Title:

Bridging the enduring gender gap in political interest in Europe: the relevance of promoting gender equality.

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Abstract:

Notwithstanding the improvement in gender equality in political power and resources in European democracies, this study shows that on average declared interest in politics is 16% lower for women than for men in Europe. This gap remains even after controlling for differences in men's and women's educational attainment, material, and cognitive resources. Drawing on the newly developed European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE) Gender Equality Index (GEI) and on the European Social Survey (ESS)-fifth wave, we show that promoting gender equality contributes towards narrowing the magnitude of the differences in political interest between men and women. However, this effect appears to be conditioned by the age of citizens. More specifically, findings show that in Europe gender-friendly policies contribute to bridging the gender gap in political engagement only during adulthood, suggesting that childhood socialisation is more strongly affected by traditional family values than by policies promoting gender equality. In contrast, feminising social citizenship does make a difference by reducing the situational disadvantages traditionally faced by women within the family and in society for middle-aged people and above.

Key Words:

Political Interest, Gender Gap, Socialisation, Gender Equality, Age Differences

INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the improvement in gender equality in political power and resources in industrialised democracies (Bericat & Bermejo 2016; Paxton et al. 2007), women appear to know less about and to be less interested in politics than men (Burns et al. 2001; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Fraile 2014; Hayes & Bean 1993; Inglehart & Norris 2003; Tolleson Rinehart 1992). This uneven distribution of political interest between men and women raises a number of normative concerns. Political interest is a key antecedent of political engagement (Verba et al. 1997). It also incentivises the formation, stability and coherence of political opinions and the expression of demands to public authorities (Converse 1970; Van Deth & Elff 2004). If women systematically have lower levels of political interest than men, this may result in a clear disadvantage in women's capacity to voice their political wants and needs, and thus to influence the political decision-making process. Strengthening women's political engagement may have fundamental implications for society as a whole, not least because the incorporation of women's voices is associated with better democratic outcomes and a higher degree of development (Hudson et al. 2014).

Traditional accounts of gender differences in political interest point to gendered socialisation processes, which promote an unadventurous political role for women (Burns et al. 2001; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). Nevertheless, the role historically fostered by gendered processes might be alleviated by public policies aiming, for instance, at providing support for carers; offering more opportunities for women to influence the political agenda; or at advancing gender-integrated workplaces regardless of what type of job people do. In spite of the gradual empowerment of women over recent decades, and particularly in certain countries, very little is known about the potential role of the degree of gender equality at the contextual level in reducing the

magnitude of the gender gap in political interest.

The present study expands the existing literature on the topic by, first, providing an updated assessment of the extent of the gender gap in political interest in Europe and, second, by examining the role of gender equality at contextual level in bridging the gender gap in political interest at the individual level. Using evidence from the fifth wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), we show that the gender gap in political interest is persistent across European countries. On average, declared interest in politics is 16% lower for women than for men. The gender gap even remains after controlling for differences in men's and women's educational attainment, material, and cognitive resources. In contrast, the magnitude of the gender gap appears to be significantly smaller in countries that present greater levels of gender equality. Finally, the evidence also shows that in Europe gender-friendly policies contribute to bridging the gender gap in political engagement only during adulthood. Feminising social citizenship could make a change by reducing the situational disadvantages traditionally faced by women within the family and in society for middle-aged people and above. We discuss the implications of these findings for the study of gender differences in political attitudes and participation.

TRADITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE GENDER GAP IN POLITICAL INTEREST

There are three interrelated explanations accounting for the existence of the gender gap in political interest. The first, based on socialisation theory, argues that gender roles are inculcated through the differentiated role played by women in society (Verba et al. 1997). The conventional social norms guiding citizens' socialisation lead men and women to grow with different conceptions, ideas, and expectations about public life, and accordingly, about politics. While some have stressed the role of childhood

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socialisation in forging people's political attitudes (Welch 1977), others have also analysed adult socialisation, claiming that the life experiences of men and women continue to be different as they grow older (Tolleson-Rinehart 1992). According to this explanation, the political socialisation of men and women are distinct: whereas men are socialised towards leadership, autonomous and public roles, women are socialised towards more private, intimate, and compassionate conduct (Alwin et al. 1991). In comparison to men, women are exposed to more substantial pressure to specialise in the private sphere, and to focus on the needs of the family. As a consequence, women are more likely to develop an interest in social welfare and community-oriented topics, which are closer to their daily concerns (Campbell & Winters 2008). Moreover, despite the existence of a substantive gender gap in general political interest, some studies show that women are on average more interested in domestic political issues than men (Coffé 2013).

Another explanation of gender differences in political engagement is based on the social division of labour between men and women (Welch 1977; Jennings & Niemi 1981; Sapiro 1983; Frazer & MacDonald 1993; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Campbell & Winters 2008), which may also be interpreted as a consequence of the deeply embedded patterns of traditional gender socialisation. According to this explanation, as women are assumed to be in charge of the domestic or private/family domain, they tend to be generally more committed to childrearing, caring, and family life regardless of whether they also work full-time outside their homes (Batalova & Cohen 2002; Knudsen & Waerness 2008). Family responsibilities (as wives, mothers, carers, home-makers) often involve a double burden of work for women but not for men, whose average contribution to housework and caring activities declines even further after marriage (Sayer 2005). As a consequence, marriage and parenthood have been shown to

significantly constrain women's political involvement while boosting men's (Garcia-Albacete 2014; Rotolo 2000). Even the incorporation of women into the labour market constitutes a double-edged sword as it increases the chances for women to make new social connections but at the same time reduces even further their available time for getting informed about and involved in politics (Schlozman et al. 1999).

