minorities in the Parliament [fell](#) to 4 %. Interestingly, [research](#) shows that between 1979 and the start of the 2014-2019 term, the percentage of young women (aged under 40) elected to the European Parliament was consistently higher than the percentage of middle-aged women (aged 40 to 60) and older women (aged over 60).

Public opinion

Voter attitudes towards women are a key determinant of how many women are elected. The latest [Eurobarometer survey on gender equality in politics](#) goes back to 2017. It shows that 86 % of respondents thought 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). Views on the existing distribution of power and on whether there should be more women in decision-making positions than there currently are, were more nuanced and gendered. Among women, 62 % thought that there should be more women in political decision-making positions in their country, while only 44 % of men agreed with this statement. Some 51 % of respondents shared the view that gender equality in politics had been achieved.

When compared with other areas, politics is relatively egalitarian when it comes to favourable public attitudes towards both men and women in political life. The [Reykjavik index for leadership](#), compiled by public consultancy group Kantar and the Women Political Leaders NGO, shows that across G7

countries (which comprise the world's most economically powerful democracies, including three EU Member States), government and politics (regarded jointly) are among the sectors where the public thinks women and men are equally suitable for positions of leadership – a view shared by 4 out of 5 respondents in the [2021/2022 survey](#). Defence and police on one hand, and fashion and beauty and child care on the other, are marked with the strongest preference for men and for women respectively. Even if favourable to women's presence in politics in general, only half of respondents (52 %) are 'very comfortable' with having a woman as head of government, with a 10 point difference between women and men – 57% to 47 respectively. The latest [edition](#) of the report (2022/2023) found a negative trend in this respect, with a drop of 7 percentage points from 52 % to 45 % across G7 countries in the number of those who believe women and men are equally suitable for a prime minister's function. It also finds that young people are more prejudiced today against women holding leadership positions.

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 persist.

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 the question format of the surveys asking those questions or the content of the questions themselves, may also have an impact. This is problematic, as political knowledge is crucial for effective participation in politics. Similar results can be seen in the [2019 post-election Eurobarometer survey](#), which reveals that women were more prone than men to state that they [did not vote](#) because they did not know much about the European Parliament or the European elections and less prone than men to state that they [voted](#) because they were very interested in European affairs.

However, when it comes to actual **voting in elections**, the gap between men and women decreases, with virtually no difference 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. In the US, a [higher share of women](#) than of men have voted since the 1980s in both presidential and non-presidential elections. In Germany, the participation gap between men and women in parliamentary elections has [shrunk](#) over time from more than 3 % in 1953 to less than 1 % in the most recent elections. There are though recent [studies](#) that show that while this may be the case for national elections, there is still a gender gap in **voter turnout in second-order elections**, such as local, regional and European elections. For example, in France more women [vote systematically](#) in national elections but not in other elections. In the 2021 regional elections, more women than men abstained from voting, with the participation gap between the two sexes [estimated](#) at between 6 % and 13 %. In the [2019](#) European elections, both women and men were more likely to vote than in the 2014 European elections (+8 and +7 percentage points respectively), but men were slightly more likely to vote than women (52 % versus 49%). Nevertheless, the European Commission [reports](#) that the gender gap in the turnout fell from 4 % in 2014 to 3 % in the 2019 elections. In the same [report](#), the Commission however recognised that the quality of indicators and data collected on the participation of specific groups is limited. With regard to the upcoming European elections, the 2023 Eurobarometer survey shows that women and men are equally interested and likely to vote in these elections.

Research has also [shown](#) that women are consistently less likely to participate in various **political activities**, such as making campaign contributions, joining political organisations or writing letters to political representatives. 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 paid to [two types](#) of representation that are expected to be achieved through gender equality measures: descriptive and substantive.² 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 EU 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 policymaking 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 the latter is perceived as being more representative of the electorate).

However, some of these arguments and assumptions have also been evaluated as [problematic](#).³ The argument 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 that there are few gender differences in the 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 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 women may not always prevail when they are identifying their 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 different groups of women can face 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 to 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**; a **male-dominated political culture** in parties and parliaments; **gender roles and stereotypes** in wider society; and an **absence of female role models**. Under the influence of [gender stereotyping](#), barriers to women's participation in politics can appear at an early stage in life, 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 figures.

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 in Europe. Those aged under 40 were more frequently subject to psychological and sexual harassment, and members taking a strong stance on women's rights and gender equality were singled out for attack. A majority (79.2%) of members 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. These obstacles also have an impact on women's abandoning their political careers more often than men. A [survey](#) of local politicians in Belgium shows that difficulties reconciling personal life and political career, but also the feeling of not making an impact, motivate many elected women not to run again in elections.

Second, there are **barriers that block '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,⁴ making electoral systems themselves a potential **institutional barrier or enabler**.

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 EU 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 world-wide [survey](#) found that a sizeable minority of girls and young women (around one quarter) wish to become actively involved in politics, but their share was lower in Europe⁵ than in Africa and North America. 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 duties. Here, [political parties](#) can reach out proactively to **expand the pool of women candidates**. 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 spans 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.

