



EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

Gender Equality at a Crossroads: Implications of the 2024 European Parliament Elections

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Summary

The European Parliament (EP) has long championed gender equality as a core European Union (EU) value and has utilised its legislative powers to advance gender equality policies.

The 2024 EP elections were pivotal for gender equality dynamics, influencing the gender balance among Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), leadership positions, and the parliament's broader functionality as an 'equality parliament'. Despite women maintaining significant representation in some leadership roles, such as the presidency, the proportion of women MEPs decreased, with representation varying widely across member states and political groups. Women are predominantly present in leftist, green, and liberal groups, while right-wing, conservative, and far-right groups remain male-dominated. Gender segregation persists in committees, with men dominating areas such as finance, foreign policy, and security.

This paper provides a gender analysis of the effects of the EP elections in 2024 and explains what is at stake. To address gender inequalities, stricter enforcement of existing rules and expanded parliamentary procedures, such as addressing committee gender imbalances, are recommended. With centre-right and far-right groups gaining influence, coalition-building for progressive policies, particularly within the European People's Party, will be essential for advancing gender, human rights, and anti-racism agendas amidst rising opposition to EU gender equality policies and laws.

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The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author.

1. Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) elections in 2024 marked an important moment for gender equality in the European Union (EU). A number of big questions were at the table. Would gender equality and democracy as core EU values continue to be defended by the parliament, and would gender equality policies continue to progress? Would the power balance within the parliament shift so that the radical-right and far-right parties would succeed in their attempts to destroy gender policies? What would the election results mean for the long-term steady progress of the number of women politicians in the parliament and their leadership positions in the parliament's committees or political groups?

'It was immediately evident from the EP election that the upward trajectory in the number of women in parliament had stopped.'

It was immediately evident from the EP election that the upward trajectory in the number of women in parliament had stopped. The percentage of women Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) dropped from the record high of 41% reached in 2019 to 38.6% in 2024. As well as falling below 40%, the fact that the upward trend reversed for the first time merits attention. The stark drop in the share of women was particularly evident in one political group, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). The ECR is the fourth biggest political group in the parliament. Women had previously constituted 31% of MEPs in the ECR, but this share decreased to 18% in the new legislature.

The 2024 elections also resulted in a new power balance between the political groups in the parliament. The political groups to the right of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) gained in power. There are three such groups in the new parliament: the ECR, the Patriots for Europe and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN). The Left group was the only group to the left of the centre-left S&D to increase its numbers. In terms of gender equality as a substantive policy issue, the so-called GAL/TAN cleavage (Green, alternative, libertarian/Traditional, authoritarian, nationalist) distinguishing these

political groups from one another has been shown to be important (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021). The GAL-side political groups (the S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA and the Left) strongly support gender equality. On the TAN side, the far-right and radical-right populist groups, now the Patriots, ECR and ESN, oppose gender equality, while the biggest political group, the EPP, has been suggested to have a 'contradictory' relation to gender equality (Kantola, 2022) or to 'sit on the fence' (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021). It sometimes supports but other times opposes gender equality and, most importantly, is internally divided in relation to gender equality. In the new parliament, the TAN-side political groups have 375 MEPs and the GAL-side groups have 312 MEPs, which makes the advancement of gender equality policy more volatile and unpredictable. A total of 32 MEPs are not attached to political groups (NI) but often come from gender-conservative parties.

This paper provides a gender analysis of the effects of EP elections in 2024 and explains what is at stake. First, this study genders the political dynamics in the previous legislative term. Second, this study analyses how political representation in the EP is now gendered at member state and political group levels. Third, this study provides data about women in the parliament's leadership positions. Finally, this study evaluates what these shifts mean for advancing gender equality in the parliament.

2. The EP and political groups from a gender perspective

2.1 The record of the EP in the field of gender equality

The EP has been considered the EU institution that is most democratic and most supportive of gender equality among all EU institutions (Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). In interinstitutional relations, the parliament often aims to strengthen the European Commission's proposals in the field of gender equality and to negotiate in trilogues to overcome resistance in the Council of the EU to legislative proposals in the field, most recently in relation to the pay transparency or violence directives (Abels and Kantola, 2025).

As an *equality parliament*, the EP is, in many ways, a supranational gender equality forerunner and progressive actor compared to other EU institutions (Kantola and Lombardo, 2023). An

equality parliament consists of many dimensions, ranging from women’s political representation and leadership positions to governance structures that support policymaking and the way that the parliament works in terms of its rules for gender equality and upholding those rules. Women’s political representation has steadily increased in the EP from 15% at the first direct election in 1979 to 20% in 1989, 27.5% in 1999, 35.5% in 2009, and 41% in 2019 (see Figure 1).