A third explanation of the gender gap in political engagement focuses on the different levels of the material and socioeconomic resources needed to get involved in politics that men and women have. According to this explanation, the gender gap in political interest/involvement can be interpreted as the product of the traditional socioeconomic disadvantages that women in general have suffered, and continue to suffer, such as lower salaries, lower levels in the hierarchy of work, or a lower propensity to be employed full time (Burns et al. 2001; Coffé 2013; Frazer & MacDonald 1993).

Implicit in most of the literature is the argument that gender inequality at societal level is key to understanding the gender gap in political engagement. Expanding women's objective opportunities of empowerment may change real empowerment practices, increasing emancipatory views about the role of women in society, and creating more opportunities for women to become interested in politics and to develop political skills (Alexander & Welzel 2010; 2015). Previous studies speculate that higher levels of gender equality might be behind a relative decrease in the gender gap in political interest in Europe between 1973 and 1998, particularly among younger people (van Deth 2000; van Deth & Elff 2004).[1] In contrast, Atkenson & Rapoport (2003) show that differences in men's and women's political involvement and expression have barely

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[1] Inglehart & Norris (1993), on the other hand, states secularism and modernisation are the forces behind the decrease – but again, both strongly correlate with gender equality.

changed in the United States despite changes in women's lifestyles and the increasing receptivity of women in politics over the past 50 years. In the next section, we argue that the promotion of gender equality contributes towards bridging the gender gap in political interest and involvement. We also discuss how previous research has dealt with the impact of contextual factors on gender differences in political involvement.

DOES GENDER EQUALITY CONTRIBUTE TO BRIDGING THE GAP IN POLITICAL INTEREST?

The importance of context

The gender gap in political interest has rarely been discussed in a cross-national context. This contrasts with the literature focusing on gender differences in political participation or political discussion, which has recently developed a more decisive comparative strategy (see, for instance, Barnes & Burchard 2013 studying African countries; Desposato & Norrander 2009, and Fraile & Gomez 2016 studying Latin American countries; and Karp & Banducci 2008; Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer 2010, and Nir & McClurg 2015 studying countries around the world).

Two types of contextual factors can be distinguished in previous studies about gender and political participation. A first branch of the literature focuses on institutional factors that, in principle, do not measure the relative position of men and women in society. Thus, Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer (2010) focus on the existence of power-sharing institutions such as proportional electoral systems, federalism, and parliamentarism. They argue that gender differences are smaller in systems that open up the political structure to the representation and inclusion of diverse social groups, which tend to be underrepresented in systems with majoritarian institutions. Thus, institutions may not only help alternative issues to make their way onto the political agenda, but also

encourage women to engage in politics. Other similar factors that the literature has looked at include political rights, electoral competitiveness, party system institutionalisation, and GNI/GDP (Desposato & Norrander 2009; Nir & McClurg 2015).

A majority of the literature, however, looks at the impact of socio-political levels of gender equality on women's political engagement. Some studies focus on overall levels of gender equality in different societies as measured by diverse comparative indices (e.g. Coffé & Dilli 2015; Schwartz & Rubel-Lifschitz 2009). Others have focused on gender equality in specific domains. In particular, most of the latter studies focus on the presence of women in political institutions (Barnes & Burchard 2013; Burns et al. 2001; Coffé & Bozendahl 2011; Desposato & Norrander 2009; Karp & Banducci 2008; Wolbrecht & Campbell 2007); although there are also studies that introduce measures of gender inequality in other domains, such as earned income (e.g. Coffé & Bozendahl 2011; Fraile & Gomez 2016).

While looking at particular domains might prove useful, especially for theories focusing on the effect of a specific manifestation of gender inequality, it is also problematic in other respects. Gender equality is a multidimensional concept, but it rarely takes place in separated areas. The implementation of gender-equality policies in one area may have spill-over effects. For example, by reducing the amount of time women dedicate to caring activities, free childcare and shared parental leave could potentially improve women's position in the labour market as well as foster their careers, economic situation, and even facilitate the presence of women in politics. In fact, in Europe there is a very strong connection between gender equality across various domains (European Institute for Gender Equality 2013), meaning that countries that do well in one policy domain tend to also do well in others. Thus, estimating the separate effect of gender equality across different domains is both theoretically and technically challenging. Since our

theory refers to socio-political gender equality as a whole, here we employ an index of gender equality.

Hypotheses

The gender gap in political engagement permeated by the deeply embedded patterns of traditional gender socialisation may be alleviated by public policies promoting gender equality at the societal level. In societies where gender-balanced public measures are not promoted, women are more likely to have to bear the whole burden associated with household and family life (childcare, household chores, etc.). The evident reduction in women's leisure time that this involves may limit women's opportunities to become engaged in and informed about politics, and therefore have a lasting effect on their levels of political interest. Previous studies have clearly demonstrated that women's political engagement and leisure time decline after marriage (García-Albacete 2014; Rotolo 2000; Sayer 2005), with parenthood defining gender roles even further within a couple (Baxter et al. 2008). Married men spend more time socialising than married women (Gershuny & Fisher 2000). By the time women can become more engaged with politics again, men's relative advantage may already be too large.

In short, the promotion of gender-balanced public measures may affect women's traditional roles in society by reducing the amount of time dedicated to family and household commitments – and by re-balancing the division of labour within a couple, albeit to a more limited degree (Lammi-Taskula 2006). This in turn may have a positive impact on the levels of material and cognitive resources that women need to become more interested in politics. As a consequence, we hypothesise that *the magnitude of the gender gap in political interest should decrease as the level of gender equality rises (H1),* even after controlling for the traditional antecedents of political interest at the

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individual level.

