

# Similar Yet Different: Patterns and Causes of Gender Differences in Opinion-Policy Congruence in Europe

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## **ABSTRACT**

Representative democracy ought to ensure not only that public policy reflects public opinion but also that no societal group's views are systematically disregarded. Since women are numerically underrepresented in politics even in most established democracies, legislation is often believed to display gender gaps as well. Yet, we still lack a comprehensive assessment of how the representation of women's and men's preferences in concrete policy compares across Europe. This study provides such an analysis, covering a diverse set of specific policy issues in 31 European countries. It shows that men and women desire the same policy in an overwhelming number of cases. However, there is some indication that in cases of disagreement men tend to be better represented. Testing a set of potential explanations for gender gaps in representation, the study reveals that women's relative policy congruence is higher under more left-wing governments and in systems with higher numbers of parliamentary parties. In contrast, the proportion of women in parliament does not appear to influence women's policy representation. The study thus contributes to the long-standing debate over the nexus between descriptive and substantive representation.

Paper prepared for presentation at the *2017 Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* Conference,  
Nottingham, 8-10 September 2017

## INTRODUCTION

One of the main principles and goals of representative democracy is that policy should be – at least roughly – reflective of citizens’ preferences. It is what Hanna Pitkin (1967) coined as ‘substantive representation’. Policy representation is certainly not the only criterion on which to judge the quality of democracy, and in cases where it is in tension with government responsibilities or fundamental human rights a closer link between the majority opinion and policy may even be undesirable. Yet, it is an important indicator of whether ‘government by the people’ is functioning, and one that has received increasing attention from scholars (e.g. Lax and Phillips 2012; Rasmussen, Reher and Toshkov 2015; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Stimson, Mackuen and Erikson 1995). However, modern democracies do not only have a problem if policy is out of step with the preferences of the people, but also if grave inequality exists in the representation of the views of different societal groups. For, as Sidney Verba states, “the equal consideration of the preferences and interests of all citizens” is “one of the bedrock principles in a democracy” (2003: 663; cf. Griffin, Newman and Wolbrecht 2012: 37). Inequality in representation may potentially undermine public support for the political system, as citizens whose preferences are less well represented have been shown to be less satisfied with the functioning of democracy (e.g. Brandenburg and Johns 2014; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2010; Kim 2009; Reher 2015) and less likely to participate in it (Kölln 2016; Reher 2014). Consequently, a growing number of studies investigate whether disparities exist in the representation of the views of different social groups, the majority of them focusing on the rich and the poor (e.g. Bartels 2008; Bernauer, Giger and Rosset 2015; Donnelly and Lefkofridi 2014; Erikson 2015; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Peters and Ensink 2015; Soroka and Wlezien 2008; Ura and Ellis 2008).

Women comprise an important societal group that is underrepresented in politics up to this date: they hold fewer seats in parliaments and posts in governments across the world, including the most advanced democracies. This might have consequences for the degree to which policy reflects the views of women, as it is often argued that women are better at representing women (Phillips 1995), and several studies suggest that women’s numerical or ‘descriptive’ representation (Pitkin 1967) and the degree to which their views are reflected in politics are indeed linked (e.g. Bratton and Ray 2002; Kittilson 2008; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). However, we actually know relatively little about how well the policies in place align with the views of women as compared to

those of men. Only a few studies have assessed whether a gender gap in policy representation exists, and they found little evidence for it (Bernauer, Giger and Rosset 2015; Griffin, Newman and Wolbrecht 2012). Yet, these studies are limited to either one country or one policy dimension and they compare the preferences of citizens to those of representatives rather than concrete policy.

The first aim of this study is to extend our knowledge about the gender dynamics in policy representation in Europe by assessing how well the preferences of women and men are reflected in policy across a wide variety of issue domains. Drawing on data of public opinion and policy on 20 diverse issues in 31 European countries, the study shows that women and men desire the same policy in an overwhelming majority of cases. Yet, the evidence indicates that when the majorities of women and men disagree, the policy in place may be more likely to be congruent with the preferences of men. The second objective is to investigate what might explain differences in the relative representation of women's preferences across countries and issues. Three characteristics of the political system and the make-up of the legislature and executive are examined: the presence of women in parliament, the electoral system, and the ideology of the government. All three factors have been discussed and analyzed in previous research, yet the empirical strategies have often been restricted to single countries or a particular policy issue and hence yielded very mixed results. The breadth of the data used in this study in terms of both countries and policy issues provides the opportunity to test the relationships in a more generalizable way.

Interestingly, the findings strongly suggest that the proportion of women in parliament does not affect the degree to which policy aligns with women's views relative to men's, shedding further light on the long-standing debate about the links between descriptive and substantive representation. Instead, a higher number of parliamentary parties – an indicator of electoral system proportionality, seems to improve women's relative representation. This holds even when controlling for women's descriptive representation, which has been shown to be strongly affected by the electoral system (e.g. Matland and Studlar 1996; Matland and Taylor 1997; McAllister and Studlar 2002). Finally, there is tentative evidence that the match between women's preferences and policy, as compared to men's, is enhanced under more left-wing governments, which the tendency of women to be more left-wing in their attitudes and voting behavior than men suggests.

## **GENDER AND REPRESENTATION**

Throughout history, women have faced exclusion and marginalization in social, economic, and political life. In Europe, they have started to become enfranchised only in the early twentieth century. Still today, women tend to be less politically engaged than men at the citizen level (Verba, Burns and Scholzman 1997) and are in the minority in parliaments across Europe (Figure 1). While women held 49 per cent of the seats in the Norwegian parliament in 2015, the European average was much lower at 28 per cent, and in Hungary only 10 per cent of parliamentarians were women. This begs the question whether women's views are also underrepresented in the output of the political process, meaning the laws that govern European societies. Surprisingly, we do not yet know the answer to this question.

[FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

One of the few studies aiming to assess women's policy representation in the European context has been conducted by Bernauer, Giger and Rosset (2015), who analyze whether ideological congruence between citizens and political parties is lower for women and poor citizens. They find that, while generally more left-leaning, women are not consistently further away than men from the most proximate political party in parliament. Whether this finding holds true with regard to the reflection of public opinion in actual policy output and across a range of more specific policy issues remains to be investigated. For while the reflection of public preferences by the parties in parliament is an important aspect of representation, not all of these parties influence the policy-making process. Even the parties in government cannot always neatly translate their positions into policy output, as they need to prioritize among issues, bargain with coalition partners, overcome institutional hurdles, and react to events, economic conditions etc. (e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2009; Bevan and Greene 2016).

Moreover, although political ideology is undoubtedly a valuable concept and measure in the study of political attitudes and party competition, it is not equivalent to concrete policies and policy preferences. Parties' goals and positions on specific policy issues do not always neatly align on a left-right axis and citizens' policy preferences have been shown not to be coherently structured by one or even several ideological dimensions (e.g. Converse 1964; Dolezal et al. 2013; Henjak 2010). We can therefore form a more precise evaluation of the representation of citizens' concrete

policy preferences by analyzing a set of more specific policy issues (Thomassen 2012). This strategy that has been employed in studies of income inequality in representation (e.g. Brunner, Ross and Washington 2013; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Donnelly and Lefkofridi 2014; Soroka and Wlezien 2008) as well as policy representation more broadly (e.g. Lax and Phillips 2012; Monroe 1998; Page and Shapiro 1983; Rasmussen, Reher and Toshkov 2015).

