

Schuman Paper
n°739
05th March 2024

2024, a European political year - through the eyes of women

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In 1906, Finland became the first country in Europe to grant women the right to vote, with the adoption of universal suffrage, at the same time as it won its autonomy from the Russian Empire. The following year, Finnish women were able to exercise this right in the [general elections](#). Throughout the twentieth century, women in Europe and around the world fought long and hard to gain the right to vote without any additional conditions to those required of men. In some countries, only widows were allowed to vote as a first step towards electoral emancipation ([in Belgium](#), for example, until 1921). In other countries, such as [Bulgaria](#), the right to vote was initially reserved for mothers of legitimate children and exclusively for local elections. In [Portugal](#), only women with a university degree were allowed to vote from 1931 on. In Spain it was not until post-Franco democratisation and the 1976 elections that Spanish women regained the right to vote, initially [acquired in 1931](#) before the civil war. This year [France](#) is celebrating the 80th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. Cypriot women won the right to vote at the same time as their male counterparts when the [Republic was created](#) in 1960. This can be explained quite simply by the fact that, at that time, such discrimination could no longer be justified. So, it took a good part of the twentieth century to get there...

In European countries, legislation on the right to vote and stand for election now recognises equal access for women and men. However, their participation in political life is still marked by significant differences and major obstacles that we believe are unjustified. Women are still less represented on the political stage, even though they make up more than half of the population.

In the European Union, there are [ten million more women](#) than men. This is a fact that deserves our attention in 2024, a year that is notable for its electoral importance, with the election of representatives to the European Parliament scheduled for 6 to 9 June. There will also be five presidential elections and six parliamentary elections [in the Member States](#). This therefore provides a good opportunity to examine the position of women on the European political scene and the obstacles that still exist behind the scenes preventing them from participating fully in political life.

WOMEN VOTERS

For a long time, international polls have shown higher abstention rates among women than men. The politicisation of the former has taken time to take hold, but this gap [has tightened greatly](#) and has practically disappeared from the national elections. However it can [be seen](#) in [so-called secondary ballots](#), such as the European elections. In 2014, 45% of men said they would go to the polls, compared with 41% of women. In 2019, — while turnout rose above 50% (50.66%) — this difference narrowed, with 52% of men and 49% of women saying they would go to the polls. We can conclude from this that women still seem to feel slightly less invested in European politics than men. It is difficult to say at this early stage whether more women will turn out to vote in June, but it is clear that their involvement could change the electoral landscape in some countries. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, in a European political context in which parties at the extremes of the political spectrum are presented as gaining ground, women appear to be less attracted to them - a phenomenon known in political science as the "Radical

Right Gender Gap”[1].

During the most recent [general elections](#) in Spain on 23 July 2023, 11% of men, while only 5% of women voted for Vox. The latter describes itself as particularly hostile to women's rights. Its campaign proposals included restricting abortion rights, repealing legislation on violence against women and replacing the Ministry of Equality with a Ministry of the Family. These arguments did little to attract women voters. In Austria during the [general elections](#) in 2019, 11% of women compared to 21% of men voted for the Freedom Party (FPÖ) which supports the idea of a return to the “good old times” – with women taking care of the family, children and the home. This position was particularly criticised when the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP) joined forces with the FPÖ in the federal state Salzburg to form a coalition and considered the [possible](#) payment of government subsidies to families who keep their children at home instead of entrusting them to a childcare system. This has been widely criticised as a “Herdprämie” (oven bonus). For Austrian women, who generally set their careers aside for much longer to look after their children ([60% of women](#) only return to their jobs after two years' parental leave – and many of them only part-time), such a project would further discourage them from pursuing the possibility of having children and a career. With ideas like these, the FPÖ does not convince women as much as it does male electorate.

Votes for the AfD party in Germany have long been typified as being [mainly masculine](#): in the 2017 federal election, 16.3% of men voted for the AfD, compared to just 9.2% of women. In 2021, the figures were 13% and 7.8% respectively. The AfD's ideal image of a woman is not particularly different from that of Vox or the FPÖ and revolves around the concept of the stay-at-home mother. However, recent regional elections in Germany show that more and more women are willing to vote for the AfD. This trend can be largely [explained](#) by a tense social context, with high inflation, low wages and high unemployment, in which the AfD is proposing

