



# Gender, perceived discrimination, and support for the Left in Western Europe

*Davide Angelucci* ✉

Unitelma Sapienza Università di Roma – [davide.angelucci@unitelmasapienza.it](mailto:davide.angelucci@unitelmasapienza.it)

*Ester Flumeri*

Unitelma Sapienza Università di Roma – [ester.flumeri@unitelmasapienza.it](mailto:ester.flumeri@unitelmasapienza.it)

## Abstract

Over recent decades, women in Western Europe have become more likely than men to support left-wing parties, leading to what the literature identifies as the “modern gender gap”. Existing research generally explains this shift as the result of structural and cultural transformations that have affected advanced democracies since the second half of the twentieth century. Building on a long-standing tradition in political and social sciences that emphasizes the role of social identities in shaping political attitudes and behaviour, this study argues that identity may help explain when and why the modern gender gap becomes politically consequential. In particular, we draw on a well-established literature showing that political choices are not driven solely by structural conditions, but also by individuals’ identification with social groups and by how they perceive the social position of those groups. Against this background, we argue that gender might become politically relevant when women’s structural position is subjectively recognized as one marked by disadvantage and discrimination. We therefore hypothesize that the modern gender gap should be amplified among women who perceive themselves as discriminated on the basis of gender. To test this argument, we analyse 15 Western European countries using individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS) over the last decade (2014-2024). The results show a consistent modern gender gap across countries and a clear moderating effect of perceived gender discrimination: women who perceive themselves as discriminated based on gender are more likely to vote for left-wing parties.

## Key words

Discrimination; modern gender gap; voting behaviour

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, one of the most striking developments in electoral behaviour across Western democracies has been the emer-

gence of a gender gap in political preferences that runs counter to historical patterns. While women were once more likely than men to support conservative parties, in many contemporary contexts they now display, on average, more progressive attitudes and a greater propensity to vote for parties of the left. This transformation—commonly referred to as the modern gender gap—has attracted significant scholarly attention and is widely interpreted as a key feature of contemporary electoral politics.

Importantly, this shift has not occurred in a vacuum. Rather, it is deeply embedded in broader processes of socio-economic and cultural change that have reshaped the position of both women and men in society (Dassonneville, 2021; Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014; Giger, 2009; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2006; Inglehart & Norris, 2000, 2003). Over the course of the late twentieth century, Western societies experienced profound transformations, including the expansion of educational opportunities, the increasing participation of women in the labour market, the decline of traditional family structures, and the progressive secularization of social life. These developments have altered not only the material conditions, but also the values, expectations, and political orientations that guide individual's political behaviour. Greater access to education and employment brought women to be exposed to labour market inequalities, economic risks, and institutional barriers, in ways that differ systematically from men (Sears & Citrin, 1982; Edlund & Pande, 2002). At the same time, the erosion of traditional social norms and the decline of religious authority have facilitated the diffusion of more egalitarian and individualistic value systems (Roig et al., 2024; Van Staaldunin & Zollinger, 2024; Togeby, 1994; Andersen & Cook, 1985; Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1977). These processes, in turn, have been associated with greater support for policies aimed at reducing inequality, expanding welfare provision, and promoting civil rights—policy domains that are typically emphasized by left-wing parties (Di Landro, 2025; Manza & Brooks, 1998). In this sense, the modern gender gap is often interpreted as the political reflection of a broader realignment between women's social position and the policy platforms offered by political parties.

Existing research has provided substantial evidence that these transformations have been driven, at least in part, by generational

dynamics (Dassonneville, 2021). Younger cohorts of women, socialized in more egalitarian and secular environments, tend to hold more progressive attitudes than older generations. As these cohorts gradually replace older ones in the electorate, the aggregate gender gap has shifted accordingly. From this perspective, the modern gender gap can be understood as the outcome of long-term processes of political socialization, whereby exposure to different social contexts during formative years translates into distinct and enduring political preferences.

Despite these advances, however, an important question remains underexplored. Much of the literature has focused on structural and cultural explanations. While these factors undoubtedly play a crucial role, they often assume a relatively direct link between individuals' objective conditions and their political behaviour. In doing so, they tend to overlook the possibility that similar structural conditions may be interpreted differently by individuals, leading to variation in political outcomes. In particular, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of group identity and subjective perceptions in shaping the gender gap in voting. This paper addresses this gap by introducing a perspective centred on identity and perceived discrimination. In particular, in line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981), we argue that the political consequences of socio-economic transformation are conditioned by processes of social recognition and group identification. More specifically, we posit that women are more likely to support left-wing parties when they interpret their experiences through the lens of group-based disadvantage—that is, when they perceive gender inequalities as reflecting a broader pattern of discrimination affecting women as a social category.

This argument draws on a long-standing tradition in social and political theory that emphasizes the role of group identities in political mobilization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981; Bartolini & Mair, 1990). Just as class-based political behaviour has historically been linked to the emergence of class consciousness (defined as the awareness of shared interests and collective disadvantage) (Bartolini & Mair, 1990), gender-based political behaviour may similarly depend on the development of a form of gender consciousness. Such consciousness involves not only the recognition of inequalities, but also the identification with a group that is perceived as sharing

common interests and experiences. From this perspective, the modern gender gap might be interpreted not only as the aggregate result of structural changes or value transformations, but also the outcome of a process of political activation rooted in identity. On this basis, we hypothesise that women who recognize and internalize gender-based inequalities as a shared group condition are more likely to support political actors that advocate for redistribution, equality, and social protection (i.e., left-wing parties). Conversely, women who do not perceive themselves as part of a disadvantaged group may not exhibit the same political alignment, even when they are exposed to similar socio-economic conditions. We test these hypotheses using individual-level data from the European Social Survey, covering 15 Western European countries over a decade (2014-2024). Our results show that the modern gender gap has consistently emerged across most Western European countries and that this gap is amplified by perceptions of gender-based discrimination.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the relevant literature on the modern gender gap in voting behaviour is reviewed. The theoretical argument and hypotheses are then developed, before the data and methods are presented. The following section discusses the results of the empirical analysis, while the final section concludes.