By analyzing how roll-call votes in the US House of Representatives represent the views of female and male voters, Griffin, Newman and Wolbrecht (2012) measure representation on a range of more specific policy issues and closer to the policy outcome. Their main finding is that women are overall not less well represented than men, since their underrepresentation in districts represented by Republicans is counterbalanced by their relatively better representation in Democratic districts. Their study yields important findings for the US context, encouraging further analysis in a cross-national setting, which also allows examining differences across countries and their origins. By examining the link between public preferences and policy on a wide range of concrete policy issues in a cross-national framework, I thus combine the benefits of both studies in order to provide the most comprehensive assessment of gender disparities in policy representation in Europe thus far.

## **EXPLAINING WOMEN'S POLICY CONGRUENCE**

After assessing whether policy in the European countries suffers from gender gaps, the second objective of this study is to examine what might explain such disparities by exploiting the variation across as well as within countries which the dataset provides. I focus on three political factors that have been argued to play important roles in this context: women's descriptive representation, the electoral system, and government ideology.

### **Descriptive representation**

The most prominent factor believed to influence how well women's views and interests are reflected in policy outcomes is women's presence in politics. As Anne Phillips (1995) famously contends, women's presence in politics might in certain contexts be a precondition for the substantive representation of their interests, because all women share certain experiences which

are distinct from those of men in a number of domains (cf. also Mansbridge 1999). A large number of studies have empirically examined the relationship from different angles (see Wängnerud 2009 for an overview). Women legislators have been shown to differ from their male colleagues by placing stronger emphasis on issues related to women, children, and family (Thomas 1991, 1994), by being more supportive of social welfare (Poggione 2004; Wängnerud 2000), and by being stronger proponents of gender equality (Campbell, Childs and Lovenduski 2010). These gender differences are to a large degree mirrored among the public (Thomas 1994; Wängnerud 2000). Female legislators are also more likely to introduce, support, and pass legislation promoting women's rights and interests (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Swers 1998; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Thomas 1991; Vega and Firestone 1995), hold cabinet positions in 'social ministries' (e.g. Reynolds 1999), and to speak out in favor of women (Celis 2006).

These findings suggest that a greater presence of women in parliament might indeed improve the match between policy and the preferences of women in society. Yet, there is also evidence that sheds doubt on this expectation. Other characteristics, most importantly party affiliation, often overshadow gender differences in the attitudes and behavior of policy-makers (cf. Vega and Firestone 1995, Swers 1998; Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996). Moreover, qualitative studies by Sawer (2012) on access to an abortion drug in Australia and by Childs and Withey (2006) on VAT on sanitary products in the UK elucidate the crucial role played by individual or small groups of women and the specific networks and institutions in which they act (see also Childs and Krook 2009).

A few studies have tested the relationship between women's descriptive and substantive representation in systematic ways. Thomas (1991) shows that the proportion of women in the US state legislatures is unrelated to the passage of bills linked to women, children, or families. Griffin, Newman and Wolbrecht (2012) find that women are no better represented if their representative in the US Congress is a woman than if he is a man. In contrast, using cross-national data Schwandt-Bayer and Mishler (2005) find an effect of women's descriptive representation on their substantive representation measured by maternity leave and marriage equality laws as well as indices of political and social gender equality. Kittilson (2008) uses a cross-national time-series approach to show that increasing proportions of female legislators increase the extensiveness of parental leave. In the Norwegian context, Bratton and Ray (2002) find that the provision of child care increases

with the proportion of women in municipal councils. The effect becomes stronger when the number of women increases, supporting the idea first introduced by Kanter (1977) and Dahlerup (1988) that a ‘critical mass’ of women is required in order for them to not be perceived as ‘tokens’ but to have an impact on the policy-making process (but see e.g. Bratton 2005; Childs and Krook 2009; Grey 2002 for more critical accounts). Finally, Wängnerud and Sundell (2012) show that the proportion of women among Swedish local councilors positively affects gender equality in terms of parental leave, full-time employment, and income, but not unemployment, health, and poverty.

While these studies provide important insights, they share two limitations. First, they focus either on a narrow range of policy issues that are considered particularly relevant to women, such as child care, or on measures of gender equality. It may certainly be argued that these policies and outcomes embody women’s interests because they are strongly related to women’s rights, opportunities, and socioeconomic well-being. However, it is unclear whether the findings can be generalized to other types of policy issues on which men and women might disagree and which might also be considered important by many women. The second issue is that the studies usually do not measure public opinion and instead make assumptions about (1) the nature and coherence of women’s preferences within and across countries and (2) their distinctiveness from men’s preferences.<sup>1</sup> Yet, women as well as men have a range of identities beyond their gender (cf. Campbell, Childs and Lovenduski 2010; Childs and Withey 2006: 11). This means that women’s preferences might differ from what is often assumed (many women may, for instance, be opposed to abortion for religious reasons), they might be very similar to men’s preferences, and they might differ across contexts. This study addresses both of these limitations by testing the first hypothesis using data on women’s and men’s preferences on a diverse set of policy issues:

*Hypothesis 1: Larger proportions of women in the national parliament are associated with higher levels of congruence between policy and the preferences of women relative to those of men.*

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<sup>1</sup> Schwandt-Bayer and Mishler (2005: 415) accept this latter limitation in order to mitigate the former: “Lacking cross-national data on women’s policy needs or demands, we make the heroic assumption that women share a number of policy interests cross-nationally and that we can measure responsiveness by focusing solely on legislative outputs on issues we assume to be especially salient to women.”

## **Electoral system**

Whether, and to what extent, women are present in parliament strongly depends on the electoral system: more proportional electoral rules – in particular higher district magnitudes, higher numbers of parliamentary parties, and lower thresholds – have been linked to higher numbers of women in parliament (Matland and Studlar 1996; Matland and Taylor 1997; McAllister and Studlar 2002; Rule 1987). If a relationship exists between descriptive and substantive representation, we would thus expect that women's preferences are better represented in more proportional electoral systems. However, electoral rules might also affect women's policy representation more directly. Bernauer, Giger and Rosset (2015) expect more proportional electoral rules to result in a better representation of women's ideological views in parliament, as they allow smaller parties and those with less centrist views to emerge and gain legislative representation. This is relevant because, as women tend to turn out in elections at lower rates than men (Verba, Burns and Schlozman 1995; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995), mainstream parties might not have a strong incentive to target women as a constituency, in particular if this requires shifting their policy proposals away from the preferences of men. This might apply particularly in systems with single-member districts, where parties' and candidates' success depends more strongly on winning majorities (Wlezien and Soroka 2012: 1414). Smaller parties might thus be more likely to represent women's preferences when they diverge from those of the median voter.

Indeed, parliaments in more proportional electoral systems have been shown to mirror the views of a wider range of the electorate by including more parties with more variation in political views (Blais and Bodet 2006; Golder and Stramski 2010), although Bernauer, Giger and Rosset (2015) do not find that they represent women's ideological positions better (in fact, they find no gender gap in any electoral system). This higher party fragmentation often results in multi-party governments, meaning that small parties have a greater chance of being part of a governing coalition and thus having a say in the policy-making process under more proportional rules (Cox 1997; Duverger 1963). If it is indeed the case that they are more likely to champion the interests of women, we would thus expect policy under these systems to better reflect the preferences of women (even though in Europe no party specifically dedicated to women, such as the Feminist Initiative in Sweden, has so far gained meaningful parliamentary representation, let alone government participation). What is more, as the clarity of responsibility tends to be lower for coalition



governments (Fisher and Hobolt 2010; Powell and Whitten 1993), even the larger parties might be less afraid of being punished by male voters for prioritizing women's preferences.

*Hypothesis 2: More proportional electoral systems are associated with higher levels of congruence between policy and the preferences of women relative to those of men.*

### **Government ideology**

A third factor which has been argued to have an important impact on women's policy representation is the ideology of the party or parties in government. While women had traditionally been more conservative in their views and more supportive of center-right parties in most Western democracies, this changed in the last two decades of the twentieth century through a 'realignment' that led to the 'modern gender gap' (Inglehart and Norris 2000). Women are now generally more left-wing in their attitudes (Campbell 2004; Gidengil et al. 2003; Bernauer, Giger and Rosset 2015) and their voting behavior (see also Bergh 2007; Giger 2009; Studlar, McAllister and Hayes 1998). Several explanations of this pattern have been proposed.