simplistic solutions and, above all, paying lip service to its ambitions for equality between men and women; secondly, because of the phenomenon known as the “normalisation” of the AfD, the party is [succeeding in diversifying](#) its electorate reaching higher socio-professional categories. This shows that the AfD is becoming more acceptable amongst the middle classes and consequently among women. In France, the National Rally electorate (RN) is equally [male and female, and it might even be said more female](#) during the last elections, which is quite new for this party. This can be explained by the fact that the chair of the National Rally, Marine le Pen, portrays herself as a strong, independent, emancipated woman, and that this party – like the AfD – is less and less perceived as being on the extreme right of the political spectrum. In terms of the electorate of Éric Zemmour's Reconquête! party – with its clearly anti-feminist stance – there is once again a marked difference between the number of women and men likely to vote for him: a [study](#) of voting intentions before the last presidential election in 2022 showed a six-point gap between the male and female vote.

Another interesting example is Hungary. As Zsuzsanna Szélényi of the Democracy Institute Leadership Academy in Budapest explains, the Fidesz Party, which is in office and which is not [considered to be a far right party](#) within the country, attracts both male and female voters. Despite the under-representation of women in its ranks and the role defended by this party, which stands as conservative and traditional, and reduces women to their roles as mothers and carers, Fidesz has managed to attract female votes. This is primarily due to the fact that, historically, Hungarian society has only been feminist from a top-down perspective: the regime of Janos Kádár (1956-1988) put women and men on an equal footing in terms of labour regulations. Women have also had the right to vote since 1918. So, there was never really any movement on the part of civil society to fight for more rights for Hungarian women. This passivity still exists – women's rights are still not a high priority in the demands of civil

[1] Givens, Terri E. (2004) [The Radical Right Gender Gap](#), Dans : *Comparative Political Studies*, Volume 31, Numéro 1.

society. The second reason why Fidesz manages to secure women's votes is that the government gives particularly substantial financial support to women with children (extremely long, generous maternity support and significant [tax breaks](#) for women who have more than three children). Support that must not be scoffed at in the country that is Europe's "inflation champion". The political movement "*Our Homeland*", which is even further to the right than Fidesz on the political spectrum and advocates radical anti-abortion and anti-feminist policies, is far less successful among women than men. In this case, the "Radical Right Gender Gap" is revealed once again.

If there is a gulf between men and women within parties that are unfavourable to women's rights, and there are more women voters than men the European Union, their greater mobilisation could have an impact the composition of the European Parliament. However, we believe that this mobilisation is only possible if women are better represented.

FEMALE REPRESENTATION

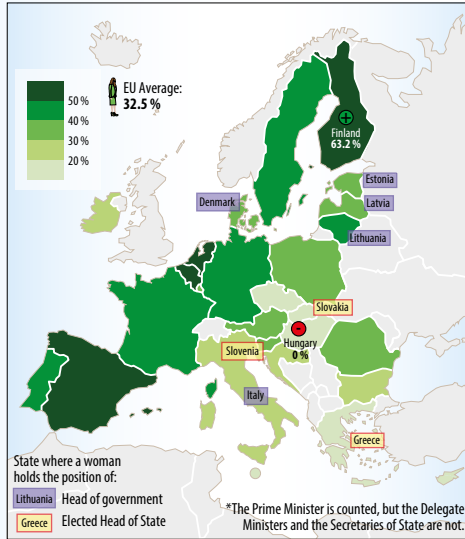
Women are not just voters; they are demanding an active role on the political stage. In the European Union and its Member States, women are increasingly well represented at political level, but much remains to be done. Let's not talk about a gap — but an abyss — in terms of representation.

Simone Veil will go down in history as the first President of the European Parliament to be elected by direct universal suffrage in 1979. The appearance of progressiveness was preserved, but in reality, the [rate of elected women](#) was only 16.6%. In the current 9th parliamentary term, the proportion of women MEPs has increased considerably to 38.5%. Progress, certainly, but still far from parity (50%) or even 51% in terms of fair representation of the European population. These figures are still unsatisfactory at European level, and it is all the more regrettable that they are even less satisfactory at global level: on average, [only 26.5%](#) of parliamentarians are women.