An additional question regards the particular age groups that are positively affected by gender equality. It is important to bear in mind that, as mentioned above, many of the constraints that are likely to hold back women's political engagement tend to occur or become stronger during adult life. In fact, policies promoting gender equality are usually designed to address gender differences between adults, especially those who are (or were) in the labour force, have (or have had) children, and are (or were) married (Sainsbury 1996). As a result, the potential effect of gender equality in bridging the gender gap in political interest might be circumscribed to adult citizens. While the gender gap may persist, or perhaps even increase, with age in countries with low levels of gender equality, the opposite will be true in contexts of greater gender equality. From here we deduce our second hypothesis, which states that *the equalising effect of gender equality on the gender gap in political interest will depend on citizens' age (H2)*.

It is true that the reduction of gender differences may have consequences for younger people too. Contexts where men take on a fair share of household responsibilities and women are seen as active agents in the public sphere could encourage young girls to become more interested in public issues. Therefore, gender differences in political interest might be smaller for all age groups in countries with greater gender equality. Socialisation mechanisms, however, cannot be tested with cross-national data. Nonetheless, testing H2 implies also exploring whether differences among young citizens are smaller in countries with greater gender equality.

DATA AND METHODS

We take advantage of the existence of a gender equality index in Europe that is, to the best of our knowledge, the most comprehensive index that currently exists. The Gender

Equality Index (GEI) has been developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2015). The GEI focuses on the impact of gender equality policies and provides comparative and reliable information for all European Union member-states. It measures the gender gap in six intertwined political and public policy domains: work (labour market participation, and segregation and quality of work), money (financial resources, and economic situation), knowledge (attainment and segregation, and lifelong learning), time (care, and social activities), power (political, and economic), and health (health status, and access to health services). The GEI is a composite index that ranges between 0 (complete gender inequality) and 100 (complete gender equality). One of the clear advantages of the GEI is that it is specifically tailored to measure gender equality in Europe, taking into account a whole range of domains where European countries show distinct levels of gender inequality. This distinguishes the GEI from other well-known indices, and particularly the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, which have been criticised for not being able to adequately capture women's disadvantage in Europe, where certain domains do fortunately no longer represent a source of gender inequality in most countries (Permanyer 2013). To our knowledge, no previous study has employed the GEI index to analyse the effect of the political and socioeconomic context in reducing the gender gap in political interest at the individual level.

As shown in Figure 1, there is huge variation across polities in the value of the GEI, with Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands at the top and Romania, Bulgaria and

Greece at the bottom.[2] This is a reflection of the considerable variations in national strategies in respect to women's employment, the level of support given to careers, the level of investment in the educational system, and the promotion of gender balance policies in the tax system, employment protection, and regulation, etc.

Figure 1. The Gender Equality Index across European Union member-states in 2010
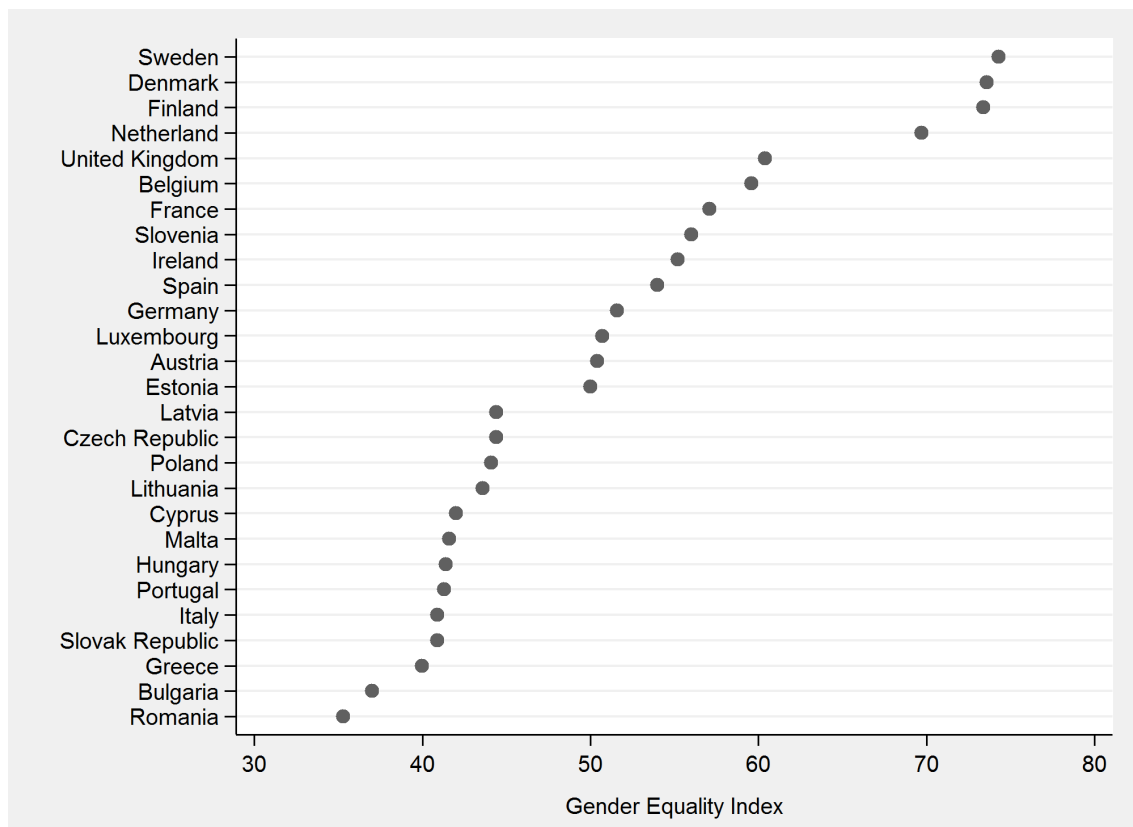
Source: Our own elaboration based on data from the European Institute for Gender Equality (2010)

To test our hypotheses we also employ data from the fifth wave of the ESS, which was conducted in 2010. The ESS is one of the most prestigious cross-country datasets in

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[2] Values correspond to 2010, which is also the year our individual-level data were collected, but they strongly correlate with most recently available data from the EIGE (2012 and 2015).