The first is linked to differences in men's and women's socioeconomic status and position in the labor market. Since women tend to be overrepresented in low-paid jobs and have lower salaries and a higher risk of poverty, they might vote more left-wing due to stronger support for the welfare state (Erie and Rein 1988; Inglehart and Norris 2000; Bergh 2007). Another cause of their stronger support for public spending may be their higher levels of public sector employment (Knutsen 2001; Gidengil et al. 2003; but see Bergh 2007). A second category of explanations focuses on cultural values and attitudes. Left-wing parties are generally more supportive of feminist ideas and goals and might therefore attract more female voters with a 'feminist consciousness', but also male voters who seek to achieve gender equality and promote women's interests (Conover 1988; Hayes 1997). Holding feminist views might also imply egalitarian attitudes in other realms of society, which may further strengthen left-wing party support (Bergh 2007).

Yet, not all differences in men's and women's policy preferences can be traced back to their socioeconomic conditions and perceptions of gender inequality, such as views on environmental issues and military and defense policy (Gilens 1988; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986). Some social psychologists explain the latter by men's higher levels of social dominance orientation, referring

to a preference for inequality among social groups (Pratto, Stallworth and Sidanius 1997). And even differences in views on economic issues might have socio-psychological rather than socio-structural explanations: Gilligan (1982) argues that gender differences exist in moral reasoning, with women being less individualistic and hence less trusting in the market and more pro-welfare state. Gidengil and colleagues (2003) also find that the gap persists after controlling for economic variables.

Regardless of the roots of the differences, women's opinions tend to be shared more strongly by left-wing parties. We would therefore expect policy to match their views better under left-wing than right-wing governments. Yet, the existing evidence on this relationship is mixed. Griffin, Newman and Wolbrecht (2012) demonstrate that women's preferences are better reflected in US Congress roll-call votes when the Democrats are in the majority. Wängnerud and Sundell (2012) find that in Swedish municipalities with stronger left-green than center-right coalitions, women's income level and employment conditions are better relative to men. However, their poverty levels and share of parental leave are not affected, while their health is worse. Kittilson (2008) finds no effect of left party power in government on family leave policy. The contradictory findings are likely due to the focus on different countries and, most importantly, different measures of women's interests. Testing the hypothesis in a cross-national framework and with public preferences on a range of different policy issues will thus shed further light on the role of government ideology in women's policy representation.

*Hypothesis 3: More left-wing governments are associated with higher levels of congruence between policy and the preferences of women relative to those of men.*

## **DATA AND METHOD**

I analyze women's and men's policy representation using a dataset that includes measures of public opinion and policy status for 20 policy issues in 31 European countries. The public opinion data comes from major cross-national opinion surveys conducted between 1998 and 2013 which cover at least 15 European countries. Among all items that ask about a specific policy and fulfil a number of criteria (i.e., concern concrete policies rather than broader issue areas, ask about agreement with policies rather than desired changes in policy, and are within the competence of the national

government), twenty policy items were selected so as to cover a large variety of policy areas. The issues also vary in salience (see the Supplementary Material, Figure S1), measured by the relative number of articles that address the policy issue in the *Financial Times* coverage of Europe over a period of three years, starting two years before the respective survey was conducted. This is crucial because representation has been found to be better on more salient issues (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1983). By including issues that had not been on the political or public agenda, we thus avoid overestimating representation levels. Overall, the sample contains 491 issue-country cases. The issues along with the survey and the number of countries are listed in the Appendix.

Public policy support is measured as the percentage of survey respondents who indicated support for a policy among all respondents who gave a response either in favor or against the policy (respondents who replied with ‘don’t know’ or ‘neither in favor nor against’ are excluded).<sup>2</sup> After the public opinion data was collected, it was determined on the basis of legal and government documents, academic publications, journalistic texts, and publications by interest groups whether each policy was in place in each country at the time when the survey was conducted. Policy representation is then measured as congruence between the preferences of the majority (of women/men/the public) and the policy in place. The congruence variable takes the value 1 if the majority is in favor of the policy and the policy is in place, or if the majority is against it and it is not in place. 0 indicates that public opinion and policy are not aligned.

The decision to measure public opinion and policy status at the same point in time reflects the desire to analyze policy *representation* rather than *responsiveness*. Policy representation may come about in a variety of legitimate ways – through policy-makers’ responsiveness to public opinion, through simultaneous reactions of both policy-makers and citizens to events or developments, or through the public adjusting its preferences to policy. As Esaiasson and Holmberg (1996) point out, one of the main tasks of political representatives is to provide the public with information about policy issues and to explain their reasons for taking (or not taking) certain actions. Thus, a match between public opinion and policy may also legitimately come about through a top-down process of public opinion formation through political elites.

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<sup>2</sup> The degree of policy support among men and women for each issue is listed in the Supplementary Material, Tables S1 and S2.

## **Independent variables**

The descriptive representation of women is measured by the mean proportion of women in the national parliament (single or lower chamber) over the previous four years (from  $t-3$  to  $t$ ), based on data provided by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU 2013). I thus take into account that it might take some time for changes in women's presence to affect policy outcomes. To test the expectation that more proportional electoral systems represent women's preferences better by allowing more (small) parties to enter parliament and government coalitions, I use the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP), developed by Golder (2010) and extended by Bormann and Golder (2013), from the last national election prior to the year when the policy data was collected (cf. Wlezien and Soroka 2012). In order to further examine the specific role of the number of parties in this relationship, I also test three alternative electoral system measures: (1) a dummy distinguishing PR from plurality systems (Keefer 2015), (2) the Gallagher Index indicating the degree of vote-seat disproportionality at the last legislative election (Gallagher 2014), and (3) the average district magnitude at the first tier at the last legislative election (Bormann and Golder 2013). Finally, government ideology is measured as the average of the mean positions of the cabinet parties, weighted by their proportion of seats, on the left-right dimension as indicated by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015) over the previous four years. The scale ranges from 0-10, with higher values indicating more right-wing positions.

## **Control variables**

The most important control variable in the models predicting congruence between policy and the preference of the majority of women is congruence between policy and the preference of the majority of men, as I am interested in the quality of women's policy representation *relative to men's*. Next, I control for the absolute difference between the proportions of men and women who support a policy. Policy might reflect women's preferences in some cases simply because women happen to agree with men, meaning their representation is 'coincidental' (Enns 2015). Their congruence might then decline with increasing differences in the policy preferences between women and men (cf. Peters and Ensink 2015 on the representation of income groups). I also control for an issue's salience among women relative to men. If voters' party preferences are more strongly based on issues that are salient to them (e.g. Fournier et al. 2003; Krosnick 1988; 1990; Lavine et

al. 1996), political elites might be incentivized to ensure that policy is congruent above all with the views of the ‘issue public’ that cares strongly about it. I thus calculate the ratio of the proportion of female respondents who expressed an opinion on an issue, i.e. in favor or against the policy as opposed to ‘neither nor’, ‘don’t know’, or no answer, over the proportion of male respondents with an expressed opinion. Higher values indicate a stronger relative concern among women.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, lower turnout rates among a group might result in lower representation because the government primarily reflects the preferences of those who vote and at the same time has higher incentives to please them before the next election. According to Peters and Ensink (2015), turnout should be particularly unequal at low overall turnout rates and gradually equalize, though not entirely; therefore which is why I follow them in including a squared term of turnout at the last election before the year in which an item was measured. I also control for a country’s democratic experience through the number of years for which a country has maintained a Polity IV score of at least +7. Lastly, I include the year when the public opinion and policy were measured, both because women’s representation might have improved due to other factors over time and because the sample of countries varies slightly, with more data for the Central and East European countries available in later years.

