



Reporting on Deliverable D4.2 – Report (including policy recommendations) on the patterns of objective and subjective representation across countries and across parties within countries

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Deliverable D4.2 - Report (including policy recommendations) on the patterns of objective and subjective representation across countries and across parties within countries

Executive Summary

PLUS (Zoe Lefkofridi)

This report is situated within the broader discourse on the crisis of liberal democracy, a phenomenon marked by declining trust in political institutions and increasing polarisation across Europe. Understanding these ongoing challenges facing European democracies - a key goal of the ActEU project - requires a nuanced assessment of the quality of political representation. The ActEU project examines the quality of political representation, which is foundational to the functioning of representative democracies, across three dimensions: **descriptive representation** (the demographic correspondence between citizens and representatives), **substantive representation** (the alignment of policy preferences and actions with citizens' interests), and **subjective representation** (citizens' perceptions and feelings of being represented).

Highlighting these key dimensions of representation, the report offers a comprehensive analysis of the patterns of representation across Europe. While representative democracy depends on a close "match" between citizens and their elected delegates, the findings of this report reveal significant gaps that continue to undermine the inclusivity and fairness of political institutions. Across Europe, persistent underrepresentation of women, youth, ethnic minorities, and LGBTIQ+ individuals in national parliaments signals the need for more inclusive electoral systems and institutional mechanisms. Moreover, while descriptive representation holds the potential to foster shared experiences and policy alignment, its relationship with substantive representation remains inconsistent, limiting the ability of marginalised groups to see their concerns addressed effectively in policymaking. Subjective representation, meanwhile, underscores the importance of citizens' perceptions of being heard and understood—an essential component of democratic legitimacy that is influenced by institutional structures, societal norms, and communication channels.

This report is grounded in both scholarly literature and empirical evidence, leveraging novel datasets developed within the ActEU project. These datasets provide an intersectional lens on representation, incorporating variables such as gender, age, education level, immigrant ancestry, minority status, and LGBTIQ+ identities. The report also investigates key policy areas, including gender equality, climate change, and migration, as they intersect with these demographic dimensions. By examining patterns of representation across six European countries—Austria, Greece, France, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom—this report offers a comparative perspective on representation gaps. It reveals critical variations in how political systems reflect their populations and highlights the limitations of existing mechanisms to ensure equitable representation. Furthermore, our analysis underscores the interplay between objective and perceived quality of representation; as such, it bears implications for our understanding of how levels of representation may matter for trust in democratic institutions. Our nuanced analysis of political representation seeks to inform the development of targeted policy recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic legitimacy in Europe.



The present report's key added value lies in our integrated and comparative approach to representation and the intersectional perspective of the analysis, which utilizes novel datasets; as such, the report produces policy-relevant findings. Firstly, unlike most studies, which tend to focus exclusively on either descriptive or substantive representation, this report combines these 'objective' dimensions with the less-studied aspect of subjective representation. This integrated approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of how representation operates across its different facets and the implications for democratic governance. Secondly, the report examines patterns of political representation across six European countries—Austria, Greece, France, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. This comparative lens facilitates the identification of both cross-national differences and variations within countries, offering a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of representation in diverse contexts. Thirdly, moving beyond traditional demographic categories, the analysis employs an intersectional framework to examine how gender, age, educational attainment, immigrant ancestry, minority status, and LGBTIQ+ identities intersect. This approach addresses critical gaps in the literature by capturing the compounded barriers experienced by individuals with multiple marginalised identities. Fourthly, the report leverages unique datasets developed within the ActEU project, enabling a granular exploration of representation patterns. By extending the scope of existing data, it provides new insights into how various demographic and policy dimensions are represented in European legislatures. Last but not least, the findings are directly translated into actionable policy recommendations aimed at addressing representation gaps. These insights are critical for policymakers seeking to promote inclusivity, equity, and trust in political institutions across Europe. Below we summarise our key findings on patterns of political representation across Europe, focusing on **descriptive, substantive, and subjective representation**.

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Key findings: To begin with patterns of descriptive representation, we observe persistent underrepresentation of historically marginalised groups in Europe -- albeit with variation across countries. Women, youth, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and openly LGBTIQ+ individuals remain significantly underrepresented in European parliaments. Austria, France, and Spain are improving in gender representation, nearing 40% female legislators. Youth representation is minimal across all countries, with slight improvements in Austria and Italy. Legislative representation of groups such as ethnic minorities and LGBTIQ+ individuals shows significant variability. The UK has comparatively higher representation of LGBTIQ+ legislators, while Greece reports none. Regarding patterns of substantive representation, we observe disparities in policy attention: Climate change and youth issues dominate legislative discourse, while topics like LGBTIQ+ and minority issues receive limited attention. Italian legislators show exceptional attention to men's issues and climate topics. Progressive parties lead in addressing minority and gender-related issues, though right-wing parties occasionally contribute significantly to immigration discourse. The existing (limited) presence of representatives from underrepresented groups (descriptive representation) does not consistently translate to greater substantive attention to their concerns. When looking at patterns of subjective representation,¹ we see that in some countries, like Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Sweden there are limited differences between men and women in feeling represented. In some countries, however, such as Austria, Belgium, and Italy we see a contained bias toward men. Only Latvia uniquely exhibits higher feelings of representation among women. The youth (aged 25 and below) feel significantly less represented in some countries, particularly in Central and Eastern

¹ Existing data is not accurate enough to fully grasp the emotional and symbolic dimensions of representation of different groups; this holds especially for the analysis of critical categories, such as sexual minorities, non-binary persons or ethnic/racial minorities. Based on the findings of this report, the ActEU project will address these gaps with new data from Task 4.3, which enable a nuanced analysis of diverse forms of representation, including emotional and symbolic aspects.



Europe (CEE) and Southern Europe (e.g., Romania, Greece, Poland). Romania has the largest gap (50% of older respondents feeling represented versus 20% of youth). Contrastingly, in countries like Latvia, France, and the Netherlands, youth report higher representation than older groups. Furthermore, in countries such as Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden show a representation gap favouring natives. Conversely, some CEE countries, including Romania, Czechia, and Slovakia, exhibit higher representation feelings among foreign-born respondents. Citizens positioned on the extremes on the left-right political spectrum feel more represented than those in the centre, especially in Belgium, Greece, and Poland. In Romania and Lithuania representation feelings among centrist respondents are particularly low (below 20%). Right-leaning individuals feel more represented in countries like Greece and Poland, whereas left-leaning individuals dominate in Portugal and Slovakia. Finally, central-eastern and southern European countries show larger gaps in youth and foreign-born representation. Western and Northern European countries generally display smaller demographic gaps but highlight other representation asymmetries, such as by ideology. Overall, our analysis highlights persistent inequalities in subjective representation across demographic, geographical, and ideological lines, underscoring the need for improved measurement tools and expanded data to address these disparities effectively.

In sum, the findings of this report, which provides a multidimensional analysis that integrates descriptive, substantive, and subjective representation, make a substantial contribution to the study of political representation in Europe. Through its comprehensive scope, novel data contributions, and policy relevance, this report advances the understanding of political representation. The report produces critical insights into the challenges and opportunities for improving political representation across Europe, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and responsive democratic institutions.

To address the persistent challenges in political representation identified in this report, we propose the following **policy recommendations**, aiming to strengthen the inclusivity, responsiveness, and legitimacy of representative institutions across Europe:

- **Enhance Descriptive Representation Through Institutional Reform:** Electoral systems should prioritise proportional representation and incorporate mechanisms such as gender and diversity quotas to improve the presence of underrepresented groups, including women, youth, ethnic minorities, and LGBTIQ+ individuals. Such reforms can help ensure that the demographic composition of legislatures more closely mirrors the populations they represent.
- **Promote Intersectional Approaches to Representation:** Policymakers should adopt an intersectional framework in addressing representation gaps, acknowledging the compounded barriers faced by individuals belonging to multiple marginalised groups. For example, gender quotas should be complemented by measures addressing ethnicity, age, and socio-economic status to provide holistic solutions.
- **Strengthen the Link Between Descriptive and Substantive Representation** Legislative bodies should institutionalise mechanisms, such as issue-specific parliamentary committees and cross-party working groups, to ensure that the presence of underrepresented groups translates into meaningful advocacy for their concerns. Particular attention should be paid to fostering the substantive representation of issues such as climate change, gender equality, and migration.
- **Consider Citizens' Perceptions of Representation:** Strengthening citizens' perceptions of representation requires investment in transparent communication channels, participatory processes, and civic education programmes. Initiatives should focus on building trust by demonstrating how policies are informed by citizens' diverse



perspectives and concerns. Digital platforms can be employed to amplify underrepresented voices and facilitate direct engagement between citizens and representatives. Policymakers should invest in secure, accessible, and inclusive digital tools to bridge the gap between constituents and legislative processes.

- **Monitor and Evaluate Representation Outcomes.** Establishing robust, standardised data collection frameworks is critical to evaluating progress in representation. Regularly assessing descriptive, substantive, and subjective representation across demographic groups will enable evidence-based policymaking and identify areas requiring targeted intervention.
- **Address Structural Barriers to Youth Participation:** Policymakers should lower the age of eligibility for candidacy where appropriate and create mentorship and capacity-building programmes to support the political engagement of young people. Incentivising youth participation can address the severe underrepresentation of this demographic.
- **Combat Societal Biases and Discrimination:** Governments should actively counter biases and discrimination that deter individuals from marginalised groups from pursuing political careers. Public campaigns and legal protections can help dismantle stereotypes and create an environment where diversity in representation is both celebrated and safeguarded.

These recommendations aim to operationalise the principle of equality and inclusion, which stand at the heart of representative democracy, ensuring that Europe's institutions are better equipped to reflect and respond to the needs of all European citizens.



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1 Introduction

Matilde Ceron and Zoe Lefkofridi (PLUS)

Understanding the broader crisis of liberal democracies is impossible without assessing the quality of political representation. The political representation of citizens is fundamental because in contemporary democratic polities citizens rule only indirectly, through their delegates. For representative democracy to work, there should be a good 'match' between citizens and the delegates they themselves elect to 'make them present again' in policy making (Pitkin 1967; Mansbridge 2009). This report aims at a comprehensive picture of political representation in Europe today, and its evolution in the last years.

When evaluating political representation, the scholarly literature examines interrelated yet distinct dimensions of the relationship between citizens and elected representatives, such as their degree of similarity in terms of demographic characteristics (descriptive representation), or their levels of congruence regarding policy preferences (substantive representation). Research concerned with the extent to which elected parliaments mirror their constituencies (descriptive representation) often assumes that demographic correspondence implies shared experiences between the represented and their representatives; common experiences, in turn, are assumed to increase the representatives' understanding of citizens' concerns and policy preferences. This raises the question of whether high levels of descriptive representation produce a better match between citizens' policy preferences and policy outcomes. To be sure, for policies to reflect what citizens want, citizens should select parties/candidates/representatives with similar policy preferences. Policy congruence between the represented and those elected to make policy on their behalf increases the likelihood that citizens' needs and wishes will be voiced in policymaking.

Besides these two dimensions of political representation – descriptive and substantive – that concern 'objective' or 'objectifiable' aspects of the relationship between citizens and their delegates (e.g., numbers of seats or parliamentary questions), a third line of research examines representation 'in the eye of the beholder'. Studies on what we call 'subjective' representation, focus on how citizens perceive and/or feel about representation. Citizens' 'personal' views provide an additional source of information about the quality of the linkage between the represented and their representatives. While subjective representation is understudied in comparison to (types of) objective representation, most research tends to focus on either (types of) objective or subjective representation; rarely do studies analyse these different dimensions of political representation together.

The present report seeks to fill this gap by providing a comparative picture of both objective (descriptive and substantive) and subjective political representation in Europe.² With this goal in

² The deliverable encompasses work spanning for Tasks 4.1 and T4.2. Specifically, we leverage the extension of data on descriptive and substantive representation and the datasets created in the context of D4.1 to provide a comparative and comprehensive understanding of objective representation of a broad set of biographical categories and policy areas, going beyond the sole focus of a single or a few dimensions. In doing so, we provide an overview of the state of objective representation across the countries covered within D4.1. Using the datasets produced within the framework of WP 4 of ActEU, the aim to explore further any trust-representation gaps correlation, and especially to analyze how they covary with country-level data has many shortcomings. Given the fact that we can only use a small number of observations (the limited N of countries included in the datasets and analyzed in this report) and we also



mind, we structure this report in three parts: the first two chapters focus on objective representation (2 and 3), and the third discusses subjective representation. Each part comprises a review of the literature followed by a data analysis. We begin by discussing the state of the art and highlighting gaps of knowledge. The datasets we created in the context of this Working Package (WP4) of the ActEU project allow us to address lacunae in debates about objective (descriptive and substantive) representation. They enable an examination of patterns not only across countries (Austria, Greece, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom) but also across parties within them. Importantly our datasets are based on an understanding of descriptive representation, which goes beyond considerations of sex and gender and considers a range of intersectional identities (hereafter gender+). Our gender+ perspective concerns both the presence of elected representatives and the discourse regarding LGBTIQ+ status and topics. Distinguishing granularly across women, men, non-binary, trans, and LGBTIQ+ topics allows for a deeper understanding of differences across countries and parties.

In the first two chapters (2 and 3), we review the literature and then provide evidence of which demographic categories are more (less) under-represented and whether/how descriptive representation maps to substantive representation (3.3). For this purpose, we focus on the following policy areas gender equality, climate change and migration – as well as youth. Importantly, our concept of gender equality used in this report includes both a “thin” (binary; women and men) and a “thick” dimension of gender (beyond binary; sexuality and gender identity - LGBTIQ+) (Gwiazda, 2023). This enables a finer measurement and deepens understanding of the relationship between represented and their representatives. On the first account, our empirical analysis considers the proportion of descriptive representatives along six dimensions: gender, age, education level, immigrant ancestry, visible minority and ‘out’ LGBTIQ+. On the second account, we consider gender related issues concerning youth, migration and minorities and climate change. This chapter ends with linking descriptive and substantive representation thus contributing to a key debate in literature about the extent to which the descriptive representation of a social group relates to the substantive representation of its policy preferences. The fourth chapter is devoted to subjective representation. Like in the previous chapters, we first discuss the limited and diverse literature and then conduct an empirical analysis that focuses specifically on feelings of representation and follows, to the extent this was possible, what is presented in the chapters on objective representation. We highlight the limitations of extant comparative data: while an inquiry of subjective representation is possible using the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), the data does not allow to disentangle across subjective perceptions of different dimensions of representation or across groups in a manner as detailed as in our analyses of objective representation. Even for a dimension in principle covered by CSES (such as migration background), we do not have systematically this information across the EU countries. In the concluding chapter, we summarize our lessons drawn from the different chapters and articulate recommendations for policymakers.

2 Patterns of descriptive representation

Matilde Ceron (PLUS), Zoe Lefkofridi (PLUS) and Laura Morales (CSIC).

lack any trust items for those parties to allow for a party-level analysis, we concluded that our preliminary findings are not reliable. Given these limitations, we opt to analyze in the future these research questions using the new data from ActEU project for a larger sample of countries.



Descriptive representation refers to the “objective” similarity between the represented and the representatives, namely the extent to which the demographic composition of the constituency is mirrored in the institution that makes decisions on its behalf (Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967). In the context of this report, we are particularly interested in the degree to which institutions (parties; parliaments) mirror the populations they seek to represent in terms of demographic characteristics (such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, social economic background). To this end, we discuss the state of the art on descriptive representation and then present results from Austria, France, Greece, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.

2.0 Literature

PLUS (Matilde Ceron, Zoe Lefkofridi)

CSIC (Laura Morales)

This literature review provides an overview of key existing research on descriptive representation, focusing on diverse demographic dimensions spanning across gender, sexual minorities, age, race and ethnicity, religion, disability and socioeconomic background, with a particular emphasis on intersectional approaches.³ Given the scope of the project, our primary focus is on studies that concern European countries and other Western democracies. Though a significant portion of the literature addresses gender representation research is rather limited regarding other demographic dimensions, or their intersection with gender. Knowledge gaps are linked to data unavailability. As a result, systematic, comparative, and intersectional analyses across EU countries are lacking. To begin with, gender representation is the most extensively researched dimension in descriptive representation, with studies highlighting advances and persistent challenges in gender equality within institutions. The literature on representation focuses primarily on characteristics of the electoral system such as proportional or majoritarian voting and the role of quotas in improving women’s descriptive presence in parliaments, also considering the role of informal rules and public support for equality (Celis and Erzeel, 2020).

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On the one hand, gender quotas are one of the most widely used instruments to increase women’s representation in legislative bodies. Studies show mixed outcomes depending on the type of quota and the context. Celis and Erzeel (2013) find that gender quotas in Belgium and the Netherlands have improved women’s representation, but ethnic minority women are still underrepresented due to compounded barriers that single-axis quotas cannot address. According to Bird’s (2016), study that combined gender and ethnic quotas in 17 countries, gender quotas alone can improve female representation; moreover, the intersection with ethnic quotas often marginalizes ethnic minority women. Combined, these findings highlight the importance of intersectional approaches to the study of political representation.

On the other hand, the type of electoral system has long been shown to play a significant role in shaping descriptive representation (McAllister and Studlar, 2002). In systems with proportional representation, women and other marginalized groups often achieve greater representation than in majoritarian systems. Clark and Kroska (2024) emphasize that PR systems are generally more

³ Intersectional approaches refer to the analytical framework that examines how various social identities—such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, and others—intersect to create overlapping systems of discrimination or privilege.



favorable for women, especially in contexts with supportive gender attitudes. In contrast, majoritarian systems tend to have lower female representation, limiting descriptive representation to those areas with progressive social norms or strong quota systems. In New Zealand, where symbolic support for women MPs remains high, the PR system still fails to provide parity in representation (Bolzendahl and Coffé 2020).