Europe and contains representative samples of individuals aged 15 or above who reside in the country. Samples are selected using strict random sampling methods with no quotas permitted at any stage. The minimum sample size is 1,500 individuals (or 800 in countries with a population of less than 2 million). Further information about the ESS can be found on the project's website: www.europeansocialsurvey.org . This particular round has been chosen because it contains enough information about the antecedents of political interest such as respondents' declared media exposure, and their family and working conditions. We have replicated a reduced version of the estimations presented here with the most recent wave of 2012 (with fewer predictors, since not all independent variable used here are included in the 2012 ESS wave) and with the 2012 GEI index. Results are robust and can be seen in the Appendix, Table A.1. The following 22 European countries are included in the analysis: Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and United Kingdom.[3] The dependent variable is measured by an ordinal variable where respondents state how interested they are in politics. The categories range from not at all interested (0) to barely interested (1), quite interested (2), and very interested (3). In contrast with other measures of political involvement such as political efficacy, the standard political interest question has been shown to be largely immune to differential item functioning across countries (Lee et al. 2015).

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[3] Since the Gender Equality Index is only available for EU members, non-members (Israel, Norway, Russia, Switzerland and Ukraine) are excluded from the analyses even though they are part of the 2010 ESS wave used here.

Due to the non-linearity of the dependent variable, and in order to take into account the hierarchical structure of our data, we use multilevel ordinal logistic regression analysis with random effects by country.[4] Models are run using the `meologit` command in Stata 13. To assess conclusions were not driven by influential cases we employed iterative elimination of cases as a robustness check. Missing observations were dropped from the analyses.[5] Regarding the right-hand side of the equation, we have selected all the antecedents of people's interest in politics that operationalise the previously discussed traditional accounts for gender differences at the individual level. Thus, apart from gender and age, which constitute our two key independent variables, estimations include marital status; presence of children at home; employment status; number of working hours; level of education; political ideology (an 11-point scale of ideological self-placement which ranges from 0-left to 10-right), trust in institutions (a composite index of trust in Parliament, Courts, the Police and political parties);[6] and exposure to media (a summative index of exposure to television, radio and newspapers).[7] Finally, in

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[4] Likelihood-ratio tests showed there was no need to specify random slopes to probe the cross-level interaction effects.

[5] They were around 1% or less for all variables but the following controls: working hours (16.6%), ideology (15.6%), trust in institutions (5.8%) and gender attitudes (2.6%). These controls were not essential to the models, and their exclusion did not lead to substantive changes in the results.

[6] The index was created using factor analysis. Results indicate there is a one-dimensional solution. Cronbach's alpha = 0.9.

[7] The variables measure the amount of time spent watching TV/listening to the radio /reading newspapers on an average weekday. We have created this simplified indicator

the very last equation we include a measure of gender attitudes - the traditional feminine role scale (Bennet & Bennet 1989)- as a robustness check. The variable accounting for gender attitudes is a composite index of two questions measuring respondents' attitudes towards working women.[8]

Together with the GEI, other country-level variables are used as additional controls at the contextual level in the last estimation equation of Table 2 (equation 4). Two of these are variables related to the openness of the political context, which has been identified in the literature as potentially impacting gender differences in political engagement (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer 2010). In particular, we employ the Gallagher index of electoral disproportionality (Gallagher 2015), and the effective number of legislative parties (Armingeon et al. 2015). Finally, a binary variable distinguishing between post-communist and non-post-communist countries is also used as a control due to historical differences in the development of women's rights between both groups of countries (Wolchick & Meyer 1985).

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of exposure to media, since the three variables are empirically correlated. Previous tests showed that exposure to the three media outlets separately are significantly related to political interest (in order: reading newspapers, watching television, and listening to the radio).

[8] The two variables are agreement/disagreement 5-point scales on the following statements: "a woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family"; and "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women".

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the gender gap in political interest across countries. To illustrate the differences, we show the mean values of political interest on the 0– 3 scale (0 = not at all interested; 3 = very interested).[9] Table 1 shows that women's levels of political interest are systematically lower than men's in every single country (although there are no significant differences in Estonia). Differences range from 2% in Estonia to 34% in Cyprus; indicating that there is a relevant degree of variation in the magnitude of the gender gap in declared political interest across countries. On average, men are 6% less likely than women to declare themselves *not at all interested in politics,* 5% less likely to declare themselves *barely interested*, 7% more likely to declare themselves *quite interested*, and 4% more likely to declare themselves *very interested*.[10] Results confirm that, in 2010, European men were still more interested than women in politics.[11]

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[9] As the variable's measurement level is ordinal, we conducted both Mann-Whitney U-tests and mean-comparisons tests to assess the statistical significance of differences. Both tests provide similar statistically significant results.

[10] These figures are average marginal probabilities based on a multilevel ordered logistic regression with random effects by country where gender was the only independent variable specified in the equation.

[11] Similar results are found in the 2012 European Social Survey, where the average gap in the level of declared interest in politics between men and women ranges from 5% in Slovenia to 36% in Cyprus (average = 17%).