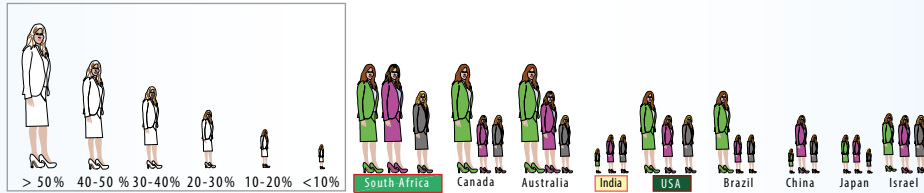
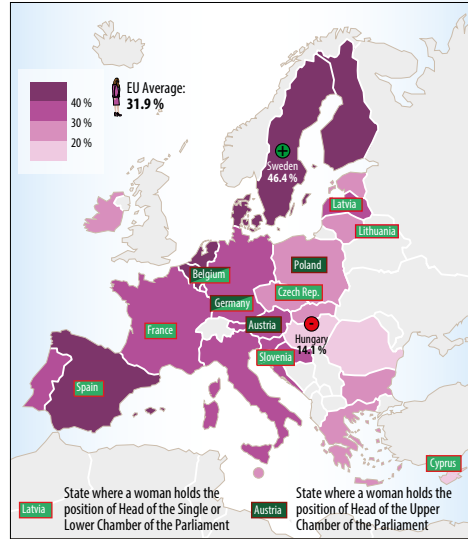
Women's Europe

on 12th February 2024

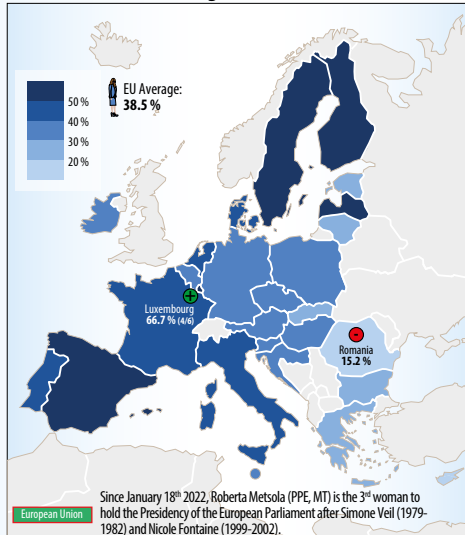
Share of Women in government



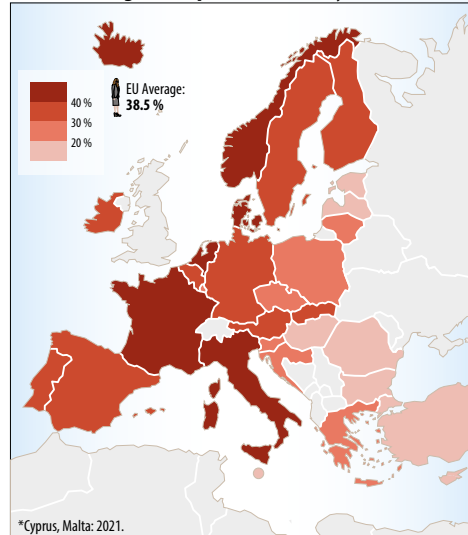
Share of Women in National Parliament



Share of Women amongst MEPs



Senior management positions held by women (2022)



Sources: Compilation by the Robert Schuman Foundation, OECD, European Institute for Gender Equality.

Lucas Destrem for the Robert Schuman Foundation, February 2024, © FFS.

In the Member States' national parliaments, this average is slightly higher, but remains below the European average, at about [31.9%](#). There are wide disparities between Member States: the Swedish Riksdag is the parliament with the highest proportion of women (46.4%), followed by the Finnish Eduskunta (46%). The Hungarian Országház is the chamber with the lowest proportion of women (14.1%), and in the Cypriot House of Representatives only 14.2% of seats are held by women.

It is interesting to note that significant diversity also exists within the political groups of parliaments. [In the European Parliament](#), The most balanced group is the Greens/EFA, with almost 50% female representation. Next come the S&D (44%), GUE and Renew groups, all of which have over 40% female representation. The other groups have between 39% and 30% female representation.

At world level, and given the speed — or rather the sheer slowness — at which progress is being made, we will not achieve gender parity in national parliaments before [2063](#). The youngest MEP - Danish MEP Kira Marie Peter-Hansen - who has just turned 26, will not be able to celebrate this achievement until she is 65. To achieve parity some Member States have [introduced quotas](#) on the electoral lists.

This is the case for example in [France](#) and Belgium, which require perfect equality between male and female candidates. Other countries, such as Spain, Croatia and Slovenia, have set the threshold at least 40% of the disadvantaged sex. If they fail to comply, parties may find their rate of public funding drastically reduced. Many of them, however, still prefer to operate with fewer financial resources than to actually respect gender parity on their lists.