Besides institutional factors, such as electoral and quota rules, another line of research focuses on public support for women's representation. A study on the evolution of descriptive representation over time and across countries shows that gender equality attitudes account for a large part of differences in women's shares in parliament (Clark and Kroska, 2024). In addition, although high in many democracies, it varies by ideology and demographic subgroup (Wäckerle, 2023). Bolzendahl and Coffé (2019) highlight that symbolic support for women's representation in New Zealand is widespread, but practical support remains limited due to persistent social norms favouring men in leadership roles. Similarly, Espírito-Santo (2016) finds that while most Portuguese citizens support increased representation for women, conservative attitudes regarding gender roles often restrict this support to symbolic backing rather than substantive institutional change. Public support is thus influential but insufficient on its own, as institutional adjustments in quotas and electoral structures are necessary to translate these attitudes into actual representation gains. While gender representation has advanced, the literature indicates that intersectional barriers remain significant, especially for young women and women of colour. Abels et al. (2022) discuss the German context, noting that while women's representation has increased, young women still face additional obstacles, with gender and age intersecting to reinforce marginalization. Christoffersen and Siow (2024) argue that standard approaches to descriptive representation in Europe often overlook the compounded effects of race and gender, which can make traditional gender quotas inadequate. Similarly, the intersection of gender and socio-economic status can also affect the quality of representation (Bernauer et al., 2015).

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Another stream of literature considers the representation of gender identity and sexual orientation minorities. The study of the descriptive parliamentary representation of people who identify as LGBTIQ+ in Europe is relatively recent. Reynolds' work (2013; 2019) was pioneering in its comparative ambition and scope beyond North America. A first finding is that, even in a relatively homogeneous political area such as the EU and Europe, the extent to which legislators are publicly 'out' as LGBTIQ+ varies considerably. Descriptive political representation of LGBTIQ+ individuals is considerable and fast-growing in the United Kingdom, with evidence pointing to limited or nil electoral penalties for 'out' candidates (Magni and Reynolds, 2018). A comparative study of Portugal and Spain (Espírito-Santo et al., 2019) showed rapid progress in the presence of 'out' LGBTIQ+ legislators in the latter country since the mid-2010s and its relative absence in the former. A second finding is that the descriptive representation of LGBTIQ+ tends to be still quite gendered, with gay men usually being more visibly present than lesbian women (Reynolds, 2013). Juvonen (2020) found this to be the case also in the comparison of Finland and Germany. The reasons for this absence of visible political representation are likely to be multiple, with voters' prejudice and assumptions about political preferences seemingly being relevant predictors (Magni and Reynolds, 2021), but it is also important to point out that there is evidence suggesting that LGBTIQ+ women are, along with ethnic minority women, more likely to be the target of harassment when they stand for elections (Collignon et al., 2022).

Some recent evidence from the United Kingdom suggests that in that country openly LGBTIQ+ candidates do not face a disadvantage at the party candidate selection stage (Butler et al., 2024). Consistently, Grahn (2024) shows that LGB candidates in Sweden may be favoured in candidate selection processes instead of facing selection penalties.



Beyond voter attitudes, institutional factors within parties affect LGBTIQ+ representation. Prearo and Trastulli (2024) argue that party dynamics, candidate profile, and local constituency characteristics shape the careers of LGBTIQ+ candidates, influencing both their likelihood of selection and their electoral success. This indicates that descriptive representation for LGBTIQ+ individuals requires not only overcoming voter bias but also achieving greater institutional support.

Age, and especially youth, represent a demographic characteristic that has received substantial attention within literature. Age-based representation is generally uneven, with younger candidates often encountering structural barriers to political office. The descriptive representation of young people varies widely depending on the electoral system. A study of 19 Western European countries shows that proportional representation systems tend to have slightly higher youth representation and smaller turnout gaps, suggesting that visible youth representation may increase youth political engagement (Angelucci et al., 2024). Yet, young MPs remain underrepresented in most legislatures, often by a factor of three compared to older age groups (Stockemer and Sundström, 2023). In addition, barriers remain among elected representatives, with young MPs facing age – further compounded by gender – related biases (Erikson and Josefsson, 2021). Furthermore, while youth representation has shown signs of improvement in some contexts, especially in the aftermath of the Great Recession, progress is uneven across countries and driven predominantly by newer or fringe parties (Freire et al., 2021). This is in line with comparative findings across 30 advanced democracies, showing that differences are not only substantial at the country but also the party level (Kurz and Ettensperger, 2024).

The descriptive representation of race and ethnic minorities has also attracted substantial attention. The scholarship on the descriptive political representation of migrants and ethnic minorities has traditionally focused on the barriers and opportunities for minority inclusion in politics (Hänni and Saalfeld, 2020). A growing body of research suggests that while Europe's political structures have become more inclusive over recent decades, minorities still face systemic obstacles, such as party gatekeeping, institutional biases, and societal discrimination (Bird et al., 2011; Ruedin 2013; Dancygier et al., 2021; Martin and Blinder, 2021). Nevertheless, minority political mobilization has been rising in countries like Germany, France, and especially in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Bloemraad and Schönwälder, 2013). The UK continues to lead in minority representation, with minority MPs growing in both major parties, though significant inequalities persist in representation for certain ethnic groups. Sobolewska (2013) showed how such increases were primarily due to a new commitment to increase minority representation and to do so beyond areas with high demographic concentration. In France, minority representation is still limited, influenced by the Republic's secular model and electoral system, which can limit visibility and support for minority candidates, especially Muslims, and limit their substantive representation (Murray, 2016). Germany has shown some progress, especially at the local level, but national-level barriers remain, particularly for those not of German descent, with limited recruitment within some of the major parties (Donovan, 2007) that may be due to limited sensitivity to the goal of increasing diversity within parties (Höhne et al., 2024) such that list inclusion is still dependent on demographic concentration in electoral districts (Geese and Schacht, 2019). Findings from the Netherlands (van der Zwan et al., 2019) suggest near proportional representation for the more visible and larger minority groups (Moroccan and Turkish) in this country but an under-presence of less visible Western minorities, and relevant gaps depending on the ideological orientation of the political party. Italy, Portugal and Spain still lag behind, with modest minority representation, often hindered by unstable or exclusionary party strategies and weaker mobilization structures (Pérez-Nievas et al., 2014; Vintila and Morales, 2018; Espírito-Santo et al., 2019; Vintila et al., 2024).



Research on descriptive representation in relation to other biographical characteristics such as disability, religion and socio-economic background is sparser, mirroring data limitations, overall highlighting marked under-representation along these dimensions. For persons with disabilities, institutional biases are highlighted as an important barrier in the recruitment process (Evans and Reher, 2023). Institutional constraints are also key in limiting the representation of religious minorities, with compositional factors such as the size of representative bodies accounting for a sizable share of cross-country variation (Gerring et al., 2023).

Finally, research linking descriptive to substantive representation in Europe is still nascent and the debate is inconclusive. A pioneer study of the substantive representation of age groups in Switzerland (Kissau et al., 2012) shows that the gap in descriptive representation of youth does not translate in a substantive representational gap. In the domain of gender equality conceptualized in a “thick” manner, a recent study of LGBTIQ+ suggests that visible presence matters for parliamentary policymaking (e.g., Bönisch, 2022). Moreover, Debus and Wurthmann’s (2024) study of LGB+ candidates in Germany suggests that they take more progressive positions than their own parties on the socio-cultural dimension, which may lead in the future to intra-party ideological tensions.

While many recent studies include an intersectional dimension with systematic intersectional cross-country analyses across EU countries are still lacking. While lack of data prevented systematic analyses of the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation in Europe, the same does not hold for North America: scholarship on the dynamics of descriptive and substantive representation in the United States and Canada dates back to the 2000s (e.g., Rimmerman et al., 2000; Haider-Markel 2007; 2010; Everitt and Camp, 2014) and accumulates a considerable body of research and empirical data (see summaries in Snell, 2020; Everitt and Tremblay, 2020; Tremblay, 2019; 2022).

The following section addresses this gap: based on the novel cross-country data expanded across country and over time within the ActEU project, we give an overview of differences across country and parties along the key dimensions of gender, age, LGBTIQ+ and minority status, as well as in relation to education level.

2.1 Differences across countries

Laura Morales (CSIC)

Drawing on the data presented in Deliverable 4.1 (Morales and Pamies, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d; Gotinakos and Teperoglou, 2024; Gianna et al., 2024), we assess differences across countries in the extent to which national parliaments across Europe descriptively represent a variety of historically under-represented social groups: women, youth, individuals with lower educational attainment and socio-economic status, people with immigrant ancestry, people of identifiable minority backgrounds and people who are ‘out’ as LGBTIQ+. Figure 2.1 shows the percentage present in the given national lower chamber of Parliament of each of these six categories for comparably recent legislative terms for Austria, Greece, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.

The results show considerable variation in the descriptive representation outcomes for the six countries. Although all countries do a poor job of reflecting the diversity of the population on



several of these categories, some do a bit better when it comes to specific categories of the population. First, women remain under-represented in all six countries, but the Austrian (in the 2019-2024 term), French (2017-2022) and Spanish (2019-2023) parliaments are gradually reaching percentages around 40 per cent. The British, Italian and, especially, Hellenic parliaments are still a very long way from gender parity.

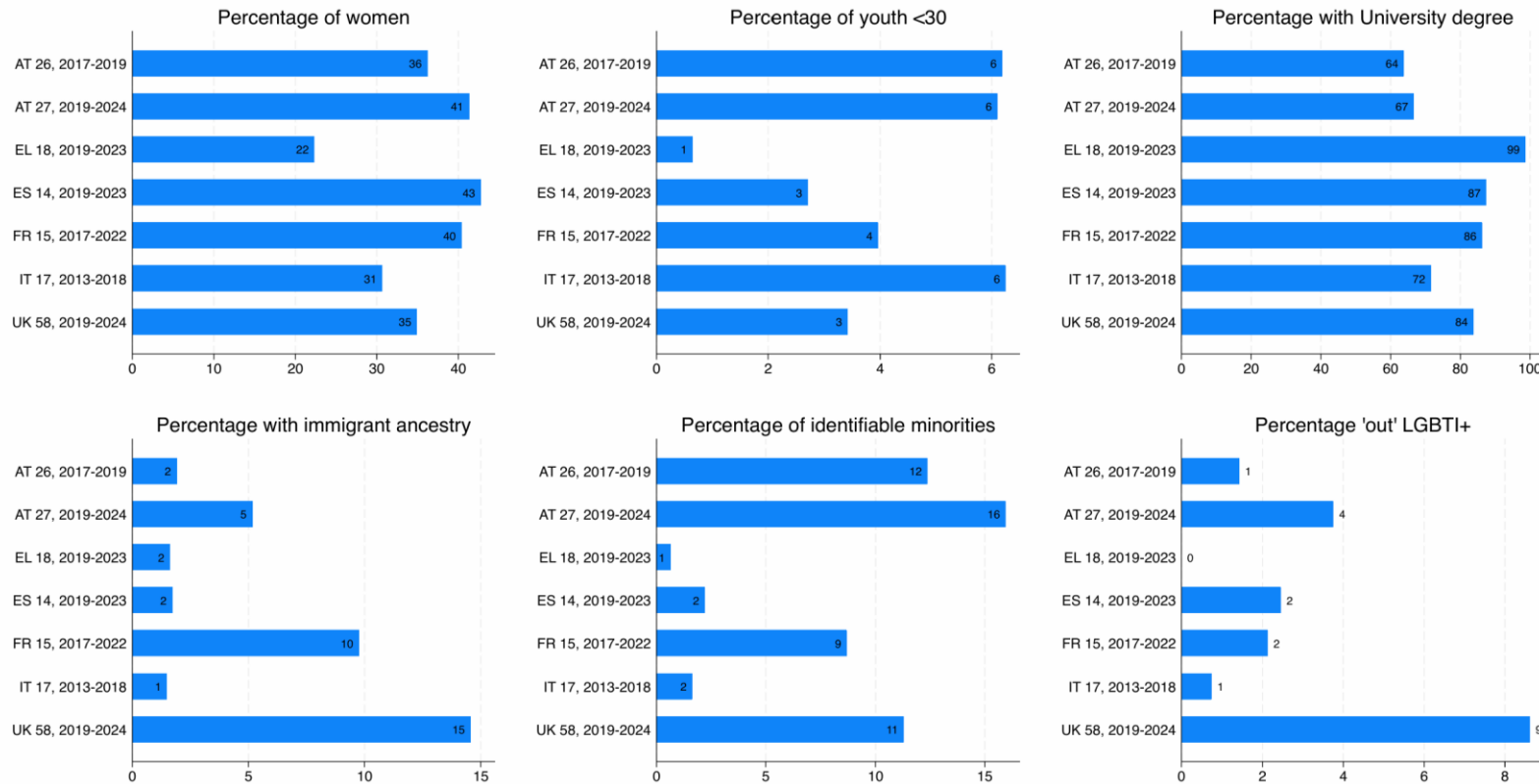
Similarly, the six countries fail to include a sizeable share of youth among their ranks. Considering that the population below 30 is between 20 and 30 per cent of the overall population in these countries, the presence in parliament of the under-30s is very testimonial. Nevertheless, the Austrian and Italian parliaments do a relatively better job of incorporating young legislators at around 6 per cent. The Italian case stands out precisely because, alongside the Hellenic Parliament, it is one of the few European national parliaments that limits candidacy eligibility to citizens aged 25 or older for the lower chamber (and to 40 or older for the Senate). To a certain extent, the younger profile of the Italian lower chamber is linked to party system volatility and high turnover. Emergent and challenger parties, such as Movimento 5 Stelle and Fratelli d'Italia have attracted younger cohorts of party members and this trickles down to parliamentary candidacies. Despite similar conditions in Greece and Spain (party system change and formation of new parties), however, we do not see an equivalent outbreak of young parliamentarians.

Turning to the descriptive parliamentary representation of citizens with lower educational attainment and socio-economic status, the results confirm the well-known over-representation of the highly educated sectors of the population. Considering that the percentage of the population of these countries that has a university degree oscillates between 30 and 40 per cent (except for Italy, where it is around 20 per cent), the results show that all parliaments are very far from representing descriptively their respective populations for this social category. The share of the highly educated is more than twice as high as that of the general population of the respective country, except for Austria. In fact, legislators without a university degree are generally rare and almost fully absent in Greece.



Figure 2.1 The Descriptive Parliamentary Representation of Key Socio-demographic Categories in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Descriptive representation by category



AT= Austria, EL = Greece, ES = Spain, FR = France, IT = Italy & UK = United Kingdom

Sources: Data collected by the AUTH, CSIC and PLUS teams within the ActEU project and by Sciences Po within the InclusiveParl and Repchance projects



Besides gender, age and educational levels, European societies are increasingly diverse in two respects. On the one hand, migration and mobility have increased the diversity of origins, ethnicities and nationalities of European populations. Between 15 and 30 per cent of the population of the countries studied have some immigrant ancestry, whether by their own national origin as first-generation migrants or because one of their parents has moved countries. Some of these population movements are intra-European whereas others are coming from third countries in the rest of the world. This means that populations are diverse along a range of features: language, religious beliefs, ethnicity, nationality, etc. Some of these features are more visible than others. For example, ethnic and racialised minorities can sometimes be identified as such (or presumed to be minorities) by skin colour or other phenotypical features; but names and surnames can also constitute (or presume to be) markers of (foreign) origin. The data collected for all six countries allows us to obtain information on migrant ancestry (of the legislators themselves or of their parents) and whether legislators could be perceived or be identified as belonging to a foreign-ancestry minority by name or appearance.

The results in Figure 2.1 show considerable variation in the parliamentary presence of minority populations on both counts. Although still considerably under-represented, individuals of migrant ancestry constitute 10 and 15 per cent respectively in the French and British lower chambers of parliament, whereas they are only symbolically present in Austria, Greece, Italy and Spain, despite the large immigrant-origin populations in these four countries. Moreover, the comparison with the results for the category 'identifiable minorities' reveals that immediate migrant ancestry and visibility as a minority are not identical. In France and the UK we observe that a portion of the migrant ancestry legislators are not immediately identifiable as such, whereas in Austria a considerable share of legislators can be identified as minorities even if they do not have immediate migrant ancestry.

Finally, European societies are also increasingly diverse from the point of view of gender identities, expressions and sexual orientation. LGBTIQ+ rights have expanded across all of Europe, despite the political and policy backlash in the last few years in some EU countries, and an increasing share of the population identifies as LGBTIQ+ at some point in their lives (FRA 2024). While population estimates of the share of individuals who identify as LGBTIQ+ are notoriously difficult to come about in a reliable manner, many sources estimate that the share is likely to be somewhere between 5 and 10 per cent of the population in most Western countries. The results in Figure 2.1 suggest that only in the UK the lower chamber of parliament is close to mirroring that share in the overall population. In all other countries, we observe that legislators who identify as LGBTIQ+ are reluctant to share information about their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression with the public.

In the next section, we examine how the ability to descriptively represent these six social categories varies across parties within each of the six countries studied.

2.2 Differences across parties

Laura Morales (CSIC)



In this section, we assess the extent to which political parties descriptively represent each of the social categories under study. To this end, we present the visualisations of the results for each of the six countries studied, by political party, for women, youth, educational attainment groups, immigrant ancestry, identifiable minorities and LGBTIQ+. As many of these national parliaments are highly fragmented and include legislators from very small political parties – some of which are territorially concentrated in specific regions – we have limited the analyses to political parties with at least 10 legislators in the given legislature.

Starting with the presence of women, Figure 2.2 shows that many political parties do not even approximate the overall average share of women in their respective lower chamber, whereas others surpass it. In general terms, conservative and radical right political parties bring a much lower share of women to the chamber within their ranks and Social Democratic and Green parties bring a higher share. For example, in Austria, the radical right FPÖ is well below the overall average of 36 and 41 per cent, respectively, for each legislative term, whereas the Green party exceeds parity levels. Although right-wing parties – New Democracy in Greece, Vox in Spain, the Republicans in France, the North League in Italy and the Conservatives in the UK – are those with the lowest shares of women among their ranks of legislators, we also find exceptions such as the French Communist Party (PCF) on the left and centre-right UDI in France and the Civic Choice (Scelta Civica) of Mario Monti in Italy.

What these results clearly indicate is that gender parity in parliamentary representation requires moderate and right-wing parties to embrace it, as they are the ones clearly trailing behind. They also suggest what is already a well-established fact in the study of gender and politics, in the absence of some form of gender quota (e.g. in France and Spain) or incentive policy/bonus (like the 3% extra funding for parliamentary groups with more than 40% of women in Austria), very few parties take it upon themselves to put in place the necessary mechanisms to reach or approximate gender parity. A noteworthy exception to this pattern is the Labour Party in the UK, which has sustained parity or near-parity percentages for a long period without any institutionalised quota policy.