The two key pillars of what can be considered a feminist governance structure of the parliament include, first, the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee (FEMM), where centre-left coalitions have dominated progressive policymaking and smaller political groups such as the Greens/EFA and the Left have punched above their relative weight to influence policy (Warasin *et al.*, 2019). The FEMM committee issues its own initiative reports to develop new ideas and expand the boundaries of EU gender policy. Second, the EP is the first and only parliament in the world to have committed to the principle of gender mainstreaming, where all policies and actions should be evaluated for their gender effects. The EP resolution on gender mainstreaming dates back to 2003, and in 2019, gender mainstreaming was included in parliamentary Rules of Procedure. As a result, all committees should implement and use the tools of gender mainstreaming (Elomäki and Ahrens, 2022). In the eighth EP and ninth EP, the MEPs also used the parliament’s informal Intergroups to come together and push for action in fields such as LGBTQIA+ rights and anti-racism (Kantola *et al.*, 2023).

EU gender equality policy faced a well-researched downturn since 2008, where all of its pillars, from hard law of directives to gender mainstreaming, equality strategies and funding, were downgraded and downsized (for detailed accounts, see Ahrens, 2019; Jacquot, 2015; Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). The von der Leyen Commission (2019–2024) reversed the downward trend with its political priority of the ‘Union of Equality’, which was included in the political priorities of the Commission (Abels *et al.*, 2025; von der Leyen, 2019). In the EP negotiations, the S&D group

especially emphasised the importance of equality questions to secure their support for von der Leyen as a Commission President. After a long break in issuing new directives in the field, five new ones were adopted in the 2019–2024 legislative term: women in corporate boards, pay transparency, combating violence against women, and two on strengthening the role of national equality bodies (Ahrens and Kantola, 2025). In the field of soft governance, the Commission presented five equality strategies, including a gender strategy and the first-ever strategies on LGBTQIA+ rights and anti-racism (Debusscher, 2023; Hubert and Jacquot, 2025). The EP ensured gender mainstreaming obligations in the initially gender-blind Recovery and Resilience Facility (Elomäki and Kantola, 2023). The EP also achieved one of its long-term goals, which had become increasingly contested over the years, when the EU finally joined the Istanbul Convention on Violence against Women in 2023 (Berthet, 2022).

2.2 The role of political groups

The advancement of gender equality in the parliament is shaped by its political groups. Over the years and across various changes to the parliament’s internal workings and power balances in its Rules of Procedure, the political groups of the EP have increased their powers. Gender equality is an EU core value¹, norm and a policy field which strongly divides the political groups into those who strongly support it and those who oppose it. This line of division also cuts through some of the political groups and leaves them internally divided (Kantola, 2022). The overall fate of the EP’s positions on gender equality is determined by these political dynamics and negotiations around it.

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Previous research on the eighth EP (2014–2019) and ninth EP (2019–2024) has suggested that the political groups polarise on the GAL–TAN

¹ Article 2 Treaty of the European Union; Article 23 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

axis (Green/Alternative/Libertarian–Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist) around their constructions of gender equality, internal gender equality practices, and gender policies, into those who support it and those who oppose it (Kantola, 2022). In relation to constructions about gender equality, on the GAL side, the Greens/EFA and the Left see gender equality as a fundamental principle. The S&D and the Renew find it equally important, but gender equality is a more flexible principle for them, which must sometimes give way to other more important concerns (Kantola, 2022).

On the TAN side of the political spectrum, research on the eighth EP and ninth EP shows that the EPP's relation to gender equality is contradictory and highly dependent on national parties and individual MEPs. The ECR and ID strongly oppose or reject gender equality (Ahrens and Kantola, 2023; Kantola, 2022). With Brexit, the diminished numbers of UK MEPs left the ECR, which became dominated by the Polish Law and Justice party, well known for its opposition to gender equality, women's and LGBTQIA+ rights nationally, including the establishment of LGBT-free zones. The second biggest delegation, Brothers of Italy, also opposed gender equality, and some delegations in the ninth EP, such as the Spanish Vox, are well known for their anti-gender politics nationally (Gaweda *et al.*, 2023; Alonso and Espinosa-Fajardo, 2021). The ID no longer exists in the new parliament, and most of its political parties have joined the newly formed Patriots for Europe political group.

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In relation to policy, the political groups have similarly been categorised into different clusters. The 'defenders' frame women and LGBTQIA+ rights as integral, universal, and indivisible human rights (S&D, Greens/EFA, the Left, and Renew). The 'reframers', in contrast, reframe human rights with strong recourse to both religious and 'sovereignty' arguments, opposing women's and