## 2. Literature review

The relationship between gender and voting behaviour has long been a central concern in the study of electoral politics. Early research consistently documented what came to be known as the “traditional gender gap”, a pattern whereby women were more likely than men to support conservative parties. This phenomenon, observed across a wide range of Western democracies until the late 1970s, was typically explained by reference to women’s social position and patterns of socialization (Inglehart & Norris, 2000, 2003). In this early phase, women’s lives were largely confined to the domestic sphere, facing barriers to education and employment opportunities. The absence of economic independence and labour market dynamics limited the development of class-based political awareness, thereby weakening their connection to redistributive issues traditionally championed by left-wing parties (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). At the same time, religion

played a central role in shaping social and political attitudes, especially among women. Given their greater involvement in religious life, women tended to internalize more conservative value orientations, which translated into stronger support for right-wing political forces (Emmenegger & Manow, 2014). The decline of this traditional pattern began in the latter part of the twentieth century, as Western societies underwent profound transformations. Scholars have identified a transitional phase characterized by the weakening of traditional social cleavages and increasing electoral dealignment. Processes such as educational expansion, rising living standards, and greater access to information contributed to what has been described as cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1984), enabling individuals to engage more autonomously with political issues (Roig et al., 2024; Van Staalduinen & Zollinger, 2024; Togeby, 1994; Andersen & Cook, 1985; Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1977).

These developments had important implications for the gender gap. As access to education expanded and labour market participation increased, the social position of women began to converge with that of men in some respects, while remaining distinct in others. This shift exposed women to new forms of marginality and economic inequality, particularly in terms of wage disparities, occupational segregation, and employment insecurity (Sears & Citrin, 1982). At the same time, changes in family structures (including rising divorce rates and declining fertility) altered the economic risks faced by women, making them more sensitive to issues related to welfare provision and social protection (Edlund & Pande, 2002). It is within this context that the modern gender gap emerged. From the 1980s onwards, a growing body of evidence has shown that women began to exhibit more progressive attitudes than men and to support left-wing parties to a greater extent (Langsæther & Knutsen, 2025; Van Ditmars & Shorrocks, 2025; Shorrocks, 2018; Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014; Giger 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Explanations for this reversal have generally followed two main lines of inquiry. The first emphasizes socio-structural changes. According to this perspective, women's increasing participation in the labour market and their exposure to economic inequalities have made them more supportive of redistributive policies (Sears & Citrin, 1982; Edlund & Pande, 2002). Left-wing parties, traditionally associated

with welfare expansion and the protection of disadvantaged groups, have thus become more attractive to female voters. This argument is often complemented by the observation that women's economic situation (particularly in the context of single parenthood or labour market precarity) heightens their demand for welfare policies. The second line of research focuses on cultural and value-based explanations (Roig et al., 2024; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Scholars in this tradition argue that the decline of religiosity and the rise of post-materialist values have played a key role in reshaping women's political preferences. As societies become more secular, the influence of traditional morale diminishes, allowing for the emergence of more progressive attitudes on issues such as gender equality, reproductive rights, and civil liberties. Women, who historically exhibited higher levels of religiosity (Emmenegger & Manow, 2014; Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014), are particularly affected by this process, leading to a more pronounced shift in their political orientations. Despite differences in emphasis, both perspectives converge on the importance of generational replacement (Dassonneville, 2021). Younger cohorts, socialized in more egalitarian and secular contexts, tend to hold more progressive attitudes than older generations. As these cohorts enter the electorate, they contribute to the gradual consolidation of the modern gender gap. However, recent research suggests that the most significant shifts occurred among cohorts socialized during key periods of social transformation, while differences between more recent generations may be less pronounced (Dassonneville, 2021).

While this body of literature has significantly advanced our understanding of the evolution of the gender gap, it leaves open an important question regarding the mechanisms that link structural and cultural change to individual political behaviour. In particular, less attention has been paid to the role of subjective perceptions and identity-based processes. By focusing primarily on objective conditions and value orientations, existing explanations may overlook the ways in which individuals interpret their experiences and translate them into political preferences. It is precisely along this dimension that the present study seeks to contribute.

## **2.1. Identity, perceived disadvantage, and the modern gender gap**

A long-standing tradition in political science has emphasized the role of social identities in shaping political attitudes and behaviour. Rather than being driven solely by structural conditions, political choices have often been understood as rooted in individuals' self-identification in social groups, such as class or gender (Tajfel et al., 1971; Conover & Feldman, 1984; McClain et al., 2009). Within this perspective, social cleavages and group-based attachments represent key mechanisms linking social structure to political behaviour.

A crucial distinction in this respect is the one between objective group membership and subjective group identity. Group membership is largely ascriptive and externally defined, whereas group identity involves a psychological attachment based on perceived shared experiences, interests, and values. In this sense, individuals do not automatically translate their socio-demographic characteristics into political behaviour. Instead, this translation requires an intermediate step: the identification with the social group. Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a useful framework for understanding this process (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981). According to SIT, individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, distinguishing between "in-groups" and "out-groups". This categorization between "inside" and "outside" shapes not only self-perception but also attitudes toward others and, importantly, political orientations. Individuals tend to evaluate their own group more positively and may develop preferences that align with what they perceive to be the interests of that group. This process is what generates in-group favouritism and prejudice against out-group members, shaping self-perception and intergroup attitudes. However, this mechanism is not sufficient to explain when and how identities become politically relevant. To develop a political identity, it is necessary to move from the concept of group identity to that of group consciousness. As originally formulated by Miller et al. (1981), group consciousness extends beyond simple identification and incorporates a broader awareness of one's group position within the social hierarchy. It includes not only a sense of belonging, but also an understanding of shared disadvantage, intergroup comparison, and awareness of being privileged or discriminated. In particular, individuals who perceive their group as disadvantaged are more likely to interpret their

experiences in collective terms and to view politics as a means of improving their group's status (McClain et al., 2009).