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When we turn our attention to the descriptive parliamentary representation of youth, the situation is even bleaker. Figure 2.3 shows that, except for Austria (where voting age has been lowered to 16 years old), the presence of people below 30 years old is extremely low across most political parties in most of the countries studied. As we saw in Figure 2.1, young legislators only represent 6 per cent in Austria and Italy, remaining well below 5 per cent in all other countries. The detailed party-by-party analysis in Figure 2.3 suggests that this under-representation would be even starker were it not for the emergence of new challenger parties in party systems.

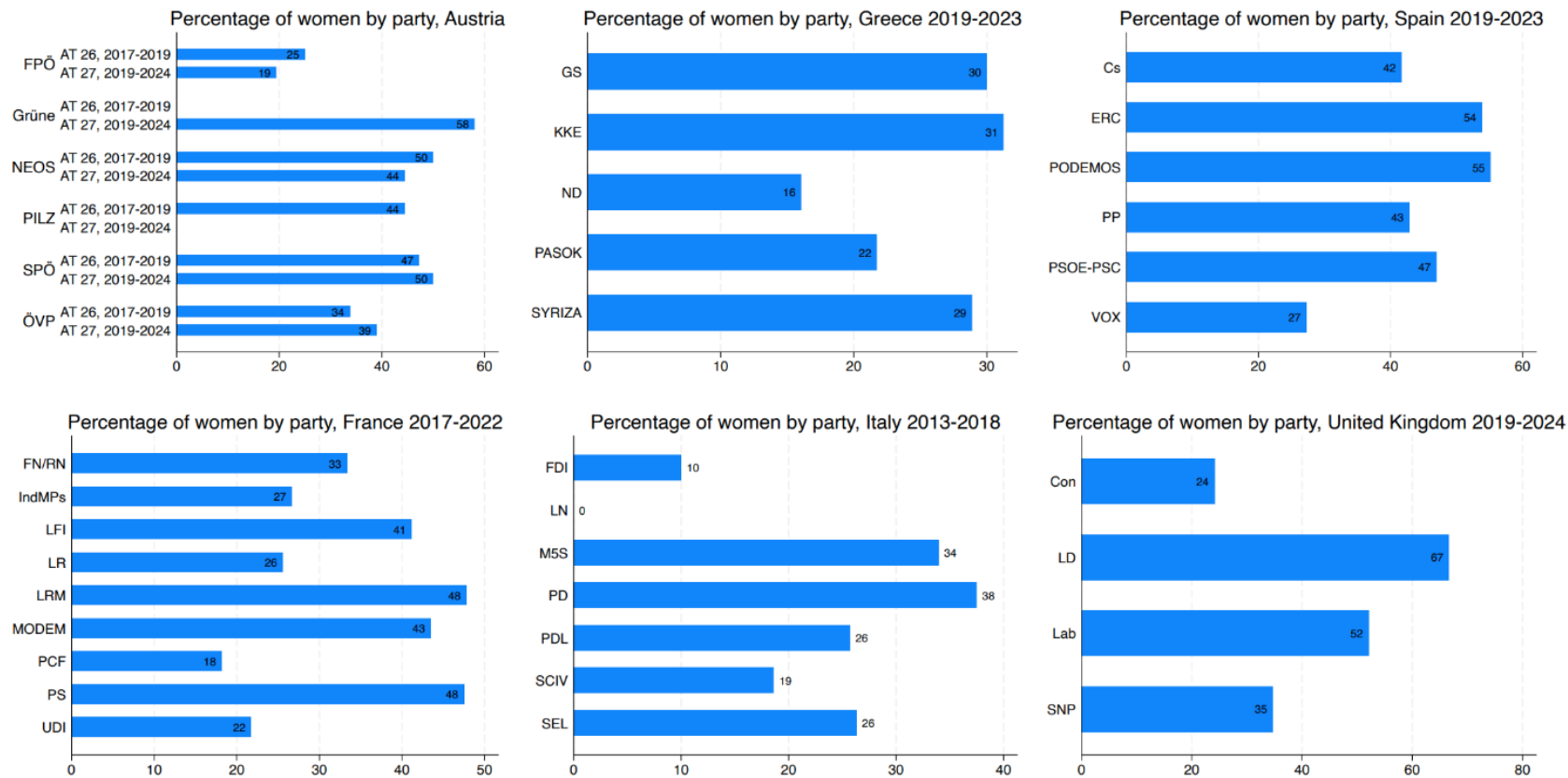
Indeed, a common pattern that we find is that it is only parties that emerge as strong challengers in the party system – NEOS and PILZ in Austria, LFI in France, M5S in Italy – that surpass the 10 per cent threshold of youth within their legislative ranks. Interestingly, this pattern does not hold for Spain, however, where challenger parties Podemos and Vox do not bring a higher share of under-30s to Parliament. The results also show that the eruption of Macron's La République en Marche was not led by the youngest cohorts, as it is often perceived to be, but by a more middle-aged one.

All in all, the problem of youth under-representation is one that affects all political parties in a relatively similar manner and will need to be confronted in a more systemic way, debating the opportunity for incentive mechanisms, and voluntary or legislated quotas.



Figure 2. 2 The Descriptive Parliamentary Representation of Women in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Descriptive representation of women by party



The analyses exclude parties with less than 10 legislators

Sources: Data collected by the AUTH, CSIC and PLUS teams within the ActEU project and by Sciences Po within the InclusiveParl and Repchance projects



Figure 2. 3 The Descriptive Parliamentary Representation of Youth in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Descriptive representation of youth by party



Note: The analyses exclude parties with less than 10 legislators

Sources: Data collected by the AUTH, CSIC and PLUS teams within the ActEU project and by Sciences Po within the InclusiveParl and Repchance projects



In Figure 2.4, we turn our attention to the parliamentary representation of the population by educational attainment. Educational attainment is a proxy for several other socio-economic status characteristics, such as social class (Savage et al., 2013; Connelly et al., 2021), family income (Blanden and Gregg, 2004) and parental cultural and social capital (Jæger and Holm, 2007). An increasing number of studies also suggest that the educational divide between those with and without university degrees is fuelling social and political polarization, resentment and perceptions of 'elite' encroachment in political institutions (Cramer, 2016; Grossmann and Hopkins, 2024). Hence, the educational attainment and credentials of elected representatives matter both as a signal of how well citizens with lower socio-economic status and resources are descriptively represented in national parliament as well as a potential signal of social elite monopolisation of representative roles.

As we have seen in Figure 2.1, in the six countries under study, university graduates overwhelmingly dominate national parliaments. This is not news. All the contributions in Best and Cotta (2000) document the trend of increasing professionalization of parliamentary elected office and the accompanying increase in the presence of university graduates. The analysis by party in Figure 2.4 reinforce the conclusion that this is a nearly universal trend that affects all parties, with very few exceptions.

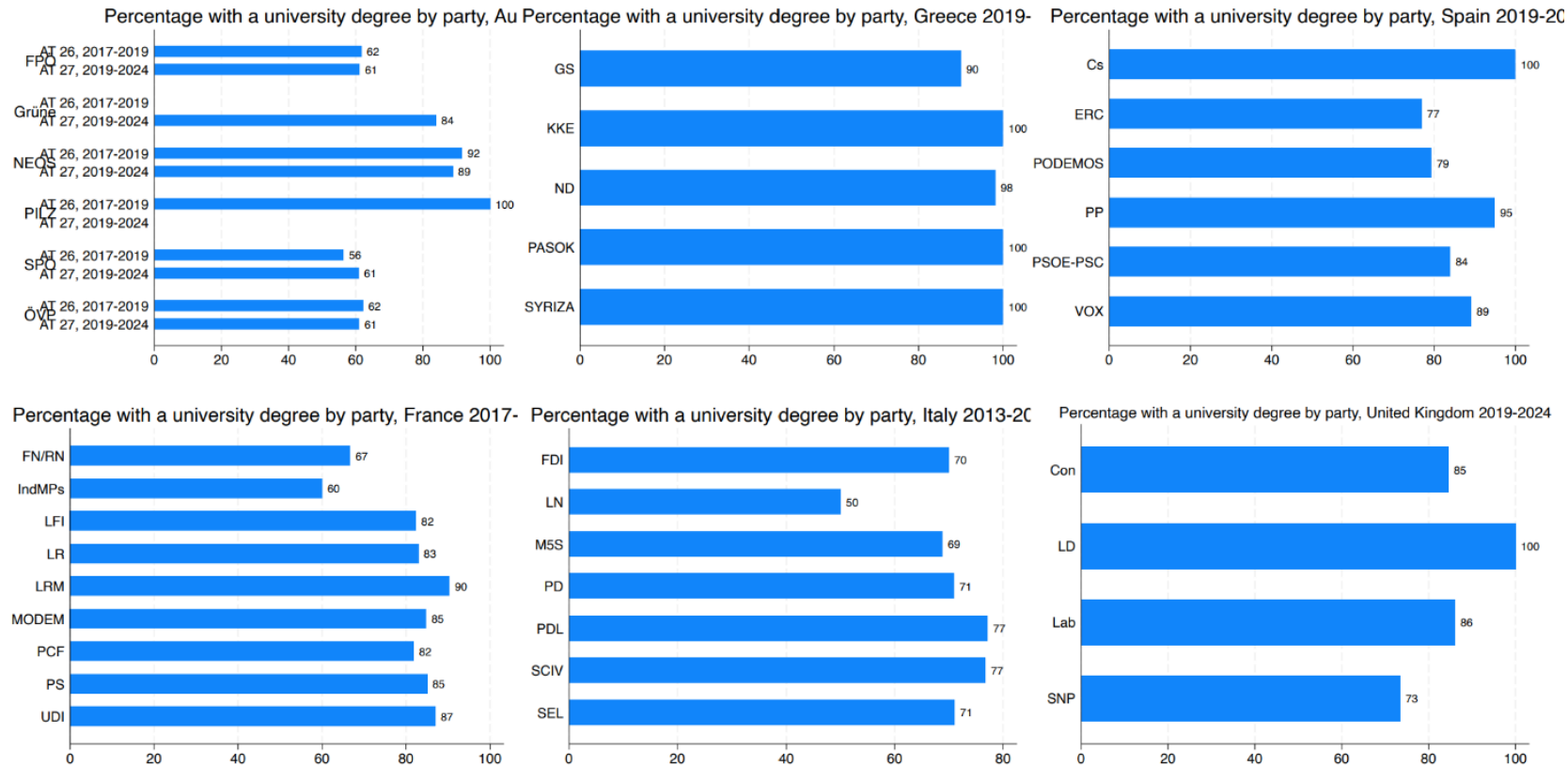
Some of these exceptions are the two traditional mass parties in Austria (the Social Democrats of SPÖ and the Christian democratic and conservative ÖVP), the radical-right Austrian FPÖ, French Front National / Rassemblement National and Italian Northern League; all at 'just' around 50-70 per cent. For all other parties, between 70 and 100 per cent of their legislators have a university degree. As can be seen, the over-representation of university graduates is very similar across left, centre and right-wing parties. In fact, beyond the Austrian case, we do not find that historically mass parties contribute a larger share of legislators without a university degree.

The overall conclusion from these findings is that the under-representation of citizens of lower socio-economic status and lower educational attainment is a general problem that permeates the whole party system and should be addressed from a global perspective.



Figure 2. 4 The Descriptive Parliamentary Representation of the Highly Educated in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Descriptive representation of educational attainment groups by party



Note: The analyses exclude parties with less than 10 legislators

Sources: Data collected by the AUTH, CSIC and PLUS teams within the ActEU project and by Sciences Po within the InclusiveParl and Repchance projects



As discussed in previous sections, European societies are increasingly diverse; much of this diversity is coming from recent and historical migration flows. The political inclusion of ethnic and migrant minorities has been a public and political concern for several decades now (Bird, 2005; Bird et al., 2011; Morales, 2011; Bloemraad, 2013). Figure 2.1 demonstrates that the presence of migrant ancestry and of identifiable minority legislators is highly variable across the six countries studied, with migrant ancestry legislators being much better represented in the UK and France than in the other four countries, and identifiable minority legislators being better represented in Austria than in any other country.

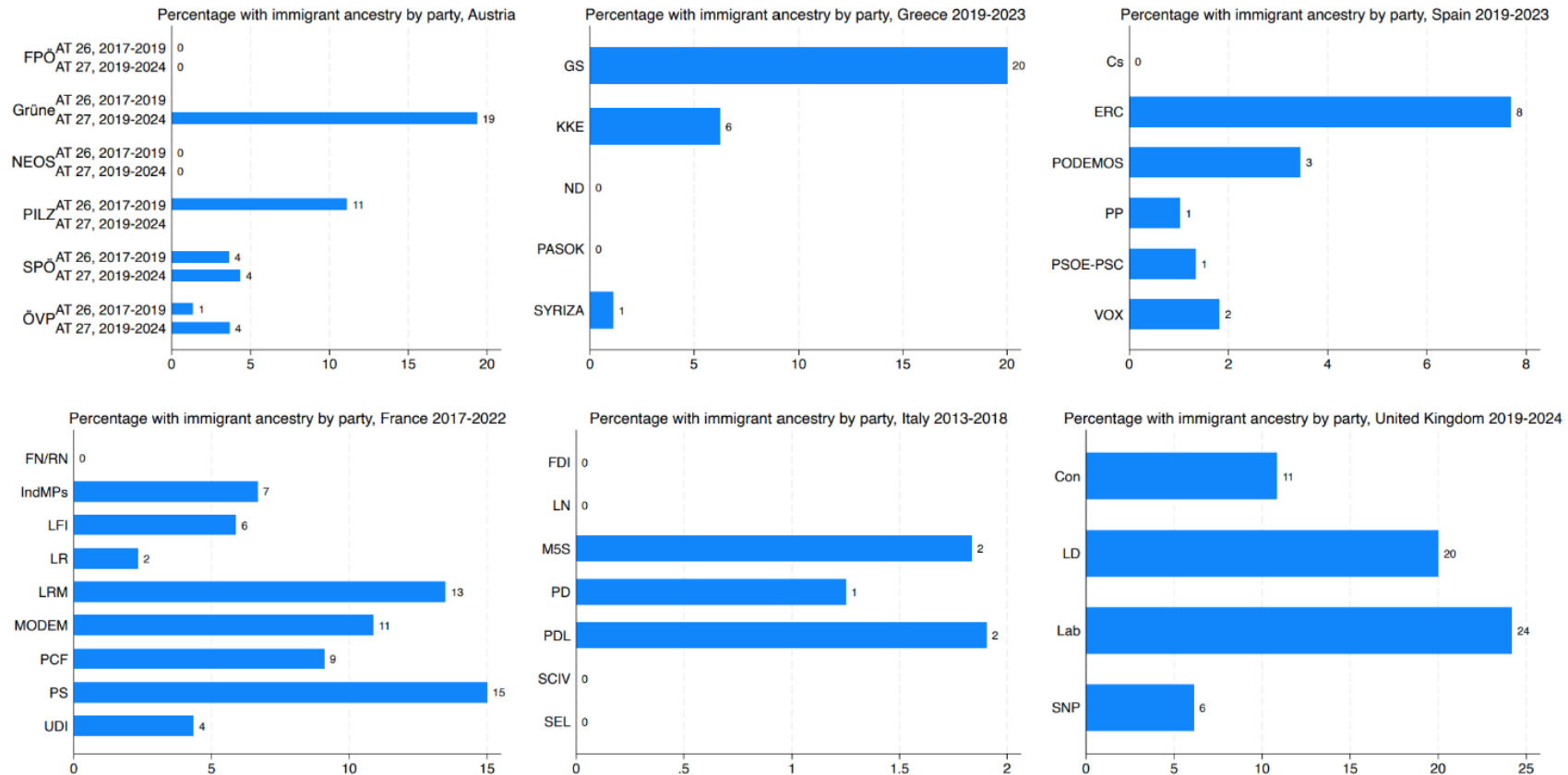
Figures 2.5 and 2.6 add to that conclusion by assessing which parties are contributing to this increased presence of ethnic and migrant minorities across Europe. One first finding is that in most countries with a more sizeable presence of migrant minorities in parliament multiple parties contribute to the representation of migrant-origin minorities, but this is especially the case for progressive or left-wing parties. Indeed, the political parties with both large shares and larger absolute numbers of legislators of migrant ancestry are all on the left side of the political ideological spectrum: the British Labour Party with 24 per cent and 52 migrant-origin MPs, the Austrian Green Party with 19 per cent and 6 legislators of migrant origin, and the French Socialists (PS) with 15 per cent and 6 legislators of migrant origin. However, we should not underestimate the importance of the contribution to diversity of other large dominant parties that have many legislators in the respective lower chamber. For example, while the British Conservatives have half the share of migrant-origin MPs as Labour or the Liberal Democrats, at 11 per cent, they were by far the largest party in the 2019-2024 parliament and that smaller share meant that 40 Conservative MPs were of immigrant ancestry. In fact, the successive Conservative cabinets of the 2019-2024 term have been the most diverse ever in Britain and in Europe, also with the symbolic selection in 2022 of the first non-White British Prime Minister ever, Rishi Sunak, and only the second non-White prime minister of any European country after the Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) Leo Varadkar, who became the first premier of Indian descent in Europe in 2017 and who was also openly gay. Similarly, the French La République en Marche has at 13 per cent, a lower percentage of legislators of immigrant origin than the Socialists, but with the largest number of MPs in the 2017-2022 term this added up to 46 legislators of migrant ancestry within their ranks, larger even than the contingent from the British Conservatives.

The findings are very similar when we assess, in Figure 2.6 the diversity of the party contingents to the lower chambers of parliament from the perspective of identifiable foreign ancestry by name or appearance. Although the figures can change a bit, especially for Austria – where a larger number of legislators are identifiable as minorities by their surnames but their migrant ancestry is not publicly disclosed – we still find that the larger shares are coming from progressive or left parties in all countries: the Green party and the Social Democrats in Austria, PASOK in Greece, the Catalan left-wing nationalists of ERC in the Spanish parliament, the Socialists and LFI in France, Labour in the UK. The one exception to this rule is the French La République en Marche, with as high a share of identifiable minority legislators as the left-wing counterparts LFI and PS.