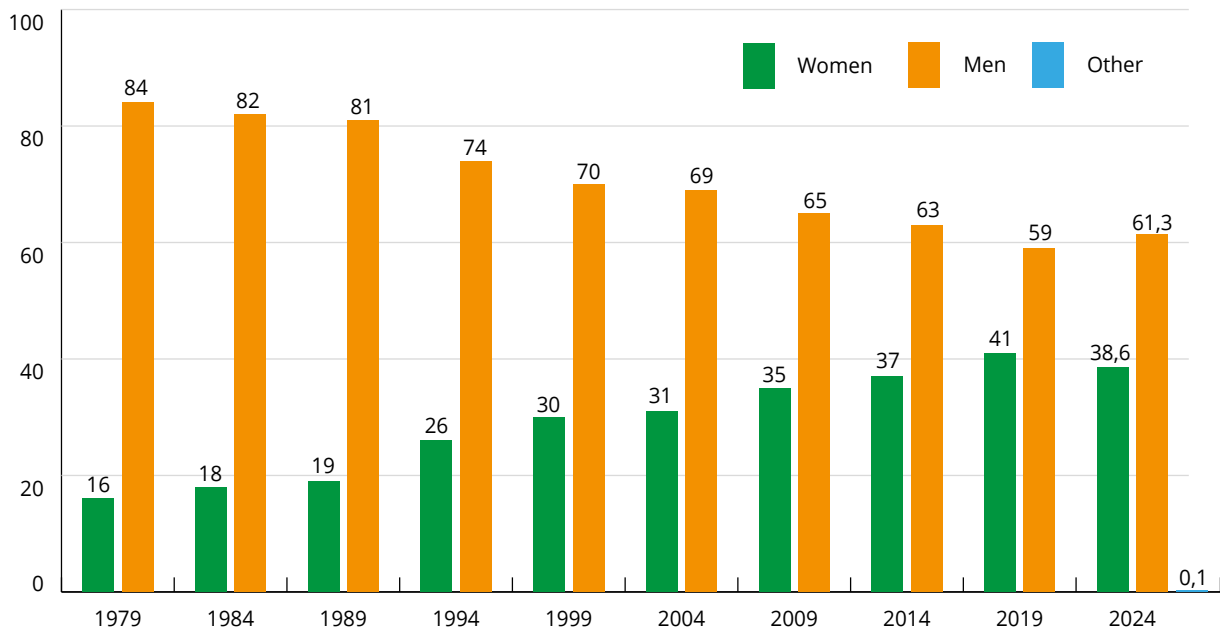
LGBTQIA+ rights as 'gender ideology' (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021; Kantola and Lombardo, 2021). They include ECR and ID and are characterised by Euroscepticism and anti-EU rhetoric. The biggest political group, EPP, 'sits on the fence' between these two contrasting clusters and can, thus, tip the scale either way (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021).

The power balance between the political groups and also within the political groups – in terms of national delegations and individual MEPs – shapes the fate of gender equality in the context of the EP. Given the presence of radical-right populist and far-right parties and political groups in the parliament and their strong opposition to gender equality, one of the core questions for many actors supporting gender equality has been the informal practice of *cordon sanitaire*. *Cordon sanitaire* means that political groups and parties that oppose democratic values, including gender equality, are closed off from official coalitions and collaboration across the board, as well as from key leadership positions in the parliament. In the 2019–2024 legislature, *cordon sanitaire* closed off the ECR and ID (see Kantola and Miller, 2021; Kantola and Lombardo, 2022) but saw the EPP increasingly influenced by radical-right populist ideas and also collaborating with them on some policy issues towards the end of the legislature (Ripoll Servant, 2022; Hix and Noury, 2024).

3. 2024 EP elections results by gender

The first and most obvious consequence of the 2024 elections for gender equality was that the number of women MEPs stopped increasing towards full parity. After the 2024 EP elections, 38.6% of MEPs were women, and 61.3% were men (Figure 1). The percentage of women dropped by 2.4 percentage points when compared to the 41% of women MEPs elected in 2019. The 2019 EP elections, in contrast, witnessed a 4 percentage point increase in the number of women MEPs. For the first time in 2024, the parliament recorded MEPs identifying as 'other' gender, currently at 0.10% (one MEP), which went beyond the gender binary between women and men and reflected gender diversity. The parliament does not record the number of racialised minorities or MEPs of colour. ENAR (2024) found that racialised MEPs constituted 3.4% of all MEPs in the 2014–2019 legislature and 4.3% in the 2019–2024 legislature after the elections but dropped to 3.5% after Brexit in 2020.

Figure 1. Gender balance of MEPs in the European parliament, by year (Percent)



Source: European Parliament elections: <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/mep-gender-balance/2024-2029/>