Table 1. Political interest (0-3 scale) by gender

	Women (mean)	Men (mean)	Gender Gap	Gap Percentage [a]
Belgium	1.24	1.44	0.2	14%
Bulgaria	1.28	1.46	0.18	12%
Cyprus	0.87	1.31	0.44	34%
Czech Republic	0.77	1.06	0.29	27%
Germany	1.52	1.84	0.32	17%
Denmark	1.76	1.93	0.17	9%
Estonia	1.28	1.31	0.03 (n.s)	2%
Spain	0.93	1.19	0.26	22%
Finland	1.36	1.49	0.13	9%
France	1.26	1.53	0.27	18%
United Kingdom	1.33	1.56	0.23	15%
Greece	0.86	1.12	0.26	23%
Croatia	0.85	1.24	0.39	31%
Hungary	1.15	1.29	0.14	11%
Ireland	1.1	1.26	0.16	13%
Netherlands	1.61	1.81	0.2	11%
Poland	1.16	1.4	0.24	17%
Portugal	0.81	1.12	0.31	28%
Sweden	1.57	1.8	0.23	13%
Slovenia	1.24	1.39	0.15	11%
Slovakia	1.2	1.43	0.23	16%
Lithuania	1.19	1.31	0.12	9%
Average	1.20	1.42	0.23	16%

Note: A Mann-Whitney U-test revealed significant differences at $p<0.01$ for all countries but Estonia.
Source: Our elaboration on the ESS, 2010.
[a] Gap Percentage is the gender gap relative to men's mean levels of political interest = (gender gap / men's mean political interest) * 100.

To what extent are smaller gender differences in political interest associated with contexts that promote gender equality? Table 2 summarises the results of the estimation of a series of multilevel ordered logit equations. The first equation contains only individual-level variables, including gender and several controls, and confirms that males declare themselves to be significantly more interested in politics than their female counterparts. The coefficient for gender is not very different when control variables are dropped (model available upon request); in fact, we cannot conclude that the effect of

gender changes significantly as a result of introducing individual-level controls,[12] which suggests that the amount of the gender gap that is due to women and men having different resources, attitudes and socio-economic positions is slight.

Aside from gender, other factors at the individual level significantly influence people's declared interest in politics, confirming previous studies (Van Deth & Elff 2004). Interest in politics increases with age, education, exposure to the mass media and left/right ideology (but the latter effect is quadratic, so people at the extremes are more interested than those closer to the centre). Political interest is also higher for students than it is for people who work full time, who in turn are more interested in politics than unemployed people. Lastly, people who are married or living with their partner, and people who trust institutions more, tend to show greater interest in politics as well. On the other hand, having children at home and the number of working hours do not appear to be related to respondents' declared political interest.

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[12] Differences are not statistically different from zero at $p < 0.05$. This was estimated using the Breen et al. (2013) technique to compare coefficients between nested non-linear models (see the khb command in Stata). Clustered standard errors were applied to account for the hierarchical structure of the data.

Table 2. Gender gap in political interest. Multilevel ordered logistic models

DV: Political Interest	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Interactions				
Gender * Gender Equality		-0.007***	0.010**	0.004
		(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.006)
Gender * Age			0.013***	0.012**
			(0.004)	(0.006)
Gender Equality * Age			-0.0001*	-0.000
			(0.000)	(0.000)
Gender * Gender Equality * Age			-0.0003***	-0.0003***
			(0.000)	(0.000)
Gender * Gender Attitudes				0.066*
				(0.036)
Gender * Number of parties				0.005
				(0.018)
Gender * Post-communist				-0.039
				(0.060)
Gender * Disproportionality				-0.003
				(0.007)
Individual-level variables				
Gender (1 = male)	0.492***	0.836***	0.15	0.494
	(0.023)	(0.102)	(0.234)	(0.344)
Age	0.021***	0.022***	0.027***	0.028***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.004)
Education	0.304***	0.302***	0.300***	0.296***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Married/cohabiting	0.128***	0.126***	0.140***	0.129***
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Children at home	0.033	0.032	0.012	0.039
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Student (ref: working)	0.572***	0.557***	0.511***	0.544***
	(0.065)	(0.064)	(0.065)	(0.066)
Inactive (ref: working)	-0.038	-0.045	-0.041	0.020
	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.043)
Unemployed (ref: working)	-0.094**	-0.102**	-0.102**	-0.070
	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.045)
Retired (ref: working)	-0.022	-0.027	-0.043	-0.022
	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.039)
Working Hours	-0.003**	-0.003**	-0.003***	-0.003***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)

Ideology	-0.367***	-0.368***	-0.373***	-0.357***
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Ideology²	0.034***	0.034***	0.034***	0.033***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Trust in institutions	0.457***	0.458***	0.464***	0.458***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Media exposure	0.055***	0.055***	0.055***	0.059***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Gender Attitudes				0.140***
				(0.025)
Aggregate-level variables				
Gender Equality		0.015***	0.010***	0.027***
		(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.004)
Number of parties				-0.029**
				(0.013)
Post-communist				0.015
				(0.042)
Disproportionality				-0.010**
				(0.005)
cut 1	0.314***	1.047***	0.961***	1.502***
	(0.091)	(0.123)	(0.159)	(0.258)
cut 2	2.319***	3.055***	2.965***	3.508***
	(0.092)	(0.124)	(0.160)	(0.259)
cut 3	4.717***	5.450***	5.351***	5.907***
	(0.096)	(0.127)	(0.162)	(0.260)
var (country)	0.045***	0.098***	0.310***	0.266***
	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.018)	(0.016)
N Individuals	29263	29263	29263	28889
N Countries	22	22	22	22
BIC	67553.47	67531.81	67677.37	66735.657

Source: Our elaboration on ESS, 2010
Standard errors in parentheses
* p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