## **RESULTS**

### **Policy preferences and congruence among women and men**

I start by exploring how women and men differ in their support for the twenty policies. Column (a) in Tables 1 and 2 shows the percentages of cases per issue and country, respectively, in which the majorities of women and men hold the same policy preference. We find remarkably high levels of agreement, with men and women agreeing in all countries on eight out of the 20 issues. There is no obvious pattern across issue types, and it is notable that women and men agree in all countries on the ‘women’s issues’ of abortion rights and financial support for caregivers. The issues with the lowest agreement are animal experiments and nuclear power. Agreement levels are also very high across all countries (Table 2). In 24 out of 31 countries, women and men desire the same policy on 80 per cent of issues or more. Even in the countries with the least agreement – Switzerland,

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<sup>3</sup> Mean salience ratios per issue are listed in the Supplementary Material, Table S3.

Belgium, and Norway – the level is around 70 per cent. Across issues and countries, men and women agree on the desired policy 87 per cent of the time. Interestingly, this high level of preference agreement is similar to that between the rich and the middle class in the United States (89.6 per cent) which Branham, Soroka and Wlezien (2017) found in Gilens’ (2012) data.<sup>4</sup>

[TABLES 1 AND 2 AROUND HERE]

As we would expect, the similarity in policy preferences between women and men translates into fairly similar levels of policy congruence. As columns (b) and (c) in Table 1 show, both women and men are least well represented on the issue of warnings on alcohol bottles and best on the issue of progressive income tax. The same columns in Table 2 show that, overall, men’s policy congruence is lowest in Belgium and highest in Sweden and Portugal, while women’s is lowest in Switzerland and highest in Estonia. As we see in Table 3, on average policy reflects men’s preferences 63 and women’s preferences 60 per cent of the time – this difference in proportions is not statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . However, when we only look at the 62 cases where the majority of women holds a different opinion from the majority of men, men are significantly better represented with 63 per cent, compared to only 37 per cent among women.

Yet, when evaluating whether women are underrepresented we also need to take the preferences of the overall majority of the public into account (cf. Brunner, Ross and Washington 2013). If fair policy representation implies that policy is congruent with the public majority, then we can consider a group to be ‘overrepresented’ if policy is congruent with its preference while being incongruent with the overall public (and the other group). As the bottom line of Table 3 shows, men get their preference 57 per cent of the time when they disagree with the overall majority, while women do so in only 33 per cent of such cases. With a  $p$ -value of .07, the difference is not statistically significant by conventional standards, which is not surprising given the relatively low number of cases in which men and women have different preferences. Nevertheless, the findings provide some indication that, while women and men in Europe often hold the same policy preferences, a gender gap in policy representation might exist in cases where they disagree.

[TABLE 3 AROUND HERE]

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<sup>4</sup> A more detailed presentation of the gender differences can be found in the Supplementary Material, Figures S2 and S3.

## Explaining the gender gap in policy congruence

The next step is to analyze what might explain instances in which women are less well represented than men. For this purpose, I regress the measure of women's policy congruence, which indicates for each issue-in-country case whether policy reflects the majority opinion of women, on the predictors and controls. The observations are clustered in both issues and countries. In order to assess whether either of the group structures should be taken into account in the analysis, I estimate empty multilevel logit models with random intercept variance parameters at the levels of issues and countries, respectively. The results show that part of the variance in women's congruence can be attributed to the clustering in issues, and the model fits the data significantly better than a simple logistic regression. In contrast, including a random intercept variance parameter at the country level does not improve the model fit, indicated by the log-likelihood test. I therefore estimate multilevel logit models with a random intercept at the issue level. Table 4 displays the results.<sup>5</sup>

[TABLE 4 AROUND HERE]

I control for men's congruence in all models in order to explore what makes policy more or less likely to represent women when they disagree with men. Model 1 also includes the three potential predictors of women's relative congruence: descriptive representation, electoral system proportionality, and government ideology. Model 2 also includes the control variables except the year, which is added in Model 3. As expected given the similarity between women's and men's preferences, men's policy congruence significantly predicts the likelihood of women's congruence. Interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, the proportion of women in parliament is not associated with women's policy congruence in any of the model specifications. It does not even have an effect when it is the only variable included in the model or when a squared term is added in order to allow the relationship to increase once a certain proportion of women in parliament is reached (results not shown here).

In contrast, the electoral system has a significant effect on women's representation: the higher the effective number of parties in parliament, the better women's preferences are represented relative to men's. In order to test whether this influence is exerted specifically by the number of parliamentary parties rather than the proportionality of the electoral system *per se*, I estimate Model

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<sup>5</sup> Iceland is excluded from these analysis as it is not included in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

3 replacing the ENPP measure with the PR system dummy, the Gallagher Index, and the average district magnitude, respectively, as well as with all four measures together (the results are presented in Table S3 in the Supplementary Material). Interestingly, none of the other variables affect women's representation, whereas the effect of the number of parties remains positive and statistically significant even while holding the other indicators of proportionality constant. This result might indicate support for the proposition that parliaments and governments with more parties are more likely to include a party that promotes women's preferences.

The results also provide tentative evidence for an effect of the ideological orientation of the government. The coefficient is negative and statistically significant in Model 2, suggesting that women's congruence decreases under more right-wing governments, as formulated in Hypothesis 3. In Model 3 it becomes non-significant, but this is presumably the case because the governments in the sample move to the right over time and thus the year variable takes out much of the variance. As for the control variables, a larger preference difference between women and men is associated with lower congruence among women, as expected. Meanwhile, the coefficient for relative salience is surprisingly negative and statistically significant in Model 2 but not when year is included in Model 3. Neither turnout nor the amount of democratic experience or the year seem to affect women's relative policy representation.

[FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE]

What the coefficients for electoral system proportionality and government ideology mean in substantive terms is illustrated in Figure 2. The predicted probability of women's policy congruence in the systems with the least proportional electoral rules in the sample is at 53 per cent and increases to 75 per cent in the most proportional systems. The probability of congruence slightly decreases when governments move to the right, from 66 per cent at the left-most position among the governments in the sample (around 3 on the 1-11 scale) to 54 per cent at the right-most position (around 7.5), with the other variables at their observed values.

## CONCLUSION

Women are still a disadvantaged and underrepresented group in many realms of society today, including in politics at the citizen and elite level: they turn out at lower numbers in elections and



are in the minority in almost all parliaments. But are the policies that govern the European societies also less reflective of the preferences of women than those of men? This study is the first to show across a large number of concrete policy issues and European countries that, although the policy preferences of women and men are remarkably similar much of the time, in cases where they disagree men are more likely to see their demands fulfilled. Although the difference does not quite reach conventional levels of statistical significance, it provides an indication of a pattern that might be confirmed by future studies of larger sets of issues with disagreement between men and women. Given the similarity of the preferences of women and men, the findings moreover raise the question whether women are often merely ‘coincidentally represented’ when policy-makers listen and cater predominantly to the male voters (cf. Enns 2015; Gilens and Page 2014). The conclusion contrasts somewhat with that of Bernauer, Giger and Rosset (2015), who found that women’s ideological views are equally well represented as men’s in parliaments across Europe. This difference in findings emphasizes the need to examine political representation at different stages of the policy-making process: even if the parties in parliament reflect the views of different groups equally well, policy outcomes might still favor some over others.

