

Women in politics in the EU

State of play

SUMMARY

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, but also in national parliaments, governments and local assemblies. The arguments for gender balance in politics are numerous. It benefits not only women and female politicians, but also political parties themselves and the rest of society. After all, women form half the population and deserve to be better represented in power structures.

There is now solid evidence of the obstacles, but also of 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.

The new security situation in Europe, triggered by the ongoing war in Ukraine, has reignited debates on the link between gender equality, female leadership and peace. Moreover, the economic downturn and the rising cost of living have once again highlighted the need for gender-balanced political representation, capable of taking into account differentiated gender impacts.

This is an update of a [briefing](#) from March 2021.



IN THIS BRIEFING

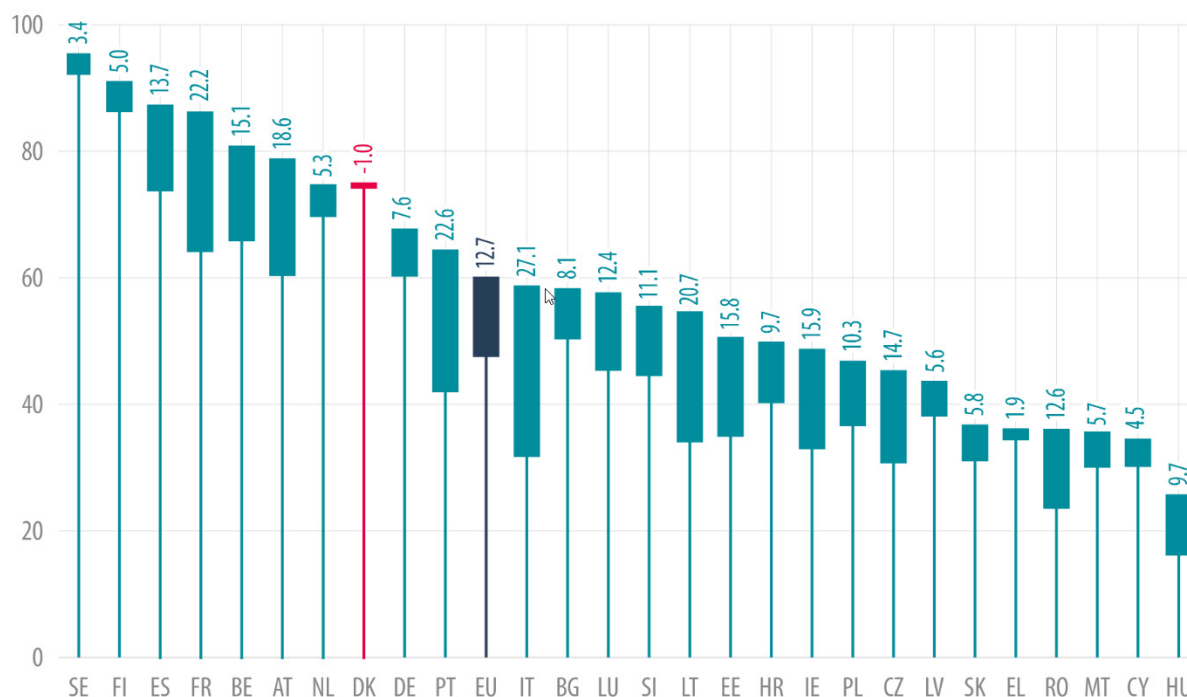
- Context
- Gender gap in political representation
- Women's political participation
- Why gender balance in politics matters
- Obstacles to gender balance
- Strategies for closing the gender gap
- The influence of media coverage
- International standards
- EU action on gender balance in political decision-making
- Spotlight on women's role in politics in the light of the war on Ukraine



Context

In several EU Member States, a century has now passed since women won the [right to vote](#) in national elections, were elected to national parliaments or first held a ministerial position. Nevertheless, one hundred years on, EU-wide data show that women are still 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 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. During the pandemic, progress in the area of power was the main driving force behind the advance in gender equality in the EU. At same time, the areas of work and knowledge – which also play a key role for attaining gender equality – experienced stagnation or regress in most EU countries. With a score of 100 equalling [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, Belgium and Spain, have scored further progress from an already high starting point. Others, such as Italy, Portugal and Lithuania, 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 – Gender equality index – Political power, change between 2013 and 2022



Note: The gender equality index in the area of political power looks at the representation of women and men as members of parliament (both houses), members of government (senior and junior ministers), and members of regional/local assemblies.

