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Masculinities, Feminist Mobilization and the New Cultural Divide: A Quantitative Analysis of Gendered Political Attitudes Among Young Europeans

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Introduction

On 10 September 2025, American far-right political commentator Charlie Kirk was shot and killed while speaking at an event at Utah Valley University – with news of the murder circulating quickly and provoking intense political discussion across the Western World (CBS News, 2025; ABC News, 2025). In the United States of America, the event quickly became a rallying moment: large memorials and public eulogies framed Kirk as a "martyr" for a renewed conservative youth movement, and leading Republican figures used the episode to mobilize support (ABC News, 2025; The Guardian, 2025a). The mobilization also spilled over to far-right European Parties and organizations, with far-right members of the European Parliament requesting a moment of silence, but also other right-wing leaders and officials across the bloc rallying up crowds in the name of his death (Euronews, 2025; Reuters, 2025; Agenzia Nova, 2025).

Charlie Kirk epitomized a new style of political and cultural discourse: through campus networks, podcasts, public debates, short-form video and branding, he helped normalize forms of right-wing extremist communication that strongly appealed to young men (Vox, 2025; ABC News, 2025). Trump himself acknowledged Kirk's role, crediting him with boosting support among younger male voters (Reuters, 2025; ABC News, 2025). This view is shared by journalistic and analytic accounts, which recognize Kirk's influence alongside a broader ecosystem of influencers, fitness and "manosphere" content, and political commentators in both the United States and Europe who together have deeply influenced Gen Z men (Vox, 2025; ABC News, 2025; CT Mirror, 2025). These dynamics point to broader empirical evidence recently identified across post-industrial democracies: a gender divergence within Gen Z, with young men shifting toward the right and young women shifting to the left (CT Mirror, 2025; Burn-Murdoch, 2024).

Across Western societies, gender differences in voting have been well researched. Since the 1980s, a specific term has been used to refer to the distance between the voting choice of women and men: the gender gap (Inglehart and Norris, 2000).

Despite this, political and social science classical literature focuses on other factors to study and assess the structure of party competition in Western democracies (Ford & Jennings, 2020). Lipset and Rokkan (1967) contended that, after universal suffrage was implemented in Europe, political competition was shaped in part by long-standing social conflicts, "cleavages", that existed before the mass franchise. Four main cleavages or divides were specifically created by nation-building and industrialization processes: labor-capital, religious-secular (church versus state), urban-rural, and center-periphery (territorial). These cleavages shaped the consequent political conflict: a

center-periphery conflict between the national culture and ethnic, linguistic and religious minority groups, mostly located in peripheral areas (Ford & Jennings, 2020), was brought on by the "National Revolution" (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Conflict between the church and the state also resulted from the church's attempt to preserve its historic authority, as the state expanded. Subsequently, the Industrial Revolution sparked a conflict between the new bourgeois industrialist class and the traditional landed elite in the cities and the countryside, followed by a conflict between workers and capitalists, which served as the foundation for the growth of the labor movement and left-wing parties (Ford & Jennings, 2020).

In deindustrialized societies, where cultural and identity-related issues have become increasingly politically dominant, the aim of this research is to assess the emergence and the magnitude of a new cleavage within the European Union: an increasing gendered divide within Generation Z in which young men and young women systematically differ in political attitudes and party preferences.

To do that, this research is structured as follows. Firstly, it reviews theories and historical trajectories on youth life courses, feminist literature, masculinity studies, the relation between politics, gender and generations – providing the conceptual tools to understand how gendered attitudes form and evolve. Secondly, it compares initial and contemporary recounts of Gen Z's political culture, including the role of digital platforms, social media and youth influencers in shaping socialization, online engagement and offline mobilization. Then, by drawing on pooled cross-national survey evidence and party position data, the study conducts a quantitative analysis to assess the Gen Z gender gap across Europe, compare patterns across socio-demographic groups or welfare regimes and identify the main predictors of these differences. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn.

1. Gender, Generations and Political Change: Theoretical Foundations

1.1 The transformation of youth life courses: social institutions, individualization and uncertainty

The life experiences of young individuals in contemporary societies have changed quite considerably. These shifts affect relations with friends and family, practices in education and labor markets, lifestyles, leisure and the capacity to grow into independent adults. Several transformations are a straight outcome of the re-configuring of labor markets, of flexible work practices, of a bigger demand for high-skilled workers and of social policies that have stretched the period in which young persons stay reliant on their parents (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). As a result of these changes, young individuals nowadays must navigate a set of risks that were essentially unfamiliar to previous generations: this applies regardless of social class or gender identity (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). Moreover, since many of these changes have occurred over a relatively brief period, the traditional reference points that once guided social development and facilitated smoother transitions into adulthood have become unclear and unreliable.

As a result, this heightened uncertainty contributes to increased stress and a broader sense of vulnerability among young people (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006): while previous generations tended to adhere to a specific life course which consisted of education, starting a career, beginning a family and achieving independence in a set order, today's youth face non-linear, fragmented and pluralistic paths (Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). Grasping this shift from a static life course system to pluralized life trajectories and biographical timelines provides the conceptual foundation to the analysis on how opportunities, constraints, ideologies and cultural values interact to shape economic, social and cultural transformations affecting contemporary youth.

Rapid and intense processes of change mean that young people today experience a very particular situation because, on the one hand, they anticipate many typical adult roles, but on the other, they maintain long-standing roles typical of adolescence (Buzzi, 2019). Therefore, it is more complicated than a few decades ago, when becoming an adult depended on external factors (such as finishing education, entering the workforce, leaving the family of origin). Today, prolonged schooling, the increased complexity of the labor market and a different relationship with parents may lead to a greater tendency to remain within the protective boundary of the family of origin – especially in South European societies. And this is what hinders the realization of individual life plans, slowing down the processes of growth, autonomy and the assumption of responsibility (Buzzi, 2019). The shifting age at which people complete the transition stages to adult roles is a

well-established fact: young people finish their education increasingly later (and not only because their studies are longer, but also because they often last significantly longer than their institutional duration) and consequently, they enter the labor market later. In addition to the delay of the transition stages, we also witness the phenomenon of the expansion of the interstitial period between completing one stage and the next. The last three stages of the transition (the achievement of independence from one's parents, the creation of a new family unit and the birth of a child) today mostly occur after the age of thirty in several European countries (Buzzi, 2019).

As mentioned above, it is essential in this analysis to discuss the subversion and destabilization of the European labor markets in the last decades and the subsequent critical consequences on youth life courses and to their perception of stability, traditionally linked to steady income and linear career trajectories (del Río et al., 2025). The sense of belonging, meanings and promise of upward mobility associated with stable professional paths have been interrupted (Sennett, 2006). The shift from a Fordist manufacturing-driven economy to a post-Fordist, knowledge-based model has been accompanied by discourses that consider workers as self-developing human capital (Rose, 1990; Sennett, 2006). Under these settings, individuals bear growing responsibility for their current material conditions and prospects (Skelton, 2017), consequently justifying ideologically the increasing removal of the State from social reproduction under the claim that it sets free individuals' complete potential (del Río et al., 2025).

Murgia and Poggio's research (2014) studying precarious labor in the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy, coined the term "passion trap" to describe the tension between young people's physical and emotional investment in finding meaningful and passion-filled jobs and the demoralization caused by the relative non-existent to low remuneration, work instability or purely the struggle of finding employment aligned with their ambitions.

Additionally, del Río et al. (2025, p. 11) argue that:

> "Not only does this reformulation of work alter life-courses but also how the meanings linked to work cement (or undermine) notions of the self as well as ideas of progress and upward mobility. This is key to relational life-course thinking, which places selves and society in dialogue –including relational selves and identities across space-time. Paradoxically, neoliberal demands on young adults to become autonomous owners of their destiny take place in precarious labour markets in which underemployment has become the norm. Young adults increasingly experience non-linear professional pathways, drifting from one job to another, engaging in atypical forms of work, experiencing in-work poverty, periods of unemployment and seeking alternative sources of income.

> In other words, while precarious work takes many different forms, permanent, well-remunerated employment is conspicuous by its absence."

A study conducted by van Lerven et al. (2022) and based on Eurostat data suggests that austerity measures have left European workers on average €3,000 poorer per year, indicating that austerity led to a permanent loss rather than a delayed improvement. These shortfalls especially affect young people, as demonstrated by IMF research (Chen et al., 2018), which indicates that the financial crisis substantially worsens the threat of relative poverty between the youth compared to older generations. After 2008, youth unemployment in several EU countries surpassed 40% (Sandor et al., 2024), demonstrating their exposure during crises, with NEET (not in employment, education, or training) rates reaching 16.1% in 2013 (O'Higgins and Brockie, 2024). Even though it is true that in the last few years youth employment rates have steered toward a positive trend and that the NEET rate has gotten to a historic low, this recovery has not converted into improved job quality – reinforcing a tendency to unstable employment conditions (del Río et al., 2025). Moreover, regardless of the rise in employment rates, poverty has endured – changing from out-of-work poverty to in-work poverty, especially affecting young, racialized and low-educated employees (Hiessl, 2020).

These enduring challenges suggest that labor market conditions cannot be discussed without an analysis of broader social protections: research has shown how early life transitions in Nordic Countries and delayed life transitions in Southern Europe can also be explained by looking at dissimilarities in social policies. Since Welfare States have an influence on determining the opportunities and constraints that young individuals encounter (Bynner, 2005; Walther, 2006), different social and youth policies might either intensify risks or, alternatively, provide cushioning instruments that can support young individuals' agency to pursue subjectively meaningful life paths (Walther, 2006).

In this current state of recurring uncertainty and de-standardization, it is crucial to underline and examine national governments' responses to tackling economic and social crises through their welfare systems – and how these responses affect the youth segment of the population. In a longitudinal analysis covering 31 European countries to study policy efforts to support young people, Giuliani and Madama (2025) show that welfare institutions play a vital role in counterbalancing economic instability through their anticyclical function – thereby shaping young people's life choices.

More specifically, these researchers show that while overall welfare spending stabilizes younger cohorts' life chances against social and economic risks, age-specific policy measures (such as income support, housing and family policies) could meaningfully facilitate young people's shift to independence. Particularly, their research shows that these policies are even more essential in crisis periods, such as the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas their effect is less noticeable in more routine conditions (Giuliani & Madama, 2025).

Therefore, given the current social policy climate in Europe – characterized by the decentralization of welfare provision, the lowering of generosity levels, the introduction and implementation of welfare markets as well as the growing conditionality and individualization of formerly rights-based benefits (Bussi et al., 2022; Pierson, 2001, 1994; Bonoli & Natali, 2012; Hemerijck, 2013; Palier & Hay, 2017) – it becomes apparent how austerity measures and cuts in social protection systems can disproportionately weaken young people's life chances, aggravate NEET rates and compound the impacts of wider demographic changes and problems (Giuliani & Madama, 2025).

In the last few decades, one of the most remarkable demographic changes in Europe relates to the development of partnership and family formation. The traditional institution of marriage, which once facilitated the joint upbringing of children and family life, has increasingly been supplanted by cohabitation. This change went from being a temporary arrangement among groups born pre-1940 to the most common way to begin the first union (Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021). In Western and Northern Europe, the greater part of first partnerships now initiates through cohabitation: 79% in Germany and 92% in France (Hiekel, 2014). This trend has also started to spread to a Southern and Eastern European context (Domínguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martín, 2013). Unlike the 1990s, when cohabitation was temporary and, in most cases, evolved into marriage within 2-3 years (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004), couples of today are increasingly likely to maintain cohabiting arrangements for a long time without marriage (Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021).

On the other hand, amid the late 1960s and the mid-1990s, first marriage rates in all European regions witnessed a sharp decline, starting from the Nordic and Western regions in the late 1960s, moving to Southern Europe in the 1980s and Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s (Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021). During this decline, marriage has also been increasingly postponed: women used to marry at the age of 22-23 in the 1970s, while nowadays most of Western, Northern and Southern European countries have the average age at first marriage for women sitting at 30-33 years (Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021). Marriage is viewed less as a key, life-defining journey to navigate and more as a mark of stability and accomplishment, increasingly

achievable only to those with secure socioeconomics (Smock & Schwartz, 2020; Kalmijn, 2013). As a result, this has widened existing inequalities, with marriage rates eroding more rapidly among lower-income groups, especially in the more gender-equal countries (Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021; Kalmijn, 2013).

Shifts concerning the joining of unions and marriages coincide with the changing reproductive trends: the fertility rates in Europe have decreased significantly after the 1960s, concurrently decreasing the youth population. Within the EU, the percentage of individuals aged 15 to 29 declined from 18.4% in 2010 to 16.3% in 2021, with projections estimating a further decline to 14.9% by 2052 (Eurostat, 2022).

This is crucial, since, as claimed by Buzzi (2019, p.14, translated by author):

> "Being residual has considerable consequences, often underestimated. The most important is the risk of sinking into marginality, which is precisely the condition that characterizes subordinate groups: exclusion from rights and resources, lack of participation and irrelevance in terms of power. According to some commentators, only those young people who are less equipped to respond to societal demands (underqualified, living in depressed areas, not supported by strong family networks) would be marginal, but for others, the risk of marginality would affect all young people as a segment of the contractually weak population. Being few in number and decreasing makes them scarcely visible; their demands appear irrelevant to those administering the public good, their electoral weight declines in favor of quantitatively much larger groups, their entry into the labor market sees them relegated to precarious and low-income positions and their access to welfare must give way to the growing assistance needs of the elderly population."

Moreover, this precariousness and social exclusion associated with young people do not reside in isolation - they are directly tied to the erosion or transformation of the social structures that once offered the young support and acknowledgment. In this regard, young people in Europe have often been central to processes of secularization (Bruce, 2002; Vincett et al., 2015): collective forms of religious practice are in general decline and while less public forms of belief are persisting in certain youth contexts, a phenomenon called "believing without belonging" (Davie, 2002; Vincett et al., 2015), large-scale survey evidence confirms that younger adults in Europe are generally less religious than their elders (Hackett et al., 2018). For instance, in countries like Denmark, Italy, Norway, Lithuania, Germany and the United Kingdom, as compared to older adults, young people are less likely in participating in any form of organized religion, reporting its importance in life, praying daily, or attending services on a weekly basis. While some countries may show different

magnitudes of differences between generations, many report a double-digit gap (Hackett et al., 2018).

Following the decline in traditional arenas of youth socialization, such as organized religion, another important site for social connection and well-being is the so-called “third place”. Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) define third places as the locations apart from one’s home (first place) and work or school (second place) that offer chances for socialization, self-expression and interaction between a diverse population (e.g. public squares, libraries, parishes, cafés, parks, pubs, community centers). For Europeans and especially young people, third places historically offered informal settings to cultivate social networks, community engagement and a sense of belonging (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Despite the recent emergence of virtual third places through the invention of information and communication technologies (ICTs) like social media (Memarovic et al., 2014), studies show that third places are in general decline (Putnam, 2000; Finlay et al., 2019; Littman et al., 2024). Young Europeans, especially those who are part of marginalized communities, can be particularly vulnerable and affected by this trend, since third places historically provided protection against loneliness and stress (Finlay & Kobayashi, 2018; Finlay et al., 2019; Littman et al., 2024).

On the one hand, the erosion of traditional religious community participation frameworks, along with the transformation of third places as informal social gatherings has diminished the anchors for social cohesion among the youth in Europe. On the other hand, these changes overlap with a greater negotiation of personal identities, contributing to transformations in the formation of families, intimacy models and the pluralization of gender and sexual paradigms, which includes the development of queer and multicultural identities.

The formation of families and intimate relationships among European youth has become more uncertain, delayed and fragmented. Identity formation, previously consolidated in adolescence, now unfolds in young adulthood and is characterized by indecision, rumination and social and economic uncertainty. (Côté, 2018; Elliott, 2016; Luyckx et al., 2013; Mannerström et al., 2025). Furthermore, intimate relationships are influenced by the frameworks of marketization and self-optimization which, through digital platforms, consumerist ideals of autonomy and choice lead up to fragmented commitments along with an increase in childlessness, despite aspirations for family life (Illouz, 2019; Mencarini et al., 2022; Mannerström et al., 2025).

Alongside these uncertainties, Europe is experiencing a broad reconfiguration of norms related to family and identity. There is a growing visibility of new household structures such as blended

families and single-parent households, as well as childfree couples (Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021). Additionally, while same-sex marriages still constitute a small proportion of all unions, they have received social acceptance and legal acknowledgment, even if their stability and access to parenthood vary by region (Valfort, 2017; Breton et al., 2019). As Cover (2012, 2018) discusses, contemporary youth culture helps expand and diversify one's gender and sexual identity, particularly through online spaces, which allow for the overcoming of older generational categories through the collective creation of new and more inclusive generational identities and taxonomies. A survey conducted by Ipsos (2025) indicates that while self-identified LGBT+ members among Boomers sit at 5%, the figure rises to 9% for Millennials and 14% for Gen Z, suggesting a redefinition of boundaries of identity and intimacy occurring in the younger cohorts of the European population.

Collectively, recent transformations in labor markets, welfare states, family structure and personal identity unveil new forms of uncertainty and agency, morphing processes of life courses and shifting social relations that continue to shape the experiences of Europe's youth.

1.2 Feminist theory and gendered political mobilization

Feminist theory has long been an essential paradigm for the understanding intersections of social change, identity formation and political conflict. Far from a monolithic set of notions, feminism has developed through a number of "waves" and varied traditions, each rewriting the relationship between society, gender and power. Starting with early struggles for civil and political rights, moving through criticisms of economic systems from socialist and materialist viewpoints and ending with the emergence of intersectionality and queer theory, feminist research has continually challenged the normalization of gender roles while highlighting the political dimensions of everyday experiences. Building on this groundwork, feminist scholars have traced the genealogy of political action, while providing analytical concepts for understanding how newer generations engage with the intersection of gender identity, social inequality and moral values.

Cultural critics and feminist historians commonly conceptualize modern feminism in terms of four "waves," although this heuristic is contested for its tendency to oversimplify temporal and spatial heterogeneity (Malinowska, 2020; Khalid et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the wave framework allows for a sociologically nuanced analysis of feminist trajectories, linking shifts in activism to broader changes in social institutions, communication technologies and cultural norms.