Within this framework, experiences of discrimination are a key factor in transforming group identity into politically group consciousness. Indeed, whether direct or indirect, discrimination represents a key mechanism through which individuals come to recognize their group membership as politically meaningful. Discrimination is not merely an individual experience, but a relational phenomenon that reflects how groups are positioned within society (Allport, 1979; Tyrberg, 2024). As such, it can be understood as both a symbolic and material signal of group status, reinforcing awareness of inequality and potentially fostering political activation. However, the relationship between perceived discrimination and political behaviour is not univocal. Some scholars have argued that experiences of marginalization may lead to political withdrawal and disengagement, particularly when individuals perceive the system as unresponsive or illegitimate (Schildkraut, 2005; Sanders et al., 2013). From this perspective, recognizing oneself as part of a disadvantaged group may generate feelings of inefficacy and alienation, thereby discouraging participation. Yet, the bulk of empirical evidence suggests a different dynamic. A large body of research has shown that perceived discrimination and group-based disadvantage are more often associated with increased political engagement, rather than withdrawal (Grasso et al., 2019; Spierings & Vermeulen, 2024). In particular, when individuals interpret their situation as part of a broader pattern of systemic inequality, this perception can act as a powerful mobilizing force. Political dissatisfaction, in this sense, does not necessarily undermine participation; instead, it can stimulate it, especially when individuals believe that political action can address their group's grievances. Crucially, this process depends on the presence of political actors capable of articulating and representing these group-based concerns. This insight echoes classic theories of political cleavage formation. As Bartolini & Mair (1990) have argued in their analysis of class politics, the existence of a social division and even of objective inequality is not sufficient to produce stable patterns of political alignment. For a cleavage to emerge, three elements are required: a social-structural division, a normative dimension, and an organizational expression. In particular, the presence of political

entrepreneurs capable of mobilizing and representing group interests is essential. However, even this is not enough. Individuals must also recognize themselves as part of a group with shared interests—that is, they must develop a form of group consciousness.

Applying this logic to gender, it follows that the mere existence of gender inequality, or even the presence of parties advocating for gender equality, does not automatically translate into gender-based voting behaviour. What is required is a process of subjective recognition, whereby women perceive themselves as belonging to a group that shares common experiences of disadvantage and whose interests can be advanced through political action. In this sense, identity acts as the key mechanism linking structural conditions to political behaviour. From this perspective, the modern gender gap can be reinterpreted not only as the result of socio-economic and cultural transformations, but also as the outcome of a process of identity-based political mobilization. While changes in women's social position (such as increased labour market participation and educational attainment) have undoubtedly played a crucial role, their political effects depend on whether these experiences are interpreted through a group-based lens. Women who perceive gender inequalities as reflecting a broader pattern of discrimination are more likely to electorally support parties that emphasize redistribution, equality, and social protection (i.e., left-wing parties). Conversely, women who do not interpret their experiences in these terms may not exhibit the same political alignment. This argument leads to a set of two testable hypotheses:

*H1: Women are more likely than men to support left-wing parties.*

Although our first hypothesis is not innovative in itself, it provides an essential starting point for our argument. In line with the modern gender gap theory, it establishes the baseline expectation that gender is associated with left-wing voting. However, our core claim is not simply that women are more likely than men to support the left, but that this relationship is conditional on how women subjectively perceive their position in society. More specifically, we argue that the effect of gender on vote choice should be stronger among women who perceive themselves as belonging to a group that is discriminated against or structurally disadvantaged. Our second hypothesis

therefore tests the central mechanism of our argument: the idea that perceived discrimination activates gender as a politically relevant identity and, in doing so, strengthens women's propensity to electorally support left-wing parties.

*H2: Perceived discrimination is expected to increase support for left-wing parties more strongly among women than among men, thereby widening the gender gap in left-wing voting.*

### 3. Data and methods

#### 3.1. The data

We test our hypotheses using individual-level data from the ESS survey (N = 72,109) covering waves 7 to 11 (2014-2024). The European Social Survey (ESS) is a biannual cross-national survey, launched in 2001, that collects data on individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours across 36 European countries. Although the ESS is not an electoral survey per se, it contains a core politics module and a broad set of variables on political behaviour. Its rigorous questionnaire design, strong cross-national comparability, and robust sampling procedures make it widely regarded as one of the most widely used datasets in social science (Jowell et al., 2007; Kohler, 2007, 2008). In our analysis we focus on 15 Western European countries<sup>1</sup>. The choice to focus on Western Europe is theoretically motivated: the arguments explaining the shift from the traditional to the modern gender gap were mostly developed in relation to advanced industrial democracies, and especially to Western European contexts (Inglehart, 1977; Inglehart & Norris, 2000). Therefore, Western Europe provides an ideal context to test our expectations.

#### 3.2. Dependent and independent variables

Our dependent variable is the vote choice for a left-wing party in the most recent general election. In the original ESS dataset, electoral choice is measured as a categorical variable that distinguishes among numerous political parties, varying across countries and survey

---

<sup>1</sup> These countries are: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

rounds. To ensure consistency with the research questions, a new coding scheme was implemented. As a result, the variable is transformed into a binary indicator, where 1 indicates a vote for left-wing parties (for the full list of left-wing parties see Table A2, Appendix A). Parties are defined as belonging to the left if they fall within either the class bloc (Emanuele, 2023) or the post-materialist bloc (Inglehart, 1977). The former category encompasses communist, socialist, and social democratic parties, whereas the latter includes green, feminist, and animal rights parties. Respondents who did not vote, refused to answer the vote choice question, or answered “don’t know” are excluded from the analysis.

The main quantity of interest in this study is the modern gender gap. To estimate the gap and to test our first hypothesis (H1), we include in our models a variable measuring the gender of the respondents. The variable distinguishes between two categories: woman (coded as 1) and man (coded as 0). To test our second hypothesis, we let gender interact with a variable that captures perceived discrimination and is derived from ESS items indicating whether respondents report experiencing discrimination based on gender. This indicator is coded as a binary variable, where 1 denotes the presence of perceived discrimination and 0 its absence.

In addition to our key predictors, we have also included a standard set of control variables commonly associated with electoral behaviour. Age is included as a continuous numerical variable and it is included in the models as it is. Education is a categorical variable, with 1=primary or less (our baseline), 2=secondary, and 3=tertiary. Finally, political interest was originally measured as a categorical variable (1=Very interested, 2=Quite interested, 3=Hardly interested and 4=Not at all interested). For the sake of simplicity, the variable has been included as dummy variable, with 0 including those who are very or quite interested in politics (the baseline) and 1 the remaining categories. Finally, since the literature has suggested that changes in the gender gap are driven by generational replacement (Dassonneville, 2021), we also include a control variable for generational belonging. Following Blais & Rubenson (2013), we distinguish three different generations: pre-boomers, the reference category (born before 1945), boomers (born between 1945-1965), and post-boomers (born after 1965). Given the binary nature of our dependent variable, we estimate

a series of logistic regression models to test our hypotheses. All models include country and ESS wave fixed effects to account for unobserved heterogeneity across countries and over time.