The gender gap in representation might have important repercussions for the ways in which women relate to the democratic process, which should be subject to inquiry. Citizens whose policy preferences are underrepresented tend to be less satisfied with the political system (e.g. Brandenburg and Johns 2014; Ezrow and Xezonakis 2010; Kim 2009; Reher 2015) and less likely to participate in elections (Kölln 2016; Reher 2014). This suggests that the lower levels of political interest, efficacy, and electoral turnout that are often observed among women might to some degree be caused and reinforced by the gender gap in substantive representation, in similar ways to how descriptive representation has been shown to affect these attitudes and behaviors (Alexander 2012; Atkeson and Carrillo 2007; Bühlmann and Schädel 2012).

The study also tested a set of potential explanations for differences in the representation of women’s and men’s preferences. Perhaps the most surprising finding is that the widespread notion that women’s presence in politics improves the substantive representation of women’s preferences was not supported by the data. The relationship might thus be restricted to certain policy areas, as previous research that found evidence for the link in the case of ‘women’s issues’ and gender equality suggests (e.g. Bratton and Ray 2002; Kittilson 2008; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005;

Wängnerud and Sundell 2012). The finding also encourages approaches that take into account the actions of individual and small groups of women as well as the structures and institutional contexts in which they operate (e.g. Childs and Krook 2009; Childs and Withey 2006; Sawer 2012).

The absence of a link between descriptive and substantive representation means that proportional electoral systems do not promote women's policy representation through their demonstrated positive effect on the number of women in parliament (e.g. Matland and Studlar 1996; Matland and Taylor 1997; McAllister and Studlar 2002). However, the findings suggest that electoral rules do matter, since a higher number of parties in parliament, which generally results from more proportional electoral rules, directly improves women's relative substantive representation. Whether this effect is due to the more frequent government participation of small parties which might be more sympathetic to women's preferences should be the focus of future research. The study thus contributes with a different perspective to the ongoing debate about the role of electoral rules in political representation, which primarily focuses on the median voter rather than different societal groups (e.g. Blais and Bodet 2006; Golder and Lloyd 2014; Powell 2009; Wlezien and Soroka 2015; Coman 2015).

The third potential predictor of the representation of women's policy preferences examined is the ideology of the government. Given that women tend to be more supportive of the welfare state and other left-wing policies and also more likely to vote for left-wing parties (e.g. Bergh 2007; Bernauer, Giger and Rosset 2015; Campbell 2004; Gidengil et al. 2003; Giger 2009; Studlar, McAllister and Hayes 1998), we would suspect that policy reflects women's preferences better under more left-wing governments. This study provides evidence that such a relationship indeed exists when looking at a wide range of policy issues across Europe, whereas findings from other contexts and indicators of women's preferences have been rather mixed (Griffin, Newman and Wolbrecht 2012; Kittilson 2008; Wängnerud and Sundell 2012).

Lastly, a note on the data is warranted. While a major contribution of this study lies in the breadth of concrete issues it analyzes, which means that opinion and policy can be more accurately matched than in studies analyzing broad policy dimensions (Griffin, Newman and Wolbrecht 2012; Thomassen 2012) and that the results apply to a range of different policy areas, the data is certainly not without limitations. By using a sample of issues drawn from public opinion surveys rather than party manifestos or legislative debates, the study makes sure to also include issues that have not

made it onto the political agenda. This is particularly important in a study of representational inequality, since policies which are strongly supported or opposed by groups with a weaker political voice but not by those with more leverage might not receive much attention by political elites in the first place. Yet, even public opinion surveys certainly do not include all policy issues that might potentially be of concern to citizens (Burstein 2014). Thus, we should be aware that if policies on which women are underrepresented compared to men are disproportionately excluded from this study, the gender gap in representation that we observe here might be an underestimation. This adds emphasis to the conclusion that European democracies still have a way to go in order to serve all of its citizens to an equal degree.

## APPENDIX: Policy issues, survey questions, year, survey, and number of countries

Policy issue	Survey item	Year	Survey	No. of countries
Warnings on alcohol bottles	“Would you agree or disagree to put warnings on alcohol bottles with the purpose to warn pregnant women and drivers of dangers of drinking alcohol?”	2009	EB 72.3	27
Animal experiments	“Scientists should be allowed to experiment on animals like dogs and monkeys if this can help sort out human health problems”	2010	EB 73.1	31
Smoking ban	“Are you in favour of smoking bans in the following places? Bars, pubs and clubs”	2008	Flash EB 253	28
Tobacco vending machines	“Banning the sales of tobacco products through vending machines”	2012	EB 77.1	27
Embryonic stem cell research	“Research involving human embryos should be forbidden, even if this means that possible treatments are not made available to ill people”	2010	EB 73.1	31
Nuclear power	“Are you totally in favour, [...] or totally opposed to energy production by nuclear power stations?”	2008	EB 69.1	27
Minimum wage	“A minimum reasonable wage should be guaranteed in (OUR COUNTRY), even if this would lead to fewer jobs available.”	2010	EB 74.1	27
Support for caregivers	“The state should pay an income to those who have to give up working or reduce their working time to care for a dependent [elderly] person”	2007	EB 67.3	28
Detention without charge	“Suppose the government suspected that a terrorist act was about to happen. Do you think the authorities should have the right to detain people for as long as they want without putting them on trial?”	2005- 2008	ISSP 2006	18
Same-sex marriage	“Same-sex marriages should be prohibited by law.”	2009	EES 2009	27
Adoption by same-sex couples	“Homosexual couples should be able to adopt children”	2008- 2009	EVS 2008	31
Abortion	“Women should be free to decide on matters of abortion.”	2009	EES 2009	27
Citizenship	“Children born in [COUNTRY] of parents who are not citizens should have the right to become [COUNTRY NATIONALITY] citizens.”	2003- 2005	ISSP 2003	20
Progressive tax	“Do you think people with high incomes should pay a larger share of their income in taxes than those with low incomes, the same share, or a smaller share?”	1998- 2001	ISSP 1999	16
Income and pension	“Pensioners should be allowed to earn as much as they want on top of their pension.”	2001	EB 56.1	16
Refugees and work	“While their applications for refugee status are being considered, people should be allowed to work in [COUNTRY]”	2002- 2003	ESS 1	21
Online voting	“On-line voting should be used for elections and referenda”	2001	EB 54.2	16
Military in Afghanistan	“Send [NATIONALITY] troops to fight with the U.S. forces?”	2001	Flash EB 114	15
Mandatory retirement	“Would you say that people should be allowed to continue working once they have reached the official retirement age, or should they have to stop working?”	2011	EB 76.2	30
Plastic waste disposal	“Disposing of plastic waste in landfill sites should be prohibited”	2013	Flash EB 388	28

Notes: EB = Eurobarometer, ISSP = International Social Survey Programme, EES = European Election Study, EVS = European Values Study, ESS = European Social Survey

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## TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table 1.** Preference agreement and policy congruence by issue

	(a) Agreement between the majorities of men and women (% of cases)	(b) Congruence between the majority of men and policy (% of cases)	(c) Congruence between the majority of women and policy (% of cases)
Warnings on alcohol bottles	100	7	7
Animal experiments	55	71	58
Smoking ban	93	71	64
Tobacco vending machines	78	78	56
Embryonic stem cell research	77	74	65
Nuclear power	56	74	67
Minimum wage	100	89	89
Support for caregivers	100	86	86
Detention without charge	89	56	44
Same-sex marriage	93	67	59
Adoption by same-sex couples	74	84	84
Abortion	100	74	74
Citizenship	100	40	40
Progressive tax	100	94	94
Income and pension	94	56	63
Refugees and work	95	43	38
Online voting	75	38	63
Military in Afghanistan	80	87	93
Mandatory retirement	100	47	47
Plastic waste disposal	100	21	21
	87	63	60