The First Wave of feminism developed in the late 19th century, in the context of industrialization, liberal democratic expansion and the expansion of print media – and lasted until the early 20th

century. Scholars like Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), John Stuart Mill (1869) and Harriet Taylor Mill questioned the ideological and institutional bases of women's exclusion and argued that oppression existed within social structures, not biological determinism (Khalid et al., 2024). Suffrage campaigns, property rights advocacy and educational access demands were not only a legal struggle but represented a broader transformation of women's social visibility and agency (Malinowska, 2020). From a sociological perspective, First Wave feminism can be understood as a preliminary moment of collective engagement in civil society, as women mobilized collective actions through newspapers, public assemblies and transnational collective action (such as through the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in 1904). However, it was marked by class and race divisions, shown by the silencing of white feminists against women of color, as finds powerful expression in Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ain't I a Woman?" speech (Khalid et al., 2024). During this time, early feminists published media images framing them as militant or unfeminine, which illuminated this persistent tension of visibility and legitimacy around women engaging in collective action (Malinowska, 2020).

The Second Wave occurred from the 1960s to the 1980s – and developed within the context of postwar social changes, the expansion of mass media and the entrenchment of neoliberal labor markets. The era refocused attention on the private sphere, emphasizing reproductive rights, labor equality, sexual autonomy and critiques of domesticity, efficiently encapsulated in the rallying cry "the personal is political" (Khalid et al., 2024). Cultural references like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystiqu*e (1963), Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" (1975) and Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) explained the ways that social institutions and media representations reproduce gender disparities. The Second Wave illustrates the dialectical relationship between structural constraints and cultural norms: women's activism targeted both institutional hierarchies and symbolic representations that constrained female agency. Legislation (e.g. Roe v. Wade in the US, the 1975 Equal Pay Act in the UK, family law reforms in France and Germany), codified aspects of feminist demands, illustrating the capacity for collective action to lead to structural change (Khalid et al., 2024). In Europe, the second wave took shape differently depending on the contending political and religious context: feminist struggles focused on reproductive rights in countries with a Catholic majority such as Spain, Italy and Poland, while Nordic feminist engaged on a more direct level with state institutions (thereby creating "state feminism" through gender quotas and institutional reform) (Dean & Aune, 2015).

The Third Wave of Feminism, which lasted from the 90s to the beginning of the 21st century, coincided with globalization, the advent of postmodern critiques and the burgeoning range of

digital communication technologies. This wave emphasized all sorts of diversity, intersectionality and the acknowledgment of multiple and fluid identities (Khalid et al., 2024). Researchers like Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) noted the structural interdependencies between race, class, gender and sexuality, building a pluralized feminist praxis that interrogated context-specific inequalities. Digital technologies presented new possibilities for diverse forms of activism, self-representation and networked mobilization, showcasing some of the opportunities and limits residing in late modernity (Malinowska, 2020). The Third Wave illustrates a turn towards identity as relational and mediated, where cultural critique and subcultural practices intersect with material conditions and institutional structures, often located on online platforms (Khalid et al., 2024).

A key feature of the current fourth wave is the ways it is continually reshaping digital activism, transnational solidarity and intersectional justice movements: the hashtag campaigns of #MeToo, #NonUnaDiMeno, #NiUnaMenos… show how social media, in turn, allows decentralized and networked mobilizations that can provide opportunities for political engagement while puncturing existing structural inequalities (Khalid et al., 2024). Feminist activism has come to rely on its dominance through advertising on sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and YouTube. Through cyber-feminism, the immediacy of connectivity enabled women to mobilize in ways that would have been impossible previously: to reach one another through campaigns like the Everyday Sexism Project, Feminist Fightback, Pink Stinks and Fourth Wave London Feminist Activists (Day & Wray, 2018). Dean and Aune (2015) note that in Europe, the context of austerity politics and the rise of the far right should be considered when thinking about fourth-wave activism – exploring also the implications of transnational movements such as SlutWalk, Pussy Riot and FEMEN, noting that feminist repertoires often deviate from each other depending on whether they combine digital mobilization with embodied protest (Dean & Aune, 2015).

This wave increasingly reflects notions of inclusion across familial, racial and sexual axes, accounting not only for dislocation across geography but also reflection in terms of the nature of social justice movements, reflected in a sociological comprehension of oppression as interlocking and compound, as grounded in both materialism and culture (Malinowska, 2020; Day & Wray, 2018). However, this focus on identities has resulted in several controversies regarding inclusion compared to fragmentation: as intersectional frameworks help us consider the complexity of oppression and privilege, their exponents caution that a focus on individual identities may deny the critique of shared collective structural opportunities, mirroring concerns raised about Third-Wave feminism (Day & Wray, 2018). Even more concerning to some scholars (Day & Wray, 2018) is the rise of the “choice feminist” or postfeminist discourses’ emphasis on self-expression or

individual empowerment that appears to focus on individual options or agency as a solution for social injustice. While personal agency and expression may be empowering in certain contexts, they remain rooted in a set of neoliberal assumptions that expect individuals will navigate their way out of structural oppression, potentially disenfranchising the notion of collective mobilization and changes to social outcomes (Day & Wray, 2018; Khalid et al, 2024).

When viewed as a whole, the history of feminist waves has reflected the changing strategies, repertoires and priorities from generation to generation – from suffrage to material rights, from liberation to digital activism: these frameworks not only helped shape public activism for hundreds of years but are also essential conceptual tools to understand the political behavior of new generations.

Fraser conceives injustice as inherently two-dimensional: every form of social wrong is situated simultaneously within the distribution of material resources and the hierarchies of social standing. She indicates that no single effective intervention can be limited to either the economics of redistribution or the politics of normative recognition. In order to achieve sustainable justice, both forms require distinct but communicating interventions, since it is crucial to specify and identify how the economic structure and the cultural hierarchies are not separable in practice but exist in an inextricably linked relationship (Dorrien, 2021; Fraser, 2001).

For Fraser, gender exemplifies this duality, as it organizes a political economy that has assigned to women the majority share of unpaid reproductive and domestic work, creating and sustaining the distinctions between paid, commodity-based "productive" labor and unpaid, primarily reproductive or domestic labor. Additionally, stratified labor markets are reaffirmed through the process of gendering occupations that minimize women's wages and status in comparison to male-dominated occupations (Fraser, 2020). These material configurations were among the systemic transformations identified in the previous section: changes that make redistributive claims especially significant to young women now navigating their precarious transition into the labor force.

Yet, gender can also be seen as a cultural-valuational axis: it functions like other identity categories to produce differences in esteem and normative prescriptions for behavior (Fraser, 2020). And because androcentrism honors traits passed as masculine, cultural sexism systematically degrades traits, practices and roles passed as feminine. This is not merely theoretical, as Fraser notes that:

> “Devaluation is expressed in a range of harms suffered by women, including sexual assault, sexual exploitation and pervasive domestic violence; trivializing, objectifying and demeaning

> stereotypical depictions in the media; harassment and disparagement in all spheres of everyday life; subjection to androcentric norms in relation to which women appear lesser or deviant and which work to disadvantage them, even in the absence of any intention to discriminate; attitudinal discrimination; exclusion or marginalization in public spheres and deliberative bodies; and denial of full legal rights and equal protections." (Fraser, 2020, p. 79).

The two-fold nature of gender disparity implies that women experience troubles both as economically-structured disadvantages and as culturally-rooted devaluation (Fraser, 2020). Because androcentric and sexist norms become institutionalized through the state and market, economic disadvantage in turn decreases women's capacity to engage fully in political and cultural life. This results in a dynamic of reciprocal causation: material subordination limits opportunities for voice and representation, while cultural devaluation legitimates and reproduces economic disadvantages, creating a feedback loop of exclusion (Fraser, 2020) – particularly salient in the experiences of contemporary young women.

The notion of intersectionality has its roots in feminist socio-legal research (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991):

> "Intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980s as a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics. It exposed how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production and struggles for social justice." (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 787)

This theory argues that social inequalities are best understood when various forms of oppression – gender, race, class, age, sexuality, etc. – are considered at the same time, not individually (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). The disadvantage of analyzing oppression only along a single dimension is the tendency to oversimplify the characteristics of marginalized individuals and lend privilege to those who are already closer to having structural or institutional power (King, 1988; Zinn & Dill, 2016). Indeed, critiques of ethnicity-only or gender-only approaches have proved that while such frameworks may relieve one system of inequality, they can simultaneously reinforce other power structures (Bettie, 2014; Cohen, 1999; Ward, 2008). As a consequence, when seeking to respond to injustices we need to recognize multiple and simultaneous effects of systems of oppression, understanding how hierarchies are enacted by considering people's position along multiple axes of inequality (McCall, 2005; Meyer, 2012; Zinn & Dill, 2016).

Understanding intersectionality as originally conceived by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) demonstrates the insufficiency of affirmative strategies and research that look at only a single axis of inequality and instead foreground transformative strategies that explicitly account for the full array of social divisions. (Meyer, 2012; Zinn & Dill, 2016). Therefore, moving up to a broader structural and cultural context provides a theoretical lens to analyze how young people navigate, react and mobilize to layered societal inequalities: differences in socio-economic background, education, or ethnicity subtly shape the way social hierarchies are experienced and contested.

Building on the intersectional insights into the various and overlapping axes of social inequality, Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990, 1994) is useful to consider how those hierarchies are performed and perpetuated through daily practices and cultural norms, which demonstrates that structural and symbolic inequalities can no longer be teased apart from the repeated acts that constitute gender itself (Salih, 2007).

Butler (1990, 1994) contests the concept of a pre-existing, "natural" body or identity, contending instead that gender as well as sex is produced through cultural and societal discourses. Each body, from the very beginning of social life, is inscribed with gender – and since every existence is socially located, there is no "natural" body that can't be culturally interpreted. What this means is that gender is not a pre-given state of being but a constant practice, a series of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" instead of a "being":

> "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender." (Butler, 1990, pp. 43-44)

These performatives, or acts, establish subjects rather than being performed by pre-existing ones: behind the expressions of gender there is no gender identity, as it is performatively created by the 'expressions' which are thought to be their outcomes (Butler, 1990). At the same time, the author emphasizes that such constructions, while normative, are not deterministic. The very traits that uphold normativity similarly create options for agency and subversion, as subjects negotiate and potentially undermine the very narrations that form them (Butler, 1990).

Collectively, these perspectives illustrate how gendered and intersecting inequalities are both structurally situated, enacted culturally and demonstrated through complex interactions between

political institutional hierarchies, normative regimes and practices that contribute to political consciousness and mobilizing social actions.

1.3 Masculinity studies and the remaking of male identities

Building on Butler's insight that gender is a performative action or series of actions instead of a fixed "substance", then the study of masculinities shifts from an inquiry for an essential "male" identity to an analysis of the practices, relations and institutions that produce certain forms of maleness. Researchers have established how different masculinities coexist and how hegemonic masculinity sustains cultural authority (e.g. Connell, 1987; Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2012; Messerschmidt, 2019), while others discuss the institutions, emotions and power formations that develop masculinity (Kimmel, Messner). This work views masculinity as historically-situated, contested and unevenly rewarded – as it appears from labor markets, family arrangements, education, media and daily interactions, not as a static and unchangeable trait. Understanding these processes helps explain why men's identities change over time and place and how contemporary social and economic pressures can lead to new configurations of masculine practices.

Multiple masculinities theory remains a keystone of the critical research on masculinities and men (Lucy, 2024). This model offers a sociological perspective of gendered power used in a myriad of academic subjects, investigating several settings and professions (Wedgewood, 2009; Messerschmidt, 2012). As well as a structurally ordered framework of interpersonal competitive types of masculinity, Connell's (1987, 1995) theorization of hegemonic masculinity functions as a valuable tool to comprehend the progressions involved in unequal gender processes through the political instruments of legitimization and relativity.

The notion of hegemonic masculinity first emerged in research on high schools in Australia, used to indicate masculinities that maintained and produced inequality amid distinct clusters of students (Lucy, 2024). Raewyn Connell, in *Gender and Power* (1987), first set the grounds for the creation of a sociological model of gender where the notion of hegemonic masculinity was included in a theory of relations of power and multiple masculinities. Subsequently, in the seminal work *Masculinities* (1995), Connell more comprehensively theorizes the principle of multiple masculinities, which keeps contributing to the critical examination of masculinity and men, offering theoretical instruments appropriated to question different arrays of gendered social settings through interdisciplinary research (Wedgwood, 2009; Yang, 2020).

The multiple masculinities model proposed a hierarchical and structured framework of five types of comparative masculine performance working within clusters of men and amid men and women (Lucy, 2024). The governing exhibition of masculine performance in all sociopolitical settings is hegemonic masculinity as it exists as a culturally consented, discursively central arrangement of

practice located over all complicit, subordinate, protest and marginalized performances. Complicit masculinities gain incentives generated by hegemonic masculinity without challenging hegemony or expressing related performances, thus implicitly strengthening the hegemonic forms (Lucy, 2024). Subordinate masculinities refer to patterns of action dismissed from hegemonic masculine performance, with subjects of this subordinance facing physical and symbolic measures of violence, or social and political exclusion (Lucy, 2024). Masculinities shaped by additional axes of disadvantage beyond gender, such as race or class, become marginalized; men in these positions may enact "hypermasculinities" (Messerschmidt, 2019) as protest while lacking political and socioeconomic power. At the top of this order, hegemonic masculinity furthermore safeguards the subordination of femininities placed as lower socially compared to these hegemonic modes (Connell, 1987; Connell, 1995).

Connell's appropriation of Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony is central to understanding how hegemonic masculinity legitimizes unequal gender relations. Gramsci's account highlights that hegemony is historically contingent and continually contested and that it crucially depends on the consent of subordinated groups. In the same way, Connell's hegemonic masculinity attains dominance not only through coercion but through the legitimizing assent of those it subordinates (Lucy, 2024). Specific acts of masculinity get prominence inside different global, regional and local contexts during cultural exaltation of historically contingent, particular conformations of acts seen as superior, beneficial and necessary which concurrently invalidates alternatives: this endorsement of hegemonic masculinities discredits other masculinities performances, aside from femininities – naturalizing an unequal gender balance via the subordination of different performances seen as lower that the consensually celebrated ones (Lucy, 2024).

Messerschmidt (2012, 2015, 2019) underscored the mechanism of legitimization as the central function of hegemonic masculinity;

> "Hegemonic masculinities acquire their legitimacy by embodying materially and/or discursively culturally supported "superior" gender qualities in relation to the embodiment or symbolization of "inferior" gender qualities […] . In addition, hegemonic masculinities must be culturally ascendant to advance a rationale for social action through consent and compliance" (Messerschmidt, 2019, p. 17).

One typical example is the violence, strength and aggression displayed by army soldiers: in this setting, these qualities are collectively praised inside nationalist narrations, traits seen as indispensable to guarantee civilian protection and defend national goals (Lucy, 2024). Expressions coded as feminine as passivity or physical vulnerability are consequently framed as inferior

relative to these exalted masculine attributes (Connell, 1995). Therefore, a cycled process of both adulation of gendered characteristics as well as subordination of others results in the reinforcement of an unbalanced gender equilibrium (Lucy, 2024).

Kimmel (1992, 2006, 2013, 2014, 2018) adds to this perspective in masculinity studies, as he understands masculinity not as a fixed biological fact but rather as a social construction that is historically situated. Traditional, essentialist views of men present ideas of manhood as timeless, innate and universal: one either possesses it as an innate quality of masculinity or one does not. Cultural narratives often reinforce this belief, suggesting that masculinity is biologically driven by hormones, anatomy, or something as simple as perceived benefits associated with it in the greater environment of the masculine social order. Bly (1990) is cited as a poet who exemplifies essentialism, stating that "the structure at the bottom of the male psyche is still as firm as it was twenty thousand years ago" (p. 230) and therefore imparting masculinity as an essentialist, ahistorical quality. In this sense, manhood is presented as a deterministic characteristic, for which any form of social critique or alteration is a wasted effort and the roles a man must fulfill are experienced psychologically and socio-culturally as premised and sanctioned (Kimmel, 2006; Kimmel, 2013).

Through context-specific framing of masculinity (Kimmel, 2018), Kimmel instead argues that masculinity is produced, performed and negotiated through practice, culture and institutions (Kimmel, 2006; Kimmel, 2014). In a social sense, masculinity is relational as it exists in the collective of men and their social contexts (families, peer associates, media, workplaces…). Additionally, Kimmel situates masculinity in a theoretical framework that acknowledges its historicity: he suggests that masculinity is a convention that evolves in time and space while being affected by broader transformations in society (Kimmel, 2018). By providing historical context, this analysis allows scholars to examine how male behavior comes to be understood (whether framed as Stoicism, emotional restraint or more aggressive and dominating behaviors) in conjunction with macro-level societal conditions (e.g., political crises, economic downturns and booms, cultural phenomena, etc.), as well as by the expectations consciously and unconsciously internalized by men in society (Kimmel, 1992; Kimmel, 2006).

Importantly, recognizing that masculinity is socially constructed does not mean that men are trailing out. Rather it allows for agency, affording men the opportunity to reflect critically on their identities without the restraint typical of essentialist frameworks (Kimmel, 2014; Kimmel, 2018), enabling an alternative model of masculinity – one which can engage emotional expressivity, foster

egalitarian relationships, mitigate competition, or employ cooperation without detracting from their identity as men. By providing a sense of historical and social opportunity, Kimmel's paradigm is capable in theory to supplant the resigned hopelessness synonymous with the timeless, ahistorical notions of manhood and of masculinity (Kimmel, 2013; Kimmel, 2018).

Critical studies on men and masculinities insist that men are not neutral actors freed from gendered meaning but, like women, are produced through social relations, institutions and cultural practices. Drawing together Connell's typology of multiple masculinities, Kimmel's historical sociology of manhood and Butler's notion of gender as performance, European scholarship treats masculinity as relational, historically situated and contested (Hearn et al., 2002; Scambor et al., 2014; Wojnicka, 2015; Hearn et al., 2021; Scambor et al., 2024). From this vantage point, masculinities are best understood as outcomes of power struggles: they are patterns of practice that secure advantage for some men while marginalizing others and they change as economic structures, family arrangements and cultural repertoires shift across time and place.