4. Results

Our analysis begins with a preliminary assessment of the modern gender gap in Western Europe. Figure 1 presents the predicted probabilities of voting for left-wing parties among women and men across the 15 countries covered by this study. These estimates are derived from a logit regression model in which the dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator of voting for a left-wing party, and the key independent variable is gender. The model is estimated on the pooled dataset and includes country and election fixed effects to account for unobserved contextual heterogeneity. We also control for age, education, and political interest across all models, while generational belonging is included only in Model 3 (the fully specified models are reported in Table A1 in Appendix A). The results are consistent with the baseline expectation of a modern gender gap: the predicted probability of voting for a left-wing party is, on average, higher among women than among men. Although the difference is statistically significant, its substantive magnitude is not particularly large. This is not surprising, given that gender is only one among several factors structuring vote choice.

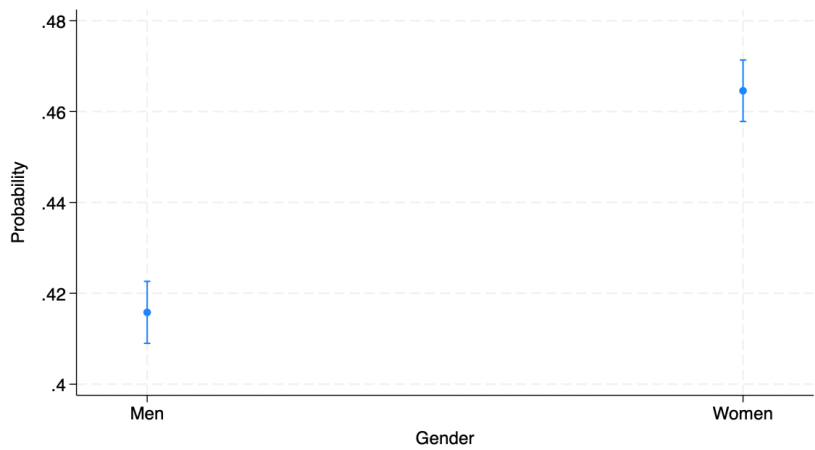


Fig. 1. The modern gender gap in Western Europe (95% CIs)

Figure 2 reports the estimated effect of gender by country, with positive values indicating that women are more likely than men to vote for left-wing parties. The effect is positive in all countries except Ireland, where it is very close to zero and not statistically significant. Among the remaining countries, the effect is not statistically significant in Cyprus and Germany, while it reaches significance at the 90% level in Austria and Italy. In the other 10 countries covered by the study, the effect is positive and statistically significant. This suggests that, despite meaningful cross-country variation in the size of the gender gap, the overall finding is robust. In most Western European countries included in the analysis, women express a more progressive voting orientation than men, as reflected in their higher propensity to support left-wing parties. Not surprisingly, the magnitude of this difference varies: it appears particularly pronounced in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, while it is more modest in several other countries. Yet the direction of the relationship is highly consistent. Overall, these results provide clear support for our first hypothesis (H1), confirming that women are, on average, more likely than men to vote for left-wing parties across Western Europe.

Although explaining cross-country variation is not the main purpose of this paper, the stronger gender gap observed in Nordic countries deserves some consideration and may point to avenues for future research. A first possible explanation concerns the structure of political competition. In Nordic countries where the modern gender gap is stronger, issues such as welfare, public services, and gender equality have historically occupied a central place in the public and political debate (Ellingsæter & Leira 2006; Lister 2009). These are precisely the kinds of issues through which gendered social interests and political preferences may become electorally consequential. Where these issues are more salient, more clearly politicized, and more strongly associated with left-wing parties, the gender gap in left-wing voting might be more likely to become more explicit. A second explanation relates to women's position in the labour market. In Nordic countries, women's labour-market participation is comparatively high (although in a context of occupational gender segregation) (Lister 2009). This may reinforce the connection between gender, welfare preferences, and support for left-wing parties. A third

possible explanation concerns party supply. The translation of gendered preferences into left-wing voting depends not only on voters’ attitudes, but also on the credibility and clarity of the political alternatives available to them. In Nordic countries, left-wing parties may be more clearly associated with welfare expansion and gender equality (Askeland & Strauss 2014). On the contrary, in other contexts the relationship between gender and left-wing voting may be weakened by less clear party positioning, greater party-system fragmentation, or the stronger role of other cleavages such as religion, territorial identity, or traditional partisan loyalties.

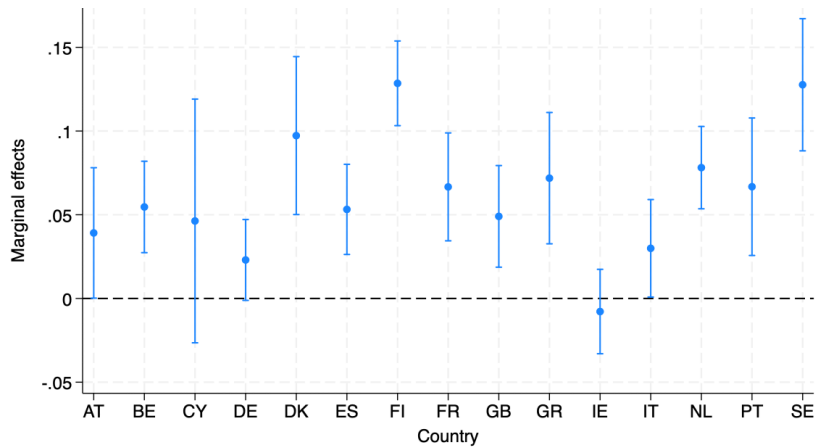


Fig. 2. The modern gender gap across countries (95% CIs)