Figure 2. 5 The Descriptive Parliamentary Representation of Immigrant-Ancestry Minorities in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Descriptive representation of migrant-ancestry minorities by party



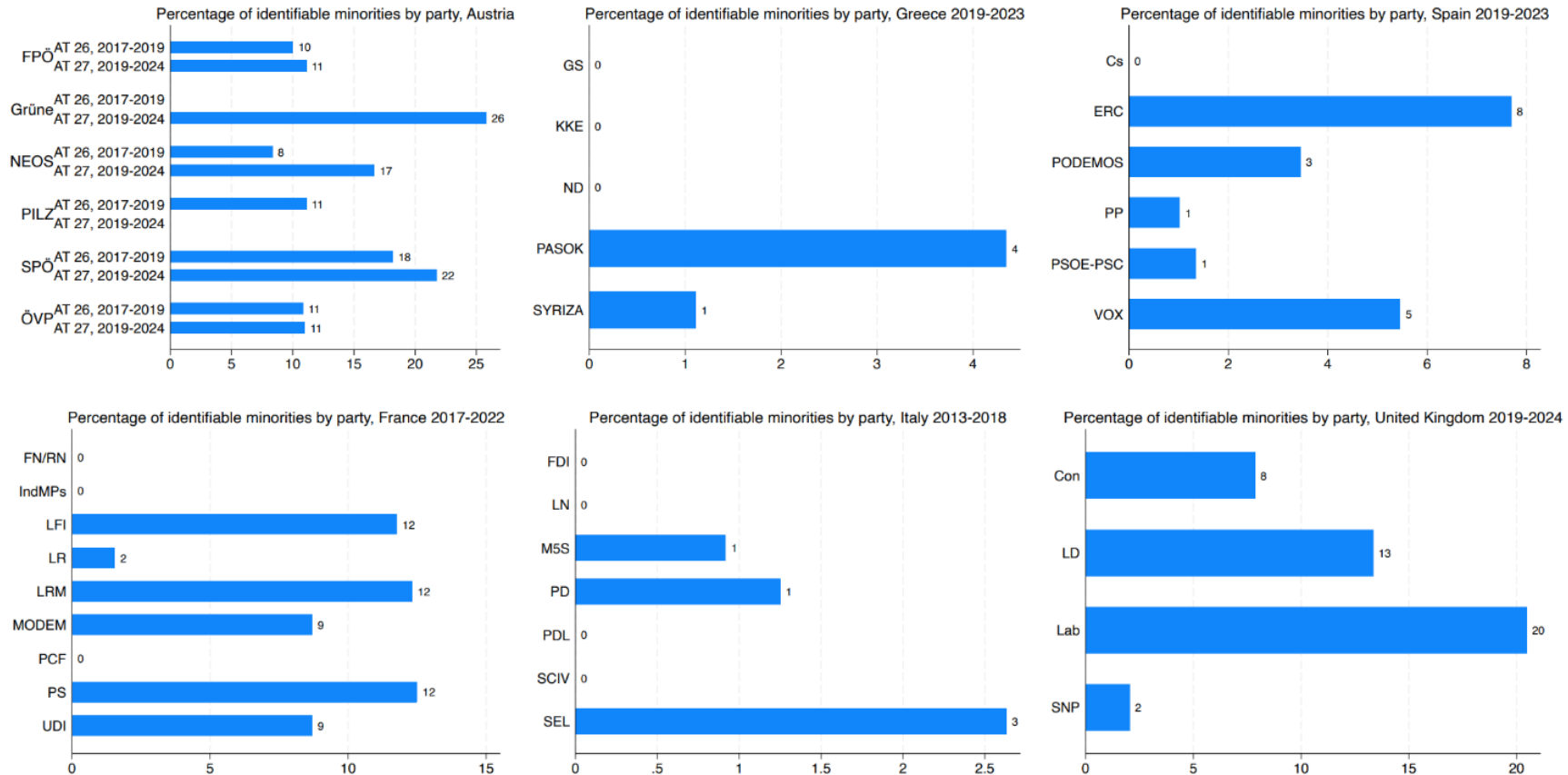
Note: The analyses exclude parties with less than 10 legislators

Sources: Data collected by the AUTH, CSIC and PLUS teams within the ActEU project and by Sciences Po within the InclusiveParl and Repchance projects



Figure 2. 6 The Descriptive Parliamentary Representation of Identifiable Minorities in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Descriptive representation of identifiable minorities by party



Note: The analyses exclude parties with less than 10 legislators

Sources: Data collected by the AUTH, CSIC and PLUS teams within the ActEU project and by Sciences Po within the InclusiveParl and Repchance projects



Lastly, we examine in Figure 2.7 the inclusion of openly LGBTIQ+ legislators across the various parties by country. As we showed in Figure 2.1, the descriptive representation of LGBTIQ+ is very low in most countries when we consider the share of the whole parliament, except in Britain. We see, however, that there is very considerable variation across parties within the six countries studied, with the only exception of Greece, where there is no 'openly LGBTIQ+' legislator for the 2019-2023 legislative term.

Similarly to the descriptive representation of other historically under-represented categories, progressive and left-wing parties tend to be at the forefront of such incorporation of diversity. The Scottish nationalists (SNP, 20% and 10 MPs), the Austrian Greens (13% and 4 legislators) and the British Labour Party (11% and 23 MPs) provide the larger shares of openly LGBTIQ+ legislators. The Front National/Rassemblement National stands out in France with a very high proportion (17%) but we need to bear in mind that, at 12 legislators, this represented only 2 openly LGBTIQ+ legislators in total for the 2017-2022 term. However, in numerical terms, the largest contingents of openly LGBTIQ+ legislators in their respective countries are from the ranks of the British Conservatives (7% but 24 MPs) and La République en Marche (2% but 7 legislators in total).

We, thus, observe that the successful inclusion of gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation diversity achieved in Britain requires the concerted efforts and lifting of stigma for legislators across all political parties. At the opposite end, the situation in Greece is worrying, as it signals that legislators do not feel at ease with openly expressing their gender identities and sexual orientations, thus depriving LGBTIQ+ citizens of descriptive (or even symbolic) representation in national parliament.

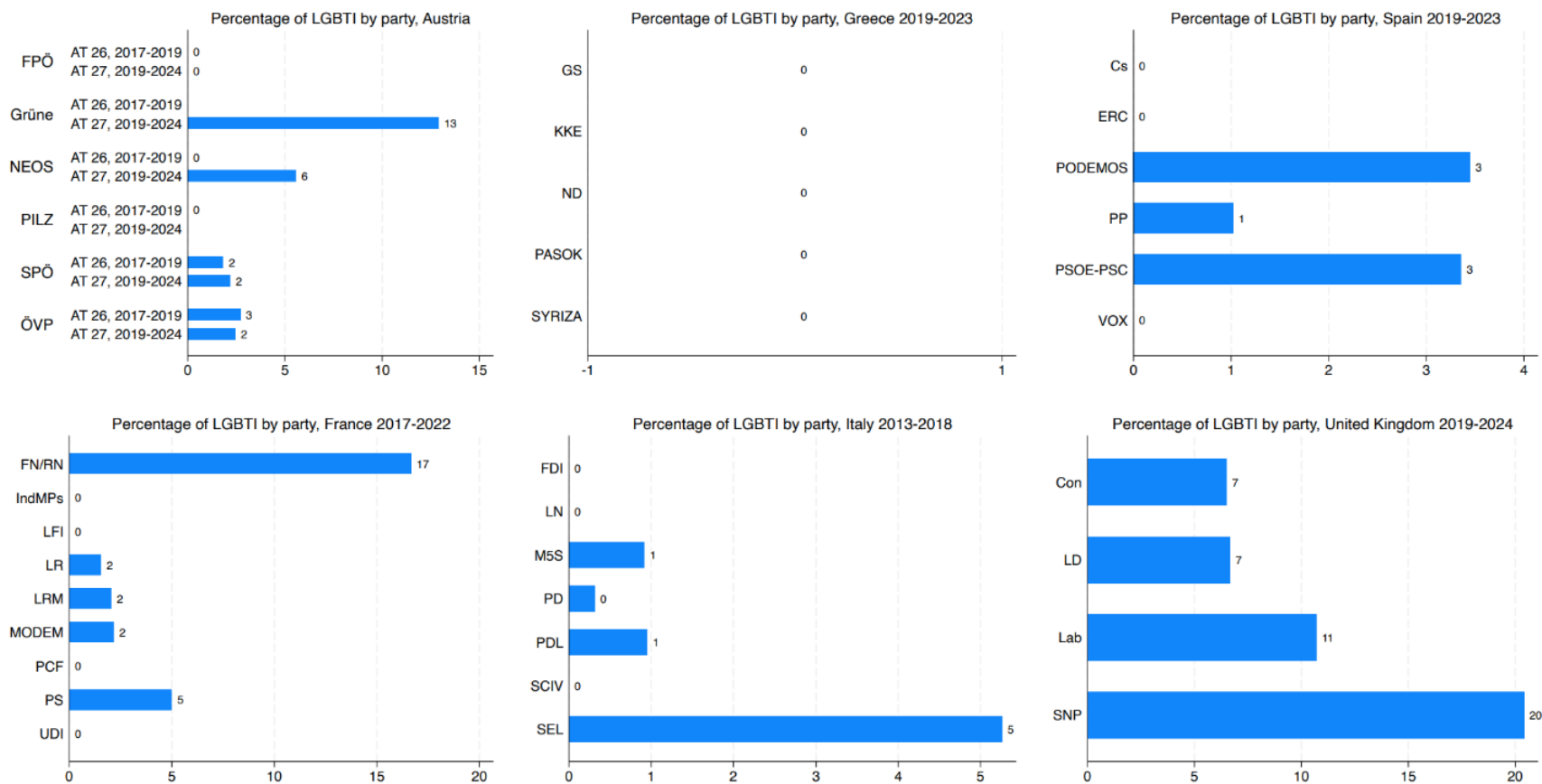
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In chapter 3 we turn our attention to how these social categories and the issues and topics they care about are represented in national parliaments through substantive activities of position-taking and claims-making.



Figure 2. 7The Descriptive Parliamentary Representation of 'out' LGBTIQ+ in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Descriptive representation of LGBTI by party



Note: The analyses exclude parties with less than 10 legislators

Sources: Data collected by the AUTH, CSIC and PLUS teams within the ActEU project and by Sciences Po within the InclusiveParl and Repchance projects



3 Patterns of substantive representation

Matilde Ceron (PLUS), Nayla Escribano (CSIC) and Laura Morales (CSIC)

This chapter extends beyond demographic characteristics of representatives to consider the extent to which they substantively represent interests and needs of their constituents (Celis, 2012). In addition, we add to a controversial debate within the literature on the extent to which/how/when descriptive representation matters for substantive representation. The objective of this chapter is – building on extant literature and its gaps – to contribute to such debate by leveraging on the novel data collected in the context of the ActEU project on biographical characteristics of representatives and their representative activities in parliament in the three policy domains of the project gender (+) equality, migration and climate.

3.0 Literature

PLUS (Matilde Ceron)

CSIC (Laura Morales)

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This literature review provides an overview of key research on substantive representation, focusing primarily on the above-mentioned dimensions—gender, LGBTIQ+, migration, and environmental issues. Substantive representation is understood as ‘acting for’ the represented, in their best interests (Pitkin, 1967). This entails studying what elected representatives do ‘on behalf’ of given social categories or groups. Studies mainly investigate how elected representatives advocate for group-specific interests through policy actions, parliamentary debates, and party platforms, examining factors such as institutional mechanisms, critical actors, and ideological influences. Much of the existing literature concentrates on the substantive representation of women, exploring both advances in gender-sensitive policymaking and the role of diverse ideological actors in promoting women’s interests. However, research is comparatively limited for other demographic groups and their intersections, particularly with systematically comparative and intersectional approaches.

Research on substantive representation has had a strong focus on women. Yet, the extent to which the descriptive representation of women correlates with their substantive representation, which pertains to the advocacy for policies that align with women's interests (e.g. Phillips, 1995; Wängnerud, 2009), remains an open controversy. The definition of what constitutes women's interests is inherently polarizing, as is the interpretation of what it entails to represent these interests (e.g. Celis, 2008; 2009). The empirical data that connects women's political representation to legislative and policy outcomes is similarly inconclusive (Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020). On the one hand, an increase in women's political representation has been shown to correlate with the enactment of legislation that better aligns with women’s preferences, promotes gender equality through family-related policies, elderly care, abortion rights, and the provision of public goods pertinent to women's concerns (Wilensky, 1990; Berkman and O'Connor, 1993; Schwindt-Bayer,



2006; Weeks, 2019; Tusalem, 2022, Persson et al., 2024). Moreover, female legislators propose more gender-sensitive amendments (Lippmann, 2022) and are more active in deliberations regarding gender-specific issues such as childcare (Baskaran and Hessami, 2019). On the other hand, some studies have identified a lack of evidence supporting the notion that women's representation changes policies, especially within the fiscal domain (Geys and Sørensen, 2019; Bagues and Campa, 2021; Casarico et al., 2022), where ideological differences are more prominent than gender gaps (Carozzi and Gago, 2023). In addition, gendered policy prioritisation may evolve over time, decreasing with representatives' tenure (Hargrave, 2023).

Another key controversy rests in going beyond depicting women and women's interests as a monolithic group. Within this domain, a central question is whether women's interests can be considered as homogeneous and universally linked to gender equality. Some authors argue that representation of women's interests and activism on women's issues occurs beyond what is traditionally associated with left-wing feminist issues (Celis and Childs, 2012). Conservative women (and men) are among advocates of some women's issues, for instance in relation to family policies (Celis and Childs, 2012). Along similar reasoning, some authors suggest that rather than considering representation of women's interest – which may be highly heterogeneous – the focus should be rather on gender equality (Christoffersen and Siow, 2024; Harder, 2023) or alignment with women's preferences (Weeks, 2022). From such a perspective, a strand of the literature devotes attention to the role of feminist allies and critical actors (e.g. Celis, 2012; Celis and Erzeel, 2015). Such debates highlight how beyond representatives' biographical characteristics, we can expect ideological divergences on whether and which issues are salient in parliamentary discourse. In addition, some authors highlight the importance of the institutional framework not only in favoring the presence of women (e.g. quotas) but also through dedicated policy mechanisms in promoting gender-sensitive policies (Rashkova and Erzeel, 2023; Sawyer, 2020). Along similar lines, others highlight the importance of gender equality bodies within parliaments for turning women's descriptive into substantive representation (Allen and Childs, 2019).

Turning to the parliamentary representation of LGBTIQ+ people and issues in Europe, scholarship on the substantive dimension is more prolific compared to descriptive representation. Single-case studies have abounded, fundamentally. In an early contribution to the field, Eeckhout and Paternotte (2011) show that early LGBTIQ+-friendly legislation was a by-product of secularisation and wider value change processes, and the window of opportunity provided by shifts in parliamentary coalitions more than the presence of 'out' LGBTIQ+ politicians. Schotel (2022) provides a longitudinal perspective on the Merkel governments in Germany and finds limited and reluctant policy change. This reluctant policy change nudged by external (EU) pressure is also a common pattern in Italy (Ciocca and Prearo, 2023). In a comparison of Ireland and the UK, Bönisch (2022) finds that non-LGBTIQ+ legislators are often among the most actively involved in the representation of LGBTIQ+ issues and topics. Indeed, Schotel and Mügge (2024) show that the specific substantive representation of Trans people is often exercised in their absence from parliaments and that presence can sometimes lead to backlash, introducing complex dynamics between descriptive, substantive and symbolic political representation. The differential patterns of the substantive representation of Trans people and their claims for rights is most evident when examining how Radical Right parties are increasingly either embracing or being silent on the rights of gays and lesbians while focusing the backlash and cultural wars primarily on Trans people (Magni and Reynolds, 2023). Finally, while not focusing on substantive representation per se, Dahlerup (2018) shows that there is a considerable gender gap in how much men and women legislators are in contact with LGBT+ organisations, thus suggesting these could translate into substantive legislative activity on behalf of LGBT+ people.



The study of the substantive representation of migrants and ethnic minorities is rapidly expanding, despite the difficulties to pin down what constitutes substantive representation for this category (Kroeber, 2018). By and large, the existing scholarship finds a clear connection between descriptive and substantive political representation of ethnic and migrant minorities (e.g., Donovan, 2012; Saalfeld and Bischof, 2013; Wüst, 2016; Mügge et al., 2019), with the policy impact of minorities being highly dependent on institutional factors (Hänni, 2017). McKee (2017) finds that the difference in substantive representation and responsiveness between ethnic minority representatives and majority legislators is especially important around critical events and when faced with the requests of minority constituents. Sobolewska et al. (2018) show that the connection between descriptive and substantive representation originates primarily from intrinsic motivations – shared experiences and a desire to represent. This desire to represent is likely to be the most valued aspect for citizens, as de Jong (2024) shows that descriptive representation matters in the eyes of minority voters but how they articulate preferences and identities seems to matter more, alongside key aspects of their personality such as empathy (de Jong and Mügge, 2023). However, recent research suggests that the link between descriptive and substantive representation of minoritised groups may be broken over time as diminishing returns are received by minority legislators from continued substantive representation (Bailer et al., 2022) and as the political environment changes (Mügge and Runderkamp, 2024).

Finally, moving to the dimension of climate and environmental policy, substantive representation entails the extent to which representatives advocate for stances aligned with the preferences of their constituents regarding the environment and climate change. Research on the representation in relation to climate change has focused on the role of political parties (e.g. Rohrschneider and Miles, 2015) and interest groups (e.g. Monaghan, 2016). Indeed, within this dimension, the potential linkage with the biographical characteristics of representatives is less straightforward. Yet, preferences on climate policies are different across key demographic characteristics, chiefly gender and age. For instance, regarding gender, this is true both at the citizen and elite level. Women are more worried about the environment, show higher risk perceptions and are more likely to take pro-environmental actions (e.g., McCright and Xiao, 2014; Joireman and Liu, 2014). This is also the case at the elite level, with gender differences extending to support for environmental legislation (Ramstetter and Habersack, 2020) and improved environmental outcomes (Salamon, 2023). Linkages between descriptive and substantive (under-)representation emerge in the domain of climate policies for women and youth (Helliesen, 2023).