3.1 Big differences between the member states

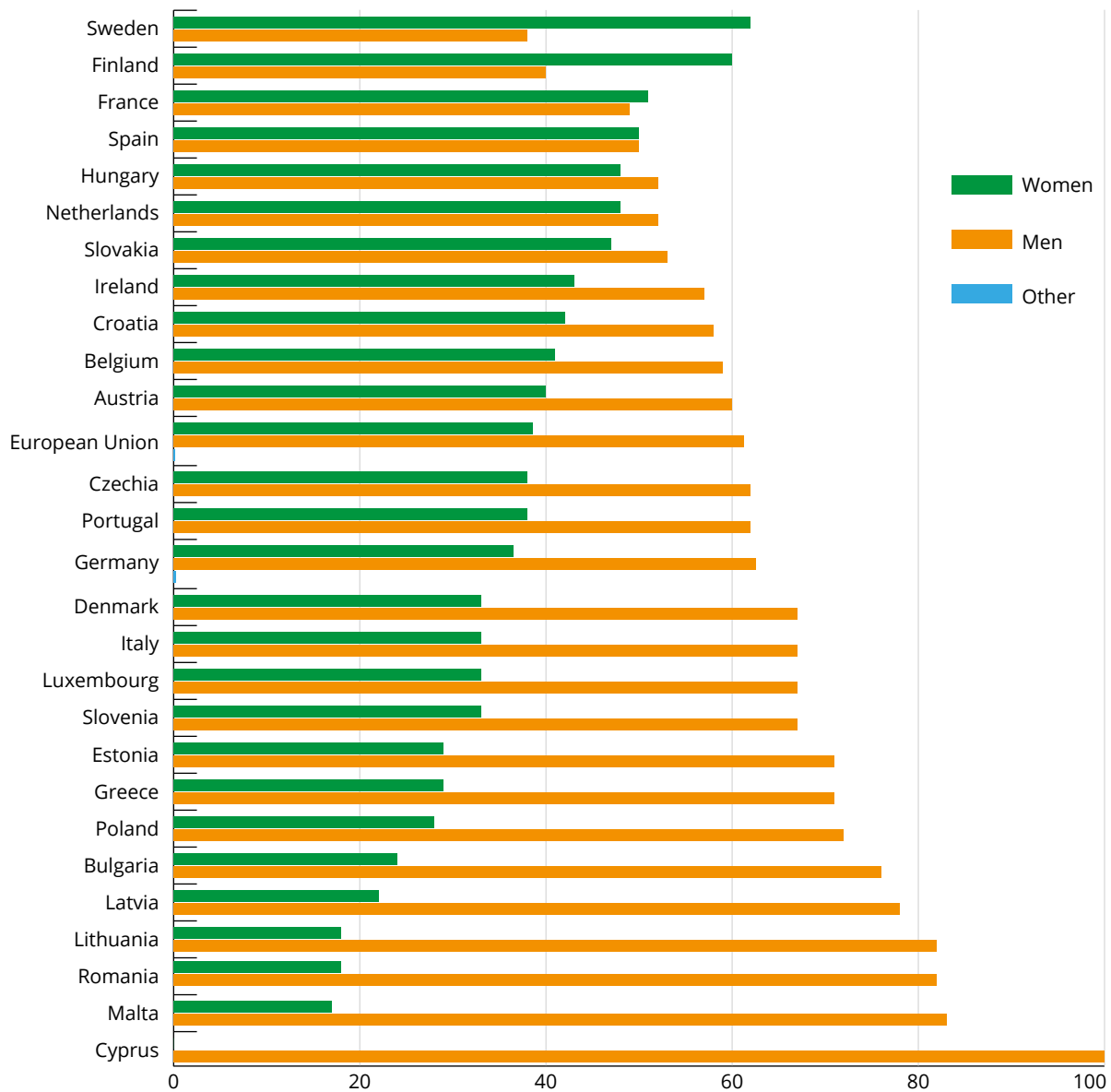
Figure 2 shows the considerable differences in gender balance between the member states. Finland, France and Sweden have more women MEPs than men, and Spain has complete parity between women and men. Seven countries have 40% or more women MEPs (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Slovakia). None of the six MEPs from Cyprus are women, and Lithuania, Malta and Romania have less than 20% women MEPs and over 80% men MEPs. Germany has one MEP in the gender category of ‘other’. In 13 member states, women’s representation is better in the EP than in national parliaments and overall, women’s level of representation in the EP is 8% higher than in member-state parliaments (Abels, 2025). In 2019, the same figure was 14% (Abels, 2020, 2025).

Numerous factors shape the national differences. The election law in the EU governing the EP elections is limited and only determines on a very general level that the elections need to be based on proportional representation. Overall, proportional

representation has been more amenable to women’s political representation. However, Fortin-Rittberger and Rittberger (2014) suggest that instead of the electoral systems used in EP elections or institutional factors relating to the EP itself, it is contextual factors related to national characteristics which are the most powerful factors in explaining the patterns of descriptive representation in the EP. Such contextual factors include national party systems.

More recently, Polak and Lewandowski (2024) found that national-level party characteristics (incumbency rates, party size, and ideological orientations, as well as intra-party power struggles and party gatekeepers’ attitudes towards women), are the most significant factors shaping women’s representation in the EP. They discern differences between Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and non-CEE member states whereby, in the Western member states, the more Green–Alternative–Liberal a party is, the more women are elected from the party. In the case of the CEE countries, such a relationship is lacking, and the party’s position on European integration is a more important factor (Polak and Lewandowski, 2024).