We test our second hypothesis by interacting gender with perceived gender discrimination. The results of this analysis, presented in Figure 3, provide important evidence on the conditional nature of the modern gender gap. The figure reports the predicted probability of voting for a left-wing party by gender and perceived discrimination. The first relevant finding is that women are, overall, more likely than men to support left-wing parties, regardless of whether they report feeling discriminated. Even among respondents who do not perceive themselves as discriminated, the predicted probability of voting for the left is higher among women than among men. This suggests that gender, as an objective social position, is already associated with a more progressive voting orientation. However, this baseline difference is relatively modest. Women who do

not perceive discrimination are only slightly more likely than men to vote for a left-wing party. The second finding concerns men. Among male respondents, perceived gender discrimination is associated with a lower probability of voting for the left. Men who report feeling discriminated based on gender are significantly less likely to support left-wing parties than men who do not report such discrimination. The third and most important finding concerns women. Among female respondents, perceived discrimination has a much stronger effect. Women who perceive themselves as discriminated based on gender are substantially more likely to vote for a left-wing party than women who do not perceive discrimination. The increase is large in substantive terms: the predicted probability rises from roughly 45% among women who do not perceive discrimination to more than 60% among women who do. This suggests that the subjective perception of discrimination strongly amplifies women's propensity to support the left. The key result, therefore, is not simply that women vote more for the left than men, but that the gender gap becomes much larger when women interpret their social condition as one marked by discrimination.

This finding is clearly in line with our second hypothesis and speaks directly to the core mechanism of our theoretical argument. Gender may matter for vote choice not only because women occupy a different objective position in society, but because this position can become politically salient when it is interpreted through the lens of discrimination. Being a woman is already associated with a higher probability of voting for left-wing parties, but this association becomes much stronger when women perceive themselves as belonging to a group that faces discrimination.

This result becomes even more interesting when compared with the pattern observed among men. Indeed, our findings suggest that perceived discrimination does not operate in the same way across gender groups. Rather than activating support for parties that emphasize gender equality, perceived discrimination among men may reflect a different political interpretation of gender relations. One possible explanation is that men who perceive themselves as discriminated based on gender may be less receptive to the egalitarian and anti-discrimination claims typically advanced by left-wing parties. Instead, they may be more attracted to political actors — particularly

on the radical right — that frame gender equality as a threat to men's status, criticize feminist claims, or defend a return to more traditional gender roles. From this perspective, perceived discrimination among men may not foster identification with disadvantaged groups, but rather a sense of status loss or backlash against perceived changes in gender hierarchies. This interpretation, however, should be treated as tentative. The analysis does not allow us to directly observe the meanings that men attach to perceived gender discrimination, and future research could investigate this mechanism more explicitly (for example by distinguishing between perceptions of unfair treatment, status threat, anti-feminist resentment, and broader opposition to changing gender norms).

More broadly, our results suggest that perceived discrimination transforms gender from a demographic characteristic into a politically mobilizing identity. The implication is that the modern gender gap should not be understood only as the mechanical effect of women's social location, labour-market position, or policy preferences. These factors are important, but the figure suggests that subjective interpretations of gendered disadvantage — among both women and men — also play a crucial role. The political relevance of gender increases when women connect their individual experiences or group position to a broader perception of disadvantage and discrimination. At the same time, gender may also become politically salient among men when perceived discrimination reflects a sense of status loss or backlash against perceived changes in gender hierarchies. This finding is important because it suggests that perceived discrimination, in itself, does not automatically translate into support for the left. Its political consequences depend on the social position from which discrimination is perceived and on the political meaning attached to that perception. In other words, the effect of perceived discrimination is not symmetric across gender groups: among women, it appears to activate support for the left, while among men it may push voters away from parties associated with gender equality and progressive claims.

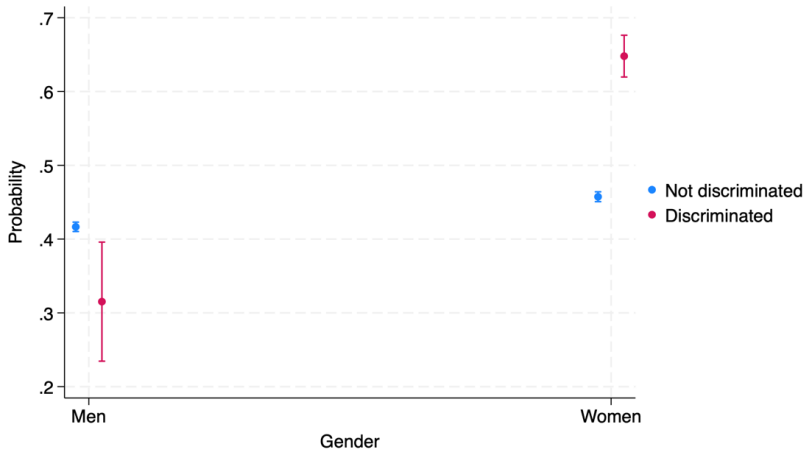


Fig. 3. The modern gender gap by perceived discrimination (95% CIs)

## 5. Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between gender, perceived gender discrimination, and electoral support for left-wing parties in Western Europe. Building on the literature on the modern gender gap, we started from the expectation that women should be more likely than men to vote for left-wing parties. However, our main theoretical contribution was to move beyond the simple association between gender and vote choice. We argued that gender becomes politically more consequential when the objective condition of being a woman is accompanied by a subjective perception of gender-based discrimination. In other words, we suggested that the modern gender gap should not be understood only as the product of women's social location or structural disadvantage, but also as the result of the extent to which women perceive their gendered as a source of discrimination.

Our argument draws on insights from social identity theory. From this perspective, gender is not only a demographic characteristic, but a social identity that may become politically salient when individuals perceive themselves as belonging to a disadvantaged or discriminated group. We therefore hypothesized that perceived gender discrimination would strengthen women's propensity to electorally support left-wing parties. The underlying mechanism is that the perception of discrimination may activate a sense of group consciousness, increasing the likelihood that women support parties that are usually more attentive to gender interests.

The empirical analysis provides strong support for both hypotheses. First, we find evidence of a modern gender gap in Western Europe: women are, on average, more likely than men to vote for left-wing parties. This finding is robust across almost all the Western European countries included in our study, although the magnitude of the gender gap varies across national contexts. More importantly, our analysis shows that this gender gap is conditional on perceived discrimination. The effect of perceived gender discrimination is not symmetrical across men and women. Among men, perceiving discrimination significantly reduce the probability of voting for a left-wing party. Among women, by contrast, perceived discrimination has a strong and significant effect on left-wing voting. Women who perceive themselves as discriminated based on gender are considerably more likely to vote for the left than women who do not perceive gender-based discrimination.