Data source: [EIGE gender statistics database: power, 2013 and 2022](#).

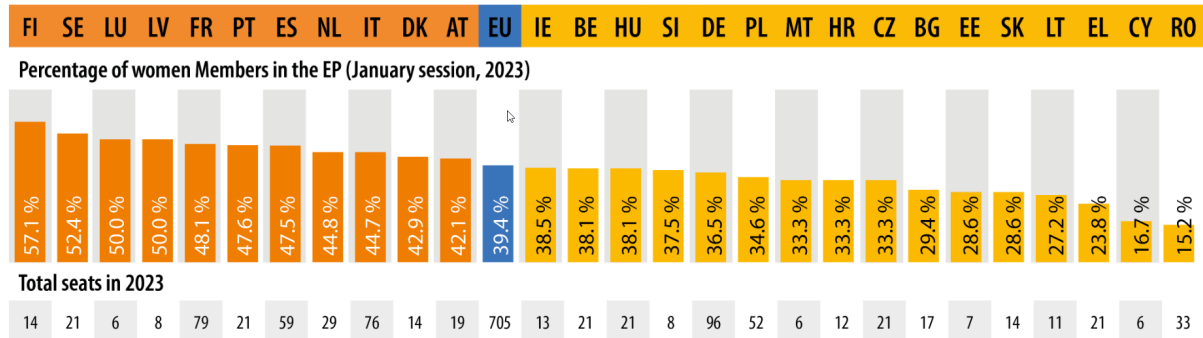
Gender gap in political representation

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 39.4%¹ – above the world average for national parliaments ([26.5%](#) at the beginning of 2023) and above the European average for national

parliaments (31.0 %). 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 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 %. In Bulgaria, the share of women has risen to 29.4 % from 17.6 % in the last European Parliament term.

Figure 2 – Share of women Members of the European Parliament



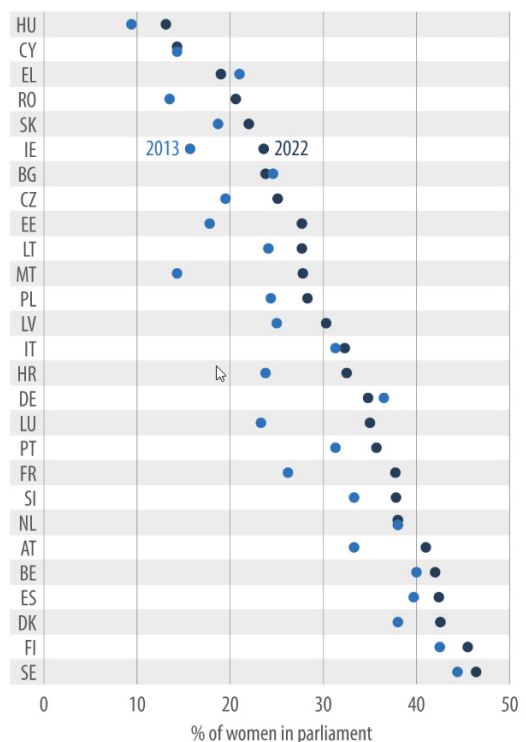
Source: [European Parliamentary Research Service](#).

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 beginning of the term of the current Commission, 12 out of 27 Commissioners were women, compared to 9 out of 28 at the end of the [previous term](#). Following the appointment of Mairead McGuinness to the Commission in October 2020, the [College](#) is now made up of 13 women (48.1 %) and 14 men. One of the three executive vice-presidents is a woman, together with two of the other five vice-presidents. 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.

National level

There are more men than women in all EU Member State [national parliaments](#) (See Figure 3). When it comes to the members of [national governments](#) of Member States, at the end of 2022 the share of women ranged from higher than men's in Spain (60.9 %), Finland (57.9 %) and Belgium (53.3 %), to very low: under 10 % in Hungary (6.7 %), Greece (8.7 %) and Romania (9.1 %). Five Member States –Denmark, Estonia, Italy and Lithuania – have female prime ministers. Estonia and Greece have female presidents.