Figure 2. **MEPs’ gender balance by country in the 2024 constitutive session (percent)**



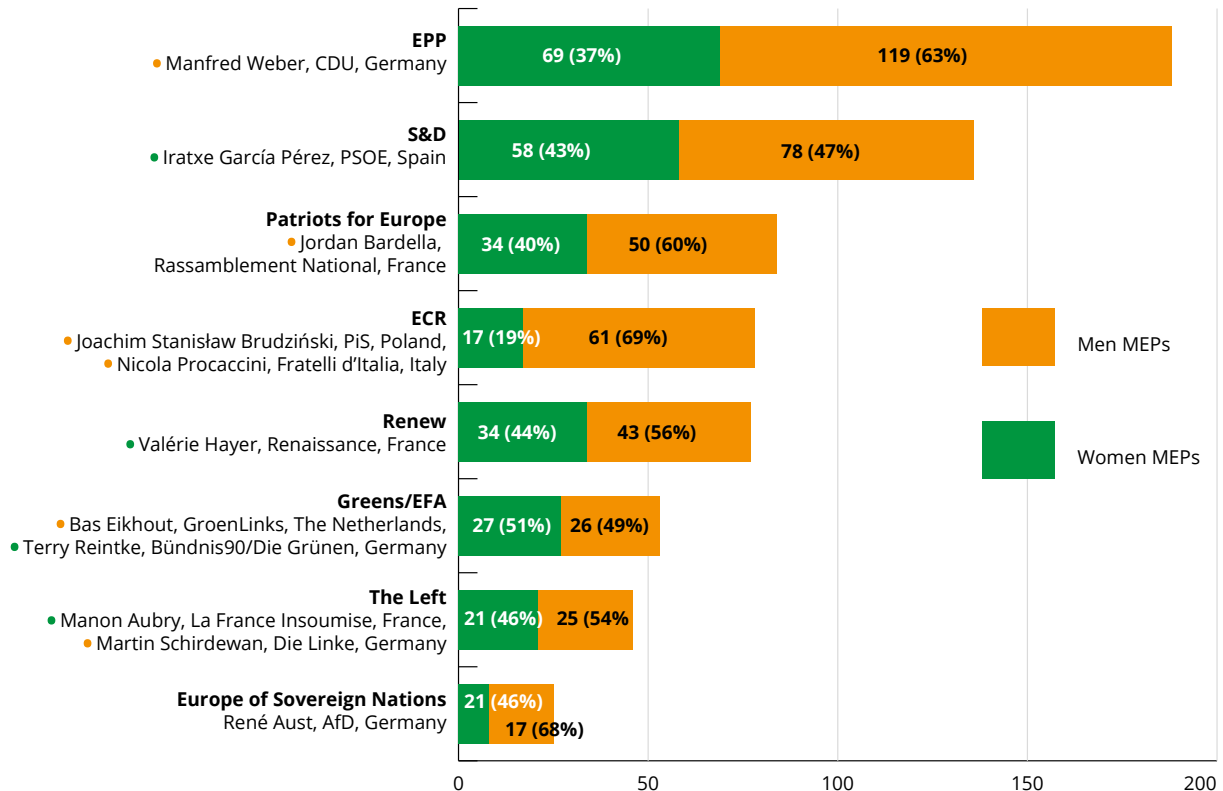
Source: European Parliament elections: <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/mep-gender-balance/2024-2029/>

3.2 Gendered dynamics in representation at the political group level

The outcome of the EP 2024 elections on the **political group** level was that the EPP remained the biggest political group, with 188 MEPs having gained some seats (Figure 3). The S&D maintained its position as the second biggest political group with 136 MEPs despite losing some seats. Renew and the Greens/EFA, which were the winners of

the 2019 EP elections, lost a significant number of seats, with Renew going down from 98 seats to 77 seats and the Greens/EFA from 73 to 53 seats. The Left, in contrast, gained some seats and grew from 39 to 46 MEPs. Far-right and radical-right populist parties performed well in the elections. The ID was dissolved, and most of its political parties joined the new far-right political group Patriots for Europe, together with Hungarian Fidesz, which

Figure 3. Women and men MEPs per political group, and political groups leaders, after the 2024 European Parliament elections



Source: European Parliament websites:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organisation-and-rules/organisation/political-groups?&at_campaign=2024-AboutParliament&at_medium=Google_Ads&at_platform=Search&at_creation=Sitelink&at_goal=TR_G&at_advertiser=Webcomm&at_topic=Group&at_lo

had been non-attached in the previous legislature after leaving the EPP group. The Patriots is the third biggest political group in the parliament with 84 MEPs. The fourth biggest group is the ECR, which grew from 63 MEPs to 78 MEPs. The smallest group in the parliament is the new far-right group ESN (25 MEPs) formed around its biggest national delegation, the German AfD.

Looking at the gender balance in the political groups, the Greens/EFA have 51% women and 49% men (Figure 3), which is a 1.8% drop in women’s representation when compared to the previous parliament. The S&D, Renew, and the Left have 40% or more women MEPs. In the S&D, women’s representation decreased by 1.5%, in Renew by 3%, and in the Left it increased by 1.8% when compared to the previous parliament (Abels, 2025). This mirrors the pattern in the previous legislature when the political groups on

the GAL side of the spectrum had more women MEPs than those on the TAN side. The EPP, however, has a higher percentage of women than in the previous legislature, with a rise from 34% to 37%. The new far-right group ESN has 32% women MEPs. The ECR witnessed a significant drop from 31% to only 19% of women MEPs. Its biggest delegation, Brothers of Italy, has 5 women MEPs and 19 men MEPs.