These findings are central to our argument. They suggest that perceived discrimination is interpreted differently by women and men, with markedly different political consequences. On the one hand, being a woman is already associated with a somewhat higher propensity to support left-wing parties, and this association becomes much stronger when women interpret their social position through the lens of discrimination. Among women, perceived discrimination appears to activate gender as a politically relevant identity, strengthening support for parties that are more closely associated with gender equality, anti-discrimination policies, welfare, and social protection. On the other hand, men who perceive themselves as discriminated based on gender are less likely to vote for left-wing parties. This suggests that, among men, perceived gender discrimination may reflect a different political interpretation: not identification with a disadvantaged group, but a sense of status loss or backlash against perceived changes in gender hierarchies. In this case, perceived discrimination may make men less receptive to the egalitarian claims advanced by the left and potentially more attracted to parties on the right, especially those that frame gender equality as a threat to traditional roles or to men's social position. However, this interpretation should be treated with caution, as the available evidence does not allow us to directly observe the meanings that men attach to perceived gender discrimination.

In any case, our results show that perceived discrimination operates as an activating mechanism. It makes gender more politically relevant and strengthens its association with electoral choices. These findings contribute to the literature in two main ways. First, they reinforce the idea that gender remains an important dimension of electoral politics in advanced democracies. Second, they show that the political effect of gender is not automatic. It depends on how gender is experienced, interpreted, and connected to perceptions of inequality and discrimination. This suggests that analyses of gender and voting should pay greater attention to the subjective mechanisms through which social positions become politically mobilizing.

The article also opens several avenues for future research. First, a promising avenue for research concerns the mechanisms through which perceived gender discrimination translates into political preferences among men and women. This study shows that women who perceive higher levels of gender discrimination are more likely to support left-wing parties. However, the available data do not allow us to directly observe the subjective meanings that respondents attach to perceived discrimination. Future research could therefore investigate more explicitly why perceived gender discrimination appears to reinforce left-wing voting among women, while operating differently among men. In particular, it could examine whether, among men, perceived gender discrimination reflects feelings of status threat, anti-feminist resentment, or opposition to changing gender norms. This would help clarify whether the observed gendered patterns are driven by different interpretations of discrimination, asymmetric reactions to changing gender hierarchies, or broader forms of political and cultural dissatisfaction.

Second, while we focused on gender and the subjective perception of gender-based discrimination, future work should more explicitly examine the role of party supply. Left-wing parties may differ in the extent to which they emphasize gender equality, welfare, anti-discrimination policies, or feminist claims. These differences may shape whether and how women who perceive discrimination translate that perception into left-wing voting. At the same time, parties on the right may also adopt strategies aimed at appealing to women voters, either by moderating their positions on gender-related issues or by reframing women's interests around family, security, or welfare chauvinism. Understanding the interaction between women's per-

ceived discrimination and party strategies would therefore provide a more complete account of the gendered dynamics of electoral competition. Third, our results reveal meaningful cross-country variation in the size of the modern gender gap. Although our main goal was not to explain these differences, future research could investigate the contextual conditions that make gender more or less electorally salient. Institutional arrangements, levels of gender equality, the strength of feminist movements, or the features of the party-system and party competition may all shape the extent to which women's perceived discrimination is translated into support for the left. Comparative research that integrates individual-level perceptions with country-level political and institutional contexts would be especially valuable in this respect.

## Bibliography

- Abendschön, S., & Steinmetz, S. (2014). The gender gap in voting revisited: Women's party preferences in a European context. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 21(2), 315-344.
- Allport, G. W. (1979). *The nature of prejudice*. Perseus Books (Original work published 1954).
- Andersen, K., & Cook, E. A. (1985). Women, work and political attitudes. *American Journal of Political Science*, 29(3), 606-625.
- Askeland, G. A., & Strauss, H. (2014). The Nordic welfare model, civil society and social work. In H. Strauss, C. Noble, & B. Littlechild (Eds.), *Global social work: Crossing borders, blurring boundaries* (pp. 241-254). Sydney University Press.
- Bartolini, S., & Mair, P. (1990). *Identity, competition and electoral availability: The stabilisation of European electorates 1885-1985*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blais, A., & Rubenson, D. (2013). The source of turnout decline: New values or new contexts? *Comparative Political Studies*, 46(1), 95-117.
- Conover, P. J., & Feldman, S. (1984). How people organize the political world: A schematic model. *American Journal of Political Science*, 95-126.
- Dalton, R. J. (1984). Cognitive mobilization and partisan dealignment in advanced industrial democracies. *The Journal of Politics*, 46(1), 264-284.
- Dassonneville, R. (2021). Change and continuity in the ideological gender gap: A longitudinal analysis of left-right self-placement in OECD countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(1), 225-238.
- Di Landro, G. (2025). Party behaviour and the gender voting gap. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55, e20.