Equation 2 introduces our main aggregate-level variable (gender equality) in interaction

with gender. If women's interest in politics increases with gender equality to a greater

extent than men's, then the gender gap should be smaller in countries with greater levels

of gender equality (H1). Results provide support for this hypothesis. The interaction

between the gender equality index and gender (1 = male) is negative and statistically

significant, suggesting that the gap between men's and women's political interest is smaller in more equal countries. However results from estimators of interaction terms cannot be interpreted by simply looking at the coefficients, especially in the case of non-linear equation estimations, and when one of the two interacted variables is continuous, as it is in the GEI index (Bambor et al. 2006; Rainey 2015). For all these reasons, we rely on graphic visualisation to summarise the main findings. First, the left hand side of Figure 2 shows the predicted political interest of men and women across different levels of gender equality at the contextual level. [13] Second, the right-hand side of Figure 2 presents the magnitude of the gender gap (that is, the difference between the predicted political interest of men and women) across diverse levels of gender equality at societal level. For the sake of simplicity, Figure 2 shows estimated probabilities for only two categories of the dependent variable: quite and very interested in politics. The left-hand side of Figure 2 shows that, while for men the levels of declared political interest remain relatively similar (around 40%) regardless of the level of gender equality in a given society, women's political interest is significantly greater in more egalitarian societies. For example, the probability for women of declaring themselves to be quite interested in politics is around 31% when gender equality is low (GEI = 37, the sample minimum), but this percentage increases to 39% for the highest level of gender equality in the sample (GEI= 74, the sample maximum). The difference is substantive: 8 percentage points. In contrast, the effect of gender equality is almost negligible for men (a difference of around 2 percentage points in the probabilities of declaring themselves quite interested in politics).

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[13] All probabilities estimated in this article are Average Marginal Effects and were computed using the `margins` command in Stata.

As a complement, the right-hand side of Figure 2 shows that the magnitude of the gender gap in political interest diminishes as gender equality increases at the contextual level. Thus, the average effect of gender on the probabilities of declaring oneself quite interested in politics is 9% when gender equality equals the sample minimum, but only of 2% when gender equality is high.

Figure 2. Probability to be quite or very interested in politics for men and women (left) and gender gap (i.e.: marginal effect of gender) in the probability to be quite or very interested in politics (right), across levels of gender equality at the country level
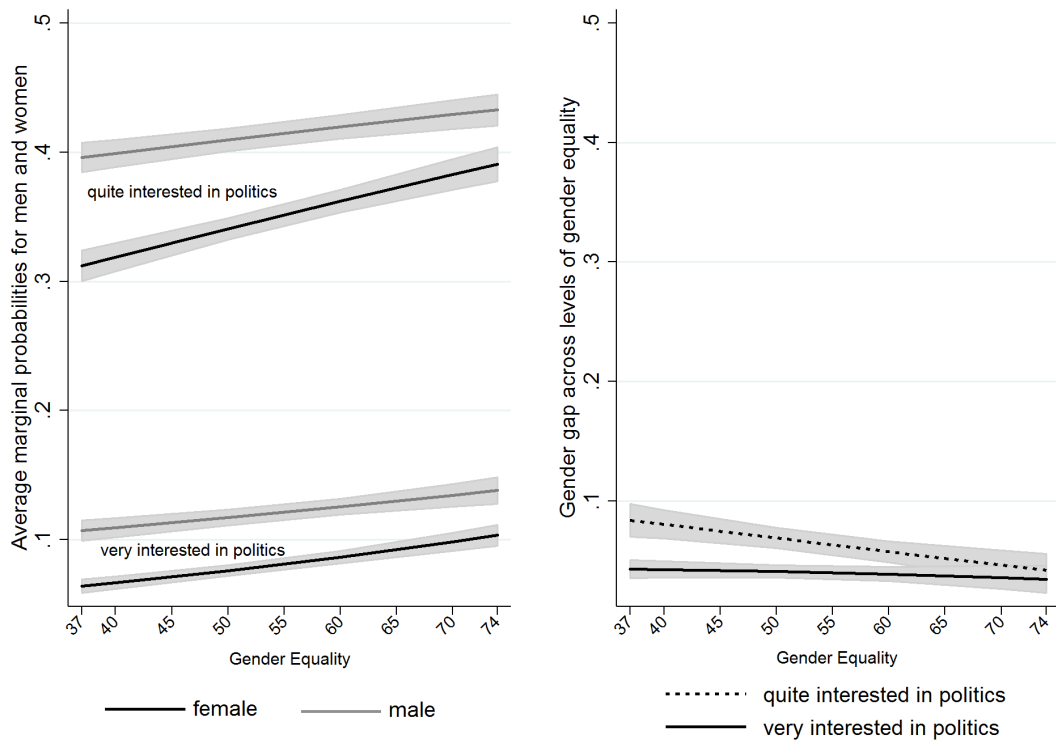
Note: Grey areas are 99% Confidence Intervals. Estimations are based on Equation 3 of Table 2

According to H2, the effects of gender equality should be different across ages. This is because gender equality is expected to have a greater impact after women's transition to adult life, where labour-market participation, family life, childcare and household

responsibilities are more likely to occur. To test H2, equation 3 in Table 2 specifies a triple interaction between gender, age, and gender equality at the country level.[14] In order to fully assess the total effect of the interaction, Figure 3 presents the estimated probabilities to declare oneself quite interested or very interested in politics for men and women, by age, and in two different scenarios: one of low levels of gender equality (GEI = 37, the sample minimum), and one of high levels of gender equality (GEI = 74, the sample maximum). In general, the evidence indicates that both men and women become more interested in politics as they age, confirming previous studies (Van Deth & Elff 2004). However, as can be seen in Figure 3, in contexts of low gender equality (see the left-hand side) the magnitude of the gender gap in political interest does not decrease with age (if anything, it slightly increases). In contrast, in contexts of greater gender equality (see the right-hand side of Figure 3) differences between men and women decrease with age in such a way that they cease to be significant for people in their 50s and above. This finding provides support for H2 and suggests that gender equality may successfully provide women with the opportunities to become more interested in politics, to the extent that in more equal countries older women have managed to close a gender gap that, unfortunately, is still present among younger people.