The former ID group (2019–2024) and now the Patriots for Europe (since 2024) contradict the GAL/TAN divide on the representation of women. The Patriots group has a surprisingly high percentage of women MEPs for a radical-right-populist/far-right political group (40%). Radical-right populist parties are often described as *Männerparteien* to reflect how their voters, elected representatives and leaders are men. This has recently started to change globally in what Weeks *et al.* (2023) call

the ‘strategic descriptive representation’ to describe the way in which the parties use women’s political representation to appeal to a broader set of voters. In the case of the EP, the high number of women MEPs is the result of the effective French quota law, which affects Rassemblement National.

Overall, we see a familiar pattern of women’s political representation being higher in the left, green, and liberal political groups and lower in the conservative, nationalist, and far-right groups. The gains made by the political parties on the right and far-right reversed the overall trend of women’s representation in parliament into a decline.

4. Leadership positions within the political groups and the parliament after the 2024 elections

Another consequence of the elections that affects gender equality is the change in the parliament’s internal leadership positions. At the parliament level, EPP MEP Roberta Metsola from Malta was re-elected the President of the parliament for the first 2.5 years with a high number of votes. Of the 14 Vice-Presidents, 7 are women and 7 are men. In terms of political group affiliations, two are from the ECR but none from the Patriots or Sovereignists, indicating how the informal practice of *cordon sanitaire* works in the 2024–2029 legislature in terms of leadership positions. Of the five Quaestors,² two are women. According to the EP’s Rules of Procedure, gender must be considered when appointing these roles (EPRoP Rule 15.2.):

When electing the President, Vice-Presidents and Quaestors, account should be taken of the need to ensure an overall fair representation of political views, as well as gender and geographical balance.

At the political group level, the political group leader often comes from the biggest national delegation(s). Despite some changes in the size of national delegations, we see a continuation in political group leadership positions. In the EPP, S&D, Renew, ECR, Greens/EFA, and the Left, the political group leaders from the previous term continued in their leadership positions. The 9 political groups have all together 11 leaders, as the

Greens/EFA, the Left and the ECR have co-leaders. Among the 11, there are 4 women (36%), 2 of whom are sole leaders and two co-leaders. The Greens/EFA and the Left continued the practice of having a gender-balanced leadership. The ECR continued having two male leaders from the two biggest national delegations.

EP committees elect a chair and up to four Vice-Chairs amongst its full members for a two-and-a-half-year mandate. At the time of writing this analysis (November 2024), There is slight male dominance in committee chair positions (Table 1). Among the committee Chairs (including the four subcommittees) there are 15 men (62.5%) and 9 women (37.5%). In 2019, there were 17 men Chairs and 7 women. The nationalities of committee Chairs are dominated by Germans, who have seven chair positions, followed by Poland and Spain (three each), and France and Italy (two each). Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech, Finland, Greece, Ireland, and Romania have one committee chair position each. The Chair of the FEMM Committee comes from the S&D group and is, this time, a Spanish woman.

Among the Vice-Chairs of the committees, 48 are men and 42 are women at the time of writing, while some Vice-Chairs were still unelected at the time of writing. The EP Rules of Procedure states (EPRoP Rule 219(1)):

The Chair and the first Vice-Chair of a committee shall not be of the same gender. Gender balance shall also apply to the other members of the bureau. It shall not be permissible for all of the bureau members to come from the same Member State.

All committees have a Chair and Vice-Chair who are of different genders and meet the goals of the first part of the rule. However, not all committees reached an overall gender balance among the (Vice) Chairs in their opening sessions in July 2024. As a result, two Vice-Chairs remained to be elected for the Subcommittee on Human Rights, one for the Committee on Budgetary Control, one for the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs, and one for the Committee on Employment and

² Quaestors are responsible for administrative and financial matters directly concerning Members and their working conditions.

Table 1. **Percentage of women MEPs in committees and Chairs**

Committee	% Women MEPs	Chair Gender, Political group, Member State
Foreign Affairs	17.7	Man, EPP, Germany
Human Rights (Subcommittee)	33.3	Man, Greens/EFA, France
Security and Defence	23.3	Woman, Renew, Germany
Development	40.0	Man, Renew, Ireland
International Trade	32.6	Man, S&D, Germany
Budgets	20.0	Man, ECR, Belgium
Budgetary Control	16.7	Man, EPP, Germany
Economic and Monetary Affairs	26.7	Woman, S&D, France
Tax Matters (Subcommittee)	17.2	Man, The Left, Italy
Employment and Social Affairs	56.9	Woman, The Left, Finland
Environment, Climate and Food Safety	42.2	Man, S&D, Italy
Public Health	37.2	Man, EPP, Poland
Industry, Research and Energy	35.6	Man, EPP Poland
Internal Market and Consumer Protection	51.9	Woman, Greens/EFA, Germany
Transport and Tourism	28.3	Woman, EPP, Greece
Regional Development	41.5	Man, S&D, Romania
Agriculture and Rural Development	34.7	Woman, ECR, Czechia
Fisheries	44.4	Woman, EPP, Spain
Culture and Education	63.3	Woman, Greens/EFA, Germany
Legal Affairs	20.0	Man, Renew, Bulgaria
Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs	49.3	Man, EPP, Spain
Constitutional Affairs	13.3	Man, EPP, Germany
Women's Rights and Gender Equality	89.7	Woman, S&D, Spain
Petitions	42.9	Man, ECR, Poland

Source: European Parliament websites; Politico (2024). The table was amended to include the committee upgrades on 23 January 2025, see European Parliament (2025).