**Table 2.** Preference agreement and policy congruence by country

	(a) Agreement between the majorities of men and women (% of cases)	(b) Congruence between the majority of men and policy (% of cases)	(c) Congruence between the majority of women and policy (% of cases)
Austria	95	79	74
Belgium	71	41	71
Bulgaria	93	67	60
Croatia	86	71	57
Cyprus	93	71	64
Czech Republic	82	65	47
Denmark	79	53	53
Estonia	92	77	85
Finland	84	63	58
France	85	70	65
Germany	75	60	55
Greece	100	65	65
Hungary	100	65	65
Iceland	75	75	50
Ireland	95	47	42
Italy	76	47	47
Latvia	94	44	50
Lithuania	100	69	69
Luxembourg	88	59	47
Malta	92	69	62
Norway	73	45	55
Poland	88	53	53
Portugal	90	80	70
Romania	85	77	62
Slovakia	100	60	60
Slovenia	94	47	41
Spain	90	65	55
Sweden	80	80	80
Switzerland	67	67	33
Netherlands	89	74	74
UK	80	65	65
Total	87	63	60

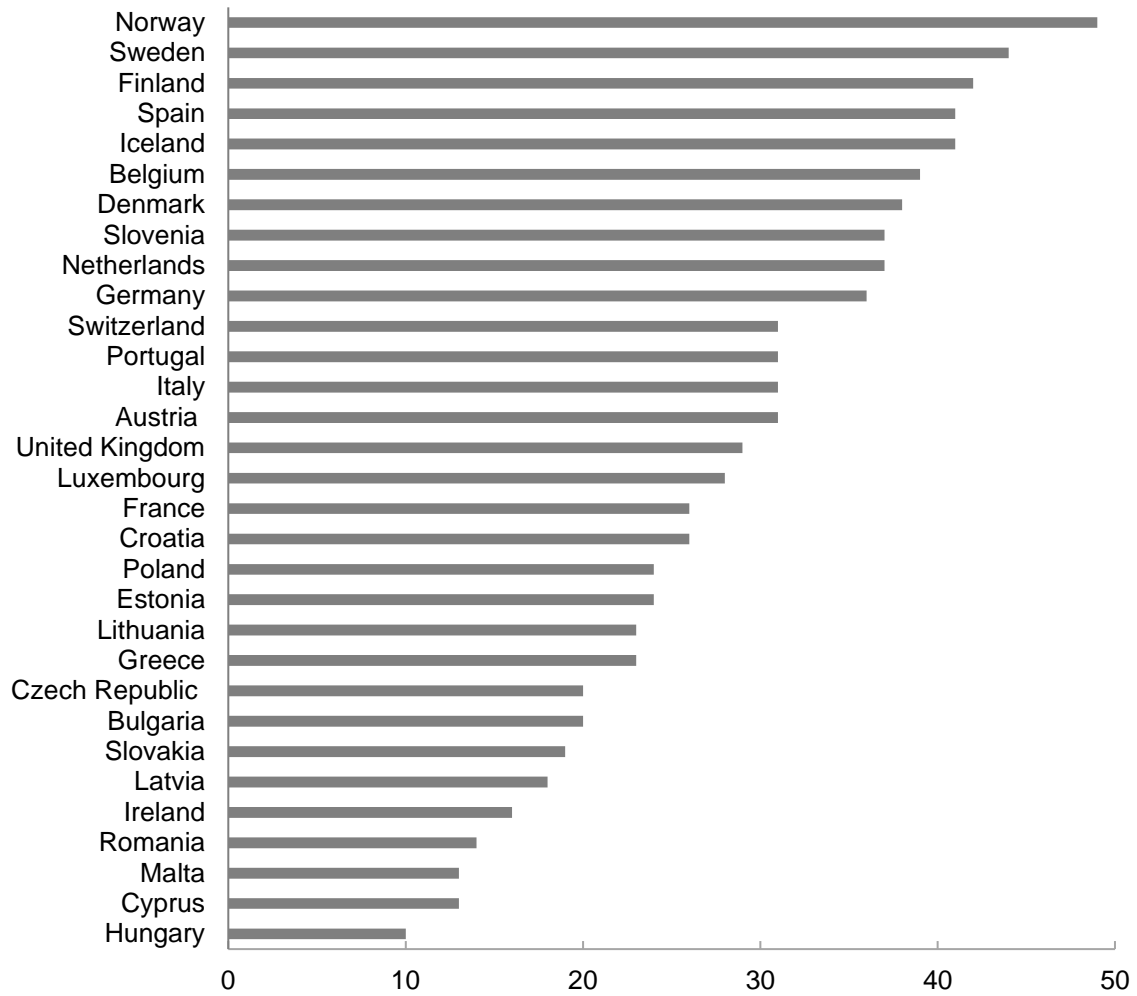
**Table 3.** Opinion-policy congruence among men and women

	Men	Women	Difference in proportions test
Share of cases with policy congruence among all cases	63% (310/491)	60% (294/491)	$z=1.05$ $p=.294$
Share of cases with policy congruence among cases with disagreement between men and women	63% (39/62)	37% (23/62)	$z=2.87$ $p=.004$
Share of cases with policy congruence among cases where they disagree with the public majority	57% (13/23)	33% (13/39)	$z=1.79$ $p=.074$

**Table 4.** Multilevel logit regressions of women's policy congruence

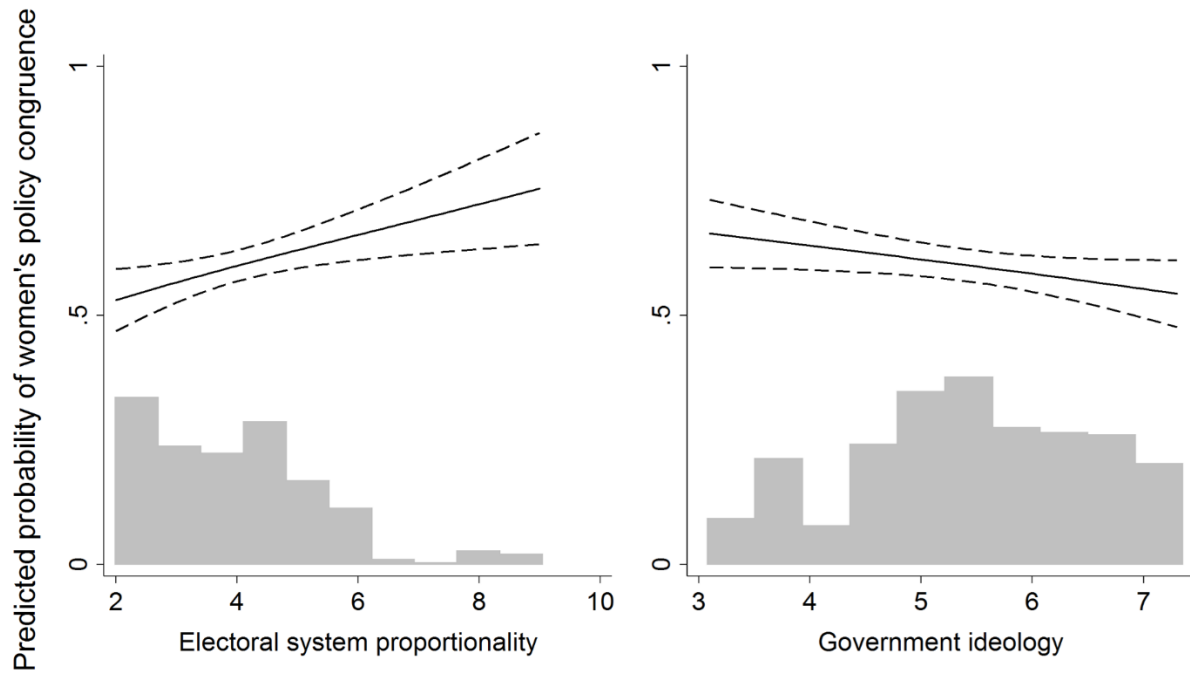
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Men's congruence	4.20 (.35)***	4.41 (.35)***	4.43 (.35)***
Descriptive representation	-.01 (.02)	-.00 (.02)	-.00 (.02)
Electoral system (ENPP)	.29 (.11)**	.33 (.12)**	.31 (.12)**
Government ideology (right-wing)	-.27 (.14)	-.28 (.14)*	-.23 (.14)
Policy support difference		-6.75 (2.44)**	-6.09 (2.34)**
Saliency ratio		-7.78 (3.77)*	-6.57 (3.71)
Turnout		.09 (.11)	.06 (.11)
Turnout <sup>2</sup>		-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Age of democracy		-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Year			-.08 (.05)
Constant	-1.66 (.94)	3.02 (5.43)	3.24 (5.32)
Issue intercept variance	.19 (.20)	.10 (.19)	.01 (.15)
BIC	388.68	406.92	410.26
N level 1 (level 2)	487 (20)	487 (20)	487 (20)

