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# Towards a modern gender gap in Europe? A comparative analysis of voting behavior in 12 countries

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## Abstract

This article examines electoral gender differences in Western Europe. It describes the electoral gender gap in a longitudinal cross-national design (1974–2000, 12 countries) with EuroBarometer data. The analysis shows that gender differences in voting in Europe follow a similar movement to what has been described for the USA. Women tended to vote more for conservative parties in the 1970s, while in the new millennium they have given higher support to left parties. The speed of this development differs cross-nationally and not all countries reached the state of a modern gender gap (where women lean left).

At the national level the driving force for the emergence of a modern gender gap is mainly increased levels of female labor participation. At the individual level structural variables explain traditional gender differences in voting, but fail to account for the gender gap in recent years.

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## 1. Introduction

Gender differences in voting have been well researched in the United States of America. Since the 1980s, a specific term has been used for this phenomenon: the gender gap. It refers to the distance between the voting choice of women and men. While women in the U.S. used to

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vote more for the Republican Party in the 1950s and 1960s, this trend changed during the early 1980s. From this period on, women voted consistently more in favor of the Democratic Party. Accordingly, the gender gap became an established phenomenon of U.S. Presidential elections and was researched by a broad range of social scientists (see e.g., Carroll, 1988; Chaney, Alvarez, & Nagler, 1998; Manza & Brooks, 1998; Randall, 1987; Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986; Trevor, 1999).

In contrast, electoral gender differences in Europe have received less academic attention. During the first half of the 20th century women gave more support to conservative parties (Baxter & Lansing, 1983; Duverger, 1955; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). However, in recent decades the situation has become less clear: The few comparative studies available (De Vaus & McAllister, 1989; Mayer & Smith, 1985; Norris, 1988, 1996, 2003) show considerable inconsistency: In some countries the gender gap also changed its bearing, while in others women are still found to vote more conservatively. Hence, this paper wants to contribute to the existing literature by providing a detailed analysis of the development of European gender differences in voting, both cross-nationally and over time.

Why have left parties become particularly appealing to women? I argue that the phenomenon of the gender gap in voting can be explained with societal modernization, as the developmental theory of gender realignment by Inglehart and Norris (2000, 2003) proposes. This theory suggests that structural and cultural shifts common to affluent societies have realigned women towards parties on the left. Inglehart and Norris theorize that factors such as the structural reform in the paid labor force for women, improved educational opportunities and the changing characteristics of modern families drive this process of realignment. Additionally, shifts in cultural attitudes and values are seen to influence the gender realignment. These developments make women more economically vulnerable on the one hand, but also more autonomous in their political behavior and hence, left parties become more attractive to them on the other hand.

The theory by Inglehart and Norris (2000, 2003) can be applied to explain cross-national differences as well as differences within one society. An individual-level analysis tests whether structural and cultural factors common to societal modernization are associated with differences in the voting behavior of women and men. An analysis at the national level gives hints as to whether modernization trends can account for differences in the development of the gender gap across countries.

The paper proceeds as follows. In a first descriptive section, it is shown whether gender differences in voting in Europe are according to the developmental theory of gender realignment. Inglehart and Norris (2000, 2003) define three categories which should come in sequence in the process of gender realignment. The first phase is known as the *traditional gender gap*<sup>1</sup>, where women overwhelmingly supported conservative parties. In the next step, gender based differences in voting behavior decreased and became essentially insignificant. The term used to describe this phase is *gender dealignment*. The term *modern gender gap*<sup>2</sup> describes the third phase, in which women offer disproportionate support to the left side of the political spectrum.

The second section of this paper focuses on the explanation of the electoral gender gap in Europe and tests societal modernization indicators on two levels: the individual and the national. In the final section of this paper, the results are shown and discussed.

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