Yet many of the arguments in support of female representation in political bodies have already been put forward and no longer seem to really raise any questions. Cypriot Marina Demetriou Stavrou, Deputy Secretary of the European Democratic Party (EDP), points out that women politicians set an example for other women, attracting them to political activity. For

example, women from other European Member States — more often and earlier politicised than Cypriot women — helped them to realise their potential, and then to enter politics in the 1990s and 2000s when Cyprus was preparing to join the European Union. Although this movement was initially limited to moderate and left-wing parties, it paved the way for a feminisation of Cypriot politics that is still ongoing.

In addition to the question of the model, the United Nations has [summarised the arguments in support of real female representativeness in political bodies in five other points](#):

- *justice*: women make up around half the population and therefore have the right to be represented as such.
- *experience*: only women can authentically represent their experiences, different from those of men, in the discussions that result in the development and implementation of policies.
- *interests*: the interests of men and women are distinct, and in some cases even contradictory, and women are therefore needed in political institutions to articulate their interests.
- *critical mass*: only with sufficient representation can women achieve solidarity of purpose.
- *democracy*: equal representation of women and men strengthens the democratisation of political bodies.

The example of peace negotiations shows the clear benefits of female representation: an [analysis of 40](#) peace processes since the end of the Cold War has shown that greater involvement by women has almost always led to agreement. If women had had little or no influence in the negotiations, the success rate would have been significantly lower.

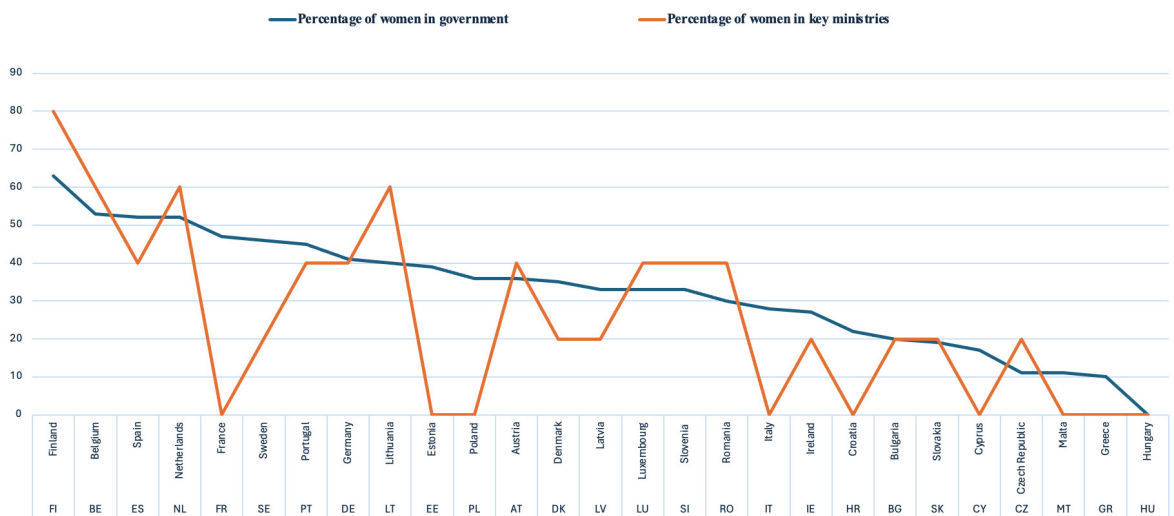
On average, 32.52% of ministers in the governments of the EU Member States are women. Despite the fact that more and more countries are attempting to establish strictly parity governments, a closer analysis shows that this equality, which is very rarely achieved, is often only superficial. In general, women are given ministries of lesser importance or positions as junior ministers or secretaries of state. Most of the ministries allocated to women are [the following](#): 'Women and

Gender Equality', 'Family and Children', 'Social Inclusion and Development', 'Social Protection and Security' and 'Protection of Minorities'.

In January 2024, five women held the post of prime minister in the countries of the Union, only ten of the twenty-seven countries had women ministers of justice, seven had women ministers of foreign

affairs, six had women ministers of the interior, and only five had women ministers of the economy and finance. It should be noted that there are significant differences between the Member States: 80% of the key ministries are held by women in Finland, while in Hungary there are simply no women in government.