Social Affairs as these committees failed to comply with the requirement for balanced representation. Two committees – the Committee of Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Constitutional Affairs – proceeded to complete all of the Vice-Chair nominations despite failing to reach an overall gender balance and selected only one woman among the five (Vice-) Chair positions. Again, in terms of *cordon sanitaire*, there were three Chairs and ten Vice-Chairs from the ECR at the time of writing but none from the Patriots or Sovereignists.

In relation to members of the committees, many remain gender-segregated (Table 1). Again, the EP Rules of Procedure aim for a gender balance (EP RoP, 2024, 216 (2)):

In the process of determining the composition of each committee, political groups should strive for a fair gender representation. Where there is no agreement among the political groups on their proportional weight or gender representation within one or more specific committees, the Conference of Presidents shall decide.

Strongly male-dominated committees include Constitutional Affairs (13.3% women), Budgetary Control (16.7% women), Tax Matters (17.24%), Foreign Affairs 17.72%, Legal Affairs (20%), Budgets (20%), Security and Defence (23.33%), Human Rights (25%), Economic and Monetary Affairs (26.67%) and Transport and Tourism (28.26%; figures from Politico, 2024). Policy areas of money, budgets and economy, on the one hand,

and foreign policy and security, on the other, are prominent among the male-dominated committees. Table 1 also shows that these committees are often chaired by men. Women are overrepresented in Employment and Social Affairs (56.90%), Culture and Education (63.33%), Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (49.33%), and Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (89.74%; figures from Politico, 2024). This so-called ‘gendered division of labour’ between women and men politicians largely mirrors the situation under the previous legislatures (see Dingler and Fortin-Rittberger, 2022).

Such gender segregation means that some policy fields continue to be coded as men’s and others as women’s fields. This can have a number of consequences. It might, for instance, be harder for women politicians to appear as experts in these fields, which is especially the case in economic policy in the EP (Elomäki, 2023; Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). The gender balance can also have consequences for the committee culture, with, for example, the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON) having a masculine, combative and competitive debating culture (ibid.). The committees and policy fields coded as masculine may also be coded as more important and valuable and perceived as high politics. Social affairs, social policy, gender policy, and education, in contrast, may be gendered as feminine and may seem secondary to the fields of high politics. This, in turn, has very real consequences for taking the concerns of these policy fields into account (for example, bringing social policy concerns to the field of economic policy), advancing specific policies in these fields in the EU, and allocating funds for them. Such differences, however, evolve and change over time, as has been the case with environmental policies, which have become increasingly important and are reflected in the popularity of the committee.

5. Possible coalitions and policy implications for gender equality in the new parliament

As the EP works without a government–opposition divide, which would determine the policy outcomes, issue-based coalitions matter in all policy negotiations. After the EP elections in June 2024, the so-called unofficial or super grand coalition of the EPP, S&D and Renew, strengthened with Greens/EFA, retains a possibility for a majority

in the parliament. The possibility of building majorities and coalitions among these political groups holds the most promise for continuity in gender policy.

The radical-right populist and far-right parties are split into three political groups in the parliament: the ECR, the Patriots for Europe, and the ESN. At the political group level, each is strongly opposed to gender equality. Previous research has shown that many of their politicians, including from some parties within the ECR, have used the language of ‘gender ideology’ to paint gender equality as a harmful elite EU ideology, which destroys natural gender roles in society and challenges heterosexual nuclear families (Kantola and Lombardo, 2021). Instead, many of the political parties within these political groups seek to promote their own conservative visions of gender equality and vehemently oppose abortion, sex education, any equality directives or funding for the equality of work. In addition, they politically exploit the language of gender equality to differentiate ‘Europe’ from ‘Muslims’ in rhetoric where Muslims are constructed as backward and violent. Their Euroscepticism means that they see all these issues as matters of member states.

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In relation to gender policy, important coalitions have also been often found from the centre-left: the S&D, Renew, the Greens/EFA and the Left (see also Hix and Noury, 2024). For example, in the FEMM committee, the Greens/EFA and the Left are important players who punch above their relative weight in parliament. The centre-left coalition had a possibility for a majority in the previous legislative term (2019–2024). After the EP 2024 elections, the centre-left coalition no longer has a possibility for a majority. The positions that the EPP as a political group or its national delegations or individual MEPs take become decisive for passing legislation, resolutions, and reports on gender equality in the new parliament.

Reflecting the power balance in the wider parliament, the TAN side political parties have a majority in the FEMM committee too for the first time in history, with 21 MEPs from EPP, ECR, Patriots, and ESN and 18 MEPs from the GAL side from S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA and the Left, with one NI MEP (Ahrens and Kantola, 2025).