Europe's diversity in welfare regimes, labor markets and social histories produces equally diverse masculinities. Comparative work shows distinct regional trends rather than consistent national types. For example, in Nordic nations, institutions and cultural patterns have created space for men to engage in fatherhood and domestic life differently, even while this does not eliminate men's dominance in power (Hearn et al., 2021; Scambor et al., 2014). Meanwhile, Southern European countries tend more strongly to the ideal of the traditional breadwinner, as men are less involved in domestic work and masculinity is also often linked to family honor, reputation and to rigid emotional expectations (Hearn et al., 2002). Central and Eastern European experiences are shaped by the specific legacies of late-socialist transformation: the post-socialist period saw both the erosion of some old roles and a retrenchment toward masculine norms in public and political life, a pattern that has had measurable consequences for men's health and social well-being (Hearn et al., 2002; Hearn et al., 2021).

These regional contrasts are not merely descriptive, they matter analytically because they show how hegemonic forms of masculinity are sustained through particular institutional arrangements. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity is useful here: this configuration in any given setting is not the only masculinity present, but it is the one that most effectively secures cultural consent and legitimization for male privilege (Connell, 1995). In the so-called progressive Scandinavia region, for example, state supports and normative expectations make certain caring practices practicable for men, yet the cultural elevation of particular masculine repertoires (like leadership in business,

performative toughness in security institutions) persists, so that caring masculinities often coexist awkwardly with still-powerful hegemonic norms (Scambor et al., 2024). In many Southern and post-socialist contexts, institutional arrangements do less to redistribute domestic burdens and therefore reproduce older hegemonic patterns more robustly.

A central empirical thread across European men's research is the link between dominant masculine ideals and patterns of violence and health risk. Research aggregated in EU comparative projects shows that men remain the principal perpetrators of most forms of interpersonal physical violence in Europe and that violent practice is shaped and rationalized by masculinities that prize strength, control and risk (Wojnicka, 2015). At the same time, particular groups of men, including racialized minorities, migrants, sexually non-conforming men, young men from deprived neighborhoods are disproportionately victimized or pushed into marginalized masculinities that confer neither authority nor protection (Wojnicka, 2015). The "costs of masculinity" (Hearn et al., 2002) appear in European epidemiological patterns (higher accident rates, elevated suicide rates and embedded patterns of help-avoidance) that intersect with class, ethnicity and regional economic dislocation. These patterns underscore Messerschmidt's point that masculinities are politically meaningful: they function as mechanisms for legitimizing particular distributions of power and for mobilizing consent to social arrangements that disadvantage many even as they privilege some (Messerschmidt, 2019).

At the same time, European research documents emergent forms of masculinity that complicate the hegemonic picture: Scambor and colleagues (2024) identify a growing tendency especially among younger, urban men in gender-progressive settings toward what they term "caring masculinities". These are not simply the retreat of men from public life or an individualized turn toward sentimentality, rather, they signal potential shifts in practice and valuation: men taking on routine childcare and emotional labor, valuing relational competence and redefining masculine dignity in non-dominative terms. Importantly, the emergence of caring masculinities is tightly bound to structural conditions such as welfare supports, labor market flexibility and the normative framing of care as public good – so that the phenomenon is unevenly distributed across Europe: in contexts where institutional supports are weak or economic insecurity is pronounced, caring practices by men may remain marginal and often contested (Scambor et al., 2024).

Intersectionality is indispensable for any European account of masculinities: men's experiences and capacities to enact alternative masculinities depend on their location in multiple hierarchies like class, race, migration status, sexuality and age. Over time, research across Europe has

highlighted that being a “real man” depends as much on one’s social position as on cultural expectations (Hearn et al., 2021). This helps explain why policies or cultural changes that seem to encourage alternative masculinities in one country may have a much smaller effect elsewhere: the same ideas or programs can play out very differently across social classes or ethnic groups, sometimes leaving some men untouched or even excluded.

In the end, masculinities are shaped by social and cultural forces as well as historical context. As Connell and Kimmel state, male identities are always in flux: they are continuously negotiated with respect to other men and they are always negotiated in their political and social context. This understanding of young European men reminds us, of course, that they are not to be seen as a single uniform group category, they are individuals whose lives and identities are generated within the dynamic social and cultural constructs that have shaped them.

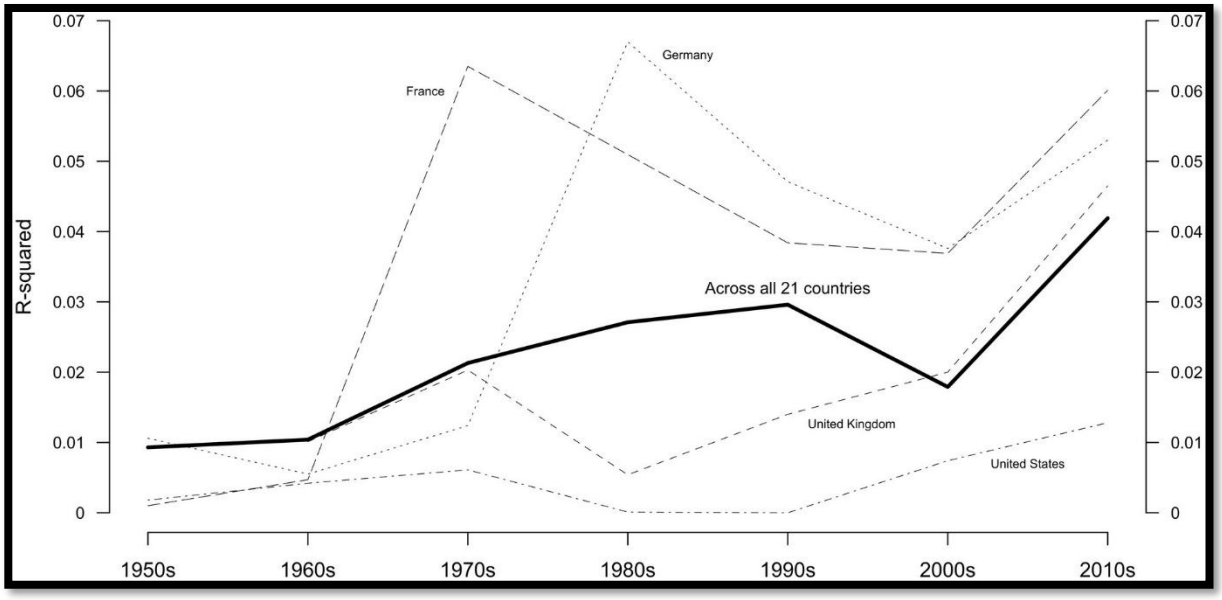
1.4 Youth, politics and culture: between engagement, alienation and anti-establishment

Major political parties in advanced industrial societies were established in the in the postwar period, when economic concerns dominated political discourse while social class and religion defined party competition (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The traditional economic left-right divide was largely founded on disagreements over the role of the state in the economy and welfare redistribution: on the one hand, labor union-affiliated, working-class parties supported comprehensive welfare states and Keynesian economic management on the left, on the other, conservative parties on the right supported free-market principles that reduced the role of the government (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

However, in many Western nations, the traditional left-right cleavage, which divided political parties over the economic role of markets and the state and was based on the traditional social identities of class and religion, has gradually lost significance since the early 1970s (Nieuwbeerta & De Graaf, 1999; Knutsen, 2017; Best, 2011; Evans & Tilley, 2012). Deepening cultural divides in the electorate have upset established party systems, according to Norris and Inglehart (2019). While economic issues like unemployment, healthcare, welfare, taxes and social justice are still significant problems, particularly during recessions and financial crises, the most contentious political issues in Western societies today are cultural in nature, involving immigration, border control, integration of ethnic minorities, terrorism related to Islam, same-sex marriage, LGBTQ rights, disagreements over the relative importance of national sovereignty versus international cooperation, issues of environmental protection and climate change (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Consequently, a number of studies have proposed that the citizens' generations may have emerged as a key predictor of their party choice, possibly surpassing or even displacing traditional social-demographic factors like social class or religion (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Fisher, 2020). According to an analysis of the differences between young and old voters in Western democracies, the gap has recently reached record proportions (Figure 1[1], Rekker, 2024).

Figure 1



Association between generation and vote choice across countries and decades. Note. Reprinted from "Electoral change through generational replacement: An age-period-cohort analysis of vote choice across 21 countries between 1948 and 2021," by R. Rekker, 2024, *Frontiers in Political Science, 6*, Article 1279888 (https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1279888).

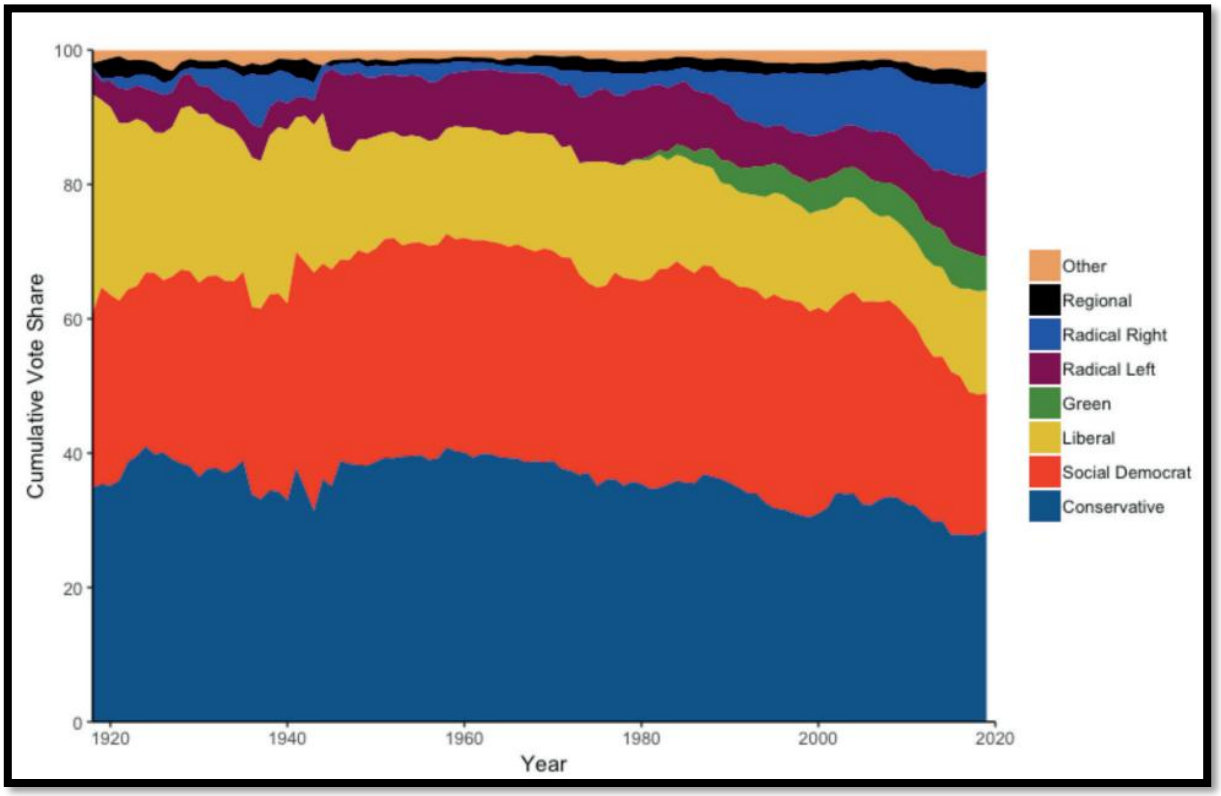
Because people form their most basic political orientations during adolescence or young adulthood, several studies demonstrate that citizens born during the same time period share significant socialization experiences (Rekker et al., 2015; Rekker et al., 2019; Neundorf & Smets, 2017; Rekker, 2024). Due to birth cohorts' historical and social experiences, which serve as the cultural foundation for their attitudes and values, intergenerational differences can arise. Through long-term population replacement processes, the makeup of society is progressively changed: new

[1] Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between generations and voting behavior across decades and nations including the four most populous Western countries. A linear regression with the respondents' year of birth as the dependent variable and dummy variables indicating which of the ten party families they voted for is used in the study to calculate adjusted R-squared values. According to the figure, when baby boomers started voting in the 1970s and 1980s generational differences in voting preferences increased. This was followed by a brief decrease and then they reached all-time highs when millennials and Generation Z gained the right to vote. According to the study most Western nations believe that the growing influence of citizens' generation on voting behavior is constant (Rekken, 2024).

people are added every day and some older people leave (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), which means that huge generational differences in political orientation can lead to stark transformation and disruption within electoral democracies.

These generational patterns have coincided with the emergence of challenger parties in Europe, which has been a major topic of discussion in the last decades. Due to the electoral decline of mainstream parties and the rise of political outsiders on both the right and left of the political spectrum, the usual patterns of European politics have been changing (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). On this note, particularly due to media coverage of challenger parties (especially those on the populist radical right), it may appear that the mainstream European party systems have virtually collapsed. However, a more thorough empirical analysis indicates that party competition patterns are more stable than recent events might imply (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

Figure 2



Vote shares (%) gained by traditional party families in parliamentary elections, 1919–2019. Note. Reprinted from "The rise of challenger parties" by C. De Vries and S. Hobolt, 2020, *Political Insight, 11*(3), p. 17.

European party politics are still fairly dominated by traditional party families, as can be seen if we plot the vote share by party family or political orientation over the past century. Looking at Figure 2 (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020), the three main party families, the Christian Democrats, the Social

Democrats and the Liberals, still make up a majority of the political landscape. However, it can be noted that a political fragmentation trend started in the early 1980s and has become increasingly noticeable in the past ten to fifteen years (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

The last two rounds of the European Elections serve as an example for this phenomenon: in 2019, the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group and the center-right European People's Party (EPP) group failed to secure a majority in the European Parliament (EP) for the first time ever (NBC News, 2019), with the liberal Renew Europe (RE) group compelled to join in order to secure a majority (Marsch Rico, 2025). More division further happened in the 2024 EP election, as the majority also required backing from the Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) group to hold a majority in the Parliament (Marsch Rico, 2025).

Since they have been demonstrated to be less supportive of traditional party politics (Franklin, 2004; Mair & van Biezen, 2001), young people in particular are more likely to experience this phenomenon. Their growing dissatisfaction can be partially attributed to mainstream European parties' and politicians' inability to shield their young people from the uncertainty affecting their life courses and previously described in subsection 1.1: for example, ensuring young people are in secure, livable-wage occupations (Woods, 2024).

Additionally, the overall youth unemployment rate for 15-24-year-old Europeans in 2023 was 13.8%. Sweden was 18%, Greece 27%, Italy 20% and Spain 27% (Eurostat, 2025; Woods, 2024). There has been some progress to tackle this problem: France's youth unemployment was 25% in 2016 and 15% in 2023, Italy's was 42% in 2014 and 22% in 2024, the Netherlands' was 13% in 2013 and 8% in 2023 and Germany's was 15% in 2005 and 6% in 2023. Nevertheless, there is mounting evidence that most young people will end up poorer than their parents, regardless of how hard they work, which has led to a decline in support for mainstream parties throughout the bloc (Doobs et al., 2016; Woods, 2024).

The issue is not limited to the labor market: young people in many European nations are also affected by faltering health-care systems, overcrowding classrooms (Generation, 2004, 2022) and housing crisis (Anderson, 2023). Young voters are becoming more concerned about who will solve their issues in light of growing rents, excessive tuition costs and stagnant real wages. On both sides of the political spectrum, non-mainstream politicians are more inclined to acknowledge the issue and are addressing it in ways that appeal to younger voters (Woods, 2024).

According to Heyne and Manucci (2021), the diminishing stigma of the authoritarian past is another factor associated with young Europeans' propensity to vote for unconventional political

parties instead of mainstream ones, which in Europe tend to take moderate center-right or center-left ideological and political positions. Due to the stigma attached to the previous authoritarian regime, there has been substantial evidence of the so-called anti-dictator bias in some European nations, which leads individuals and political parties to adopt anti-extremist stances (Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2020; Dinas, 2017). With the decline of this stigma, populist and extreme parties may have more opportunities to succeed (Manucci, 2019).

Young people also have weaker party attachments – as research indicates party identification and core beliefs about politics are primarily established in the early years and remain stable throughout adulthood. Perceptions of politics can be fundamentally altered by experiences in that period (being exposed to a historical moment, for example). Voting is also relevant since habitual party preferences are established in the first few elections and voters are often psychologically locked into a party, decreasing the chances of changing their vote later in life. As a result, even decades after, parties that experienced political success during a generation's formative years may still reap the benefits decades later (Rekker, 2024; Converse, 1969; Dinas, 2014; Meredith, 2009).

In addition to being from a different generation, younger voters may have different views from older voters due to their different life stages. Most notably, the Financial Times has referred to this as "the oldest rule in politics" (Burn-Murdoch, 2022): this relates to the notion that people become more conservative as they age (Rekker, 2024). Particularly, Winston Churchill supposedly once stated that anyone who was not a liberal at 20 years of age had no heart, while anyone who was still a liberal at 40 had no head (Burn-Murdoch, 2022).

The academic literature, despite these statements, is split on this issue (Rekker, 2024), as both sides have presented convincing theoretical arguments, backed by empirical data, for and against the idea that conservatism and aging are strongly related.

One side of this argument holds that shifting life priorities, financial interests and psychological needs may cause people to become more conservative as they get older. For instance, people may become less idealistic in middle adulthood as their focus shifts to more pressing personal issues due to work and family obligations (Peterson et al., 2020). As they age and advance in their careers, many people also amass financial resources, which may influence their financial interests in a more conservative direction. Age-related psychological changes associated with conservatism include a decrease in openness to new experiences and an increase in conscientiousness (Cornelis et al., 2009; Gerber et al., 2010; Specht, 2017). According to some research, aging increases the

likelihood of voting for the Conservative Party in Britain (Tilley & Evans, 2014), as well as for liberal and Christian democratic parties in Germany and Norway (Geys et al., 2022).

Contrarily, another strand of literature has concentrated on the extent of attitude change throughout life, regardless of its trajectory. Looking back to classical works (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1969), scholars have argued that as voters spend more time engaged in the electoral process, their political attitudes become increasingly stable. An extensive body of research has tried to confirm this theory (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991; Hobbs, 2019): people are less likely to switch parties as they get older and tend to continue voting for the same one, which reinforces their partisan identification (Meredith, 2009; Dinas, 2014). This increasing stability of attitude does not rule out the idea that people become more conservative as they age, but it does indicate that any later-life shift toward conservatism should be modest in scope (Peterson et al., 2020). In fact, some research (Tilley, 2005; Goerres, 2008) found no significant correlation between conservatism and aging after adjusting for generation. Another study that balanced both viewpoints on aging discovered that while a relatively small percentage of conservatives turn liberal as they age, very few liberals turn conservative (Peterson et al., 2020).