When we look into the differences between 15-year-olds (the youngest respondents in the sample) across contexts, not only is the gender gap very similar among young

[14] A reduced version of equations 3 and 4 using data from 2012 is presented in the Appendix. Results are very similar regardless of the ESS wave employed. Gender attitudes are not available for 2012, and the same applies to exposure to newspapers and radio news. As previously explained in the main text, this is one of the reasons for having used the ESS 2010 wave in this study.

adolescents in contexts of very low and very high levels of gender equality, but it is also even slightly larger in more equal countries.[15] 15 year-old girls are 7% less likely than boys to be *quite interested* in politics when GEI=37, and 11% less likely when GEI=75 (differences between both gender gaps are only significant at $p<0.05$). Similarly, girls are 2% less likely than boys to be *very interested* in politics when GEI=37, and 4% when GEI=75 (differences are significant at $p<0.01$). So while results did support H2, we find no evidence that gender equality at the country level helps reduce the differences in the political interest of young adolescents men and women.

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[15] This is explained by the high levels of political interest among boys in more egalitarian countries. Girls in countries with higher levels of gender equality are actually slightly more interested in politics than those in more unequal countries but the average gap with respect to boys in their countries is still striking and needs further investigation.

Figure 3. Probability to be quite or very interested in politics by age and gender in contexts of low (left-hand side) and high (right-hand side) levels of gender equality
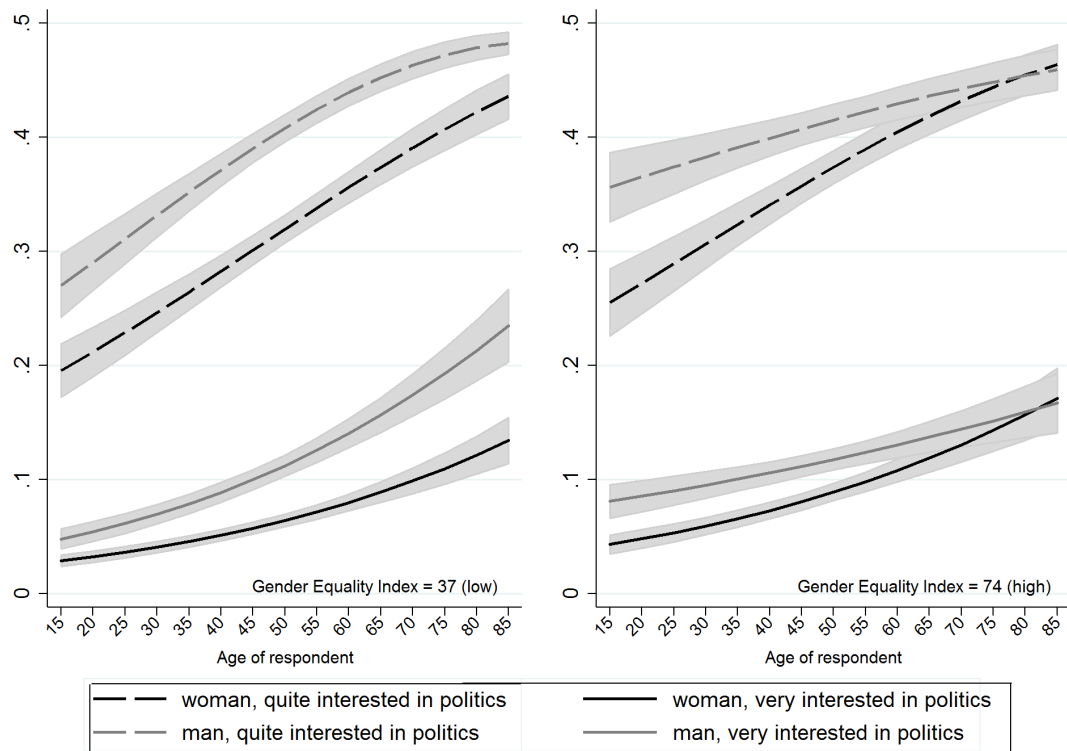
Note: Grey areas are 99% Confidence Intervals. Estimations are based on Equation 3 of Table 2

As argued above, the reduction, and even disappearance, of the gender gap among middle-aged citizens in contexts of greater gender equality is consistent with gender equality helping to overcome gender differences among adult individuals, but it could also be due to different attitudes among older women in those countries. The influence of the second wave of feminism was strong in countries that currently present high levels of gender equality (Crompton & Lyonette 2006). It is, therefore, possible that in such countries women who were young adults during the 60s and 70s have more supportive attitudes regarding gender equality and, as a consequence, are also more politically aware (although it would be difficult to explain why, in that case, there has been a reversal among younger people). It is also possible that the effect of gender equality is caused by other characteristics of those countries, such as the presence of