Ursula von der Leyen's second term as a Commission President was supported in the EP in July 2024 by the EPP, S&D, Renew and the Greens/EFA. Her political priorities for 2024–2029 include a continued commitment to the Union of Equality, which placed gender equality firmly on the previous Commission's agenda (Abels *et al.*, 2025). However, there are very few new or concrete openings towards gender equality, reflecting the overall state of the election manifestos of the biggest political groups in the coalition that supported her in the parliament vote (EPP, 2024; EGP, 2024; Party of European Socialists (PES), 2024; Renew Europe Now, 2024; see Ahrens and Kantola, 2025).

In the EPP election manifesto (EPP, 2024), violence against women was featured early in the manifesto and included 'cultural violence' but also cyber violence (violent acts taking place through technology) and the full implementation of the Istanbul Convention. While the EPP manifesto mentioned 'fighting racism' and 'protecting LGBTQ+ rights', it also reflected more conservative values as it heavily promoted families as the backbone of the society, thereby balancing the more progressive sections of the Europarty (also found in the political group in the parliament) and more conservative ones.

The election manifestos of the PES (2024) and Renew Europe Now (2024) made general commitments to gender equality but lacked concrete policy openings. For example, the PES manifesto called for a 'feminist Europe'. One of the slightly more concrete formulations on equality stated that the PES wanted to 'close gender pay, care and pensions gaps by 2030'. Yet, the exact legislative or other measures on how to do this were missing. The Europarty also wanted to take the violence directive recently adopted by the EP further and called for making violence against women an EU crime and also continuing to support 'yes means yes' principle, a reference to the lack of consent-based definition of rape in the new violence directive. The PES stressed the

importance of EU equality strategies and wanted to push for the adoption of the Anti-Discrimination Directive, which has been stalled by the Council for years. (see Ahrens and Kantola, 2025).

The Greens Europarty manifesto 2024, in contrast, was long and detailed in general about gender equality, too (see also Ahrens and Kantola, 2025; Raunio and Johansson, 2024). It gave a prominent role not just to gender equality but also to intersectionality. The Greens called for universal and equal access to childcare and long-term care facilities as well as a fully paid parental level of equal and sufficient duration (with the concrete proposal of revising the Work–Life Balance as well as Maternity Leave directives). Other concrete proposals included making the Charter of Fundamental Rights directly applicable to EU citizens and fundamental rights to be direct EU competencies, as well as including abortion as a fundamental right, assessing the EU anti-discrimination framework with 'an intersectional and comprehensive approach', and adding gender-based violence to the list of EU crimes. A renewed LGBTQIA+ strategy and implementation of the EU Action Plan against racism as well as mandatory national action plans. The manifesto committed to having candidates 'from racialised communities on electable spots'.

6. Conclusion: The future of the equality parliament

An equality parliament consists of many dimensions, ranging from women's political representation and their leadership positions to governance structures that support policymaking and the way that the parliament works in terms of its rules for gender equality and upholding them.

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After the EP 2024 elections, women are still strongly represented in the parliament and hold many of its leadership positions, including the

parliament's presidency. However, the percentage of women MEPs dropped. The differences when it comes to representation by member states as well as political groups remain stark. Women continue to be more strongly represented in the left, green and liberal political groups than in the right-wing, conservative or far-right ones. The leadership of political groups is still male-dominated. Committees are strongly gender-segregated with continued male domination in fields such as money, budgets and economy, and foreign policy and security. The parliament has made progress in recording a category of 'other' in relation to the gender balance of the MEPs. The racialised minority position is still not recorded to capture the whiteness of the parliament (see Kantola *et al.*, 2022).

To tackle the remaining gender inequalities in the parliament's leadership positions, the parliamentary Rules of Procedure could be extended to tackle gender-segregated committee membership. The existing rules about gender balance in the EP leadership positions need to be followed and implemented in actual politics and complex negotiations in the aftermath of the elections.

In terms of policies and coalitions, after a strong legislative term during 2019–2024 for gender policy, the Europarty manifestos and von der Leyen's political programme still show some commitment to gender equality. Yet, concrete openings for legislative proposals beyond the existing equality strategies are lacking.

This emphasises the role of the work carried out in the FEMM committee to push for new ideas to the agenda. A specific challenge will be that the centre-right, conservative and radical-right populist political groups now have a majority in the committee.

Progress in gender equality, human rights, LGBTQIA+, and anti-racism policies will depend on the EPP as the biggest political group and on the role of individual MEPs in supporting these values and policies from within the group. In the past, the EPP has been described as 'sitting on the fence' (Ahrens *et al.*, 2021) in relation to gender equality. It is ever more important to follow the internal politics and power balances within the EPP and evaluate and understand their significance for gender equality questions.

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The selection of Committee Chair and Vice-Chair positions shows that the informal and negotiated practice of *cordon sanitaire* does not extend to the ECR group, only to the Patriots for Europe and the ESN groups. Given ECR's overall opposition to gender equality as a harmful and elitist EU gender ideology, the question of where coalitions are found for progressive gender policy will be crucial.

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