Regardless of the debate, empirical evidence suggests that the Millennial generation has taken on a trajectory of its own, as it was revealed that if Millennials were to follow past patterns, a 35-year-old would be roughly five percentage points less conservative than the national average and would progressively become more conservative. Actually, recent trends revealed how they are about 15 points less conservative, making them the least conservative 35-year-olds in history in both the US and Britain (Burn-Murdoch, 2022; Fisher, 2020).

Regarding young people and political participation, age is one of the best indicators of voter turnout, along with income and education (Zukin et al., 2006; Deželan, 2023). Young people's turnout is alarmingly low across a range of levels, regions and nations, according to numerous studies (López Pintor et al., 2002; Martin, 2012; Wattenberg, 2012; Albacete, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2016; Pickard, 2019; Deželan, 2023). Election Studies in Europe (Schmitt et al., 2016; Carteny et al., 2022) particularly indicate that there is a notable disparity between young people and other age groups and that youth absenteeism in the primary (national) political arena is surprisingly high. With an average of nearly 60% of eligible voters between the ages of 16–18 and 24 opting not to cast a ballot, European youth appear to be alarmingly uninterested in national elections (Deželan, 2023).

Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the low level of political participation among young people in Europe and the whole democratic world is a problem, both in terms of institutional politics and elections (Deželan, 2023). According to studies, younger people today are less involved in institutional politics than both previous generations in the past and other age groups in the present. The issue of youth political engagement is evident in the number of young people who participate in national, subnational and, in the case of the EU, European political arenas. Their lack of intention to run in future elections is another indication of the growing disinterest of young people in participating in traditional European politics, democratic processes and structures (Deželan, 2023).

The decrease in party membership seen in all European democracies is also indicative of the declining involvement of youth in institutional politics (Mair & Van Biezen, 2001): numerous studies have unequivocally shown that young people are becoming less involved as party members (Cross & Young, 2008; Hooghe et al., 2004; Deželan, 2023), which has a detrimental effect on young people's political representation and negatively impacts political parties' recruitment and mobilization efforts. Another signal of this phenomenon is the participation in political party and organization activities by young people, which is very uncommon: only roughly 5% of people aged 15 to 29 are involved in political party and organization activities (Deželan, 2023). Similar declines are seen in other traditional forms of participation, like active involvement in political groups, contacting public officials and taking part in election campaign activities (Deželan, 2023).

However, low turnout rates do not automatically equate to disengagement: by expanding the definition of political participation, the issue of youth participation shifts away from whether or not they participate to where they participate, as young people are more likely to participate in non-institutional forms of political participation (Norris, 2002; Martin, 2012; Deželan, 2023; Pickard, 2019). Since young people's understanding of politics does not provide for a strong distinction between traditional political institutions and day-to-day life, the political sphere's evolution increasingly blurs the division between politics and society, allowing political orientation and expression to become an everyday part of young people's lives (Soler-i-Martí, 2015; Deželan, 2023). Additionally, their engagement is based on ethical principles and includes daily decisions and actions on clothing, food, how to use public space, etc., which positions political issues on a broader spectrum that transcends conventional boundaries (Soler-i-Martí, 2015).

Traditional divisions or life-cycle explanations by themselves are insufficient to fully explain the political behavior of young people. Due to their weakened ties to mainstream parties, exposure to unstable career paths or labor conditions, economic uncertainty and societal challenges, they are more open to non-mainstream parties, as well as non-institutional forms of participation. The characteristics of youth political engagement include adaptability, moral reflection and a blurring of the lines between politics and daily life – with generational experiences, however perceived by each individual based on their socioeconomic conditions, shaping both their priorities and the ways they act politically.

1.5 The gender gap in political behavior: historical developments and trends

Similar to age or generation, gender has never been a definite cleavage in determining electoral choice, in contrast to class, religion, or geography (Lipset, 1981). Since there are cleavages that cut across both men and women, in the past their voting habits have not differed as much as upper-middle-class and worker voters, for example (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). However, gender has always been a topic of interest in political behavior studies since the early days of political culture research (Almond & Verba, 1963; Duverger, 1955), particularly in the U.S., where the gender gap became a recognized phenomenon. Research on presidential elections was conducted by a variety of social scientists, including Shapiro and Mahajan (1986), Trevor (1999), Giger (2009) and Carroll (1988).

Conversely, scholarly focus on gender disparities in elections in Europe has been lacking (Giger, 2009). However, a review of the literature indicates differing opinions regarding the gender gap in elections in Europe: according to Lipset and Rokkan (1967), Christian Democratic parties are favored and Communist and Socialist parties are disadvantaged by female suffrage everywhere in Western Europe. This pattern of female conservatism is described as well established in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, a notion also corroborated by Randall (1987), whose research found that women in Greece, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland tended to vote more conservatively. According to Baxter and Lansing (1983) and Mayer and Smith (1985), women's conservatism was frequently interpreted as a result of their religious beliefs, longer lifespans and social standing differences, especially in relation to their involvement in the paid workforce.

However, after the late twentieth century, the literature shifted: the extent and direction of gendered voting patterns are evaluated by cross-national comparisons and single-country studies in an inconsistent way (Giger, 2009). As women's social and economic statuses shift and partisan ties

weaken, gender disparities in party preference decrease according to a number of authors who support a process of convergence or dealignment (De Vaus & McAllister, 1989; Jelen et al., 1994; Norris, 1988). However, other empirical studies show women are moving more left, suggesting that gendered partisan preferences are, in fact, undergoing extensive change rather than simply converging (Listhaug et al., 1985; Rusciano, 1992). Additionally, another set of studies finds context-dependent fluctuations between countries and periods without a clearly discernible long-term trend (Norris, 1996; Oskarson, 1995; Walker, 1994).

Theoretical re-configuration was triggered by these conflicting results: a framework for gender realignment based on cultural and postmaterialist changes is put forth by Inglehart and Norris (2000, 2003) - stating that as societies modernize, women, particularly those in younger generations, become more sensitive to matters related to societal modernization (gender equality, welfare, environmentalism, etc.) and, as a result, more likely to support left and green parties. Their empirical surveys identify a "modern" gender gap in several postindustrial societies during the 1990-1995 period, although this pattern is initially not defined as universal: Finland and Spain, for example, were exceptions, with women leaning more to the right during that time (Inglehart & Norris, 2000). While women's conventional conservatism waned in industrialized democracies, Inglehart and Norris (2003) note that in certain situations, women's conservative inclinations lasted until the 1980s, though with the gap weakening.

Despite these theoretical advancements, the empirical picture remained fragmented because a large portion of the data was derived from cross-sectional snapshots rather than thorough longitudinal series. This restriction made it more difficult to determine whether these changes were due to variations in the measurements, period effects or cohort replacement (Giger, 2009). In order to address this, Giger's research (2009) provides a systematic, longitudinal analysis that employs repeated, year-by-year measures from comprehensive surveys, which deliver a more comprehensive picture of the electoral gender gap in Western Europe (Giger, 2009)[2]. Using standard vote-intention questions, the analysis (Giger, 2009) employs an operational definition

[2] In Giger's (2009) study, methodological safety measures are clearly stated: the application of four-year moving averages, which roughly correspond to a legislative period, smooths short-term noise while maintaining long-term trends, thereby reducing volatility related to the fluctuating temporal distance between waves and national election calendars. The Eurobarometer's vote-choice item was discontinued after 2000, which means that the longitudinal series must end there. As a result, more recent decades are not included in these analyses (Giger, 2009). In accordance with comparative precedents (Oskarson, 1995; Norris, 1996; Jelen et al., 1994) and gender-realignment literature (Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Inglehart & Norris, 2003), parties are grouped into "left" and "other" categories. Since there aren't many people who identify as green, the inclusion of green parties in the left category is justified on the basis of their shared views on social security and societal modernization (Giger, 2009).

common to most comparative literature: the electoral gender gap is defined as the difference between male and female support for left (including green) parties.

Two main conclusions are drawn from the empirical synthesis. First, strong evidence was found of a widespread European trend – from the 1970s to 2000, women's conservatism generally faded and women were more likely to support left-of-center parties (Giger, 2009). Out of the dozen Western European nations studied, almost all of them exhibit leftward shifts between the mid to late 1970s and 2000, according to trend coefficients – representing movement to the left among women voters (Giger, 2009). The magnitudes vary by country: some, like Italy and Belgium, show more moderate changes, while others, like the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Greece, show especially significant leftward shifts. By the late 1990s, none out of the sample countries maintained a classical "traditional" gender gap as this configuration seems confined to the 1980s and earlier (Giger, 2009).

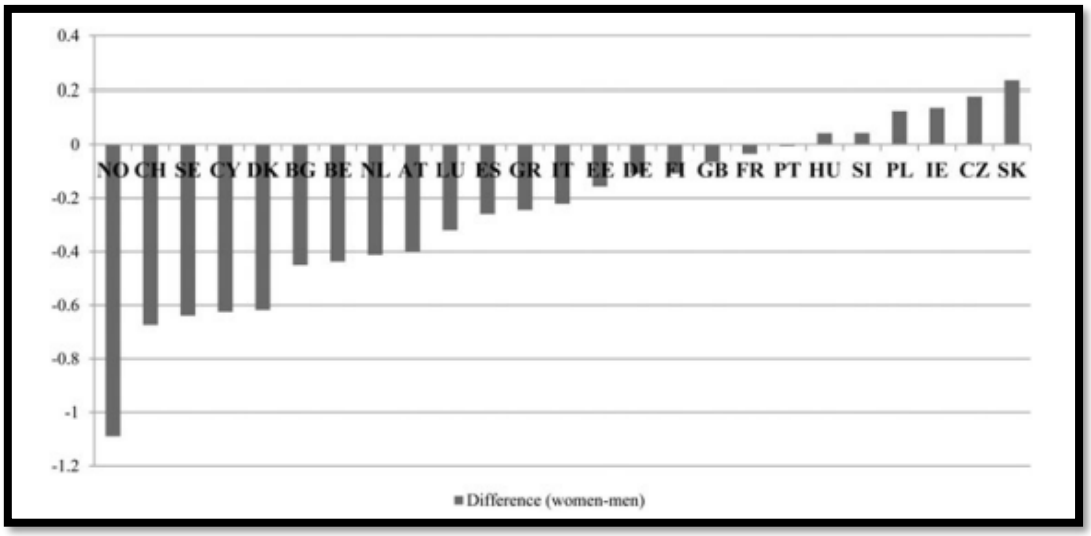
Second, it was found a great diversification in the speed and the timing of the shift from a traditional to a modern gender political gap (Giger, 2009): different countries occupy different positions along a three-phase scheme (traditional gender gap, gender dealignment, modern gender gap) rather than moving in unison from traditional to modern configurations. The dealignment phase began in the 1980s for some nations, but it started later for others, such as a number of Southern European nations. By 2000, some countries exhibit trends that are consistent with a modern gender gap, while others are still in dealigned or transitional phases where there isn't a discernible systematic gender difference. Giger's (2009) analysis also highlights the unpredictability of survey-based measures of vote intention; even after smoothing, country-level trajectories show significant variation, in part because of the timing of the survey in relation to national elections and other ephemeral factors.

The longitudinal and cross-national consistency of the female leftward trend (i.e. general movement away from female conservatism and toward left-leaning voting) constitutes strong evidence in support of the gender-realignment thesis, despite this volatility (Giger, 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). Overall, the literature - when complemented by long-term empirical analyses - points to a complex but comprehensible evolution: a fall in the traditional pan-European female conservatism of the 1950s and 1960s, a period of instability and dealignment that was concentrated in the 1980s and 1990s and the emergence of a modern gender gap in several advanced industrial democracies, which is marked by comparatively higher female support for those parties. The variations in timing and scale among countries demonstrate how

national political and cultural contexts, institutional legacies and modernization processes mediate these changes (Giger, 2009).

Abendschön and Steinmetz's research (2014) helps fill the lack of information and literature regarding the gender gap in post-communist, Central and Eastern European countries, as well as providing a snapshot of the gap's condition across the whole European Union during the 2000s. They come to the conclusion that it is reasonable to employ concepts of voting behavior elaborated via the study of Western Europe to the relatively "new" electoral democracies in Eastern and Central European countries (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). Similarly, the determining factors of party affiliation were found to be remarkably analogous in a comparative study by van der Brug et al. (2008) on vote choices in West and East Central Europe. Rudi (2010) suggests that electorates in Central and Eastern Europe associate approximately identical political content with the notions of left and right as Western Europe does – and therefore infers that related research can relate the concepts. Of course, this association is not to be mistaken for an assumption of similarity in behavior: these countries have had different cultural contexts and historical trajectories and – as will be shown – are exhibiting degrees of the gender gap in a variety of ways.

Figure 3



2008's modern gender voting gap for 25 European countries.

Note. The bars show the differences between the mean value of women minus the mean value of men on the left/right party placement scale (10 = right). A negative value indicates that women tend to prefer left-wing parties, whereas a positive value indicates that women tend to prefer right-wing parties. Reprinted from *The gender gap in voting revisited: Women's party preferences in a European context*, by S. Abendschön and S. Steinmetz, 2014, *Social Politics, 21*(2), p. 318 (https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxu009).

According to Abendschön and Steinmetz's analysis (2014) from the European Values Study's 2008 data, 18 of the 25 European sample countries exhibit the expected pattern of women voting more

for left-leaning parties, compared to men (Figure 3). However, in the majority of post-communist nations, such as Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia and Hungary, this pattern is inverted. Only Estonia and Bulgaria are two post-communist countries that also exhibit the modern gender voting gap (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). To a certain degree, this supports 1990s research (Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Inglehart & Norris, 2003), which found that most post-communist nations under study either exhibit a traditional gender voting gap or show no discernible difference between the male and female vote. Inglehart and Norris's developmental theory, which postulates that modernization processes responsible for the female shift toward the left party spectrum still needed to occur in former communist nations, therefore seems to be supported by the research (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). However, nearly two decades later, these findings beg the question of whether the traditional gender voting gap in these nations persists for reasons other than a lack of societal modernization processes – according to the authors (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). One could argue that cultural shifts take longer to occur, but there may also be political explanations for this trend: as described by Tavits and Letki (2009), leftist parties in post-communist nations were more likely to pursue traditional right-wing policies of fiscal responsibility and economic reform than the rightist counterparts themselves, which differed from those in West European democracies. In these nations, additionally, the experiences and the trauma endured during the Soviet and communist regimes may also play a role in the rejection of left-leaning parties and the embrace of nationalist ones (Brils et al., 2022). These particular political and historical environments may be the cause of women's increased hesitancy to support left-leaning parties (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014).

Additionally, it appears that Ireland is the only Western European nation that exhibits a traditional gender voting gap in 2008. Giger's (2009) analysis and Inglehart and Norris' (2000) studies both show that Irish women tended to vote more clearly to the left than Irish men, which makes this finding especially intriguing. Compared to research conducted in the 1990s, a noticeable gender voting gap was found in Luxembourg, Spain, Italy and Finland in the late 2000s (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). It appears that Portugal is the only nation where gender voting patterns have not changed significantly from the early 1990s to the late 2000s. Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, Cyprus and Denmark have the largest observed gender disparity, suggesting that women there are more likely than men to vote left (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014). Since the 1990s, female left voting has steadily increased in these nations, with the exception of Cyprus, for which comparable analyses are unavailable (Giger, 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

More recent studies (Dassonneville, 2021; Nennstiel & Hudde, 2025) have found that from the late 2000s to the end of the 2010s, the modern gender gap – when considering all countries collectively – has remained relatively stable.

Additionally, as shown in recent literature, no European country displays a traditional gender gap in political attitudes, proving right the expectations given in the theory of social modernization (Inglehart & Norris, 2000). The above-mentioned studies (Giger, 2009; Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014) – which covered earlier decades ranging from the 1950s to the 2000s – still somewhat found in their analyses traditional gender gaps, predominantly in post-communist and southern European countries. Nowadays, studies of various empirical surveys show that the traditional gender hardly exists anymore (Nennstiel & Hudde, 2025; Dassonneville, 2021; Koeppl-Turyna, 2021).

A specific digression on the determinant of the gender gap (specifically on why women should vote for more leftist parties) can be divided into individual-level and macro-level determinants.

The literature on the modern gender voting gap identifies two complementary individual-level explanations: socio-structural/situational factors and cultural/attitudinal factors.

Socio-structural accounts stress that women's changing social and economic position, greater economic independence, higher labor-force participation, disproportionate exposure to low-paid or precarious employment and transformations in family structure heighten incentives to support left-leaning parties and de-familiarizing welfare policies (De Vaus & McAllister, 1989; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2006).

Cultural and attitudinal accounts, by contrast, emphasize value change: the spread of post-materialist and feminist ideas, the weakening of religious ties and the growing salience of "soft" issues (welfare, equality, environment, etc.) have reshaped women's political orientations toward the left (Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Giger, 2009).

Additionally to the individual-level determinants, Abendschön and Steinmetz (2014, p. 319) bring attention to the importance of macro-level determinants:

> "[…] They [referring to macro-level determinants] have rarely been considered as additional explanatory factors, nor have they been tested in comprehensive analyses. […] We argue that the observed cross-national gender differences in voting cannot only be explained by the individual voter's socio-economic situation and political values. In contrast, the socio-economic, cultural and political climate that is predominant in the country must be factored into the equation."

Particularly, they consider on the one hand the socio-structural/situational contexts of the countries: higher female labor-force participation and greater employment vulnerability tend to increase women's propensity to vote left, part-time employment is ambiguous (it may signal either traditional preference or lack of family–work support) and higher female unemployment or greater female tertiary attainment are likewise linked to changes in left-voting by women. Lower women- and family-directed public expenditure may also push women toward leftist parties. (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014).

On the other hand, they also include the cultural-attitudinal contexts of the countries: elevated levels of post-materialism, stronger legal gender equality and a pro-gender-equality environment reinforce women's left-leaning tendencies. Higher divorce rates (reflecting both economic risk and autonomy) are also associated with greater female support for left parties. Conversely, predominant Catholic affiliation stifles female left-wing voting.