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. Quotas 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 the EU, there are [two](#) main types of gender quotas: **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 the 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 alternation 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.

A [number](#) of Member States (Belgium, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia) have binding gender quotas for the European elections. Belgium, France, Italy and Luxembourg apply the parity principle (50% for each gender). Greece, Spain, Croatia, Portugal and Slovenia have a quota of at least 40% for each gender, while Poland sets the minimal presence of each gender at 35%. Romania is a special case, being the only country that sets the vaguely worded legal obligation for ensuring that lists of

candidates represent both sexes, which has proven rather ineffective in practice. Numerous parties in the EU, mostly on the left but also increasingly on the right, apply voluntary quotas when nominating their candidates.

The use of quotas has its pros and cons; it is argued that they could violate the principle of merit, lead to a decline in the quality of politicians, undermine the credibility of women politicians, or provoke hostility from the electorate. Countries such as Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany have managed to reach some of the highest shares of women parliamentarians and women executives in the EU without binding quotas. In other countries, such as Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain, where progress had been slow, quotas have proven very effective at driving major advances. Overall, when comparing recent progress in all EU countries, binding quotas appear to significantly speed up [progress](#) towards gender equality in political representation. They however need to be accompanied by other measures such as zipped lists and efforts towards creating a more favourable political environment for women in general.

Various forms of gender quotas, as described in the box above, have been found to be an effective way of **boosting the share of women candidates** – and getting more women elected. Aside from gender quotas, when it comes to **ensuring that more women are elected**, giving them **targeted support and training to run for office, as well equal access to campaign funding**, have been found to directly increase their chances of success, especially since women have been [shown](#) to rely on party sponsorship and support relatively more than men. 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 have strengthened the role of women within political parties in the medium term and may have been among the factors behind the big increase in the number of women elected to parliament.

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

Specific recommendations for the European elections

A report [analysing](#) the outcome of the 2014 elections commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) found that women had been popular with the electorate. In countries with a low proportion of women elected as MEPs, one key reason was the low share of women in the candidate base. Party processes had been a significant contributing factor. Respondents to the survey within the report felt that, owing to their reluctance to intervene in national political party decisions, [European political parties](#)⁶ and EU-level players had missed the opportunity to encourage national parties to promote gender balance on party lists. For future elections, the report 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 2019 elections stressed that, since candidates in European elections compete for fewer seats compared to those in national elections, political parties play a particularly key role in promoting candidates. Therefore, the study urged them to consider lists that will improve gender balance in the next Parliament.

In 2015, the Parliament [called for](#) amending the 1976 [European Electoral Act](#) to introduce quotas for European elections. This proposal was [rejected](#) by the Council and not taken into account when the act was [reformed](#) in 2018.⁷ A further [reform](#) was initiated by the Parliament during the current term but is not on track to be adopted before the 2024 elections. A [legislative resolution](#) to amend the European Electoral Act, debated in the Parliament plenary of May 2022, includes a provision urging Member States to seek gender equality by making use of the model that best fits their system for electing candidates to the European Parliament. The same provision urges political entities to also ensure gender equality when presenting their candidatures in the EU-wide constituency that the reform aims to establish, by means of a zipped system or quotas. The draft legislative act containing the proposed reform was submitted to the Council, which would need to agree unanimously for it to be adopted, but [discussions](#) in the Council show that EU countries are still far from unanimity.

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 the 2004 and the 2014 elections, there was little improvement in this regard. Higher media visibility can 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 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 International Parliamentary Union (IPU) 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 also apply to the EU Member States. The Council of Europe too calls on governments to achieve a 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

For the [2014](#) and [2019](#) European elections, the Parliament urged Member States and political parties to support gender-balanced electoral lists. It also called for measures to prevent and combat sexual harassment in political life. In 2018, it [took](#) a firm position on the backlash against women's rights and gender equality, targeted, inter alia, at the presence of women in decision-making positions. In a June 2023 [resolution](#) on sexual harassment in the EU and the #MeToo movement, Parliament reiterated its concern that female politicians and advocates for women's rights are particularly exposed to online violence and harassment. In a December 2023 [resolution](#) on the European elections, the plenary highlighted gender equality as a key element for improving representation in elections and called for the implementation of the Parliament's provisions in the new European electoral act (which, as mentioned above, is waiting for the Council's approval).

Since the 1990s, the EU has pursued the objective of promoting a balanced participation of women and men in decision-making at local, regional and national levels as part of its broader [commitment](#) to gender equality.⁸ This objective has been assigned priority under the European Commission's [gender equality strategy 2020-2025](#), which maps out measures to promote women's participation as voters and candidates in the 2024 European elections, including through funding and exchanges of best practices. The EU Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) has funded [projects](#) to improve women's representation in decision making, and in particular to achieve equal representation of women and men in the European Parliament after the 2024 election.