more parties and a more proportional electoral system – factors that have been highlighted in previous literature as having an effect on women's political participation (and that are not included in the GEI index of gender equality). In order to confirm the robustness of the results, equation 4 in Table 2 specifies interactions between gender and gender attitudes, effective number of parliamentary parties, the disproportionality of the electoral system, and a dummy variable indicating whether countries are post-communist, or not, since post-communist countries have different histories regarding women's rights and gender equality (Wolchick & Meyer 1985). The interaction between age, gender and gender equality remains intact after including those controls; moreover, marginal effects do not differ substantially from those shown in Figure 3. All in all, the effects of gender equality at the contextual level on the gender gap in political interest across ages do not appear to be driven by diverging gender attitudes, or by the party and electoral system, or the regime history of the country.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Despite the progress made during the past few decades in terms of gender equality, women still declare lower levels of political interest than men in virtually every European country, which begs the question: has the promotion of gender equality made any difference? This study provides evidence in favour of an affirmative answer: more equal countries provide more opportunities for women to engage in politics and to develop a greater interest in political issues. However, the equalising effect of the promotion of gender-balanced policies is partial. The effect of contextual gender equality on women's political interest seems to be circumscribed to adult citizens - precisely those who are more likely to benefit (or have benefited) from policies aimed at reducing differences between women and men. This finding suggests that policies promoting gender equality may contribute to boosting women's levels of political

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interest during adulthood, allowing them to overcome the significant differences observed for younger people across European democracies. In contrast, however, childhood socialisation might be more strongly influenced by traditional family values that are not particularly impacted by the current policies.

Much remains to be done in terms of gender equality in Europe. Even in countries with greater levels of gender equality women do not yet enjoy the same position as their male counterparts. Achieving gender equality is not an easy task and will take a considerable amount of time. In fact, the evidence shown in Figure 1 suggests that with an average score of 54 (where 1 stands for absolute gender inequality and 100 for full gender equality) the European Union is only halfway towards a gender equal society. We speculate that until complete gender balance is reached, childhood socialisation may persist to be gendered even in countries with higher levels of gender equality. Gender balance requires a revolutionary change in the way people work and raise their children, so that men and women are equally able and willing to participate in both the private and the public sphere (Roseberry & Roos 2014).

The findings in this article have implications that may well go beyond the study of gender differences in political attitudes. It is well known that interest in politics is associated with a greater likelihood to participate in politics and to express demands to public authorities (Verba et al. 1997; Van Deth & Elff 2004). However, greater political interest may not necessarily mean the same for men and women. Previous studies have shown that there are topics, such as social welfare, community-oriented topics and local politics, that women are significantly more interested in and know more about (Campbell & Winters 2008; Coffé 2013; Ferrin et al. 2016; Rapeli 2014; Stolle & Gidengil 2010). If political interest means something different for women than it does for men, then increasing the former's levels of interest may involve increasing the

salience of those issues women are generally interested in. Therefore, facilitating women's interest in politics might indirectly trigger changes in the political agenda, political competition, and perhaps even the party system. Previous studies have suggested that promoting gender equality may have effective consequences on a range of political and economic outcomes, including political corruption, state violence, and economic growth (Hudson et al. 2014).

Future research on this topic needs to employ novel ways to measure the different dimensions of politics men and women might be interested in. Changing the kind of items that has been used in surveys for decades is not an easy task, and will take time. However, perhaps the time has come to stop assuming similarities between genders in the study of political attitudes and behaviour in political science in order to gain a better understanding of how citizens relate to politics.

Last but not least, the evidence shown here is based on a cross-country analysis, so it is not possible to assess the direction of causality or whether findings are due to life-course or generational effects, or both. Further research on this topic should ideally explore how political interest changes over the life course for men and women, and how this is affected by changes in gender-equality policies vis-à-vis changes in their life course such as their transition to adulthood. The lack of longitudinal data is certainly a problem, but this is an interesting avenue for future research that would provide invaluable knowledge about how to tackle gender differences in political engagement.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Replication of equations 3 and 4 using data from 2012.

DV: Political Interest	Eq 3 in 2012	Eq. 4 in 2012
Interactions		
Gender * Gender Equality	-0.0043**	0.011*
	(0.0019)	(0.006)
Gender * Age		0.012*
		(0.006)
Gender Equality * Age		0.000
		(0.000)
Gender * Gender Equality * Age		-0.0003***
		(0.0001)
Individual-level variables		
Gender (1 = male)	0.756***	0.184
	(0.105)	(0.323)
Age	0.0167***	0.0164***
	(0.00106)	(0.00421)
Education	0.298***	0.303***
	(0.00691)	(0.00704)
Married/cohabiting	0.144***	0.146***
	(0.0259)	(0.0261)
Children at home	-0.0341	-0.0238
	(0.0266)	(0.0267)
Student (ref: working)	0.593***	0.601***
	(0.0690)	(0.0701)
Inactive (ref: working)	-0.118***	-0.116***
	(0.0421)	(0.0421)
Unemployed (ref: working)	-0.167***	-0.164***
	(0.0468)	(0.0469)
Retired (ref: working)	-0.108***	-0.116***
	(0.0395)	(0.0397)
Working Hours	-0.00102	-0.00101
	(0.00127)	(0.00128)
Ideology	-0.345***	-0.342***
	(0.0174)	(0.0175)
Ideology²	0.0312***	0.0313***
	(0.00165)	(0.00166)
Trust in institutions	0.423***	0.413***
	(0.0153)	(0.0154)
TV news exposure	0.391***	0.399***

	(0.009)	(0.009)
Aggregate-level variables		
Gender Equality	0.019***	0.016***
	(0.001)	(0.004)
cut 1	1.236***	1.256***
	(0.123)	(0.250)
cut 2	3.454***	3.473***
	(0.125)	(0.251)
cut 3	5.998***	6.022***
	(0.129)	(0.253)
var(country)	0.102***	0.0694***
	(0.00611)	(0.00459)
N Individuals	27794	27794
N Countries	20	20
BIC	61571.8	61571.7

Standard errors in parentheses

* p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01