In sum, the literature reviewed suggests a complex historical trajectory: classical female conservatism dominated much of Europe in the post-war decades; varied empirical findings from the late twentieth century and recent cross-national works documenting the emergence of a modern gender gap and the gradual disappearance of the traditional gender gap, along with persistent cross-regional differences. Overall, the evidence generally points to the gender realignment thesis put forth by Inglehart and Norris: women's increasing educational attainment, employment and exposure to progressive cultural change are among the factors that have contributed to a long-lasting shift in female partisan preferences to the left, in contrast to men.

This first chapter has shown how the social and cultural factors that influence the political orientations of young Europeans are being reshaped by changes in youth life-courses, the digital resurgence and spread of feminist repertoires and the pluralization and contestation of masculinities. By addressing intersectional feminist claims, affective and performative aspects of masculine identity, structural precarity, labor-market instability and the affordances of online networks, I articulated a succinct yet comprehensive framework that explains both the persistence of previous gender gaps and the unique dynamics that are emerging among younger cohorts. Any gendered pattern is likely to differ by class, education, region, race and political opportunity structures, rather than manifest as a single, monolithic effect. The chapter emphasizes heterogeneity and contingency by embedding these mechanisms in a variety of national and social structures. As a result, this mechanism-oriented approach privileges empirical scrutiny over

presumption while equipping the dissertation with the conceptual tools needed to evaluate competing explanations.

2. The New Politics Among Gen Z

2.1 The political culture of Generation Z: values, activism and ideological shifts

Beginning with Mannheim's work, the idea of generations has a long history, particularly in Europe (Mannheim, 1927). As early as the eighteenth century, the idea of generational differences was recognized (Cobb, 2006): according to this theory, a generation's social and political surroundings simultaneously shape its members during their formative years. Furthermore, each generation maintains a largely consistent set of values from its early years, albeit one that is lived differently (Howe & Strauss, 2007). The time periods that each generation covered are still somewhat debated on, nonetheless, the majority of researchers (Howe & Strauss, 2007; McCrindle, 2014; Scholz, 2019) agree on the current presence of five generations.

The Silent Generation was born up to 1949. In this group, the experiences of the Second World War and the immediate aftermath play a lot of importance. As a consequence, survival, recovery and taking chances when they arise are essential for them. While their lives were dominated by hard work, the Silent Generation took their first real vacation, bought their first car and made an effort to better their own circumstances. Although the majority of the Silent Generation is now retired, some continue to fight for their place in history by working in institutions such as politics. Additionally, a handful of them took every possible risk and became extremely wealthy (Scholz, 2019).

A focus on work, hard work, was (and frequently still is) also important to Baby Boomers (1950-1964). The Vietnam War, witnessing humans set foot on the moon, attending rock concerts like Woodstock, listening to visionary politicians and the energy crisis (four Sundays without cars in Germany) have all influenced the collective consciousness. For the US, we must include politicians such as John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Technology was also significant at the time, as the first television set and the first movies and series were introduced into the living room. Additionally, we must include the student uprisings in both the U.S. and Europe, which aimed to establish a more democratic, open and equitable educational system that favored the people over corporations. This somewhat idealistic generation sought to make the world a little better, in addition to bettering their own lives (Scholz, 2019).

Douglas Coupland, in his 1991 novel *Generation X*, partially accurately characterized Generation X (1965-1979) as a generation that finds life more difficult than it was in the past. Accordingly, we witnessed a gloomier outlook on each person's professional future (Scholz, 2019): jobs are sometimes viewed as little more than ways to maximize their personal lives. Furthermore,

Generation X had trouble connecting with their parents and teachers. In many instances, Generation X is viewed as the backbone of the workforce that lays the foundation for some Baby Boomer visions (Scholz, 2019).

Millennials (1980-1995) are completely different from all previous generations: according to Scholz (2019), this disproves the theory that generations are to be interpreted as merely a pendulum that swings back and forth. With the advent of the personal computer and later the Internet, information technology truly took over for Millennials. Initial promises of success and wealth (Scholz, 2019), but followed by global crises, austerity and instability:

> "Millennials are seen as characterized by experiences of exclusion and repression: They present themselves as belonging to a precarious, lonely, threatened and orphaned generation–socially weak, culturally alone and politically abandoned." (Della Porta, 2019, p. 1586).

Gen Z, short for Generation Z (1996-2012), is currently the youngest generation present in Europe able to vote – excluding the not-yet-of-age Generation Alpha (Höfrová et al., 2024), which is therefore not considered in this analysis.

Globally, some estimates from American scholars claim that Generation Z might outnumber Millennials (Wood, 2018). In 2019, it was projected that Gen Zers would take over as the biggest generation. However, in Europe, the situation is context-specific: the percentage of children and young people (those under 29) has been gradually decreasing, dropping from 38.1% in 1999 to 31.8% present in the EU today (Milotay, 2020).

Indeed, the majority of European countries have low birth rates, compared to those in most nations of Asia and Africa. There are notable intra-national variations as well, as certain areas in northern Italy, eastern Germany and Spain exhibit notably low youth shares. According to projections, the percentage of young people will continue to fall, reaching 28.6% by 2052 and only marginally recovering after that without surpassing 2019 levels, even as the EU's total population rises to its peak by the mid-2020s (Milotay, 2020).

Numerous defining characteristics of Gen Z are found in surveys that are primarily conducted in English-speaking contexts, frequently for commercial purposes (Deloitte, 2025). This generation is described as self-aware, persistent, realist, innovative and self-reliant, in contrast to Millennials. Generation Z is claimed to be the best educated per capita (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), as well as open to emerging social trends and focused on seeking the truth, both individually and as a group (Milotay, 2020).

In Europe, Gen Z is extremely diverse, although unevenly so, in terms of culture and socioeconomic status. In Luxembourg, for example, the share of foreign-born children in the 0-14 age group is the highest in the EU, with one fifth born outside the national boundaries – compared to rates as low as 0.7% in Croatia and 1.1% in Czechia. The foreign-born shares of young adults (15–29) are highest in Luxembourg, Cyprus, Malta, Austria and Sweden, while they are lowest in Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Latvia (Milotay, 2020). Socioeconomic vulnerability is also important, since in many OECD nations inter-generational class mobility has stalled from the 1990s (Milotay, 2020). In the EU, the youngest people are found to be especially vulnerable to unemployment and poverty. Poverty in particular requires a broader multidimensional perspective and, looking across several other dimensions of poverty, about 30% of children are affected in high-income countries. These differences have been made worse by the post-2008 recession era, with younger people under 25 years old now having a nearly ten percentage point higher chance of living in poverty than older generations (Chen et al., 2018).

Regional variations exist in the attitudes and expectations of Gen Z in Europe (Milotay, 2020). Priorities identified by pre-pandemic surveys and early pandemic follow-ups include mental health, meaningful workplaces, community involvement, environmental sustainability and inequality reduction (Deloitte, 2025). The environment is not always the top priority, but Gen Zers in Europe typically show more concern for it than their US counterparts (de Weck & Ferguson, 2019). The majority think that the private sector is crucial to creating jobs and also have a generally favorable opinion of globalization. In Europe, there are still East–West divides, though, as younger people in many eastern Member States continue to hold more conservative opinions on matters like definitions of citizenship and same-sex marriage. A tendency toward conservatism is reinforced in some Eastern European contexts by the ongoing migration of educated youth from the East to the West, which further shapes political and demographic dynamics (Milotay, 2020).

Additionally, it's crucial to underline that the defining trait of Gen Z is their unique position as the first generation to grow up entirely in a world shaped by the Internet. Despite some cross-country variations, Gen Zers in OECD nations have almost universal access to the Internet (Milotay, 2020). This generation has never experienced life without its pervasive influence and as a result, their behaviors and attitudes are fundamentally intertwined with the digital world (Cervi, 2021).

Social media platforms such as TikTok, BeReal and Instagram are favored by this generation due to the appeal of authenticity and a sense of community that they feel lacking in real life or other spaces (Boffone, 2022), as mentioned in the previous chapter.

> "Leaning into the "social" of social media, they view TikTok and BeReal in much of the same way that previous generations might have approached sociality at school, on sports teams, at church, or in clubs. As these social practices disseminate on social media, youth begin to establish complex systems of culture, aesthetics, ethics, and social norms that spill into offline spaces and, in the process, distill and establish generational culture." (Boffone, 2022, p. 1)

As English is seen as the language dominating the Internet, the United States of America is widely regarded as the superpower with the most significant impact on the virtual space. The country's media influence and cultural imprint have been extensively debated. In the late 1990s, the iconic term "McDonaldization" burst onto the scene of sociological reflection on consumption (Camozzi, 2019). The term was proposed by sociologist George Ritzer (1993), according to whom the growing popularity of the well-known fast-food chain would fuel a process of McDonaldization of American society and the rest of the world in general.

> "For all the talk of "world culture" – and the undoubted evidence of constant American borrowings from diverse sources – it remains true that, unlike flows of capital, the flows of cultural influence tend to increasingly favor the United States, and overseas-owned corporations often contribute to this (...) Producers of 'Canadian' popular culture confront an audience socialised into American music, film and genre fiction. Whatever they produce can only be a 'Canadian version' of 'the real thing.'" (Altman, 2001, p. 31).

In this sense, the centrality of American cultural production in shaping global youth imaginaries has direct implications for the discussion on European Gen Z. Even though their lived political and institutional realities are rooted in European contexts (Scholz, 2019), their cultural repertoires are deeply influenced by American platforms, celebrities and discourses circulating online. The digital sphere (dominated by American companies and creators) acts especially for Europe's Gen Z both as a crucial space of socialization and as the main conduit for cultural imperialism.

As a consequence, a large portion of the symbolic language used by Gen Zers in Europe to express their identities, values and cultural positionings comes from an Americanized digital environment. Although they are actively appropriated and reinterpreted within European contexts, rather than being passively imported (Scholz, 2019) – it is still justified to discuss American-centric historical events, case studies and cultural trends as analytical points of reference for comprehending the European Generation Z.

During pre-pandemic 2020, global superstar and TIME's 2023 person of the year, Taylor Swift, released a song titled *Only the Young* (Brow & Norwin, 2020). The track, widely described as a political anthem and a tribute to the next generation of activists (Sheffield, 2018), gives voice to

Swift's disillusionment with society by issuing a defiant warning to older generations on how their greed and failure to act have given rise to a youth movement determined to bring change. She does this by alluding to the first term of US President Donald Trump, the 2016 presidential election, the following vote tampering allegations, issues like gun violence, school shootings and climate injustice (Brow & Norwin, 2020; Sheffield, 2018; Kaufman, 2020).

The narrative that Swift embraced in the song echoed global media portrayals of Gen Z's political participation and activism – and for a number of reasons. Starting from the late 2010s until the early 2020s, Gen Z-led cross-national protests, both online and offline, covered a wide array of issues and resulted in headlines and political commentaries on the generation's emerging ideologies.

In August 2018, 15-year-old Greta Thunberg, a Swedish citizen, demanded that her government implement the objectives of the Paris Agreement by engaging in a boycott of school attendance (Biswas, 2021). Her act of civil disobedience echoed around Europe and the world – and attracted vast support from several climate activist groups led by youth like Anuna De Wever in Belgium, Luisa Neubauer in Germany and others (Biswas, 2021). By 2019, kindergarten and schoolchildren, along with other empathizers, began striking school regularly in all parts of the world (Holmberg & Alvinius, 2020). UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres, after the global deep strike on 15th March 2019, acknowledged that his generation had failed to tackle the challenge of climate change (Biswas, 2021).

The brutal death of George Floyd during a police arrest in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, triggered unprecedented mass mobilizations – some of the largest in US history (Beaman et al., 2023). According to several surveys, up to 26 million American citizens participated in the protest wave, with an average of about 140 organized events daily. In particular, June 6 represented the peak of the 2020 mobilization, with half a million people protesting in 550 locations (Buchanan et al., 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement has spread beyond the USA, with a surge of anti-racist protests across Europe (Beaman et al., 2023): the mobilizations were exceptional in terms of both the number of protest events and the sheer number of participants. A study on the movement in Denmark, Poland, Germany and Italy has found a total of nearly 300,000 participants in 278 protests, which represents an unprecedented mobilization for the rights of Black people in Europe (Milman et al., 2021). Another feature deemed as exceptional (Beaman et al., 2023) was the amount of engagement that the movement had with young, Gen Z Europeans – partially due to the related TikTok activism online (Kennedy, 2020).

On a EU institutional level, influences of these youth-sensitive, activism-driven issues can be identified during those years: anti-racist policies were developed (Beaman et al., 2023); the European Green Deal – proposed by von der Leyen Commission and backed by the European Council – was approved (European Interest, 2020); the declaration, through a EP resolution, of the European Union as a "LGBTIQ freedom zone" (Sharma, 2021); and even the apparent disruption of the austerity-oriented status quo through the EU27 approval of the NextGenerationEU – a fiscal and policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic, involving common EU-wide borrowing of 750 billion euros in grants and loans to tackle its social and economic consequences (De la Porte & Jensen, 2021).

Other instances of TikTok being used as a platform to fight right-wing populism and ideology include the episode in which users claimed to have registered hundreds of thousands of tickets for Trump's rally in Oklahoma, as a way to boycott him into having a 19,000-seat auditorium barely filled or completely empty. The collective, digital and transnational action ended with Trump's campaign having to cancel scheduled events outside the rally for an overflow crowd that never appeared (Lorenz et al., 2020). Allegedly, as one of the consequences, the Trump administration launched legal procedures to ban the platform in the United States (Brown, 2020). Some months later, at the American 2020 presidential elections, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris managed to defeat Trump – supported by a strong mandate from Gen Z Americans, who overwhelmingly voted for the Democratic Party ticket (Igielnik et al., 2021).

Then, in 2024, the story changed: the same president who had previously attempted to outlaw the app openly used TikTok as a campaign tool – later attributing his success to the platform in interviews after the election (The Guardian, 2025b).

This changing media ecology exemplifies why, in the last couple of years, the image of a uniformly "woke" Gen Z has been called into question by recent election results. As Hill (2024) documents, the 2024 U.S. presidential election revealed a notable rightward movement among many young voters (especially men) with exit polls and county-level analyses showing sizable variation since 2020. Crucially, this shift is not peculiar to the United States. In Europe, the same platform has recently been exploited by far-right politicians: when looking at the 2024 European elections, figures such as Jordan Bardella (France's National Rally) and Maximilian Krah (Germany's AfD) cultivated influencer-style TikTok and Instagram presences that resonated with Gen Z audiences, combining polished aesthetics, aspirational masculinity and populist messaging to attract and mobilize the young electorate (Samuel & Jackson, 2024).

Taken together, the evidence undermines the stereotype of a monolithic "woke" Gen Z: political orientations within the cohort can be heterogeneous and especially gendered. By focusing on gender-specific digital and offline behaviors, patterns and mobilizations, the following parts of this chapter will be crucial to explaining these dynamics.

2.2 Feminist and progressive mobilizations among Gen Z women

Historically, there is an extensive literature that addresses political participatory inequalities between women and men. Regarding earlier data, one of the most important groundbreaking studies, Schlozman et al. (1994), looked at gender disparities in participation, especially as they relate to various forms of civic engagement in the US. Differential processes of social learning and adult roles that centered women in the private domain of the home were cited as the reason for the gender gap (Schlozman et al., 1994).

Schlozman and colleagues (1995) examined related questions by analyzing the notion that women are more likely than men to base their participation on concern for the welfare of the community, to be active on behalf of issues involving children and families, human welfare and broadly shared interests like international peace or consumer or environmental concerns. However, they pointed out that by focusing solely on formal repertoires, political scientists are ignoring participation repertoires that are also essential for the study of gendered political participation.

Young women and political participation have comparatively little research, despite the fact that there is a well-developed literature relating to youth inequalities and gender inequalities in political participation (Taft, 2010). A few studies nevertheless tackle this topic: girls are described as preferring involvement more associated with social movements, while boys preferred more radical and confrontational forms (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004). A study by Campbell and Wolbrecht (2006) examined how young women's political participation in the US was influenced by female role models. In addition, qualitative studies like Gordon's (2008), which drew from ethnographic research with two high school student movement organizations on the US West Coast, reveal that young women face more resistance from their families to their involvement, particularly when there is a perceived risk.

Additionally, earlier studies have argued that girls and women are generally socialized to be nice (Babcock et al., 2003), courteous (Smith-Hefner, 1988) – and to try not to offend people (Fuchs and Thelen, 1988; Garner and Power, 1996), so they may steer clear of potentially divisive activities like publicly engaging in politics (Bode, 2017).

While historical and conventional accounts have often portrayed women as politically disengaged or confined to private, domestic spheres, the evidence from Grasso and Smith (2021) challenges this view, showing that, nowadays, Gen Z women actively participate in issue-driven, non-conventional political activities: by focusing on 9 European countries their analysis on Gen Z women's political participation indicates that they demonstrate a distinctive pattern of engagement.

Particularly, Gen Z women are more participating in specific political activities than their male counterparts, including volunteering, boycotting, ethical shopping and petitioning (Grasso & Smith, 2021). Young women seem to respond especially well to these forms of political participation, which are frequently more localized, issue-specific and less confrontational. This supports the importance of gendered repertoires of action mentioned in other studies (Fisher, 2019; Grosse, 2019; Valdini, 2019).

On the other hand, compared to men, Gen Z women typically participate in less formal, traditional forms of political engagement. Joining political parties, attending political gatherings and corresponding with politicians are all activities less participated by Gen Z women. More specifically, they favor engagement strategies that emphasize community, issue or group-oriented action, which accounts for their lower involvement in these conventional spheres rather than a lack of general political interest (Grasso & Smith 2021).

According to these findings, Gen Z women are very active in grassroots and participatory forms of political engagement that involve specific, issue-oriented actions, despite their underrepresentation in formal political structures and online political spaces (Grasso & Smith 2021).