\*  $p<.05$ , \*\*  $p<.01$ , \*\*\*  $p<.0005$ .



**Figure 1.** Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (single chamber or lower house) in 2015 in Europe

*Source:* World Bank (2016)



**Figure 2.** Predicted probabilities of women’s policy congruence based on electoral system proportionality (ENPP) and government ideology (right-wing)

*Notes:* Probabilities are based on Model 2 and calculated from average marginal effects with all other variables at their observed means.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

**Table S1.** Mean degree of policy support among men and women by issue

	Proportion of men in support	Proportion of women in support
Warnings on alcohol bottles	0.78	0.82
Animal experiments	0.62	0.48
Smoking ban	0.64	0.71
Tobacco vending machines	0.56	0.65
Embryonic stem cell research	0.41	0.46
Nuclear power	0.55	0.38
Minimum wage	0.69	0.68
Support for caregivers	0.91	0.93
Detention without charge	0.48	0.50
Same-sex marriage	0.52	0.45
Adoption by same-sex couples	0.29	0.37
Abortion	0.85	0.86
Citizenship	0.81	0.83
Progressive tax	0.80	0.82
Income and pension	0.66	0.65
Refugees and work	0.73	0.78
Online voting	0.51	0.47
Military in Afghanistan	0.43	0.35
Mandatory retirement	0.35	0.35
Plastic waste disposal	0.81	0.83
Mean	0.62	0.62

**Table S2.** Relative policy concern among women and men

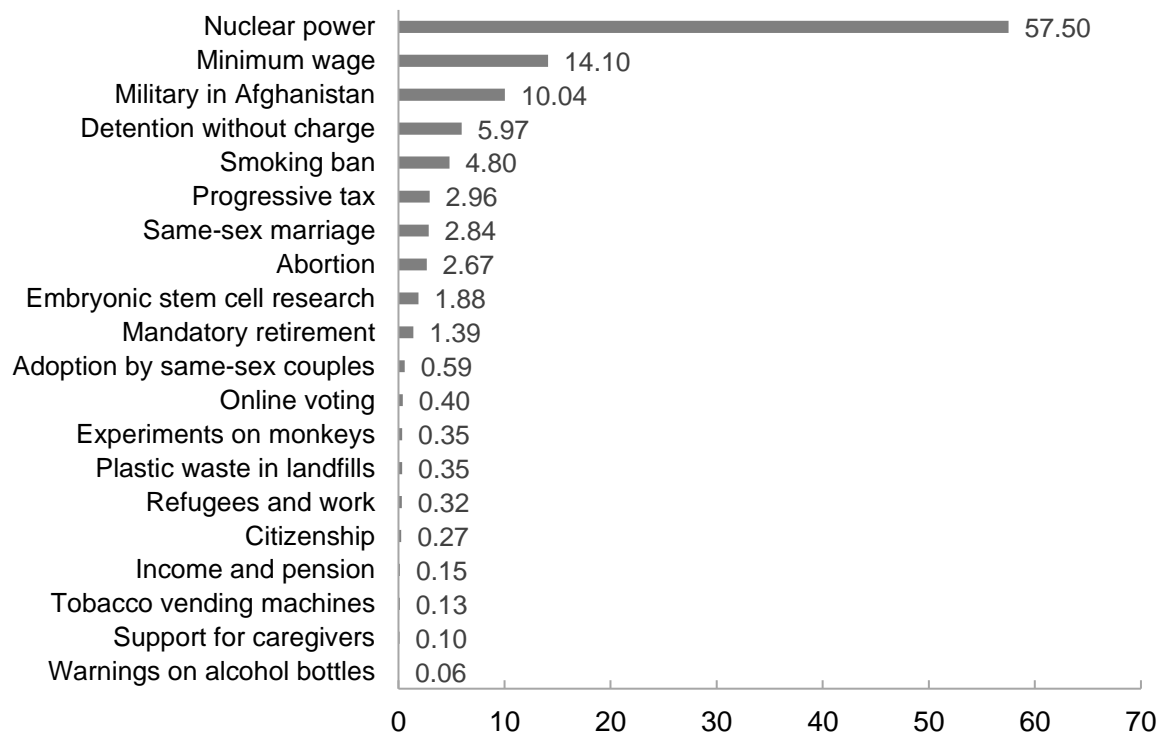
Policy issue	Relative policy concern among women vs men
Abortion	1.028
Same-sex marriage	1.007
Citizenship	1.006
Warnings on alcohol bottles	1.001
Support for caregivers	0.999
Mandatory retirement	0.998
Animal experiments	0.997
Progressive tax	0.995
Smoking ban	0.994
Tobacco vending machines	0.990
Adoption by same-sex couples	0.990
Embryonic stem cell research	0.990
Plastic waste disposal	0.982
Income and pension	0.980
Military in Afghanistan	0.978
Minimum wage	0.975
Refugees and work	0.966
Detention without charge	0.961
Online voting	0.950
Nuclear power	0.944
Total	0.988