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



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

National, local and regional levels

The [situation](#) at national, regional and local levels shows similar proportions of gender inequality, with an average of 32.1 % of women in [regional assemblies](#) in the EU. Progress has been slow. According to the European Commission's 2019 [report](#) on equality between women and men in the EU, the proportion of women in regional assemblies has improved by an average rate of just 0.3 % per year since 2005. 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 scale are Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, with the percentage of women not even reaching 20 %. [Local and municipal councils](#) are also short of women representatives, with the EU average equalling 34.1 % of women. While France and Spain have over 40 % of women on local and municipal councils, Romania, Cyprus, and Greece trail behind with under 20 % of women.

Appointments to ministerial portfolios and parliament 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 (42.8 % versus 32.1 %), and finance and industry (23.1 % versus 18.6 %), while women were more likely to be given socio-cultural portfolios such as health, education or social affairs (40.4 % versus 19.4 %). 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 seven of the 23 standing committees and subcommittees, including the committees on budgetary control, internal market, economic and monetary affairs, transport, culture, petitions, as well as the subcommittee on security and defence.

Diversity of women in politics

No EU-wide data² exists 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 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 Members of the European Parliament and 10 % of the overall population. Following Brexit, the share of ethnic minorities in the Parliament [fell](#) to 4 %. 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 members of parliament. Interestingly, [research](#) finds that throughout the European Parliament's history, from 1979 to the 2014-2019 session, more young women than middle-aged or older women were 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.

When compared with other areas, politics is an area where public attitudes are similarly favourable to the presence of both men and women. The [Reykjavik Index for Leadership](#), compiled by public consultancy group Kantar and Women Political Leaders for 2020/2021, showed that across G20 countries, government and politics (regarded jointly) are one of the sectors where the gap in public perception about women and men being equally suitable for positions of leadership is smaller than in other sectors (defence and police on one hand, and child care on the other, are marked with the strongest preference for men and for women respectively). On average, 75 % of respondents across the G20 considered men and women equally suited for government and politics, but not necessarily for top political posts (only 47 % declared to be 'very comfortable' with having a women as a head of government).

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. When it comes to voting preferences, [research](#) has shown that women have been moving toward the left of men in advanced industrial societies, although 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 focus on satisfying 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 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 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, there is still a gender gap in voter turnout in second-order elections (of which the European Parliament elections are an example). In the [2019](#) European Parliament 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 turnout reduced from 4 % in 2014 to 3 % in 2019.

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 paid to [two types](#) of representation that are expected to be achieved through gender equality measures: descriptive and substantive.³ 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](#).⁴ 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 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 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.

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,⁵ making electoral systems themselves a potential **institutional barrier**.

A [report](#) on women's experiences of selection and election to the United Kingdom (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 Members elected to the European Parliament, 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](#)⁶ 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. In its [report](#) on the 2019 European elections, the European Commission concluded that the quality of indicators and data collected on the participation of specific groups is limited.

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 survey⁷ 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 members [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.

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 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 the EU, 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 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.

According to the [International IDEA's, gender quotas database](#), of the 23 EU Member States covered, 12 have legally binding candidate quotas for national elections and nine have both legally binding and voluntary political party quotas. Another nine only have voluntary political party quotas, while Bulgaria and Czechia (as well as [Denmark](#), [Estonia](#), [Latvia](#) and [Finland](#), not included in the database) have neither. At the 2019 European elections, legally binding quotas [applied](#) in 11 countries (Belgium, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia).

The use of quotas has its [pros and cons](#), it is argued that they could 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. Countries such as Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany have managed to reach some of the highest shares of women in parliaments and executives in the EU without binding quotas, but in other countries, where progress had been slow, such as Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal or Spain quotas have proven very effective at driving major advances. Overall, when comparing recent progress in all EU countries, binding quotas appear to effectively speed up [progress](#) towards gender equality in political representation significantly. They need however to be accompanied by other measures such as zipped lists.

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 2019 elections stressed 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 Members of the European Parliament. 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 urged Member States and political parties to support gender-balanced electoral lists. 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 [current] term.