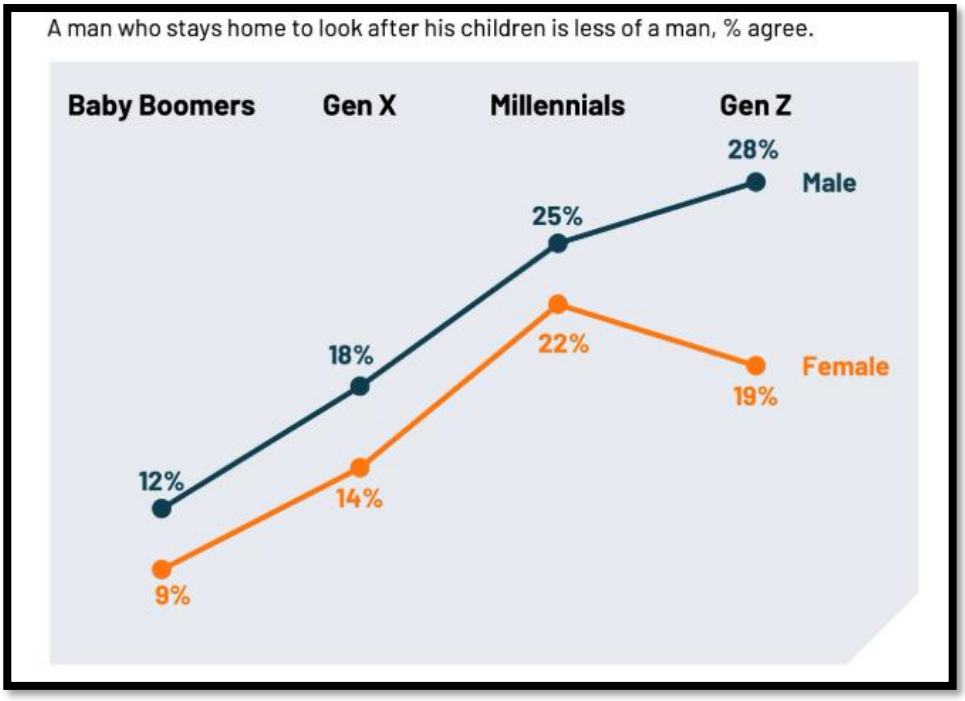
A study by Langsæther and Knutsen (2024) reveals that women are consistently more progressive than men in 14 European democracies on five different dimensions: gender equality, immigration, economic ideology, environmentalism and moral traditionalism, claim Langsæther and Knutsen (2024).

The biggest and most pronounced gender gap is found in attitudes toward gender equality, with notable differences for environmentalism and left–right economic positioning. Women are rarely less progressive than men across the 84 estimated gender coefficients, with coefficients for immigration orientation and moral traditionalism smaller but usually significant. Crucially, their age-moderation analyses reveal that these gender disparities are more pronounced in younger cohorts, with Gen Z women being noticeably more progressive on these issues than Gen Z men. Additionally, Langsæther and Knutsen (2024) report cross-national variation, with smaller gaps in

a number of Southern and Catholic contexts and larger, more consistent gaps in wealthier Northern and Protestant countries.

Recent global data further highlights the glaring gender gap among Gen Z with regard to feminism, gender roles and women's rights. Ipsos UK and King's College London's Global Institute for Women's Leadership 30-country study (King's College London, 2025) found that Generation Z is more divided than any other generation on important issues pertaining to gender equality – with stark changes coming from Gen Z women. For instance, they identify as feminists at a rate of 53%, whereas Gen Z men only identify as feminists at 32%, representing the largest gender gap between generations (King's College London, 2025). In comparison, even men from older generations, such as Baby Boomers, are slightly more likely than men from Generation Z to identify as feminists and women from those generations are less likely to do so than their younger female counterparts (King's College London, 2025). The perception of women's equality advancement also differs by 21 points between genders, with 36 percent of Gen Z women and 57 percent of Gen Z men thinking it has progressed too far. Women of Generation Z are considerably more progressive and therefore far more likely to embrace feminist ideals than women in previous generations (King's College London, 2025): they have reversed the trend, ongoing in the past three generations, of increased belief in the fact that a man who stays at home to look after his children is less of man (Figure 4).

Figure 4



Gen Z attitudes on whether a man who stays home to look after his children is less of a man. Note. Reprinted from *"Gen Z men and women most divided on gender equality, global study shows,"* by King's College London, 2025, King's College London (https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/gen-z-men-and-women-most-divided-on-gender-equality-global-study-shows).

Women from Generation Z have become key players in collective action throughout Europe, especially in mobilizations motivated by identity politics. Their activism frequently takes the form of strikes, large-scale protests and street demonstrations – where progressive ideals, gender identity and generational belonging converge. When seen historically, they are both numerically and symbolically significant, changing protest cultures and action repertoires.

Poland's Constitutional Tribunal declared on October 22, 2020, the unconstitutionality of abortions in cases where a fetus is found to have a serious and permanent birth defect. The ruling terminated the so-called abortion compromise, a law that had been in effect in the country since 1993 and permitted voluntary pregnancy termination in specific situations (Gliszczyńska-Grabias & Sadurski, 2021). Following a formal request from 119 members of Parliament, all of whom belonged to right-wing, socially conservative parties, the tribunal revised this piece of legislation (i.e., Konfederacja and PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość). Consequently, abortion is now only permitted in Poland in situations involving rape, incest, or when the life of a pregnant woman is in danger (Wigura & Kuisz, 2020). Given that 96 percent of all legal abortions performed in Poland in 2018 were due to fetal defects, this legislative change has resulted in a near-total ban of voluntary pregnancy termination (Szczepańska & Marchlewska, 2023).

Following the publication of the ruling, the All-Poland Women's Strike organized several large-scale street protests in both large and small Polish cities. At its height, the protests gathered up to 400,000 people in about 400 locations throughout the nation (Szczepańska & Marchlewska, 2023). Despite the government's restrictions on public gatherings due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Garda World, 2020), these protests continued throughout the rest of 2020 and into 2021, since the new law only entered into force on January 27, 2021.

As stated in Szczepańska & Marchlewska's study (2023):

> "[…] the All-Poland Women's Strike clearly seems to have shed new light on civic participation among Poles. It has shown that many people–especially young women–are willing to fight for their rights and are ready to do so even less conventionally, choosing non-normative (i.e., street protests) rather than normative (e.g., electoral voting, petition signing) forms of political participation." (p. 56)

Looking at Spain, a 24-hour four-part strike was called by the feminist movement 8M on March 8 2018, with the slogan "If we stop, the world stops". The strike called on women to stop working, stop going to school, stop providing care and stop consuming. A lengthy protest cycle and extensive decentralized planning served as the foundation for the strike, which specifically

mobilized young women and adolescents who had been politicized by previous waves of conflict (most notably the 15M movement) (Campillo, 2019).

According to Campillo (2019), this preparatory phase – which included seven working committees, monthly local and state-level meetings and extensive alliance-building – transformed weak institutional resources into a powerful, geographically distributed organizational capacity that attracted a sizable number of younger participants to visible collective action. Young generations, including Gen Z women, were both central in terms of numbers and symbolism. Care and household duties were positioned at the center of the dispute, along with demands on gender violence, reproductive rights, labor precarity, pensions and the wage gap (Campillo, 2019).

Young women's political agency was made more visible in towns and cities that had previously been inaccessible to widespread mobilization, thanks to the strike's innovative forms of cultural and symbolic participation, such as mass gatherings, train blockages and pots-and-pans protests (Campillo, 2019): 8M's political impact was multifaceted and immediate.

Due to massive strikes in large factories, widespread protests in Spanish cities and extensive media coverage, feminist issues gained national attention and influenced party responses and policy changes. Various studies (i.e., Campillo, 2019; Reverter & Medina-Vicent, 2022) provide examples of how the strike affected public sentiment and produced observable political outcomes, including symbolic changes in party rhetoric and policy suggestions embedded in the subsequent budgetary agreement. Many younger participants reported feeling more feminist and more confident that collective, issue-focused action could lead to real change, which accelerated Gen Z women's political socialization and recruitment into long-term activism (Campillo, 2019).

Another case study on Gen Z women's recent feminist mobilization is the French collective NousToutes. The movement was founded in 2018 with the specific goal of preventing sexist and sexual violence against women and children in metropolitan France and the overseas territories. It emerged from petition networks and activist initiatives following the #MeToo wave (France 24, 2018). In a clear attempt to make gendered urban invisibility visible in public, the collective launched a high-visibility campaign in Paris in early March 2019 that included placing thousands of fake street signs with the names of women and victims underneath official plaques. Its local actions and nationwide marches later that year attracted sizable crowds, indicating a quick transition from online testimony to offline collective capacity and public salience (Nori, 2022).

When combined, the case studies from Poland, Spain and France show how Gen Z women have emerged as key players in feminist movements throughout Europe. In all of these situations, they

blend issue-specific, localized activities with highly visible public interventions, exhibiting a range of engagement strategies that are flexible and creative and frequently deviate from the more traditional methods preferred by previous generations of feminist women and movements (Portos, 2019).

Shifting from the offline to the online world, social media nowadays is undoubtedly an integral part of activism, affording accessible and wide-reaching ways for individuals to mobilize around political and social issues, especially among the youth (Brodovskaya et al., 2022; Gitomer et al., 2024; Le Compte & Klug, 2021). TikTok, the quintessential Gen Z platform (Dohest, 2025), is increasingly lauded for its contribution to digital activism, given its innovative algorithm and video-based format – generating individual engagement as well as collective mobilization (Gitomer et al., 2024; Le Compte & Klug, 2021). Participating in activist activities is enabled through the platform's basic functionalities – therefore, the dissemination of the content conforms perfectly to TikTok's casual and low-production nature of videos, rendering it more accessible (Brodovskaya et al., 2022; Lampe, 2025; Le Compte & Klug, 2021).

The social media network, hence, stimulates imitation publics, where the point of participation is reproduction as opposed to dialogue: users add themselves to a digital collective just by joining a trend, sharing a sound or becoming part of a challenge (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

> "Thus, TikTok should be recognized not merely as an entertainment platform, but as a dynamic site where public discourse, digital activism, and socio-political education are taking place. Rather than using social media simply as a space for personal expression, young activists are leveraging the platform's affordances to build momentum for political causes in ways that emphasize collectivity and strategic message dissemination." (Lampe, 2025, p.33).

This potential for activist practices naturally extends to gendered political awareness, especially for Gen Z women consuming feminist content on TikTok. Instances such as the 2021 killing of Sarah Everard in the UK exemplify how the dissemination of gendered violence – through viral media sharing and TikTok's algorithms – triggers emotional and cognitive responses that contribute to feminist socialization (Pomerantz & Field, 2022). Short videos of online harassment, police violence, public commentary are media representations that contribute to offering young people an emotionalized, more immediate depiction of systemic gendered injustice. This exposure serves to not only draw attention to the widespread nature of sexual violence but also to nurture a counter-position that conflicts with male-focused discourses that dismiss or displace responsibility, evident in the responses to hashtags such as #NotAllMen (Pomerantz & Field, 2022).

The multimodal character of TikTok (mixing video, sound, text, performance, etc.) allows Gen Z women to incorporate collective experiences of oppression in an extremely immersive manner, a notion Pomerantz and Field (2022) have conceptualized as “radical media engagement”.

Trends like “Kill All Men” (Yu, 2022) and the “Men or Bear” dilemma (Greer et al., 2025) demonstrate ways in which humor and irony work to deconstruct and dismantle patriarchal paradigms as well as hegemonic masculinity. These trends act as performative attempts to question traditional gender norms and to call attention to the pervasive nature of male violence and dominance.

Through these interactions, young women are actively reading, writing, sharing feminist messages, engaging with knowledge in digitally mediated, multidirectional ways that disrupt hierarchies of authority and situate young people as co-constructors of feminist knowledge production. Such “overall ‘sharing’” enables the consciousness raising around gendered oppression, as well as a politically and socially active identity that leads to both mediated activism as well as feminist practice in everyday life (Greer et al., 2025; Pomerantz & Field, 2022).

Furthermore, TikTok provides a room for intersectional awareness, pointing out how violence against women looks different by race, wealth and region. Young women’s engagement with content about sexism and structural racism places oppressions as intersecting rather than singular, encouraging critical assessment of power relations and the systemic character of gendered and racialized violence (Peña-Fernández, 2023). The platform thus becomes a space where feminist knowledge is generated and experienced, a site of not only feminist awareness, but of radicalized gender consciousness among young women in Gen Z who can build strong feminist commitments and a collectively oriented sense of political efficacy through their participatory, peer-mediated media practices.

In sum, Gen Z women transitioned from inherited patterns of private, hesitant political participation into explicit, issue-focused activism by intersecting offline protest with affective, peer-mediated learning content on platforms such as TikTok. Affective exposure to gendered injustice and violence, multimodal “radical media engagement” and intersectional framing may jointly produce durable awareness for Gen Z European women on social and gender injustices – both locally and internationally.

2.3 The mainstreaming of right-wing rhetoric and the conquest of male-oriented digital spaces

Michael Kimmel's study *Angry White Men* (2017) has become one of the most quoted books to describe how men, especially young and white, respond to shifting gender relations (like the ones brought forth by the feminist movement). Kimmel doesn't simply frame men's prejudice down to personal pathology, but in its wider framework of status loss and relative decline. His defining notion of "aggrieved entitlement" (a fusion of privilege with a sense of victimization) explains why so many men regard modern societal change not just as a cultural shift but especially as a personal affront to them (Kimmel, 2017). This concept is especially helpful for explaining recent online masculinities, as it connects individual experiences of perceived humiliation with broader cultural and political repertoires.

The concept of aggrieved entitlement points to an affective economy of disappointment and shame transformed into anger and grievance: men socialized to expect stable work, social admiration and gendered authority find themselves increasingly unable to fulfill these promises (Kimmel, 2017). In Kimmel's language, it's not just loss of privilege, but the perceived betrayal of a "social contract" that promised reward for hard work, loyalty and masculinity itself. The result is a robust moral grammar: men feel wronged, cheated and robbed of what was theirs (Kimmel, 2017). This emotional and psychological structure, derived from social changes already listed in the previous chapter, is the reason why so much resentment is aimed at "others": usually women, immigrants, sexual minorities, etc., rather than systems of economic oppression and capitalistic exploitation (Kimmel, 2017).

This redirection of loss into grievance plays out as a linear sequence: structural change reveals the inadequacy of longstanding masculine models, which produces confusion and humiliation; afterward, cultural repertoires of entitlement provide narratives that frame this disorientation as illegitimate loss (men aren't just losing power, the "others" are stealing it from them); then, restorative impulses kick in: men want to reassert identities they feel are under assault – often by reinforcing traditional forms of masculinity; finally, these narratives gain political and cultural traction as they are amplified by intermediaries (media personalities, movements, charismatic leaders) that transform general grievance into a sense of collective identity (Kimmel, 2017).

Using this framework as a reference point, several cultural dynamics and processes unfold. Importantly, aggrieved entitlement provides a list of enemies, the "others": women, immigrants, any group not considered to be native of their society, non-heteronormative people of all kinds and other minorities are imagined to be unfair competitors for scarce jobs, recognition and sexual

access – and therefore make convenient scapegoats for fears about social change (Pease, 2020; Kimmel, 2017).

Secondly, the threat to traditional masculine scripts leads to compensatory performance: over-the-top displays of toughness, public repudiation of egalitarian norms and nostalgia for a "golden age" of male dominance. This nostalgia is important because it serves to legitimate both restorative claims, but also to underline the imagination of a recapturable perfect past, whether committed to through cultural claims or the promise of successful political action (Kimmel 2017). Particularly, Kimmel (2017) states:

> "Angry White Men feel entitled while looking "down"–at the hordes of "others" who are threatening to take what they believe is rightfully theirs and are being aided in their illegitimate quest by a government that is in their thrall. It's ironic that the Angry White Men I am discussing in this book feel they can actually get what they are entitled to only if the government shrinks–nearly to the point of disappearing. By contrast, poor people should–I emphasize the normative–understand that they can get what they want only if the government expands to stimulate growth, promote consumer spending, and provide a social safety net. This irony is resolved not by some abstract analysis of entitlement, but by a sense of historical context. Angry White Men tend to feel their sense of aggrieved entitlement because of the past; they want to restore what they once had. Their entitlement is not aspirational; it's nostalgic. Poor people and people of color, by contrast, feel entitled to what they should have, what others in fact do have. Angry white men feel entitled to restrict equality; people of color want to expand it." (p. 63)

Third, intermediaries direct the expression of legitimate financial requests into cultural frames that blame gender and racial minorities, instead of structural change. Kimmel is able to demonstrate this pattern through the example of "Talk Radio" in America and its earliest web-based forums, where anger caused by unemployment and economic insecurity was conveyed into aversion towards women, immigrants and minorities, providing men a diagnosis of their social status as well as a sense of moral belonging (Kimmel, 2017).

Another crucial aspect of Kimmel's framework is the in-group men differences: these men can often be redirected to be part of the so-called "losers of globalization" (Teney et al., 2014): low-skilled, underpaid, overexploited workers in high-cost countries. When studied empirically, it is seen that not every aggrieved-entitled man is the same, as the effect has its most potent expression when economic insecurity, cultural dislocation and strict identity demands are all present (Manning & Stefanovic, 2024). Survey research finds that perceptions of cultural threat and loss of status predict reactionary sympathies more reliably than material hardship (Mutz, 2018). Cross-

national research also finds that men who are downwardly mobile and in particular men with lower educational attainment, are more likely to hold gender-traditionalist views (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Manning & Stefanovic, 2024). Kimmel's interviews and case studies add texture to this picture: white working-class men in de-industrialized towns, in one example, expressed a sense of profound betrayal, but their framing of that betrayal took different forms depending on the cultural grammars of masculinity and race they had available to them: grievances were aimed at corporations and political elites in some places, women, immigrants and minorities in others. This difference illustrates that aggrieved entitlement is not just a singular response but one that is reconfigured by local masculinities, race and class (Kimmel, 2017).

One case study that Kimmel uses is the story of Timothy McVeigh, an American working-class young man from Lockport, New York. Disillusioned after fighting in the Gulf War and failing to make it into the special forces, McVeigh came back to a faltering industrial hometown with few job prospects, landing in low-paid security work. Alienated and unable to develop a stable social life, increasingly embittered, he drifted toward extremist groups that recast his grievances as government betrayal. His breaking point was the 1993 Waco siege[3], and two years after that, he bombed Oklahoma City, culminating in 168 deaths (Kimmel, 2017).