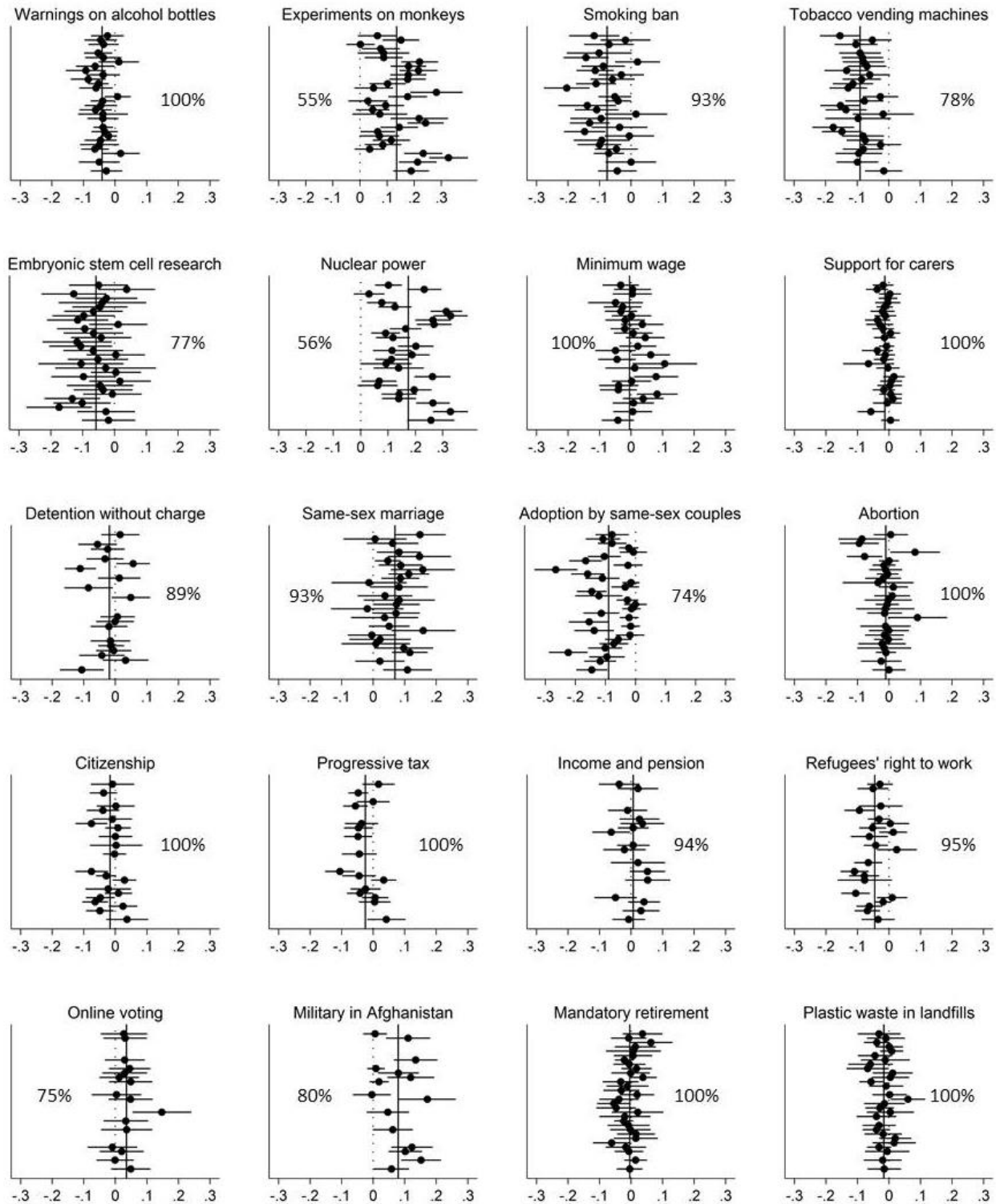
**Table S3.** Multilevel logit regressions of women’s policy congruence with different measures of electoral system proportionality

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Men’s congruence	4.26 (.33)***	4.25 (.33)***	4.26 (.33)***	4.47 (.35)***
Descriptive representation	.02 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.00 (.02)
ENPP				.35 (.13)**
PR system	-.65 (.49)			-1.27 (.71)
Gallagher Index		.02 (.05)		-.03 (.06)
District magnitude			.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Government ideology	-.29 (.14)*	-.28 (.14)*	-.29 (.14)*	-.26 (.15)
Policy support difference	-5.56 (2.36)*	-5.72 (2.35)*	-5.82 (2.35)*	-5.80 (2.38)*
Salience ratio	-5.87 (3.69)	-5.92 (3.66)	-6.20 (3.62)	-6.58 (3.85)
Turnout	.03 (.11)	-.04 (.11)	-.03 (.10)	.20 (.15)
Turnout <sup>2</sup>	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Age of democracy	-.01 (.01)	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.01)
Year	-.09 (.05)	-.09 (.05)	-.09 (.05)	-.07 (.04)
Constant	4.47 (5.51)	7.10 (5.17)	7.17 (5.16)	-2.18 (6.28)
Issue intercept variance	.02 (.15)	.02 (.16)	.02 (.16)	.01 (.15)
BIC	415.56	416.90	416.61	424.40
N level 1 (level 2)	487 (20)	486 (20)	487 (20)	486 (20)

\* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.0005.

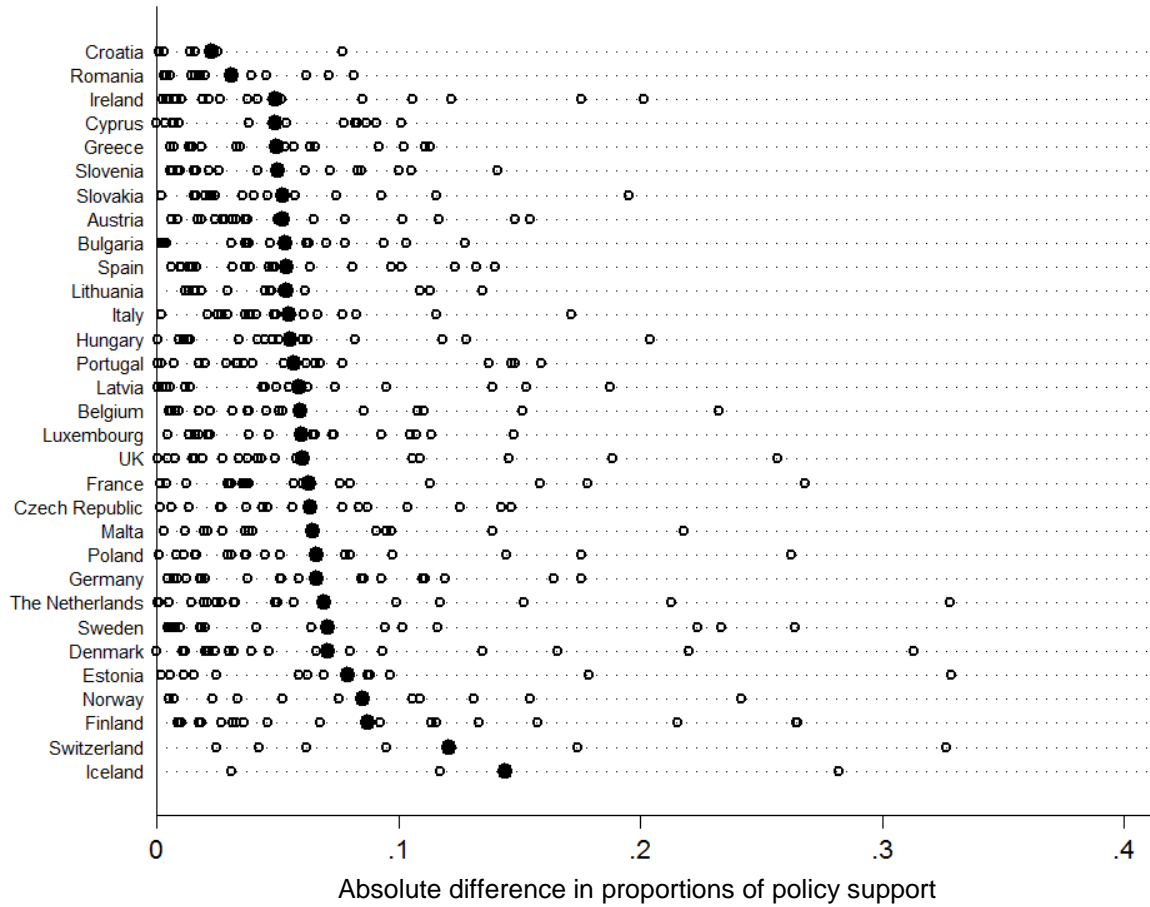


**Figure S1.** Issue salience based on proportion of *Financial Times* articles on Europe



**Figure S2.** Differences in policy support between men and women across issues

*Notes:* The dots indicate differences in the proportions of policy support between men and women in a country, with positive values indicating higher support amongst men. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The percentage of countries with majority agreement between men and women is indicated.



**Figure S3.** Differences in policy support between men and women across countries

*Notes:* The hollow circles indicate absolute differences in the proportions of policy support between men and women on each issue. The dots indicate the mean difference in a country.