- Edlund, L., & Pande, R. (2002). Why have women become left-wing? The political gender gap and the decline in marriage. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 117(3), 917-961.
- Ellingsæter, A. L., & Leira, A. (2006). *Politicising parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender relations in welfare states*. Bristol University Press.
- Emanuele, V. (2023). Lost in translation? Class cleavage roots and left electoral mobilization in Western Europe. *Perspectives on Politics*, 21(3), 913-931.
- Emmenegger, P., & Manow, P. (2014). Religion and the gender vote gap: Women's changed political preferences from the 1970s to 2010. *Politics & Society*, 42(2), 166-193.
- Giger, N. (2009). Towards a modern gender gap in Europe? *Social Science Journal*, 46(3), 474-492.
- Grasso, M., Yoxon, B., Karampampas, S., & Temple, L. (2019). Relative deprivation and inequalities in social and political activism. *Acta Politica*, 54, 398-429.
- Inglehart, R. (1977). *The silent revolution: Changing values and political styles among Western publics*. Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2000). The developmental theory of the gender gap: Women's and men's voting behaviour in global perspective. *International Political Science Review*, 21(4), 441-463.
- Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2003). *Rising tide: Gender equality and cultural change around the world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Iversen, T. & Rosenbluth, F. (2006). The political economy of gender: Explaining cross-national variation in the gender division of labor and the gender voting gap. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(1), 1-19.
- Langsæther, P. E., & Knutsen, C. H. (2025). Are women more progressive than men? Attitudinal gender gaps in West European democracies. *International Political Science Review*, 46(3), 442-453.
- Lipset, S. M., & Rokkan, S. (1967). *Cleavage structures, party systems, and voter alignments: An introduction (Vol. 2)*. Free Press.
- Lister, R. (2009). A nordic nirvana? Gender, citizenship, and social justice in the Nordic welfare states. *Social Politics*, 16(2), 242-278.
- Manza, J., & Brooks, C. (1998). The gender gap in U.S. presidential elections: When? Why? Implications? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(5), 1235-1266.
- McClain, P. D., Johnson Carew, J. D., Walton, Jr. E., & Watts, C. S. (2009). Group membership, group identity, and group consciousness: Measures of racial identity in American politics. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12(1), 471-485.
- Miller, A. H., Gurin, P., Gurin, G., & Malanchuk, O. (1981). Group consciousness and political participation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 494-511.
- Roig, R., Aybar, C., & Pavía, J. M. (2024). *Toward a modern gender gap in left-right self-placement: A study case of the population aged over 64 years in Spain*. *SAGE Open*, 14(2).

Sanders, D., Fisher, S. D., Heath, A., & Sobolewska, M. (2013). The democratic engagement of Britain’s ethnic minorities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37(1), 120-139.

Schildkraut, D. J. (2005). The rise and fall of political engagement among Latinos: The role of identity and perceptions of discrimination. *Political Behavior*, 27(3), 285-312.

Sears, D., & Citrin, J. (1982). *Tax revolt: Something for nothing in California*. Harvard University Press.

Shorrocks, R. (2018). Cohort change in political gender gaps in Europe and Canada: The role of modernization. *Politics & Society*, 46(2), 135-175.

Spierings, N., & Vermeulen, F. (2024). Minding the political engagement gap: How discrimination and religion impact Dutch voters with an immigrant background. *Acta Politica*, 59, 619-642.

Tajfel, H., Billig, M. G., Bundy, R. P., & Flament, C. (1971). Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1(2), 149-178.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33-37). Brooks/Cole.

Tajfel, H. (1978). Intergroup behavior. In H. Tajfel & C. Fraser (Eds.), *Introducing Social Psychology* (pp. 401-466). Penguin Books.

Togeby, L. (1994). Political implications of increasing numbers of women in the labor force. *Comparative Political Studies*, 20(2), 211-240.

Tyrberg, M. (2024). The impact of discrimination and support on immigrant trust and belonging. *European Political Science Review*, 16(1), 18-34.

Van Ditmars, M. M., & Shorrocks, R. (2025). Social change and women’s left vote: The role of employment, education, and marriage in the gender vote gap. *Comparative Political Studies*, 58(8), 1571-1602.

Van Staalduin, B., & Zollinger, D. (2024). Perceptions of social mobility, gender, and progressive politics. *Comparative Political Studies*, 58(12), 2718-2749.

Appendix A

Tab. A1. Logistic regressions

|                  | Model 1<br>Pooled<br>model | Model 2<br>Country<br>model | Model 3<br>Interaction<br>model |
|------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Gender (2=Women) | 0.205***<br>(0.0289)       | 0.160*<br>(0.0811)          | 0.171***<br>(0.0276)            |

|                                            |                        |                         |                        |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Age                                        | -0.0130**<br>(0.00419) | -0.0130***<br>(0.00146) | -0.0123**<br>(0.00416) |
| Education                                  |                        |                         |                        |
| Primary                                    | Baseline               | Baseline                | Baseline               |
| Secondary                                  | -0.156*<br>(0.0715)    | -0.154***<br>(0.0338)   | -0.159*<br>(0.0726)    |
| Tertiary                                   | 0.0523<br>(0.104)      | 0.0486<br>(0.0340)      | 0.0363<br>(0.106)      |
| Generation                                 |                        |                         |                        |
| Pre-boomer                                 | Baseline               | Baseline                | Baseline               |
| Boomer                                     | 0.0893<br>(0.0939)     | 0.0879<br>(0.0453)      | 0.0972<br>(0.0957)     |
| Post-boomer                                | -0.107<br>(0.0744)     | -0.108<br>(0.0713)      | -0.0921<br>(0.0756)    |
| Interest in politics (2=Not<br>interested) | -0.115<br>(0.0736)     | -0.114***<br>(0.0254)   | -0.104<br>(0.0758)     |
| Discrimination (0=Not<br>discriminated)    |                        |                         | -0.452*<br>(0.200)     |
| Men*Not discriminated                      |                        |                         | Baseline               |
| Women*Discriminated                        |                        |                         | 1.259***<br>(0.240)    |
| Ess round                                  |                        |                         |                        |
| Round 7                                    | Baseline               | Baseline                | Baseline               |
| Round 8                                    | 0.152*<br>(0.0743)     | 0.152***<br>(0.0380)    | 0.145*<br>(0.0737)     |
| Round 9                                    | 0.0231<br>(0.137)      | 0.0235<br>(0.0373)      | 0.0145<br>(0.136)      |
| Round 10                                   | 0.138<br>(0.120)       | 0.138***<br>(0.0374)    | 0.125<br>(0.119)       |
| Round 11                                   | 0.156<br>(0.147)       | 0.157***<br>(0.0420)    | 0.139<br>(0.147)       |