Gender equality in the 2024 European election year

The year 2024 has been named a '[super-election year](#)'. Roughly half the world's population is expected to vote this year, and not all [elections](#) are expected to be free and fair. Decisive elections will take place in some of the world's largest democracies, including the European Union and the United States. Election outcomes may decide whether progress towards women's rights across the world will continue or will be stifled by the political forces opposing it. Conversely, issues revolving around gender equality may determine the outcome where the race is tight. This, according to some commentators, is the case with the US, where [abortion](#) could shape the outcome of the upcoming presidential election. The salience of women's rights issues in the US presidential race also explains the [significant gaps](#) in women's and men's preferences for the two likely presidential candidates.

Given the high stakes in Europe, women's organisations, including Europe's largest umbrella organisation, EWL, call for women in Europe to vote, and for political parties⁹ to recognise gender equality as a priority issue in their programmes. The [EWL Manifesto](#) for the 2024 elections, entitled 'Europe at a crossroads', notes the backward trend in gender equality in Europe and calls on the EU to adopt several measures, among others a gender mainstreaming strategy, mandatory parity in candidate lists for the European elections, and a 50/50 representation of each sex in any EU decision-making body, including the EU 'top jobs'.

As explained earlier, several aspects deserve attention in any electoral context, including in the upcoming European elections: women's turnout rates in the election compared to men's; women's knowledge of and interest in (European) politics and political affairs; the salience of gender equality issues in electoral debates; and these issues' capacity to decisively influence outcomes.

European elections in the recent past have been marked by **low participation rates** overall, even though a somewhat higher participation rate was registered during the latest ones in 2019. The gender gap in participation has narrowed over time, and this trend is expected to continue in line with trends at the national level. If vital women's [interests](#) are at stake, women can show up at polling stations in greater numbers than men. This is what happened in the autumn 2023 election in Poland, where [74.7 %](#) of women voted compared to 73.1 % of men. Their vote, particularly that of young women, played an important [role](#) in determining the final outcome of the election.

A spring 2023 Eurobarometer [survey](#) shows that most respondents, both women and men, are **informed about and interested in European politics**. Roughly two thirds have recently read in the press, seen on the internet or on television, or heard on the radio something about the European Parliament, yet there is a gender difference in this regard of 9 % (66 % of men to 57 % of women). This kind of information has made a favourable impression on 56 % of the respondents. The topics linked to the EU and the European Parliament that most attracted public attention were support for Ukraine (74 % have heard about it) followed by migration and asylum (38 %), with a small gender gap. Men are more likely to discuss, whether frequently or occasionally, topics related to EU politics with friends and relatives than women, with the shares being 71 % and 64 % respectively.

With the **backlash against women's rights** and empowerment in many liberal democracies, gender equality emerges as an important topic for both political parties and citizens. Support for gender equality policies continues to be strong among citizens as well as among mainstream political parties in the EU, but there are signs that some of this support is eroding. For example, a January 2024 [survey](#) in Spain has revealed that while the majority of citizens still support such policies, 44.1 % of men and 32.5 % of women think that the promotion of women's equality has gone too far and is now causing discrimination against men.

Research has highlighted that there are sometimes marked **gender preferences for political parties**. Women tend to prefer either left-wing parties that are favourable to women's empowerment or conservative parties that support family-friendly policies. For example, since the 1950s, a [higher share](#) of women than men has consistently voted for the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany – a pattern followed at the 2019 European elections, but this

gap shrank to only [1%](#) at the latest 2021 elections for the German Bundestag. At the same time, more women have voted for the German Greens in recent elections, while men tend to prefer the liberals (FDP) and the Alternative for Germany. Men's stronger preferences for populist and radical right-wing parties have been well documented, and [researchers](#) have pointed out that these parties' opposition to gender equality policies is one of the factors explaining this stance. Recent [research](#) however also notes the increasing popularity of such parties among women in Europe. One reason is their focus on satisfying women's practical interests such as social policies focused on family. Another is that right-wing populist parties have integrated gender equality in their anti-migration agenda, portraying themselves as the true defenders of women's rights against misogynist attitudes 'imported' from outside Europe. According to another [author](#), the populist anti-elitist rhetoric also attracts women who are dissatisfied with the economic situation in their country. The factor of age plays a role too: the populist radical right is more successful among younger voters, whether men or women. In practice, populist right-wing parties, even if they have promoted some charismatic female leaders, have fewer women holding parliamentary posts, contributing to an [overall decrease](#) in the share of women in parliaments.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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 European Commission [reports](#) issued in 2017.
- ² D. L. Rhode, *Women in Leadership*, 2017.
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ For European elections, proportional representation applies in all EU countries, but they can use either open or closed lists. For details, see [Towards gender balance in the European elections: Electoral quotas](#), EPRS briefing, 2023.
- ⁵ The survey included respondents from 10 European countries, eight of whom were from the EU.
- ⁶ 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 elections and have been assessed as having significant power within the European Parliament and the European Council.
- ⁷ The reform adopted under [Council Decision 2018/994/EC](#) has yet to be implemented because not all Member States have approved it 'in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements', as required by [Article 223\(1\) TFEU](#).
- ⁸ 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.
- ⁹ At the time of writing, no European political party had yet published its political manifesto.

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