In summary, while comparative analyses extend to large time scales (Siow, 2023) and across countries (e.g. Tusalem, 2022; Wäckerle, 2023), cross-country (e.g. Persson et al., 2024) and group analysis (e.g. Bailer et al., 2022; Lowande et al., 2019) are limited (Erzeel and Rashkova, 2022). Similarly, while intersectional approaches have been deployed, for instance in relation to gender and race (Siow, 2023) or religion (Akirav, 2021), they remain sparse.

3.1 Differences across countries

Laura Morales and Nayla Escribano (CSIC)

In this section, we examine how the six national parliaments studied substantively represent the several social categories presented in Chapter 2 and the three issue topics at the heart of the ActEU project: climate change, gender equality, and immigration. To this end, we present the results from



the analysis of the written questions submitted by individual legislators (or small groups of legislators) to the government, aided by dictionaries of keywords that are described in detail in Morales et al. (2024) and Escribano and Morales (2024).

We created nine multilingual dictionaries of keywords on topics relating to (1) women's issues and the equality between women and men, (2) issues specifically relating to men, (3) issues specifically relating to non-binary individuals, (4) issues specifically affecting Trans people, (5) issues and topics more generally relevant for the wider LGBTIQ+ groups, (6) issues particularly affecting youth, (7) issues specifically concerning immigration, (8) issues regarding ethnic and religious minorities, and (9) aspects relating to climate change. With these dictionaries, we detect and count the written questions submitted by legislators and classify which ones touch upon the given topics. As we also count the total number of questions submitted by each legislator (and, hence, by party), we can calculate the share of all written questions (WQs) that focus (at least partially) on each of the sub-topics/issues.⁴

Figure 3.8 shows the results for each of the sub-topics and issues by country. A first glance at the plots for each of the topics clearly points to the greater prevalence of climate change issues, youth issues and women's issues among the written questions submitted by legislators. The second observation that stands out is the near absence of written questions on issues regarding non-binary and Trans individuals, with the exception of Italy, and the limited attention paid to LGBTIQ+ and ethnic and religious minority issues. The third relevant observation concerns the Italian case, which is somewhat of an outlier for many of these topics: Italian legislators have given considerably greater salience in their written questions to men's issues, non-binary issues, Trans issues, immigration, and climate change.

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Indeed, the Italian case is the only one where legislators seem to submit more questions on men's issues or mentioning men than on women's issues or mentioning women. This is especially noteworthy if one considers that the dictionary of keywords used was considerably more detailed for women's issues – 60 keywords covering a range of topics from parenting, maternity and pregnancy, abortion and reproductive rights, several forms of violence against women, feminism and sexism, various forms of gender (in)equality and discrimination, as well as generic terms to refer to women and girls – than for men's issues – covering solely 13 keywords on masculinity, manhood, paternity, and violence against men. Against this methodological backdrop, Italian legislators have submitted 11% of their written questions on issues directly affecting or mentioning men compared to 7% affecting or mentioning women. The reason for this large gap is, upon detailed inspection and reading of the questions, a much more gendered use of language by Italian parliamentarians, who more often than in other countries use the term 'man' (uomo) or 'men' (uomini) to refer to the universal 'human' or 'person', and even 'personnel'. This needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the results. In all other countries, written questions are more likely to focus on women's issues than on specifically men's issues, and the gap is particularly large in Austria, where legislators ask more than double the number of written questions on issues

⁴ It must be noted that using such dictionaries as the core of the methodological setup can have unwanted effects. Some of the unusual results might be due to the selection of too general keywords to retrieve a written question belonging to a specific topic. In fact, a closer look at some of the most divergent results suggests that this is the case for the higher salience of women and/or men's issues for some countries. Additionally, texts that are related to a topic will not be counted if none of the corresponding keywords is present, and the different number of keywords for each issue could be increasing this impact on the comparison among topics. The different usage and context of each of the keywords in each of the considered languages, as well as the varying length and format of the written questions and the specific language models used for processing, may also affect the results when comparing among countries.



affecting women specifically (13% in 2017-2019 and 15% in 2019-2024) than those directly focusing on men's issues (5 and 6% respectively).

In fact, Austria stands out as a country where legislators provide greater salience to issues regarding gender and sexuality matters more broadly than in any of the six countries considered. Austrian legislators are the ones giving more space to women's issues but also pay more attention than those of most other countries to men's issues and LGBTIQ+ issues.

Focusing on topics that affect youth, the dictionary primarily focused on keywords that signal age, life cycle, generation or cohort – youth, young, minor, adolescent, etc. Despite this very limited demarcation of what constitutes 'youth' issues, the results in Figure 3.8 suggest that it is the topic that attracts the second most attention of those considered in our analyses. Youth issues are particularly salient in France (18%), Italy (17%) and Austria (11 and 15% respectively), but they are much less so in Spain, Greece and the UK, though in these countries they still attract more attention than immigration or minority issues. All in all, thus, while young people are relatively absent from national parliaments, legislators are giving a voice to issues affecting the youth.

Climate change is one such issue disproportionately concerning and affecting youth (Kiess and Portos, 2024). For this topic, our dictionary included 47 keywords covering a range of climate-related aspects, such as the environment generally, IPCC, gas emissions, biodiversity, warming and its consequences, and various natural disasters. Here, Italian legislators stand out as an outlier with nearly a third of written questions focusing on at least one of the environmental or climate change aspects included in the dictionary. Following from a substantial distance, the Austrian and French legislators also manifest a considerable interest in issues relating to the environment and climate change, with around 15% of their written questions mentioning these matters. Given the very high exposure to extreme climate change-related weather events and natural disasters, such as wildfires, droughts and flooding, it is surprising to see the very limited attention that Hellenic and Spanish legislators pay to these matters in their written questions.

Turning our attention now to the issues relating to immigration, the dictionary covered 13 keywords comprising vocabulary on immigration, asylum, refugee, family reunification, settlement, remittances and xenophobia. Figure 3.8 shows that this highly polarising matter is not as much a focus of attention as one could expect, at least through the mechanism of parliamentary control that written questions afford. Italian and French legislators pay more attention to matters of immigration than the rest, but when compared to gender equality issues or climate change, the salience is lower in all countries but Italy, where immigration is somewhat more salient than gender equality but much less so than climate change. This is all the more surprising if one considers the continued media and political attention afforded to irregular migration arriving by boat to the coastal areas of Greece, Italy, Spain and the UK throughout the legislative periods considered.

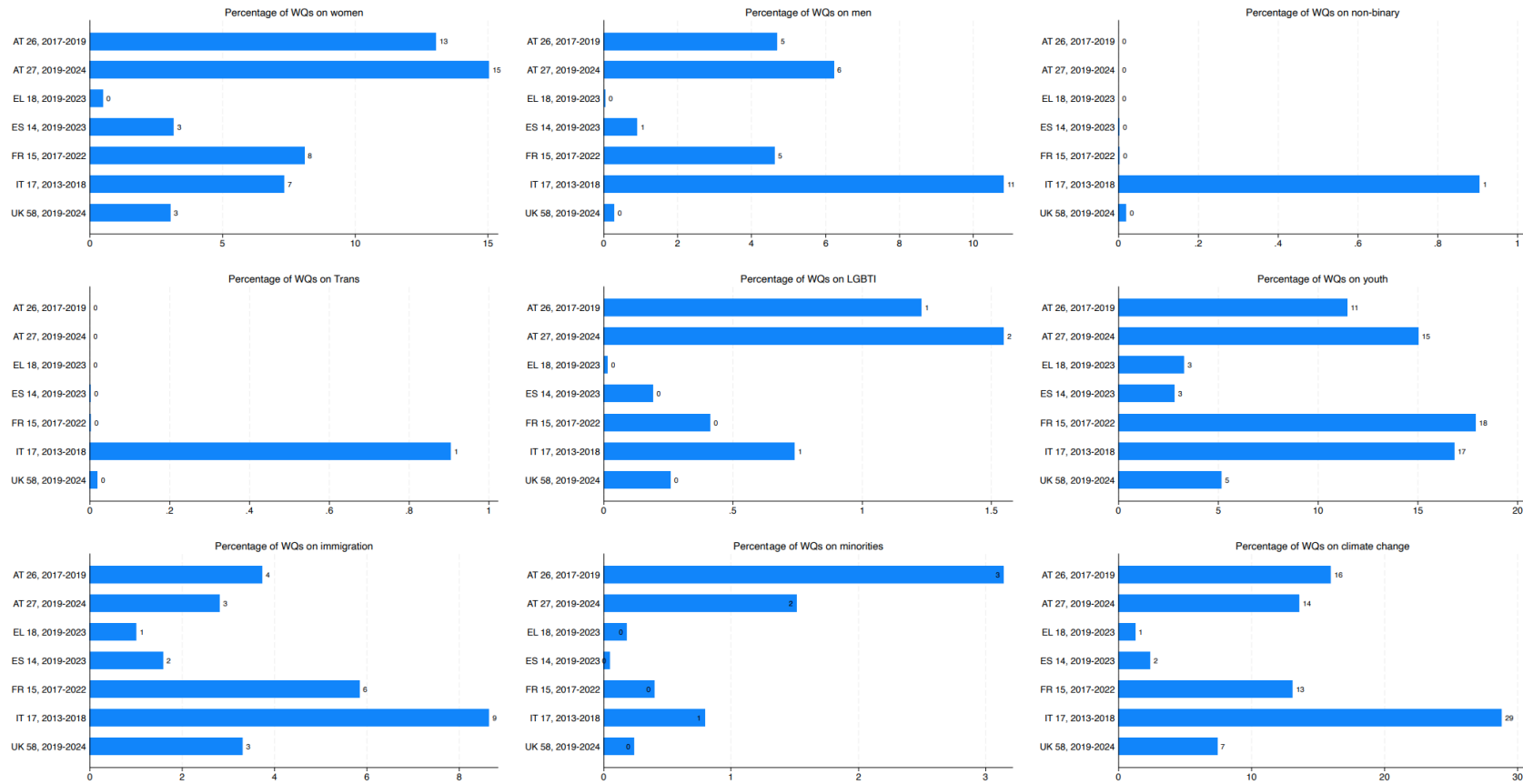
Similarly, matters relating to ethnic and religious minorities – captured through 10 keywords tapping on ethnic minorities, islamophobia, antisemitism, racism, diasporas or multiculturalism – did not attract too much attention from legislators through the instrument of written questions, except in Austria, where legislators focus on these issues as much as they do (or more) on LGBTIQ+ minorities.

In the next section, we examine how the attention to these nine sub-topics and issues varies across parties, and which parties are giving greater salience to each of them.



Figure 3.1 The Substantive Parliamentary Representation of Social Categories and Issues in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Substantive representation by topic



AT= Austria, EL = Greece, ES = Spain, FR = France, IT = Italy & UK = United Kingdom

Sources: Data collected by the CSIC team within the ActEU project

3.2 Differences across parties

Laura Morales and Nayla Escribano (CSIC)

Figure 3.9 shows the share of written questions submitted on each of the issues studied by political parties for each country. The first finding that stands out is that, by and large, and with few exceptions, parties pay attention to roughly the same issues within a given country, though not across countries.

Starting with Austria, youth issues are similarly salient – and often the most salient – for all political parties. However, women's issues and climate change issues are more salient for several parties (SPÖ and ÖVP). Contrary to what could be expected, immigration issues are not more salient for radical right parties in their written questions but for the Green party; and, symmetrically, climate change and its consequences are not more salient for the Austrian Green party than for the SPÖ in 2017-2019 or the ÖVP in 2019-2024.

In Greece, the issue that dominates by far for all parties is youth issues, with very little cross-party variation, and all political parties seem to afford a very similar attention to climate change and, to a lesser extent, immigration. As in Austria, interestingly, immigration is not the dominant topic covered by the radical right party Elliniki Lisi (GS), and the Communist KKE pays as much attention to immigration through written questions at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum. In fact, climate change (though not covered extensively) is as important as immigration for all parties, and gender equality is not too salient for any of the parties, and only slightly more for Syriza legislators.

In Spain, we also observe more similarity than the naked eye would suggest. First, for nearly all parties, the first three issues of concern studied and manifested in written questions are women's issues, youth issues and climate change. The rank order of salience for each of these three issue/topic areas varies somewhat across parties, but it is primarily a difference in the magnitude of the attention that varies the most. Podemos and the Socialists stand out for the greater attention afforded to women's issues in written questions, consistent with the enormous salience in policy and lawmaking of gender equality and women's rights during the 2019-2023 parliament. While youth issues are among the top 3 topics covered by the written questions of all parties, Podemos is an outlier given the share of their written questions that touch upon the young. Again, the radical right party Vox does not place immigration on the very top of its concerns through written questions, paying more attention to youth and women's issues, though in this case, it is the party focusing the most on immigration, consistent with its issue ownership of immigration matters and its fierce anti-immigration rhetoric.

Also in France, we can observe a relatively similar distribution in the rank order of the topics covered by the written questions across parties. Youth issues, climate change and women's issues are typically the three most salient issues for all parties among those studied here. The main variation is in the magnitude of the salience for each of them and the gap across the three issues. Youth issues are the most salient of the nine studied for all parties, but they constitute around 25% of all the written questions submitted by the radical left LFI, whereas they were 15% of those submitted by the centrist legislators of UDI. Climate change and environmental issues are the second most salient for all parties except for the National Front/Unity (FN/RN), which disproportionally focuses on immigration issues, consistent with its issue ownership on this topic.



Still, while LFI devotes around 20% of their written questions to climate change and the environment, many parties devote half that share to these issues. Women's issues are also highly salient for LFI at nearly 15% of all the written questions their legislators submitted, and we see that the attention paid by all other parties to these issues is relatively similar, oscillating between 5 and 10%. None of the French parties pays more attention to men's issues than to women's issues, but it is noteworthy that men's issues are ahead of immigration issues in the set of written questions authored by LFI legislators, which signals that men's issues are increasingly being appropriated as part of the wider political debates around equality between men and women and are not a proxy for 'masculinist' positions.

As discussed earlier, Italy stands out as an outlier in the higher attention afforded to climate change and the environment in written questions, and Figure 3.9 shows that this is the result of a joint attention to the topic by nearly all political parties, which place these issues on top of the nine studied here, but particularly the 5-Stars Movement (M5S). Youth issues come a close second for many of the political parties and all of them pay similar attention to the concerns of young people, despite the very limited presence of youth in the Italian parliament. Lega Nord is the party that devotes the most attention to immigration in their written questions, but the gap with all other parties is not as wide as one might expect, given that all parties devote around 10% of their written questions to matters relating to immigration, including Fratelli d' Italia. The Italian case also stands out for the unusually high attention afforded to men's issues in the written questions, and Figure 3.9 demonstrates that this is the result of a very similar degree of salience across all parties, even if we see a somewhat higher salience for right-wing parties (Fratelli d' Italia and Lega Nord). Women's issues are also similarly salient across all parties, at percentages slightly below 10 for all of them.

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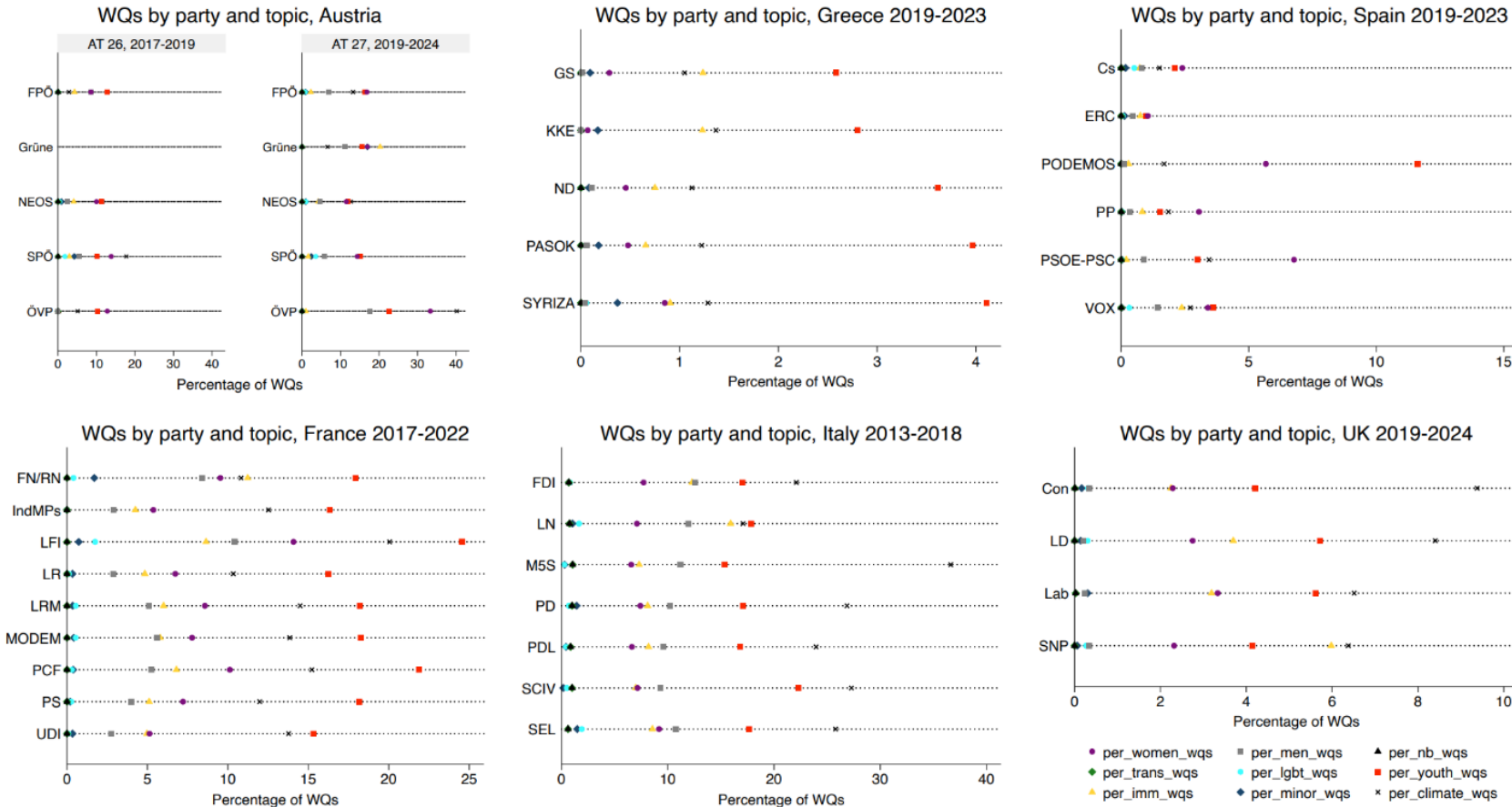
The UK also shows a considerable degree of similarity in the patterns of topic salience. Across all parties, climate change and the environment are the most salient of the nine topics studied, followed in most cases by youth issues, except for the Scottish SNP, which affords greater space to immigration matters. Immigration is not as salient for the Conservatives as one might expect given the high salience that irregular migration arriving from the Calais coast in France through the Channel and the Rwanda deportation scheme had throughout the whole period. Women's issues are also similarly salient for all four larger parties, with men's issues afforded only residual attention in the written questions submitted by British MPs.