| Country        |                        |                       |                        |
|----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Austria        | Baseline               | Baseline              | Baseline               |
| Belgium        | -0.379***<br>(0.0493)  | -0.419***<br>(0.0744) | -0.380***<br>(0.0487)  |
| Cyprus         | -0.324***<br>(0.0157)  | -0.343**<br>(0.132)   | -0.333***<br>(0.0159)  |
| Germany        | 0.272***<br>(0.0576)   | 0.305***<br>(0.0694)  | 0.274***<br>(0.0574)   |
| Denmark        | -0.0239<br>(0.0643)    | -0.146<br>(0.0923)    | -0.0198<br>(0.0646)    |
| Spain          | 0.0556<br>(0.0411)     | 0.0277<br>(0.0729)    | 0.0421<br>(0.0397)     |
| Finland        | -0.330***<br>(0.0513)  | -0.542***<br>(0.0730) | -0.327***<br>(0.0510)  |
| France         | -0.0203<br>(0.0564)    | -0.0772<br>(0.0768)   | -0.0350<br>(0.0556)    |
| United Kingdom | -0.167***<br>(0.0493)  | -0.188*<br>(0.0776)   | -0.177***<br>(0.0479)  |
| Greece         | -0.0202<br>(0.0236)    | -0.0877<br>(0.0846)   | -0.0134<br>(0.0246)    |
| Ireland        | -1.955***<br>(0.116)   | -1.825***<br>(0.117)  | -1.960***<br>(0.115)   |
| Italy          | -0.547***<br>(0.0320)  | -0.536***<br>(0.0768) | -0.546***<br>(0.0325)  |
| Netherlands    | -0.705***<br>(0.0425)  | -0.821***<br>(0.0755) | -0.705***<br>(0.0421)  |
| Portugal       | 0.489***<br>(0.0395)   | 0.430***<br>(0.0882)  | 0.489***<br>(0.0393)   |
| Sweden         | -0.0670***<br>(0.0153) | -0.254**<br>(0.0849)  | -0.0822***<br>(0.0156) |
| Men*Austria    |                        | Baseline              |                        |
| Women*Belgium  |                        | 0.0789<br>(0.101)     |                        |

|                       |                  |                      |                  |
|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Women*Cyprus          |                  | 0.0395<br>(0.179)    |                  |
| Women*Germany         |                  | -0.0664<br>(0.0952)  |                  |
| Women*Denmark         |                  | 0.239<br>(0.128)     |                  |
| Women*Spain           |                  | 0.0565<br>(0.0984)   |                  |
| Women*Finland         |                  | 0.398***<br>(0.0989) |                  |
| Women*France          |                  | 0.113<br>(0.105)     |                  |
| Women*United Kingdom  |                  | 0.0447<br>(0.104)    |                  |
| Women*Greece          |                  | 0.134<br>(0.115)     |                  |
| Women*Ireland         |                  | -0.241<br>(0.156)    |                  |
| Women*Italy           |                  | -0.0222<br>(0.106)   |                  |
| Women*Netherlands     |                  | 0.222*<br>(0.102)    |                  |
| Women*Portugal        |                  | 0.117<br>(0.119)     |                  |
| Women*Sweden          |                  | 0.367**<br>(0.117)   |                  |
| Intercept             | 0.412<br>(0.242) | 0.437**<br>(0.137)   | 0.385<br>(0.244) |
| Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> | 0.0255           | 0.0260               | 0.0275           |
| N                     | 71842            | 71842                | 71842            |

Tab. A2. Left-wing party classification: class-bloc and post-materialist parties by count

| Country        | N  | Class bloc and Post materialist                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                    |
|----------------|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Austria</b> | 3  | Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ); Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ)                                                                                                                                                                                     | The Greens                                                         |
| <b>Belgium</b> | 6  | Socialist Party Different (SP.A); Workers' Party of Belgium (PVDA+); Socialist Party (PS); Workers' Party of Belgium (PTB)                                                                                                                                     | Green; Ecolo                                                       |
| <b>Cyprus</b>  | 3  | Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL); Movement for Social Democracy (EDEK);                                                                                                                                                                              | Movement of Ecologists – Citizens' Cooperation (KOSP);             |
| <b>Denmark</b> | 4  | Social Democrats (SD); Socialist People's Party (SF); Red–Green Alliance (RGA)                                                                                                                                                                                 | The Alternative (ALT)                                              |
| <b>Finland</b> | 7  | Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP); Left Alliance (LA); Communist Party of Finland (SKP); Communist Workers' Party (KTP)                                                                                                                                 | Feminist Party (FP); Green League (GL); Animal Justice Party (AJP) |
| <b>France</b>  | 10 | New Anticapitalist Party (NPA); Workers' Struggle (LO); Left Front (FG); Socialist Party (PS); Radical Party of the Left (PRG); French Communist Party (PCF); Miscellaneous Left (DVG); New Ecological and Social People's Union (NUPES); France Unbowed (LFI) | Europe Ecology The Greens (EELV)                                   |
| <b>Germany</b> | 3  | Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); The Left (Die Linke)                                                                                                                                                                                                 | The Greens                                                         |
| <b>Greece</b>  | 5  | Movement for Change (KINAL); Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA); Communist Party of Greece (KKE); Popular Unity (LAE); Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)                                                                                              | —                                                                  |
| <b>Ireland</b> | 8  | Labour Party (LAB); People Before Profit (PBP); Socialist Party (SP); United Left Alliance (ULA); Solidarity (SOL); Social Democrats (SD); Workers' Party (WP)                                                                                                 | Green Party (GP)                                                   |
| <b>Italy</b>   | 8  | Democratic Party (PD); Left Ecology Freedom (SEL); Civil Revolution (RC); Free and Equal (LeU); Greens and Left Alliance (AVS); Popular Union (UP); Italy Europe Together (IEI)                                                                                | Italian Radicals (RI)                                              |

|                       |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                              |
|-----------------------|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Netherlands</b>    | 5 | Labour Party (PvdA); Socialist Party (SP)                                                                                                                                                                                                              | GreenLeft (GL); Party for the Animals (PvdD); Article 1 (A1)                 |
| <b>Portugal</b>       | 8 | Left Bloc (BE); Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU); Portuguese Workers' Communist Party (PCTP/MRPP); Workers' Party of Socialist Unity (POUS); Socialist Party (PS); Portuguese Labour Party (PTP) – Socialist Alternative Movement (MAS) – Act (AGIR) | People–Animals–Nature (PAN); LIVRE / Time to Move Forward (L/TPA)            |
| <b>Spain</b>          | 8 | Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE); United Left (IU); Unidas Podemos (UP); En Comú Podem (ECP); Sumar (SUMAR)                                                                                                                                     | Animalist Party with the Environment (PACMA); Equo (EQUO); More Country (MP) |
| <b>Sweden</b>         | 4 | Social Democrats (SAP); Left Party (V)                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Green Party (MP); Feminist Initiative (FI)                                   |
| <b>United Kingdom</b> | 2 | Labour Party                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Green Party (GP)                                                             |