> "What makes McVeigh's story so compelling is that it could have been so different. Imagine if he'd returned from the war with sufficient veterans' benefits that he could have enrolled in community college, learned some practical skills, and found a meaningful job. Or had he returned to a less-desolate industrial landscape, the Lockport of his father, where union-protected jobs enabled working-class men to support a family and feel some sense of dignity in their work. Or had his working-class mates been more aware of their denigrated class position than of their fictive racial superiority and shifted to the Left instead of to the Far Right. There is nothing inevitable about the drift to the Right among so many dispossessed and downwardly mobile young white men. It has to be massaged, maneuvered, even manipulated by ideologues who see them as the shock troops of their effort to reclaim the country from what they perceive as the cancerous forces within." (Kimmel, 2017, p. 250).

Kimmel's framework is particularly relevant today in the way in which it prefigures the digital shift of grievance. As far back as the 1990s and early 2000s, he noticed how the rise of talk radio and fledgling online platforms allowed men to turn private disappointment into something similar

[3] The Waco siege was a standoff, lasting from February 28 to April 19, 1993, between the U.S. federal government and the Branch Davidians, a group led by David Koresh, in McLennan County, Texas. The standoff ended when Federal Bureau of Investigation forces mounted an assault and a fire broke out at the compound, killing more than 70 people, including Mr. Koresh and many children. The episode has been a potent symbol for anti-government and militia movements in the United States, often cited as proof of federal oppression.

to collective outrage. Those spaces offered not only stories but rituals: call-in shows, message boards and in-group humor that fostered a sense of inclusiveness and mutual recognition (Kimmel, 2017).

Additionally, when looking at the tone and the stylistic expressions of these mechanisms, Kimmel explained how humor and irony gave men a way to express this resentment while deflecting any consequences by dismissing it as a joke (Kimmel, 2017). This is a central strategy to many digital cultures of masculinity: the irony serves as a protective shield, both normalizing the extreme statements it makes and isolating them from any sort of critique. By framing hostility as humor, virtual actors have the ability to experiment with new elements, recruit new players and extend the boundaries of misogynistic rhetoric without assuming explicit ideological positions (Kimmel, 2017).

The modus operandi of mainstreaming can also be thought of as a way in which aggrieved entitlement moves through media ecologies. First, niche forums produce narratives that are emotional in nature. Second, these narratives are repackaged by influencers and cultural brokers for a broader audience, often in the form of humor or lifestyle branding that hides ideologically filled content. Third, algorithms and cross-platform flows speed the spread, ensuring that repertoires of grievance find their way into mainstream political speech. Kimmel's theorization helps explain the reason why anti gender equality and restorationist narratives are well-suited in this process: they are reductive, simplistic, emotionally salient and adaptable across various forms of media communication (Kimmel, 2017).

Kimmel's schema explains why private humiliation can transform into political consequences, but it does not on its own articulate the current media through which grievance is mobilized and amplified – especially relative to Gen Z men. Contemporary digital ecologies supply that missing link: platforms, influencer economies and meme cultures provide ritualized membership, rhetorical repertoires and algorithmic amplification that render aggrieved narratives socially legible, emotionally contagious and commercially viable. In other words, the work of converting personal shame into collective ideology now takes place at platform speed and scale.

The manosphere, labelled as online communities centering on men's perspectives, grievances and problems – with women and minority groups as targets of hatred, was originally one of the most hostile misogynist online spaces (Farrell et al., 2019). The concept stemmed from the idea of taking the Red Pill, a comparison from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where an individual can choose between ignorance (taking the blue pill) or knowing the ugly, shocking truth about society (taking the red

pill) (Ging, 2019). The actions of these online communities have dangerous real-life consequences, with one example being the death and rape threats aimed at female participants at the Gamergate movement, or another various shootings in 2014, 2018 and 2021 (Elliot Rodger, 2018; Lindeman, 2022; Weaver & Morris, 2021). The causes of the appeal of the manosphere's ideologies for young men were always identified by scholars, congruent to Kimmel's analysis, as effects of neoliberalism: wage cuts, burnout, overwork, inflation, downward mobility, underemployment, wage stagnation, the growing costs of education and housing insecurity (Bujalka et al., 2022). Men, incapable of living up to the expectations of masculinity, search for scapegoats and explanations presented in the manosphere.

The manosphere is a range of misogynist groups with varying ideologies and purposes (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). For example, the inability of incels to form romantic and sexual relationships with women unites them, while Men Going Their Own Way promotes male separation from women (Krendel, 2024).

The manosphere's groups (e.g., incels) have usually been studied on Reddit as the social media's design grants an appropriate setting for numerous misogynist communities (Massanari, 2017). Nowadays, however, the manosphere has started to take root outside isolated bubbles and spread to more mainstream platforms, including the short video platform TikTok. As described earlier, Gen Z is increasingly using TikTok as a source of news and entertainment (Grandinetti & Bruinsma, 2023; Huang, 2022), often without considering the quality of the content (Jolley et al., 2021). TikTok has the most pervasive algorithmic method, especially when looking at interaction, content and participation (Qin et al., 2022). Users' understandings of social realities are influenced by network-based and popularity-based algorithms – which have been identified as the most important contributors to the diffusion of misinformation (Pathak et al., 2023; Cotter et al., 2022).

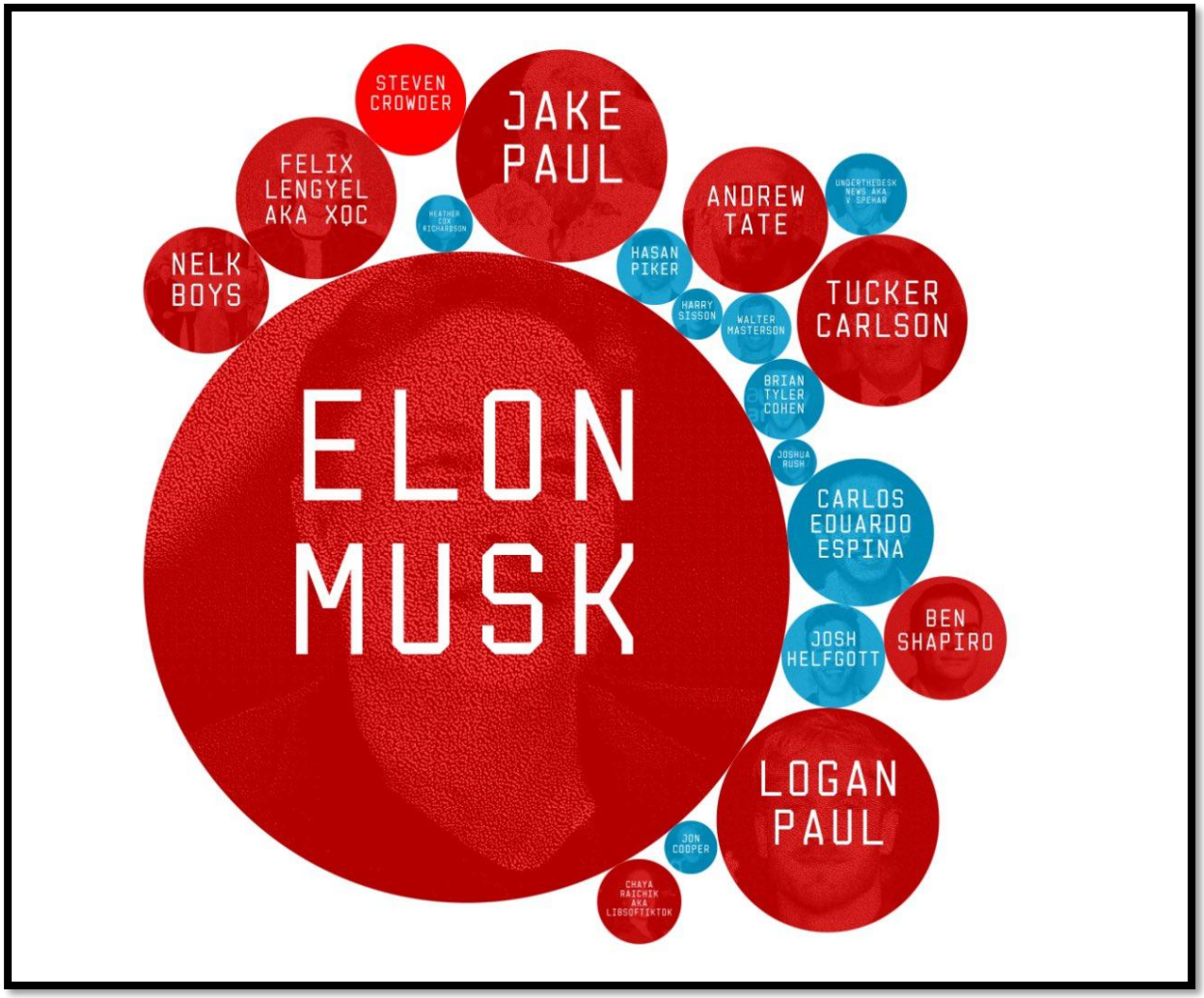
The ideologies of these types of manosphere communities have been extensively studied, but there is minimal research on what ideologies have been highlighted in the process of mainstreaming – as it is considered a recent development (Lott et al., 2025).

While the manosphere was traditionally referred to as a set of groups with extremist ideas, a large portion of the discourse in these communities is based on prevalent sexist and misogynist beliefs (Cameron, 2024).

The first recognizable ideology of the manosphere is victimization, which holds feminism as the primary cause of today's suffering and that men, straight white cis men in particular, are the main victims (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Dickel & Evolvi, 2023). Men's unfulfilled expectations

about their future are frequently the source of victimization ideology: it is asserted that, for men who feel deprived of their dominant social position, the world no longer makes sense (Bujalka et al., 2022). Thus, the narratives of the manosphere seek to return to a form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) that grants social power exclusively to men (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023).

Figure 5



Right-wing and left-wing digital influencers shaping political debates.

Note. Reprinted from *A visual guide to the influencers shaping the 2024 election* (Illustration by B. Amado), by M. Kelly, 2024, *WIRED*. https://www.wired.com/story/visual-guide-to-influencers-shaping-2024-election/

The manosphere includes "manfluencers" (Lott et al. 2025), who weaponize highly performative and extremist notions of masculinity to advance sexist views about women, with the most notable example being Andrew Tate (Figure 5[4]) (Haslop et al., 2024; Wescott et al., 2024). Tate is currently

[4] Each bubble represents an individual influencer, with the size of the bubble proportional to the number of followers on their primary social media platform. Although many influencers have audiences across multiple platforms, the visualization accounts only for the followers on the platform where they have the largest presence, providing a visual comparison of reach between right- and left-wing creators. The figure also differentiates between political orientation: red bubbles represent right-wing influencers, who generally have larger followings, while blue bubbles represent left-wing influencers, who tend to have smaller audiences (Kelly, 2024).

the only manfluencer whose beliefs have been thoroughly examined: Haslop et al. (2024) identify his four main discourses: the first is the perspective of men as the naturally dominant gender, as demonstrated by their tendency to take charge of relationships financially and by the stereotype of men as natural warriors. Secondly, Tate glorifies the traditional relationship dynamics in Muslim countries by arguing that women should submit to their male partners. The third discourse weaponizes gender stereotypes to punish women who challenge patriarchal norms. Finally, in today's society, men are perceived as victims who are invisible to women unless they are wealthy (Haslop et al., 2024).

According to Bujalka et al. (2022), manfluencers frequently discuss relationship advice, entrepreneurship and mental and physical health. They stress how crucial it is to be in charge of one's life and financial security. Frequently, lifestyle tips are offered on how to attract women, gain confidence and get in shape (Bujalka et al., 2022). They make common sexist claims in their discourse, such as that women are irrational or that they want to control men who are wealthy and powerful (Ging, 2019). As Cameron (2024) notes, misogynist discourse asserts, for instance, that women who talk too much, especially if they challenge men's authority or express opinions men disapprove of, deserve to be punished and, if necessary, silenced by force.

Bujalka et al. (2022) also show how frequently manfluencers depict a bleak future, predicting that their followers will fail in their quest for sexual partners if they do not acknowledge men's victimization. As a consequence, the content thrives on playing on the fears of the audience through a process of "ontological racketeering" (Bujalka et al., 2022): by fabricating threats to ontological security, escalating anxieties and causing chaos, providing a solution to the threats, frequently through monetization and gaining legitimacy through audience social acceptance (Bujalka et al., 2022).

Despite this study focusing on content producers in the traditional manosphere communities active on YouTube (Bujalka et al., 2022), it does not necessarily reflect the ideologies of TikTok manfluencers or how they navigate the attention economy and algorithms to gain the position of manfluencers. In the following, we place these discourses into an international attention economy context to show how the ideas are being mainstreamed.

Skillful navigators in the attention economy, manfluencers often use secretly coded speech, or so-called dog whistles (Quaranto, 2022). Their discourse can occasionally operate below the radar (Abidin, 2021a), conveying a different message to various audience subdivisions. Such methods

provide both a dominant-hegemonic position as well as a negotiated or oppositional decoding position (Hall, 1980).

Hall's (1980) en/decoding framework's dominant-hegemonic position requires symmetrical meaning-making between the encoder-producer and the decoder-receiver. For instance, identifying the "Top G" as Andrew Tate's nickname and acknowledging this hierarchical reference are necessary to decode a manfluencer's reference to it: one might agree with Tate's trope of men as warriors but not with the narrative of women having to submit to men.

Oppositional decoding (Hall, 1980) decodes the message in the opposite way, while still understanding the intended discourse: such decodings or counter-discourses are frequently created on social media by individuals who strongly dislike a text or genre, as seen in comments, responses and reactions (Gray, 2003). Hate-watching by oppositional audiences is common (Gilbert, 2019; Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, 2020), since, in opposition to manfluencers, feminist counterpublics unite women and minorities (as described earlier) to establish platforms for activism and discourse (Murumaa-Mengel & Muuli, 2021; Smith, 2019).

Because social media is becoming more divisive and communities create their own echo chambers, followers might never come into contact with one another and their disagreements. Although the majority of social media influencers aim for a positive kind of online celebrity, many are intentionally turning to shame and scandal to bait interest as controversy-seeking influencers (Abidin, 2021b). Such strategic controversy herding is seen as profitable: it capitalizes on the notion that all publicity is good publicity by employing conspiratorial elements in a post-shame society (Murumaa-Mengel & Lott, 2023; Wodak, 2019). "Shamelebrities" is the term Abidin (2021b) has used to describe the influencers involved in scandal and controversy – although it is not carried out by manfluencers, actual shame is a fundamental social value of the production of outrageous content (Hartley, 2023).

These behaviors were brought about by the process of mediatization, in which the distinction between media representations and reality has become hazier due to the widespread use of media (Hjarvard, 2008). For almost all actors to take part in mediatized societies and profit from the attention economy, they must adapt to this staged media logic (Goldhaber, 1997; Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019). The attention economy revolves primarily around paying, receiving and seeking what is most intrinsically limited and not replaceable by anything else, namely the attention of other human beings (Goldhaber, 2006). In particular, people must adapt to the logic of social media, i.e., the methods by which platforms channel social traffic and process information

(Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Social media algorithms favor negative emotions because they keep users on platforms longer and reinforce, strengthen or amplify pre-existing harms like hate speech and disinformation, further entrenching polarization and radicalization (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021). These algorithmic amplification flaws are frequently exploited by skilled content producers, who purposefully craft contentious messages to elicit strong feelings. Rage-baiting is a powerful manipulation technique that incites outrage in order to boost traffic and engagement and benefit the content creator (Bryant, 2024; Gabor, 2023). Strongly emotional content draws large amounts of engagement, which indicates high relevance to the platform's recommendation algorithms and leads to further recommendations to other users (Stark et al., 2020).

The circulation of manosphere routines in mainstream media is concretized by high-reach personalities and platforms that render subcultural grievance as mass attention. The Joe Rogan podcast is a case point: millions of views per episode, a long commercial association with Spotify and a guest list with the most recognizable champions of anti-gender discourse, the Joe Rogan Experience amplifies masculinist lenses to very large numbers of people (Klocker, 2025). Rogan's show is almost entirely filled with men guests and often it normalizes gender-essentialist and formulations of hegemonic masculinity as the naturalized 'factual' common sense (Klocker, 2025).

A notable example is Rogan's conversation with Elon Musk, with the episode having accumulated over twenty million views on YouTube. At the end of the episode Musk made a nakedly political plea around gendered voting behaviour, direct messaged to men to vote at the polls: "men need to vote I don't know what's the reason to be men just vote more than women […] That's just a direct message to the men out there vote like your life depends on it, because it does. Vote, vote tomorrow as though your life depended on it, nothing is more important." (Klocker, 2025, p. 73). By constructing the act of electoral choice as existential between the genders, the comment materializes manosphere victim narratives into one of civic duty and in the process establishes a direct connection between the language of aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel, 2017) to concrete political action.

Additionally, equally telling is the Donald Trump episode being one of Joe Rogan's most listened and the circulation of Trumpian tropes across Rogan's discourse (Klocker, 2025). Trump's public persona presents a kind of hypermasculine concretization of several elements of aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel, 2017) and his presence on mainstream channels has shown how repertoires that may once have circulated in niche forums become electoral coin.

Across the EU, similar dynamics have been documented: in Estonia, TikTok manfluencers exhibited mainstream manosphere discourses on a media platform that belongs in the Gen Z era

(Lott et al., 2025). In Belgium, a similar study shows how TikTok masculinity representations were found to be manosphere-adjacent and a likely exposure for younger audiences (Dhoest, 2025). Research based on experiments and surveys on Swedish manfluencer exposure with the growth of misogynistic attitudes in young men (Renström & Bäck, 2024). In Greece, Alipranti's study (2025) has found the national manosphere to be strikingly similar to the international manosphere and also to be gaining popularity, whereas the exposure and legal fallout from the Andrew Tate case have rendered Tate-style rhetoric a national issue in Romania (Al Jazeera, 2024). Besides country-specific academic studies and analyses, cross-national and NGO reports describe similar trends in other EU Member States (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025; Anti-Bullying Centre, 2024; Gender Concerns Bulgaria, 2025).