All in all, these analyses suggest that the substantive representation of social categories and issues varies less across parties within countries than across countries, and that we find relatively high consistency in the topics substantively represented across parties. In fact, given that political parties do not coordinate for the submission of written questions and they are not 'deliberating' among themselves through this instrument (there is no public hearing or reading of the written questions submitted to the government), it is somewhat surprising that left-right divides do not seem to leave an imprint on the topics that are being represented through this instrument.



Figure 3. 2 The Substantive Parliamentary Representation of Social Categories and Issues by Political Parties in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Substantive representation by party and topic



Sources: Data collected by the CSIC team within the ActEU project



3.3 The relation between descriptive and substantive representation

Laura Morales (CSIC)

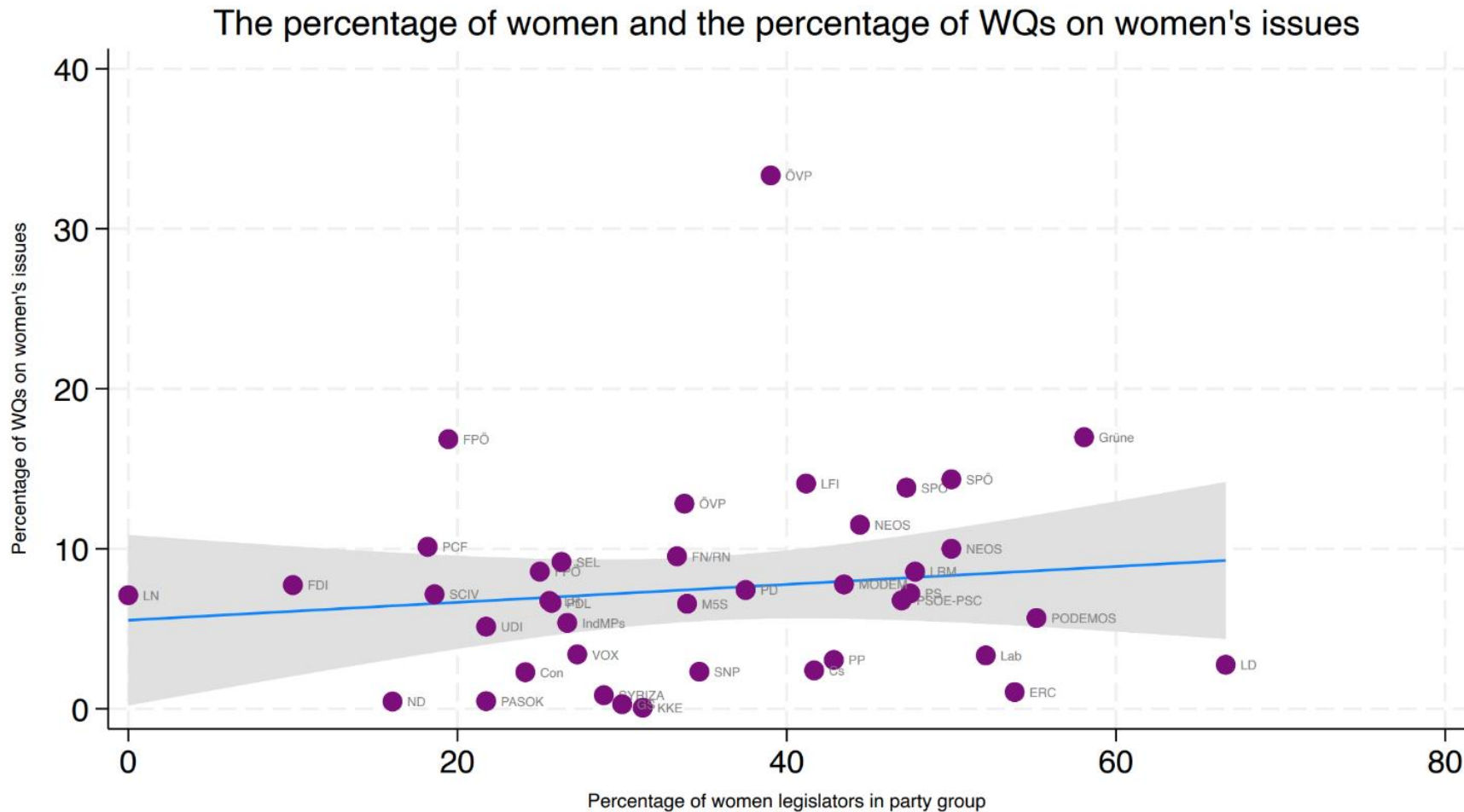
In this section, we examine whether there is a correlation between the descriptive representation of a given social category (women, men, youth, etc.) and the substantive representation of topics particularly affecting that social category through written questions submitted to the government. To this end, we use the data at the party level: the percentage of the given social category in the parliamentary group of each political party and correlate it with the percentage of written questions on the topic at hand. As in previous analyses, for these party-level correlations, we only include political parties with at least 10 legislators in the lower chamber. In order to keep the analyses concise, we limit them to the correlation between the presence of women and the substantive representation of women's issues, the presence of openly LGBTIQ+ and the substantive representation of LGBTIQ+ issues, the presence of youth and the substantive representation of youth and climate change issues, and the presence of immigrant ancestry legislators and the representation of immigration and minority issues.

Figure 3.10 shows the results for the association between the descriptive representation of women and the substantive representation of women's issues. As we can see, we find a very moderate positive correlation between the share of women a political party has and the share of written questions they submit on women's issues. In fact, there are many parties that submit relatively low shares of written questions despite having large shares of women, and the other way around, parties that submit relatively high shares of written questions on women's issues with moderate to low percentages of women within their ranks (notably, the Austrian FPÖ and ÖVP).

When we consider the same analysis for the presence of openly LGBTIQ+ legislators and the substantive representation of LGBTIQ+ issues through written questions (Figure 3.11), we find that there is no statistical association between the two distinct dimensions of objective political representation. Parties with no or very few openly LGBTIQ+ legislators are as likely to submit written questions on LGBTIQ+ matters than those with several openly LGBTIQ+ legislators.



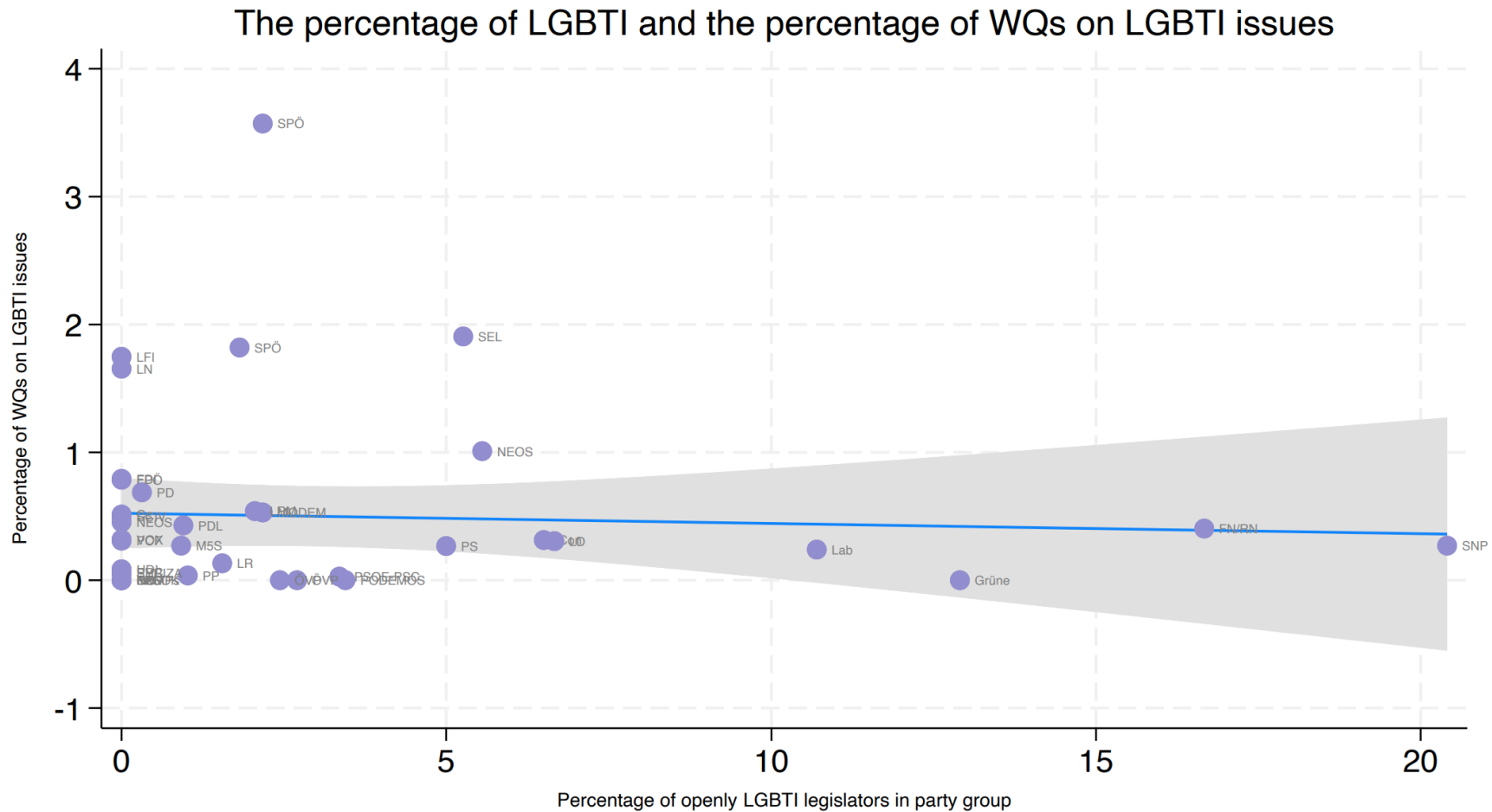
Figure 3.3 The Connection between Descriptive and Substantive Parliamentary Representation of Women by Political Parties in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)



Sources: Data collected by the CSIC team within the ActEU project



Figure 3. 4 The Connection between Descriptive and Substantive Parliamentary Representation of LGBTIQ+ by Political Parties in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)



Sources: Data collected by the CSIC team within the ActEU project



When we turn our attention to the association between the percentage of youth present in the political parties in parliament and the salience of both climate change (in green) and youth issues (in red), we observe in Figure 3.12 that the positive correlation found is extremely dependent on a few outlier cases, notably three challenger parties: La France Insoumise, NEOS in Austria and Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy. The three of them have relatively large shares of young legislators and have been quite active submitting written questions on both youth and climate change issues. If these three parties are excluded, the association between the presence of youth and each of the topics is nil. Hence, while new challenger parties that bring in large shares of young legislators seem to have a clear impact on the substantive representation of climate change and youth issues, outside such outlier shares of youth presence, there is no significant effect of a marginal increase in the share of young legislators. A critical mass seems to be necessary for effects to be visible.

Our last analysis, in Figure 3.13, focuses the attention on the association between the presence of migrant-ancestry legislators in each party and their propensity to submit written questions on immigration or on minority issues. The results suggest a moderately positive correlation, but it is entirely driven by one outlier: the Austrian Greens. When the Austrian Greens are excluded, the correlation with the substantive representation of minority issues becomes nil, and the correlation with written questions on immigration becomes very moderately negative. because several radical right parties both ask relatively more questions on immigration and include smaller (or no) shares of migrant-ancestry legislators within their ranks.

In summary, the analysis of the link between descriptive and substantive parliamentary representation at the party level does not point to a strong association between them: by and large, parties with larger shares of legislators with given socio-demographic characteristics, identities or origins do not necessarily pay significantly and substantially more attention to issues that specifically affect those social categories. Only for youth presence can we find some visible effects of a critical mass of young legislators on the substantive representation of both climate change and youth issues.



Figure 3.5 The Connection between Descriptive and Substantive Parliamentary Representation of Youth and Climate Change by Political Parties in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)

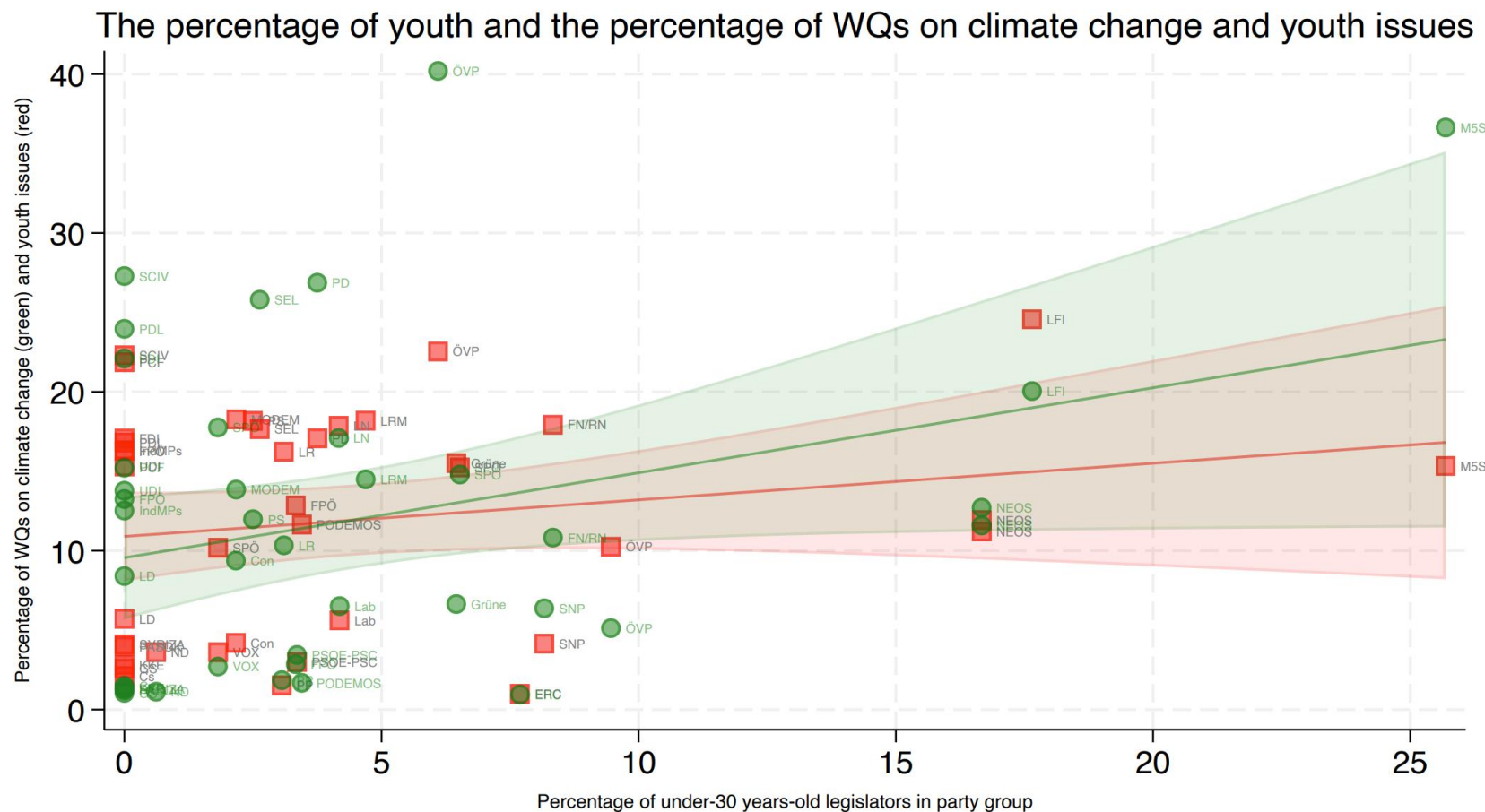
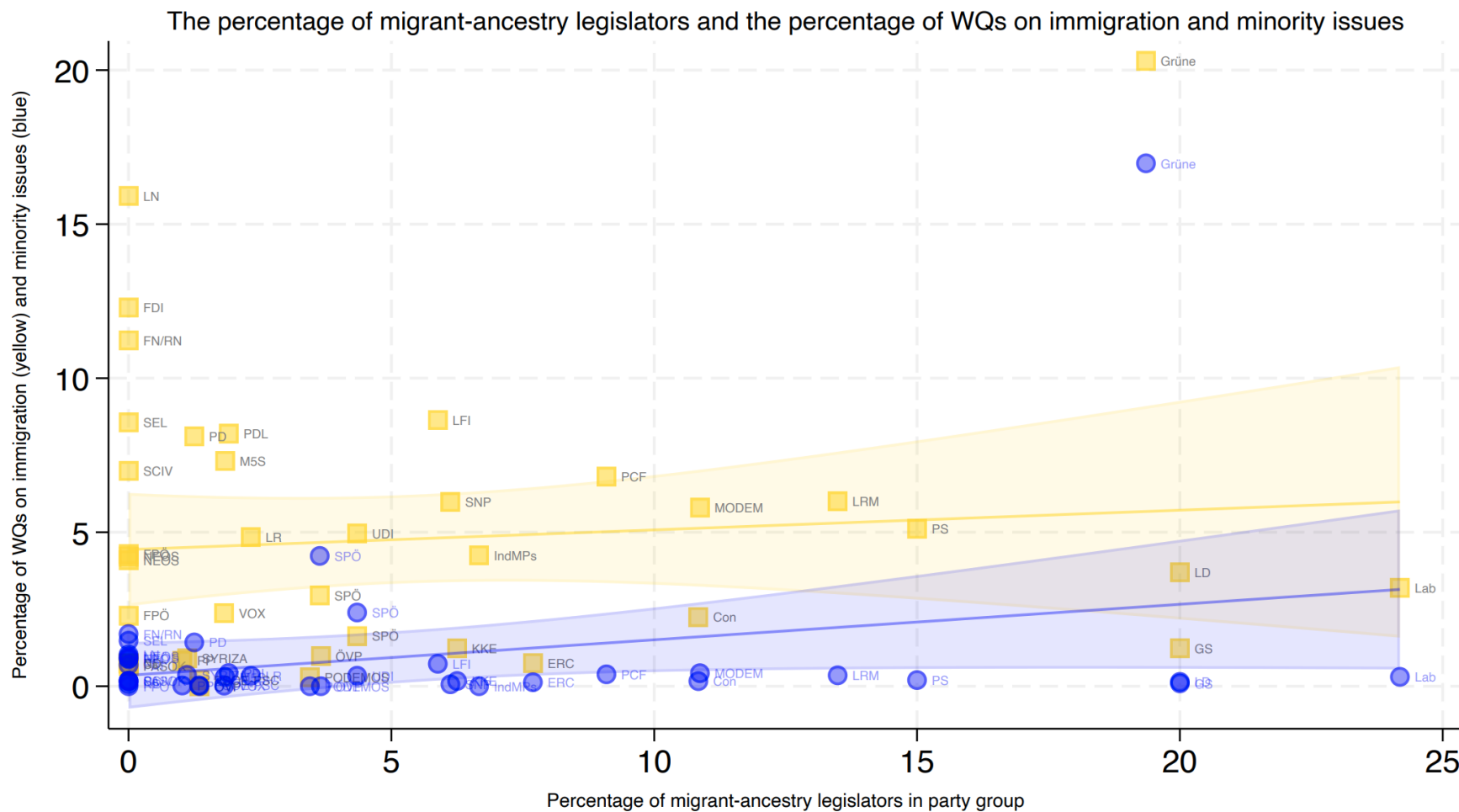