Comparison of the percentage of women in government and the percentage of women in key ministries



Data: Robert Schuman Foundation, January 2024

WOMEN IN OFFICE?

At global level, if we progress at the current slow pace, it will take [130 years to](#) achieve equality between men and women in the highest positions of power in government. Hence, none of us will be around to see the results. So be patient, ladies! Or take action... Strong initiatives are needed to speed up this process.

Zsuzsanna Szelényi stresses the need for women to be prepared to take more risks in politics. She notes that the differences between women and men as leaders are almost invisible, except for one: risk-taking, which is also well documented in [scientific literature](#). Without taking risks, however, a political career is rarely possible. Other [recent studies](#) show,

however, that the differences between men and women in terms of risk-taking are less significant. This may mean that a new generation of women is emerging, which could help to rebalance gender representation at political level. This caution is not the result of a lesser interest in a political career on the part of women. Political ambition [is as great](#) for women as for men. The risks associated with a career in politics, however, are perceived as greater by women because the context is less favourable for them. Those who do manage to rise to positions of political decision-making often have to overcome many obstacles if they aim not to give up too quickly.

First obstacle: women still face a high level of mistrust when they enter politics and rise to power. A [study](#) conducted in the G20 countries in 2021, showed that only 45% of those questioned felt

"*very comfortable*" with the idea of having a woman at the head of government. This shows that there is still a long way to go to normalise gender equality in the highest ranks of power.

Second obstacle: women in power in particular [are frequently targets](#) of sexist attacks — both off and online. A survey of Members of the European Parliament shows that, on the Internet, elected women [mainly face online hate](#) based on their physical appearance. Users infantilise them, make unwelcome comments about their private life or send calls for sexual violence against them. Elected women's reactions to this kind of experience vary, but many choose to reduce their activity on social networks, their public presence, or even to withdraw from political life to take a "*break*".

New developments in artificial intelligence add another level of complexity to this observation, because [more and more fake images or videos](#) of women in power are circulating and putting them under pressure. Of course, the threat of *deep fakes* does not only concern women, but also their male colleagues. However, the nature of this type of practice often differs according to gender, and is more pronounced in the case of women, who have to deal with particularly violent and sexualised manipulation of their image. This development is all the more worrying in the context of the multiple elections that are about to take place, and at a time when foreign interference is attempting to influence the results and destabilise democracies.

Third obstacle: women politicians face the same problem as women working in other sectors. They have to reconcile their career plans with their private

lives, which for women are more often determined by family commitments than for men. In 2023 at the European Parliament, for example, several female MEPs drew attention to the fact that they were [de facto excluded from voting](#) in the hemicycle just before or after having a baby, because [there is no means](#) of combining maternity or parental leave with distance voting (unlike the Spanish system, for example, which provides for this possibility). Nor can absent women be represented by another member of parliament.

All of these obstacles and others which are not listed here mean that women [often stay less time](#) in a position of power than their masculine counterparts or that fewer women start a political career.

The political world remains more hostile to women than to men. Nevertheless, a great deal of progress has already been made and, above all, there is a very strong awareness at European level of the need to reduce the difficulties that persist, which makes the debates more productive.

First there has [never](#) been so many high-profile women at the head of the institutions. After the 2024 elections, this figure could rise even higher. Ursula von der Leyen has just announced her candidacy for a second term as President of the European Commission. Roberta Metsola could be re-elected to head the European Parliament, as Martin Schulz was in 2014. Christine Lagarde presides over the European Central Bank until 2027, and the European Investment Bank is now headed by Nadia Calviño. For the European Council, it is not impossible to imagine the appointment of a woman!

2024, a European political year - through the eyes of women

In reality, what matters is not so much the "*top jobs*", which are of course highly visible and symbolic, but what they hide: a political party system that still does not give women as much room as men, a daily political life that still presents more obstacles for women than for their male colleagues, and policies that still do not take enough account of women's experiences and constraints.

The year 2024, with all of these elections on the horizon, in particular the European elections, represents a new opportunity for women to make their voices heard, not only by casting a vote in the

ballot box, but also by being better represented and thus initiating more policies in favour of gender equality or with a feminine dimension. An increase in the number of women voting could change the composition of the European Parliament, as there would be more of them and, above all, they would be much less inclined to vote in favour of certain reactionary parties.

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The author would like to thank Mila Shay and Charles Devoud, Research assistants at the Foundation.

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Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN
ISSN 2402-614X

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