Since the 1990s, the EU has pursued the objective of promoting 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 The European Commission's [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#) includes this as a priority objective. Action will include promoting women's participation as voters and candidates in the 2024 European elections, through funding and exchanges of best practices.

War raging again on Europe's doorstep has reignited the debate on the role of women and men leaders in times of war. The link between [militarised masculinity](#) as aggressively promoted by the Russian leadership and Russia's unjustified war of aggression against a neighbouring country could not escape public attention.

In the context of this debate, looking solely at the top leadership posts is not sufficient, because it does not take into account the complexities of decision-making mechanisms (with men usually over-represented in governmental security and military decision chains) or the role of public opinion. Rather than the gender of the political leader, it is the level of gender equality in a society as a whole that has a strong impact on peace. There are various scientific arguments correlating peaceful state conduct with gender equality in politics and in society in general. [Research](#) on international crises in the 20th century shows that countries with a higher level of gender equality use a lower level of violence during international crises. This is so because the international behaviour of more egalitarian countries reflects the 'domestic norm of tolerance and equality'. Moreover, democracies that are inherently more egalitarian from a gender perspective (even if some authoritarian regimes such as Cuba or Rwanda have ostensibly [promoted](#) women in politics), also tend to be more peaceful in their external relations, according to the [democratic peace theory](#).

Women's role in politics in the light of the war on Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has had devastating impacts both within the country and beyond its borders. While Ukrainian men have borne most of the burden of fighting at the frontline in this particularly [bloody conflict](#), Ukrainian women have also been severely affected. [War crimes](#) and crimes against humanity directed specifically at women have shocked the global community. [Women](#) have also been exposed to the consequences of the war, such as food and energy deprivation, [health risks](#), job loss, and an increased burden of care in the absence of their men fighting on the frontline. Ukrainian women have shown courage and resilience in the face of adversity: many have been active in the [army](#) or provided [relief](#) to those affected by the war. Some, as members of the Ukrainian civil society, have continued their [hard work](#) in reforming their country and preparing it for EU membership, even though their [political representation](#) remains low.

Now that the war has entered in its second year without any prospect of a negotiated end, it is worth remembering the [decisive role](#) women have played in peace-making in recent history. Before the war broke out, women's [involvement](#) in previous negotiations under the Minsk framework was minimal. According to [research on recent conflicts](#), whenever women were able to exercise strong influence on a negotiation process, 'the chances of agreements being reached and implemented were much higher'.

Elsewhere in Europe, the current generation of women leaders (whether heads of state or government, as in Finland, Estonia, Italy and Moldova, president of the European Commission or of

the European Parliament, or foreign ministers, as in Bulgaria and Germany) have reacted to the Russian aggression in Ukraine with strong determination and commitment to respect for international principles.

The war in Ukraine has had indirect effects on women all over the world. In particular, the cost of living crisis has strongly affected women's livelihoods and opportunities, and [compounded](#) the negative effects of the pandemic. There are concerns that policy responses have so far not been sufficiently [gender sensitive](#). Gender-balanced political representation is generally [considered](#) better able to contribute to policies that take into account women's interests and needs.

A situation of crisis can change public attitudes towards women in political leadership in opposite directions. According to [existing indicators](#), the level of trust in women leaders across G20 and G7 countries has decreased over the past few years, which can be explained by a tendency to trust well-known traditional figures in times of crises, i.e. male leaders. On the other hand, there is also a propensity to turn to women or leaders of minorities in very difficult situations, whether in the [executive](#) or the political world. Women leaders have proven their capacity to be more effective in dealing with crisis situations (e.g. during [COVID-19](#)). However, there is also the risk of the '[glass cliff](#)': given their slimmer opportunities to reach top positions, women are tempted to take their chances when offered a leadership post in times of crisis, even though the likelihood of failure is higher.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The next [annual report](#) on gender equality in the European Parliament is due to be published in 2023.
- ² 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.
- ³ D. L. Rhode, *Women in Leadership*, 2017.
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ 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.
- 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 Parliament elections and have been assessed as having significant power within the European Parliament and the European Council.
- ⁷ M. Bruter and S. Harrison, *The future of our democracies: Young party members in Europe*, Palgrave, 2009.
- 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.

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