Figure 3. 6 The Connection between Descriptive and Substantive Parliamentary Representation of Migrant-Ancestry People and Immigration and Minority Issues by Political Parties in European countries (Laura Morales, CSIC)



Sources: Data collected by the CSIC team within the ActEU project



4 Patterns of subjective representation

Matilde Ceron and Zoe Lefkofridi (PLUS)

Besides research on the descriptive and substantive dimensions of political representation, which use 'objective' indicators (e.g., numbers of parliamentary seats/ministerial portfolios/questions posed in parliament or substantive policy outcomes), there is also a research strand that looks "*in the eyes of the beholder*". This literature emerges at the intersection of politics, communication and psychology, and focuses on perceptions, emotions and affective connections between the represented and their representatives. In this section, we use the term "**subjective** representation" to refer to works that study representation based on subjective indicators, e.g., citizens' feeling of being represented (e.g., Anderson, 2011; Holmberg, 2014), their 'sense' of political representation (Kaplan et al., 2024) and citizens' perceptions (Blais et al., 2014). After illustrating the diverse research, we proceed with using existing data to map patterns of subjective representation across similar categories of the other chapters (where possible). Although this part of our analysis lacks depth, in terms of detail, it is richer in breadth, as it includes more EU countries.

4.0 Literature

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Zoe Lefkofridi (PLUS) and Matilde Ceron (PLUS)

Perceptions and feelings of political representation are complex and multifaceted, influenced by various factors including communication channels, social dynamics, and electoral systems. Early political research on feelings of representation inquired about the determinants of feelings of electoral representation in cross-national perspective and showed that electoral systems and the menu of choices available to voters (Anderson, 2011) interact with individuals' predispositions to shape citizens' feelings of being represented. Using data collected by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), Anderson revealed more negative views about representation among voters located in the middle of the political spectrum; moreover, that the gap between the voters in the middle and those far away from it is smaller in countries using proportional representation and larger in systems with polarized partisan choices (ibid.). Blais et al. (2014) also show that individuals are more likely to feel represented by a party in countries with proportional electoral systems; moreover, they demonstrate that the link between electoral system proportionality and turnout is mediated by the ideological polarization of the party system. In contrast, Holmberg (2014; 2020), who also used CSES, finds no effect of electoral systems on the extent to which people feel represented. Instead, his work highlights the role of 'institutional learning', finding that citizens in older and more mature democracies exhibit stronger feelings of representation compared to those in new and emerging democracies (Holmberg, 2014; 2020).

Other contextual factors, such as the level of gender equality have not yet been examined. Besides macro-level factors, feelings of political representation can also be influenced by societal biases, such as negative perceptions towards specific groups, which can lead to disengagement from the political process (Verkuyten et al., 2016). Non-political factors, such as the media, also play a role in



shaping citizens' perceptions of political representation. Boomgaarden (2017) highlights how media coverage attributes, such as bias, personalization, and negativity, affect evaluations of candidates: the visibility of political actors in media affects audience judgments, with gendered coverage impacting how citizens evaluate candidates, particularly women ones. While this finding highlights the obstacles faced by candidates from marginalised/previously excluded groups, de Jong and Mügge (2024), who use an intersectional lens, reveal that symbolic representation by descriptive representatives specifically matters for young women of colour who lack role models. Geurts et al. (2024) analyse the extent to which there are intersectional differences in perceived representation among minoritised citizens with migrant background, and show that perceptions are shaped negatively by exclusions grounded in discursive boundaries. Exclusion and inclusion matter for subjective representation.

More recent scholarship conceptualises feelings of political representation as multidimensional (De Mulder, 2023). Focusing on feelings of being substantively represented distinguishes between perceived representative behaviours (listening, knowing, acting, succeeding) and the actors (some or most representatives), offering a novel measure to assess these feelings empirically (ibid.); this nuanced understanding reveals that feelings of representation are not merely about electoral outcomes but also about the quality of interactions between citizens and their representatives. Following the constructivist paradigm, Vik and de Wilde (2024) understand representation as arising from a process linking the represented and the representative; they incorporate psychological insights to suggest that the experience of feeling represented is essential in forming this representative connection. Vik and de Wilde (2024) develop and test a new conceptualisation of feeling represented and show that it is a multidimensional concept with instrumental, expressive, and aversive components.

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A related question is how citizens' feelings of political representation are cultivated. Recent studies also highlight the role played by social media and metanarratives. Dvir-Gvirsman et al. (2022) study the role played by social media platforms in forging a connection with politicians and parties. In detail, they examine citizens' feelings of being represented by a certain politician or party (dyadic representation), or by the entire parliament (collective representation). They find that passive (receiving political information), but not active (producing political information), connection strengthens perceptions of dyadic representation (politician/party). However, neither type of connection strengthens citizens' perceptions of collective representation (parliament). This suggests that while social media can bridge gaps, its effectiveness is limited to individual connections. Drawing on narrative theory, Kaplan et al. (2024) focus on metanarratives, which are dominant, shared stories that convey socially desirable norms to a community and propose a new mechanism that cultivates a feeling of political representation: the alignment between individuals' personal-national narratives and the collective-national metanarrative of the polity. Kaplan et al. (2024) find that this alignment fosters a sense of inclusion within the political community, enhancing perceived legitimacy and connection to the political system.

4.1 Differences across countries

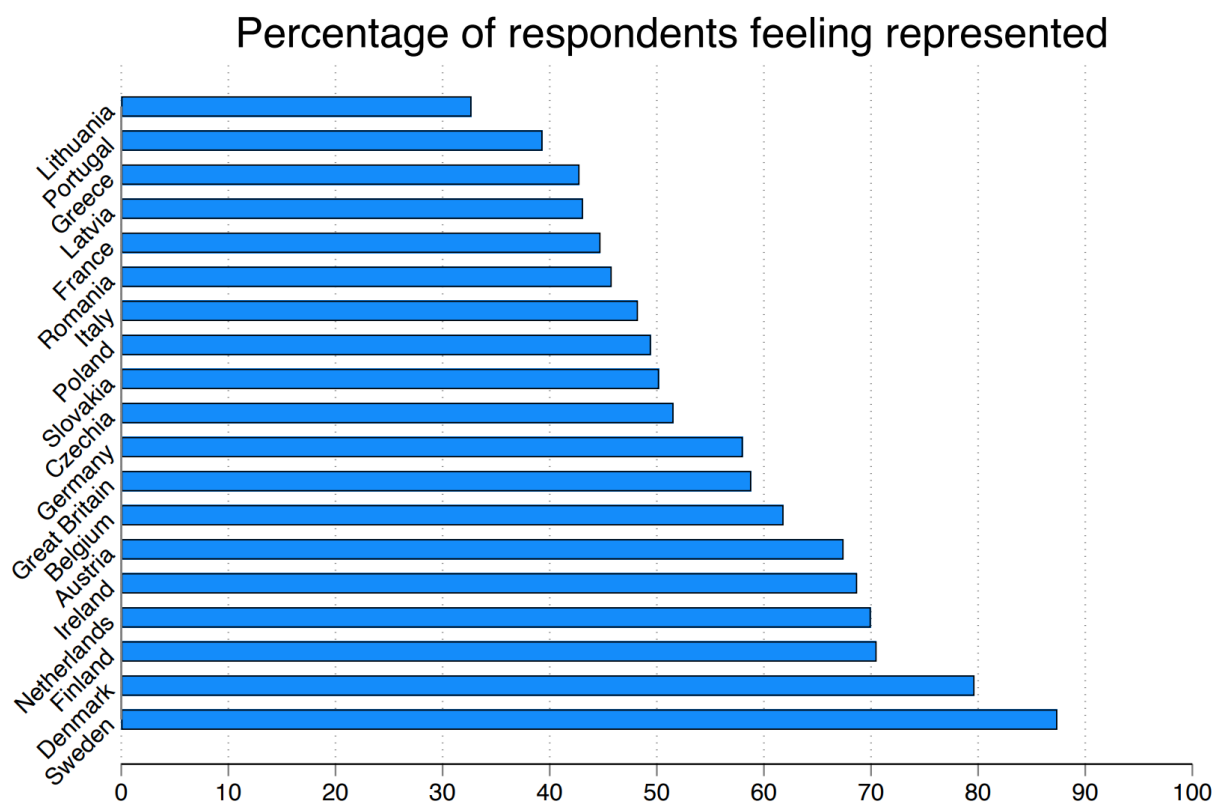
Matilde Ceron (PLUS)

Extant data on subjective representation from large cross-country surveys is severely lacking. Indeed, in this context, data on "feelings of representation" is limited to a single question included in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The CSES enables a comparative analysis across space. Yet its measurement of subjective representation is crude and data availability across

countries is limited for some key demographic variables of interest within the EU (e.g. race, ethnicity). Nevertheless, the CSES allows for comparison across countries and some of our demographics of interests (gender, age, foreign born). We present these comparisons first at the country level, before delving into differences within countries across demographics and ideology. Given the broader geographical scope in terms of data availability, we include all EU member states to the extent possible and leverage Module 5, covering overall a time frame spanning 2015-2021 (CSES, 2023), somewhat aligning with the covered legislations in the D4.1 datasets.

The key variable of interest is whether there is a party in the country which represents the respondent's views reasonably well⁵. This dichotomous variable only offers a coarse account of subjective representation, nevertheless allowing for comparisons across countries and demographic as well as partisan differences. Overall, among EU countries for which data is available, the proportion of respondents that feel well represented varies widely, ranging from nearly 90% in Sweden to barely above 30% in Lithuania. Geographical clusters do emerge, with the highest prevalence of those feeling well represented in Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland) and generally lower performances in Central and Eastern European Countries, as well as in the Southern ones.

Figure 4. 1 Percentage of respondents feeling represented across countries (PLUS)



Source: Own elaboration (PLUS) from CSES (2023) data.

⁵ "Would you say that any of the parties in [COUNTRY] represents your views reasonably well?"



4.2 Differences within countries

Matilde Ceron (PLUS)

Delving beyond the aggregate level, we address two dimensions: demographics and partisan differences within countries. Among the main demographic characteristics of interest of this deliverable, information is available on gender, age and, to a more limited extent, minority status, as further discussed below. However, this data does not allow to account for differences across sexual minorities. Starting from gender, it should be noted that information is only available in binary form. Three clusters can be identified. Firstly, we have countries with no or extremely limited gender gaps: Czechia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden. This includes both countries with high (e.g. Denmark, Finland) and low (e.g. Czechia and Lithuania) levels of representation overall. Secondly, we encounter a set of countries with a gender gap in favour of men – albeit in most cases still quite contained: Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, and Slovakia. Finally, one country – Latvia – displays the exceptional pattern of gender gaps in favour of women.

Shifting the focus to youth, we distinguish between respondents aged 25 and below and the rest of the sample. In this regard, cross-country differences are even more marked. While the two overarching groups remain either having virtually no gaps or lower proportions of youth feeling represented, the latter groups include countries with substantial gaps – namely Czechia, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovakia. In this case, a clear geographical pattern emerges with CEE countries especially, and to an extent Southern, among those with the largest distance between feelings of representation by youth and the rest of the sample. The largest gap is in Romania, where the 50% among older respondents drops to only 20% of youth feeling represented. In addition, the reverse pattern is also present, in this case in more than one country, as, in addition to Latvia (still with the largest difference), France and the Netherlands also display higher proportions of youth feeling represented.



Figure 4. 2 Percentage of respondents feeling represented by gender within countries (PLUS)

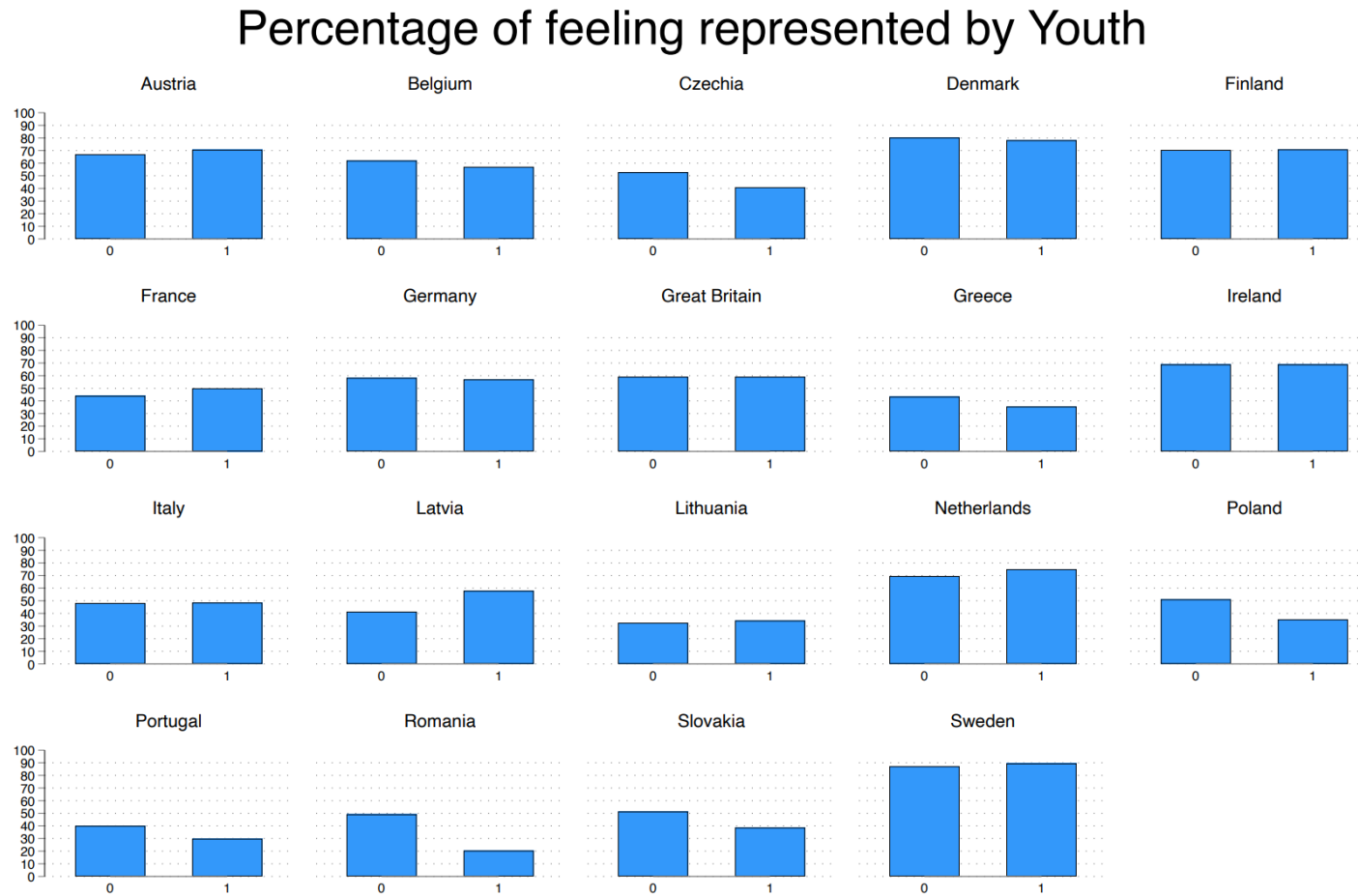
Percentage of feeling represented by gender



Source: Own elaboration (PLUS) from CSES (2023) data.



Figure 4. 3 Percentage of respondents feeling represented by Youth within countries (PLUS)



Note: Youth is considered as aged 25 or under (1)

Source: Own elaboration (PLUS) from CSES (2023) data.



Next, we turn our attention to minorities in relation to migration background. First, it should be noted that questions in the survey do, in principle, address ethnicity and race. However, missing data in this regard is extensive, and these variables are unavailable for most EU countries. As a result, we show differences by leveraging a variable with more extensive cross-country coverage and more limited missing values: country of birth. We generate a dummy variable that takes the value of one for respondents whose country of birth differs from the one where the survey is administered. Also in this case, all three patterns are somewhat present, with most countries displaying no gaps or lower proportions of feeling represented among those who are foreign born. Geographically, however, patterns differ, as the largest gap in favour of natives emerges in Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden – which are also countries with higher proportions of feeling well represented overall. Conversely, countries displaying the opposite pattern are CEE countries, with the biggest gap in favour of foreign born in Romania, but also present for Czechia, Latvia and Slovakia.

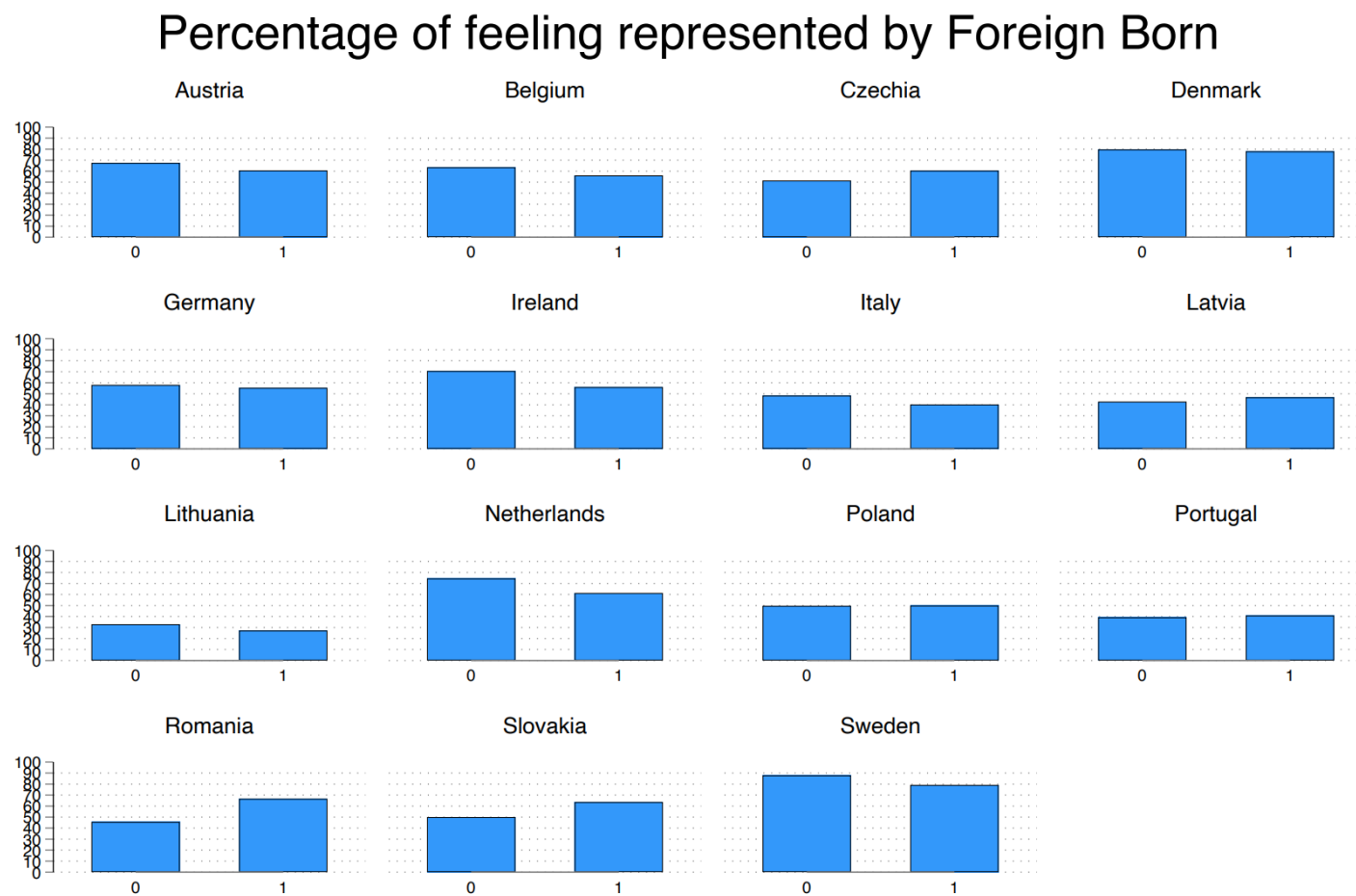
Finally, we consider ideological differences in feelings of representation within countries. To do so, we consider respondents self-placement on the left (0) – right (10) scale. In this case, there is an overarching prevalent pattern – coherent with the literature – in nearly all countries: higher feelings of representation at the extremes rather than in the centre. Nevertheless, how marked such differences are varies across countries, with Belgium, Czechia, Greece, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Poland and Romania displaying the largest difference overall. In the last three countries, respondents at the centre are extremely unlikely to feel represented, reaching below or just 20% in Romania and Lithuania and barely above 30% in Poland. Another element of difference is whether feelings of representation are somewhat balanced or not across the two extremes. This is not the case for several countries, predominantly with higher proportions emerging on the right side of the spectrum. The most marked examples are Greece, Lithuania and Poland. Yet the opposite also occurs, namely in Portugal and Slovakia.

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This chapter has presented an overview of the available data on subjective representation. As noted, the possibility of cross-country comparisons through existing large datasets is limited on several accounts. Firstly, the measurement of subjective representation is extremely crude, captured by a sole question related to party positions, which takes a dichotomous form and does not allow to distinguish across perceptions of representation. This crude measurement of subjective representation prevents a deeper understanding of how citizens emotionally connect to representation and how these feelings of being (un-) represented matter differently, for instance, in terms of descriptive representatives and/or substantive representation. Additionally, several key categories of interest within the ActEU project cannot be captured at all or adequately through this data. This is the case for minorities in relation to gender identities and sexual orientation. In addition, extant data on the countries of interest does not allow us to consider ethnic and racial minorities, but only – and only for some – to distinguish among those born in the country or abroad. The ActEU project fills all those gaps within Task 4.3, as the project survey allows for such distinctions, and resulting future research will allow to consider both differences across perceptions relating to different forms of representation and their emotional and symbolic component.



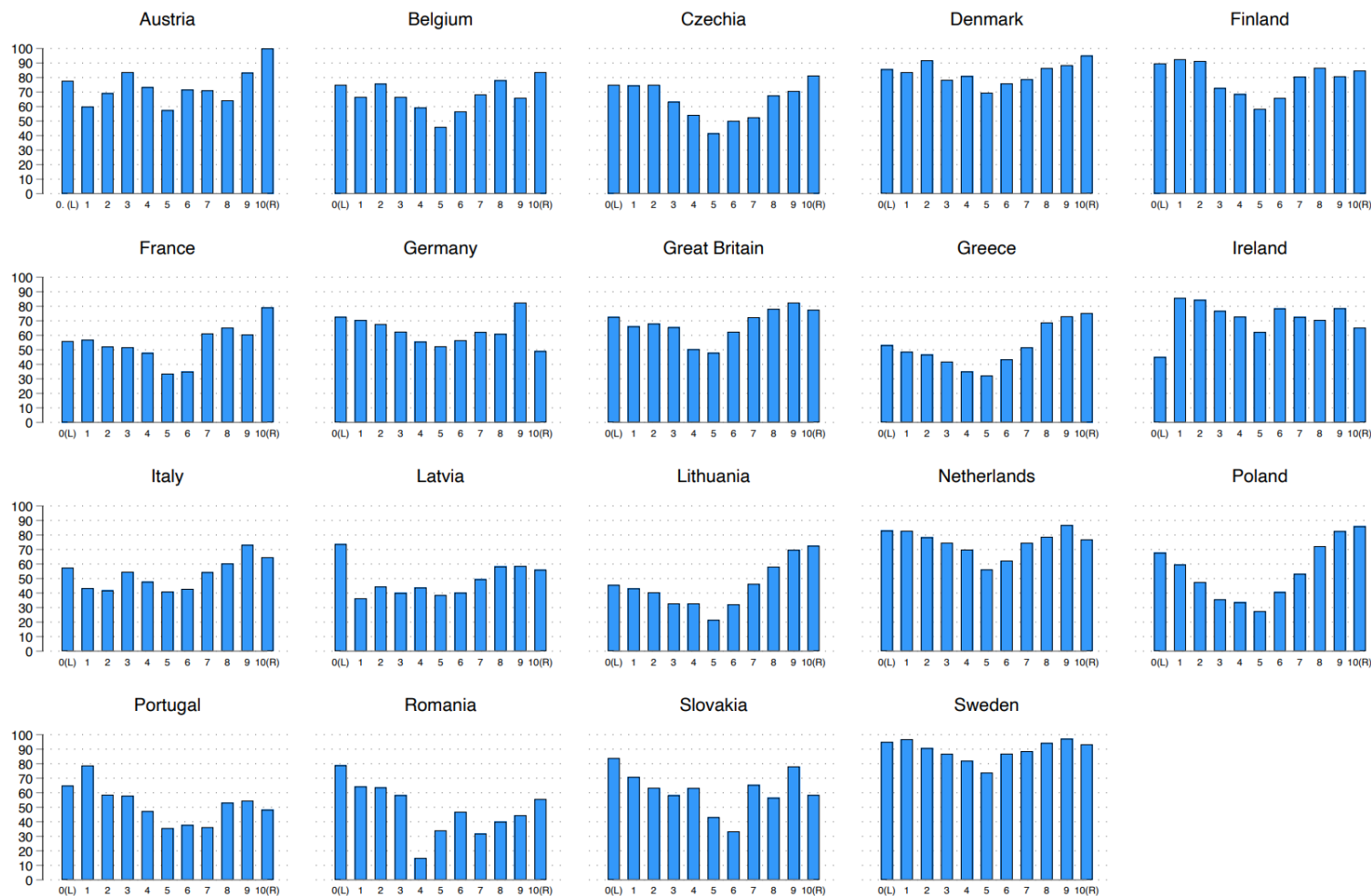
Figure 4. 4 Percentage of respondents feeling represented by Foreign Born within countries (PLUS)



Note: Foreign born (1) is considered those with a country of birth different than the country the survey is fielded in
Source: Own elaboration (PLUS) from CSES (2023) data.



Figure 4. 5 Partisan differences in feelings of representation within countries (PLUS)



Note: Self-placement on the left (0) to right (10) scale
Source: Own elaboration (PLUS) from CSES (2023) data.



5 Conclusions and Implications for Research and Policy

PLUS (Matilde Ceron and Zoe Lefkofridi)

This section summarizes the main findings of each of the chapters and highlights our contribution to the systematic understanding of cross-country and party patterns of descriptive, substantive and subjective representation. It also discusses their implications for future research and policy.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The analysis of descriptive representation in national parliaments across Europe (Chapter 2) reveals significant variation in the extent to which historically under-represented social categories are reflected among legislators. While under-representation is widespread, its severity varies across groups, countries, and political parties.

For women, representation approaches 40% in countries such as Austria, France, and Spain but lags in others, including the UK, Italy, and especially Greece. Youth are more severely under-represented, with the best performers (Austria and Italy) only reaching 6%, despite contributions from challenger parties like M5S and FdI in Italy. Educational attainment shows a persistent over-representation of highly educated groups, mirroring socio-economic disparities. Representation of ethnic and racial minorities varies widely: while migrant ancestry is virtually absent in Greece, Italy, and Spain, it reaches 10–15% in France and the UK. Similar disparities are evident for visible minorities and LGBTIQ+ representatives, with notable gaps in Greece and other Southern countries and relatively higher levels in Austria, France, and the UK.

A granular party-level analysis highlights disparities within political spectrums. Progressive parties, particularly Social Democratic and Green parties, often exceed parity in women's representation, whereas Conservative and Radical Right parties lag significantly. Gender quotas and incentive mechanisms are key drivers of progress. For youth, under-representation is pervasive across the mainstream, with notable exceptions among some challenger parties, though patterns are inconsistent across countries. Educational disparities are also pronounced, with Austria showing relative balance compared to other countries. Ethnic and sexual minorities are more prevalent among progressive parties, yet these differences persist even in countries with otherwise higher overall representation, such as the UK. These findings underscore the importance of both systemic solutions and cultural factors in addressing under-representation.

The analysis of written questions submitted by legislators across six national parliaments sheds light on the substantive representation of various social categories (Chapter 3). Key findings reveal significant country-level variation in issue saliency. Climate change, youth, and women's issues dominate, while topics related to ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities receive limited attention. Notable exceptions include Italy, where minority issues, men's issues, and climate change receive more focus. Austria shows higher saliency for gender and sexuality issues, while Southern countries exposed to extreme climate events, such as Greece and Spain, devote surprisingly little attention to climate-related topics.



At the party level, youth issues are more uniformly salient across political spectrums in Austria, while climate and women's issues are prioritized by centre-left and right parties. Migration, often assumed to be a key issue for right-wing parties, does not dominate their agendas in many cases. A recurring pattern is the alignment across parties on top issues like youth, climate, and women's concerns, challenging the expectation of strong left-right divides.

The relationship between descriptive and substantive representation remains inconclusive. While a moderate positive correlation exists between women's legislative presence and attention to women's issues, similar patterns are absent for other groups. For instance, no correlation was found between LGBTIQ+ legislators and LGBTIQ+ issue saliency. Youth representation correlates positively with climate and youth issues, but only in outlier cases. Migrant-ancestry legislators show limited correlation with migration-related topics, again influenced by outliers. These findings suggest that increased descriptive representation alone may not guarantee substantive focus on related issues, reinforcing the importance of critical mass and systemic mechanisms.

The analysis of subjective representation (Chapter 4) reveals notable cross-country differences. Respondents feeling adequately represented range from over 30% in Lithuania to nearly 90% in Sweden. Geographically, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Southern Member States show lower levels of perceived representation, often below 50%. Within countries, differences across demographic groups are generally limited, although women and youth often report lower levels of representation. Youth feel especially under-represented in CEE and Southern Europe, with representation gaps as large as 20% in Romania. Differences by foreign-born status are less consistent, and gaps in subjective representation vary by political spectrum, with lower perceived representation typically associated with centrist parties. These patterns suggest the need to explore how cultural and institutional factors intersect with representation perceptions.

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5.2 Avenues for Further Research

The datasets developed through ActEU represent a significant advancement in the comparative analysis of descriptive representation across social groups, including ethnic and sexual minorities. Future research could extend this work by incorporating institutional and cultural variables and conducting granular country-level case studies. Longitudinal analyses could reveal where and how representation has improved, identifying best practices and structural drivers of change.

The substantive representation analysis offers further opportunities to examine contextual drivers of issue saliency, particularly given the weak correlations observed between descriptive and substantive representation. Case studies could explore outliers, such as Italy's higher saliency of minority issues. Additionally, the low legislative focus on migration, despite its polarizing nature in public discourse, warrants investigation into the disconnect between public and legislative priorities.

Subjective representation findings highlight the need for more nuanced data. Future research should explore intersectional differences in perceived representation and examine how these perceptions influence trust in political institutions. The novel ActEU survey data provides a foundation for such analysis, particularly regarding youth representation gaps.



5.3 Policy Implications

Addressing under-representation requires institutional mechanisms, such as quotas, particularly for groups like women, youth, and ethnic minorities. Socio-economic disparities in representation underscore the need to include disadvantaged groups in legislative politics, a central concern for ActEU.

Our findings suggest a series of policy implications, especially in relation to the linkages across different dimensions of representation. Firstly, demographics which are objectively (descriptively) under-represented may demonstrate similar or even equal levels of subjective representation compared to dominant groups. In other words, differences across gender, youth, and foreign-born respondents appear to be either limited or context dependent. In contrast, our findings also indicate that some countries and groups feel especially under-represented by the current political offering. Such patterns are of particular interest in the context of the ActEU project and can be further explored in its different components to unveil their implications for trust and to test the factors that account for the emergence of these gaps, as indicated by different patterns across countries. This is especially the case for youth, the group for which the largest gaps emerge in some contexts, and which is the direct focus of the remedial toolbox developed within the project.

Based on the analysis of substantive representation conducted for the purpose of this report, there are three highly policy relevant take-aways. Firstly, broader descriptive representation does not guarantee greater substantive representation on the issues closely related to such groups. This implies that improving the first – for instance, through mechanisms such as quotas – may not be sufficient to produce policies that are more inclusive. Our analysis speaks for the need for a critical mass for perceivable policy change overall, which would indicate – albeit potentially in the longer term – that progress in the first should trickle down to the second. Secondly, findings also indicate that descriptive representatives are not a precondition for issue saliency, as indicated by the overall prevalence of climate and youth-related topics in the general absence of young representatives. Thirdly, in view of the public and media debate one would expect that issue saliency, and the degree of polarisation would translate into the legislative arena. However, this is not the picture painted by the data analysed here, as indicated by the limited saliency of migration (often even among right-wing parties) and the limited differences across parties.

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Three key policy takeaways emerge:

- Minimal improvements in descriptive representation may not lead to greater substantive representation of historically marginalized groups. A critical mass of under-represented groups is necessary for meaningful policy impact.
- Descriptive representatives are not a prerequisite for issue saliency, as seen in the prevalence of youth and climate topics despite limited youth representation.
- The limited legislative focus on migration, even among right-wing parties, raises questions about the alignment between public debates and legislative priorities.



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About ActEU

How can we conceptualize and empirically measure political trust and legitimacy beyond the usual survey question “How much trust do you have in the parliament?”? Does the multi-level nature of European representative democracies require an identical level of citizen support at the regional, national and EU levels? How does social polarization on key policy issues of our times – immigration, climate change, and gender inequality – challenge the political trust in, and legitimacy of, democratic political systems? And what can policymakers and civil society do to master these challenges? ActEU aims at finding answers to these questions pursuing two overarching goals: In phase 1, we map and investigate persistent problems of declining trust, legitimacy and representation in Europe with a particular attention to the polarization of societies and the EU’s multi-level structures. Providing an innovative conceptual framework on political attitudes, behavior and representation across Europe, we establish an original empirical infrastructure based on an innovative combination of methods and newly collected quantitative and qualitative empirical data (focus groups, experimental surveys, web scraping). In phase 2, these results will flow directly into the creation of a toolbox of remedial actions to enhance political trust in and legitimacy of European representative democracies. In cooperation with a newly created Civil Society Network, Youth Democracy Labs across 13 European cities and in exchange with political cartoonists “Cartooning for democracy”, we will develop context-sensitive solutions for all polity levels and some of the most polarizing policy areas, and craft tailor-made toolkits for both policymakers and civil society and the educational sector. Finally, we deploy a differentiated dissemination strategy to maximize ActEU’s scientific, policy and societal impact in activating European citizens’ trust and working towards a new era of representative democracy.

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