The discussed mainstreaming of right-wing, misogynistic discourse in male-oriented digital environments reveals the way a sense of aggrieved entitlement, a response to structural and cultural transformation, is now increasingly amplified and normalized through digital media – which enables its pervasiveness in Gen Z men's lives. Grievance is repackaged as entertainment, lifestyle or advice from niche forums to TikTok, YouTube and high-reach podcasts and subsequently finds a greater degree of emotional resonance and social legitimacy among young males. Manfluencers and other personalities transform economic struggles into a collective, male-oriented identity, articulating misogyny, anti-feminism and gender-essentialist dogma with the aid of algorithmic amplification. Such dynamics are mirrored across Europe, where international and local manfluencers, Andrew Tate imitators and similar figures are now reaching young adult male audiences and molding ideas about what it means to be a man, to have social status and also translating it to supposed democratic and civic values. On the other hand, as discussed above, young, Gen Z women (together with marginalized minorities) are increasingly being included in feminist, emancipated, progressive discourse – partially because of the same algorithmic mechanisms associated with the mainstreaming of the manosphere.

Taken together, these cultural and ideological panoramas show how culturally and technologically mediated experiences of social change, identity and belonging affect the gendered political environment of Gen Z – creating an empirical and theoretical background for the subsequent political quantitative analysis of these cohorts across the EU.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research aims and rationale

This study aims to map and explain the gendered contours of political behavior within Generation Z across all 27 member states of the European Union. Rather than testing a set of pre-registered hypotheses, the research follows an exploratory logic: the goal is to identify recurring patterns, emerging trends and systematic cleavages between young women and young men and to assess how these patterns vary across groups and institutional contexts.

This choice responds to the theoretical framing developed in Chapters 1 and 2, which highlights the combined effects of unstable life courses, digital feminist mobilization and the mainstreaming of anti-feminist narratives in shaping youth political cultures.

Three core objectives guide the analysis. First, to compare gendered Gen Z political orientation in the European Union with preceding generations, thereby tracing whether observed differences are generationally specific or part of longer-term trends. Second, to probe heterogeneity within Gen Z: to what extent do gendered divides intersect with socioeconomic background, education, migration status and other social factors. Third, to investigate contextual moderation: whether and how national institutional features, historical and cultural legacies amplify or attenuate the gender gap among young people.

This approach draws on feminist frameworks on recognition and redistribution, on masculinity studies that stress contested and contingent male identities - and on research on digital political frameworks that shape exposure to mobilizing content for Gen Z men and women. These theories inform variable choice and model specifications, while the exploratory stance keeps interpretation grounded in observed patterns rather than in confirmatory hypothesis testing. Where robust and repeated patterns emerge, they will be interpreted in light of the theoretical and historical perspectives mentioned earlier. Finally, the rationale acknowledges limits: small national subsamples of Gen Z and cross-survey measurement differences counsel caution. Accordingly, analysis proceeds at multiple levels of aggregation, combining country-level comparisons with pooled multilevel models and sensitivity checks.

3.2 Data sources and harmonizaton

This study uses mainly two large, cross-national surveys that give comparable measures of political attitudes and sociodemographic characteristics across European countries: the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2025) and the European Parliament Election Study (Popa et al., 2024).

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a structured source for cross-national research on social and political attitudes in Europe. Founded in 2001, it has high-quality and harmonized data that make it possible to follow both stability and change in values, beliefs and political behavior across a wide range of national contexts. The eleventh round of the ESS was fielded between March 2023 and July 2024 and consisted of interviews with 46,162 individuals from thirty-one European countries[5]. It is based on strict probability sampling and on carefully standardized fieldwork procedures. Interviews are conducted face to face, with Czechia as the only exception, where self-completion has been used: this makes it quite comparable despite many different institutional and cultural environments. The survey covers all residents aged fifteen and over, with no regard to their nationality or legal status. This ensures that young people of migrant background are fully represented (ESS ERIC, 2025).

The European Election Study (EES) 2024 Voter Study is the main cross-national source for understanding electoral behavior in the most recent European Parliament election. In all twenty-seven EU member states, a survey was conducted shortly after the elections in June 2024: 25,904 people of voting age who are permanent residents in one of these countries answered. In each member state, at least 1,000 interviews were conducted (five hundred in Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta), which resulted in a balanced but pragmatic coverage of electors. The interviews took place between June 10 and June 30, 2024. The main method of data collection was self-administered online interviews (CAWI), sampled from quota-based access panels - however, in Malta, half of the interviews were carried out through computer-assisted video calls. Quotas were applied for gender and age (interlocked), education, region and level of urbanization (Popa et al., 2024).

Both the ESS and the EES record, among their core variables, the last party voted for in a national election or in the 2024 European Parliament contest. These self-reported choices provide the bridge between individual-level attitudes and the broader ideological landscape of European politics. To situate parties consistently across countries and to translate those reported votes into meaningful ideological positions, the analysis draws on the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). Administered between October and December 2024, CHES collected evaluations from 609 political scientists with expertise in European parties and integration. This latest wave places the leadership of 279 parties in thirty-one countries on multiple dimensions, including general left-right ideology, libertarian-traditional values, European integration, populism and selected policy

[5] Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

areas. Coverage spans all EU member states (except Luxembourg) and extends to Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom, providing a dense comparative map of party positions in the year preceding and following the elections. Since CHES 2024 had no coverage of Luxembourg, party positions were assigned using the classification from CHES 2019 (Jolly et al. 2022), ensuring comparability with other European parties. Because the survey follows a stable coding scheme compatible with its earlier waves, it allows both cross-sectional comparison and continuity with previous literature (Rovny et al., 2025).

In this study, CHES serves as the authoritative external benchmark for locating each party chosen by ESS and EES respondents on the ideological and cultural dimensions most relevant to understanding gendered political divides among European Gen Z.

Individual votes from the ESS and EES were systematically mapped to CHES party identifiers. Each national party was manually matched to ensure consistency across countries. This mapping enables a reliable linkage between respondents' self-reported votes and expert-coded party positions, providing the foundation for analyzing ideological and cultural dimensions relevant to gendered political divides among European Gen Z.

The empirical universe of the analysis is restricted to the EU27, as defined in the CHES canonical file used for this study. Respondents from countries outside this set were excluded prior to pooling; similarly, only respondents with a valid year of birth (1936-2010), a binary gender code (Male/Female) and a party identifier successfully mapped to CHES were retained for the analyses. Generation boundaries follow the convention used earlier (Silent Generation up to 1949; Baby Boomers 1950-1964; Gen X 1965-1979; Millennials 1980-1995; Gen Z 1996-2012). Weighting is available for both surveys but is applied selectively: primary descriptive results are presented unweighted.

3.3 Workflow and operationalization of variables

The study relies on survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2025) and the European Parliament Election Study (Popa et al., 2024). To ensure comparability, all key variables are harmonized across surveys. A complete mapping of concepts, coding schemes and harmonization notes is provided in Appendix 1.

National party codes reported in each survey are systematically matched to standardized CHES identifiers. Continuous indicators in CHES capture general left-right, libertarian-traditional and support for women's rights orientations. These scores serve as proxies for individual political

positioning and form the basis for cohort and gender comparisons. Cases that cannot be matched are excluded from analyses requiring these linked positions.

Gender is harmonized into a binary variable, with respondents outside these categories excluded. Year of birth is used to define generational categories, with invalid or missing values excluded from cohort analyses. Survey special codes (e.g. 7777, 8888, 9999 for birth year, 7/8/9 for gender, 97 for EES education-other) are converted to missing values and excluded where appropriate.

Sociodemographic variables are harmonized and grouped for analysis. Economic difficulty is harmonized across surveys, z-scored and where sample sizes enable, divided into tertiles for descriptive analysis. Education is documented into three levels; place of residence is grouped into rural, town/small city, or large city; parental origin is captured as a binary indicator for whether at least one parent was born abroad; religious attendance and denomination are harmonized into ordinal and categorical levels, respectively; employment, occupational class and sector are harmonized into consistent categories for comparability across surveys.

To improve reliability of the analysis of gendered political differences, rolling-window means of ideological indicators are computed by year of birth and gender using 5-year centered windows. Extreme positions on the cultural dimension are identified using fixed thresholds to compute the proportion of respondents at each end (very progressive identified as a CHES score equal or below 2.5 and very traditional as equal or above 7.5)

Minimum cell-size thresholds are applied in all analyses to prevent unstable estimates. By default, a minimum of 40 respondents per gender is required for most analyses, while some plots that aggregate by welfare regime or other subgroupings use a higher threshold of 100 respondents per cell.

Weighting is not applied in the main analyses and the scripts produce unweighted results, as the analyses account for key demographic characteristics, ensuring that descriptive comparisons between men and women and between generations, are based on reasonably representative samples. Respondents with missing or invalid key identifiers, or cases that could not be harmonized, are excluded from relevant analyses.

This operational framework, with variable harmonization and coding documented in Appendix 1, ensures consistency, transparency and reproducibility across surveys, providing a robust foundation for the descriptive and comparative analyses presented in the thesis.

All analyses were carried out in programming language R and followed a planned workflow designed for cleaning, harmonizing and analyzing the different datasets. The data pipeline is organized in four phases corresponding to dedicated scripts for data preparation, descriptive analyses and visualization. Figures summarize these patterns across genders, generations and institutional contexts, with smoothing applied for readability. Regression analyses assess how sociodemographic factors relate to gendered differences in political orientation, using standardized comparisons across groups.

4. Empirical Analysis: Gendered Political Attitudes Among Young Europeans

4.1 The Gen Z gender gap in political orientation

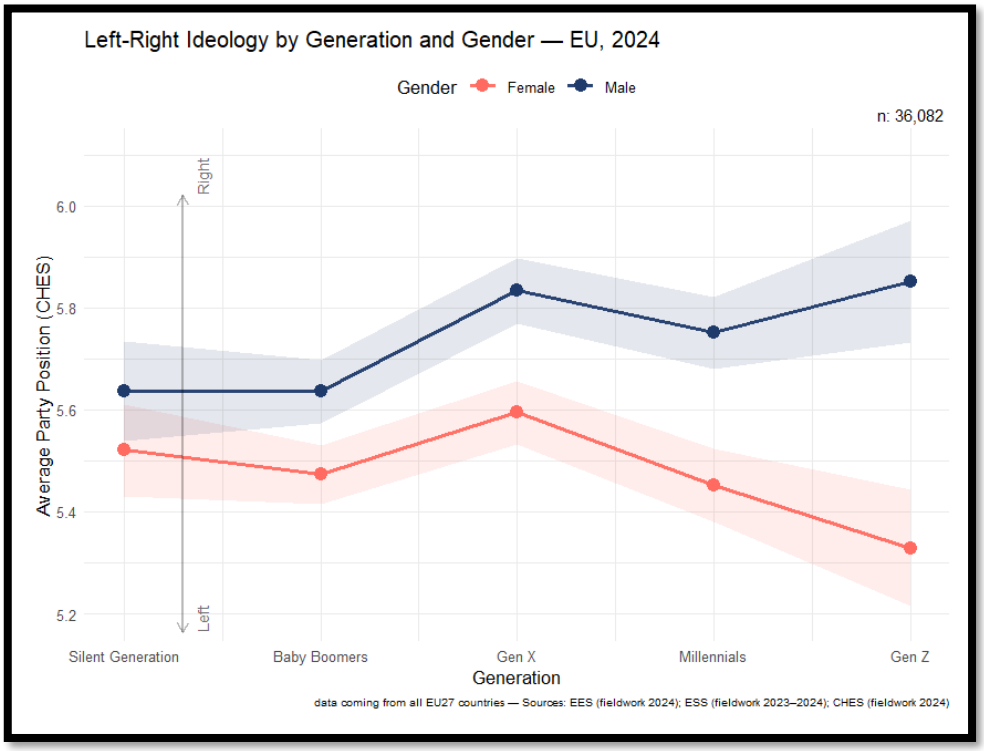
Respondent and their political affiliation from the ESS and the EES were harmonized following the steps described in Chapter 3 – with the coding system with mapping details documented in Appendix 1.

Each respondent was linked to party position estimates from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Rovny et al., 2025), allowing their reported votes to be situated consistently on left–right, postmaterialist–traditional and women's rights dimensions. Observations with invalid or missing information (such as unmapped party identifiers, non-binary gender codes or missing birth years) were excluded to maintain comparability.

Gender gaps are estimated across cohorts and generations using two complementary approaches. First, year-of-birth trends are smoothed using centered five-year rolling windows, which stabilise estimates while preserving generational change. Signed gaps and their absolute values are plotted with confidence intervals and loess smoothing to make sampling uncertainty and broad patterns visible. Second, respondents are grouped into generational categories (Silent Generation through Gen Z), and mean ideological positions are compared by gender within each cohort, with confidence intervals reported for clarity. Extreme party positions are trimmed according to the thresholds specified earlier to reduce the influence of outliers, and sensitivity checks confirm that substantive conclusions remain robust.

These methods generate the figures presented below: an analysis of gendered attitudes inside each generation and year of birth on three different political scales, and also bar plots quantifying the gap between men and women. Together, they provide an EU-wide overview of how Gen Z's gender gap compares with older generations and how far it reflects broader European patterns or distinctive features of today's youth.

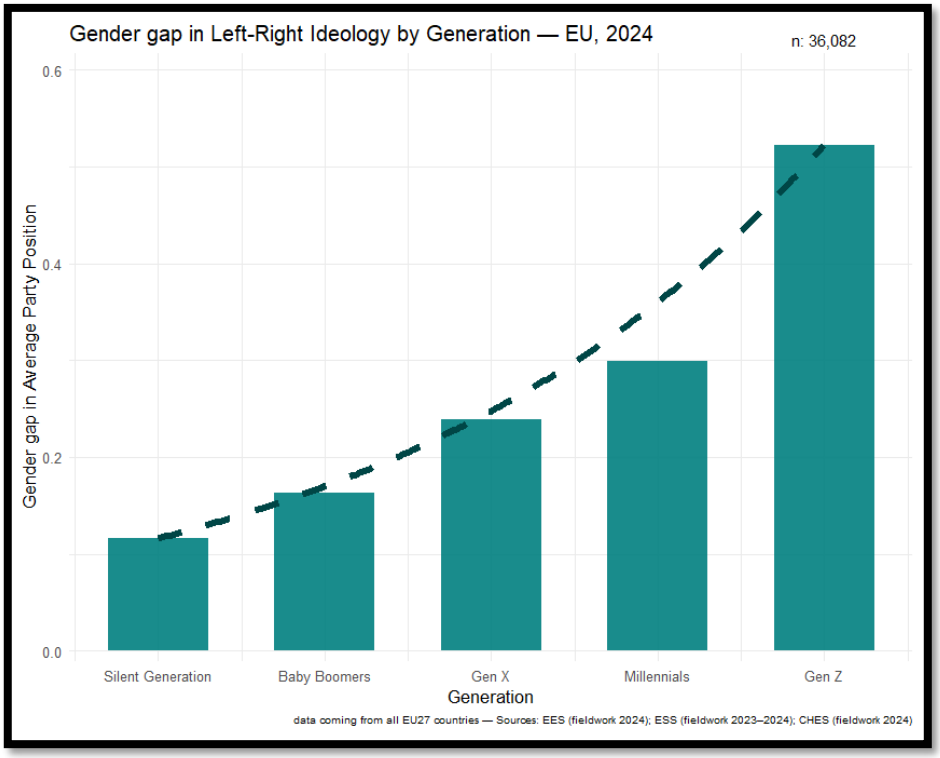
Figure 6



Left–Right Ideology by Generation and Gender, EU, 2024.

Note. Lines show mean CHES-linked left–right party positions for Female (red) and Male (blue) respondents by generation, with 95% confidence ribbons. Higher values indicate placement toward the right, lower values toward the left. Estimates are pooled across EU27 countries (n = 36,082). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

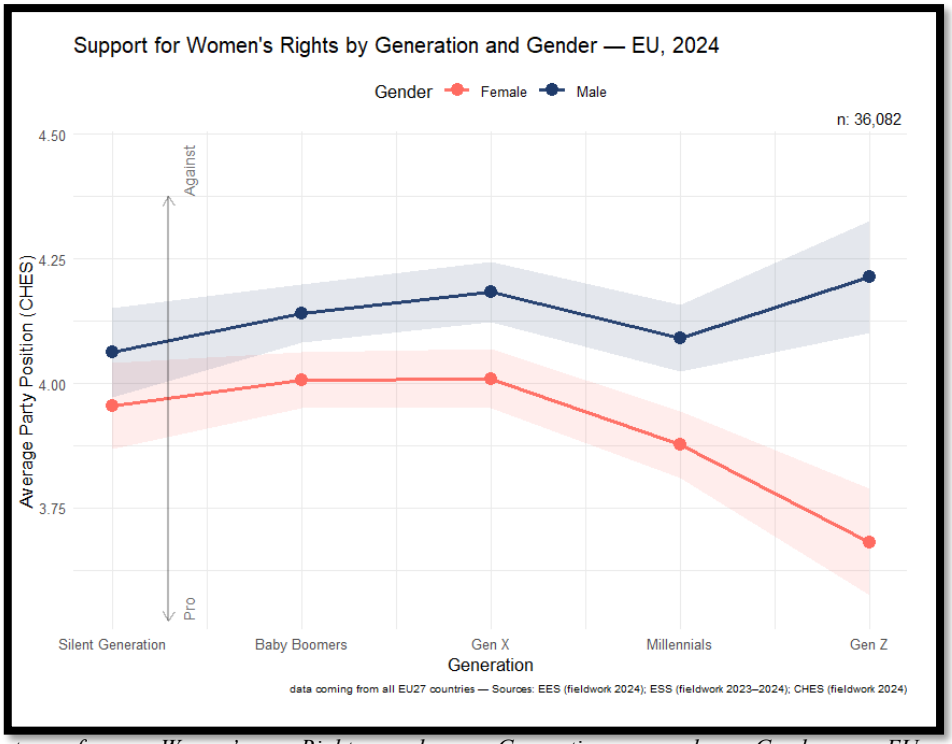
Figure 7



Gender Gap in Left-Right Ideology by Generation, EU, 2024

Note. Bars show the absolute gender gap in average party position on the CHES left-right scale, computed as |Female − Male| (higher = more right). The dashed line is an anchored exponential fit constrained to the first and last generation endpoints as a descriptive summary. Generations: Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 36,082). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

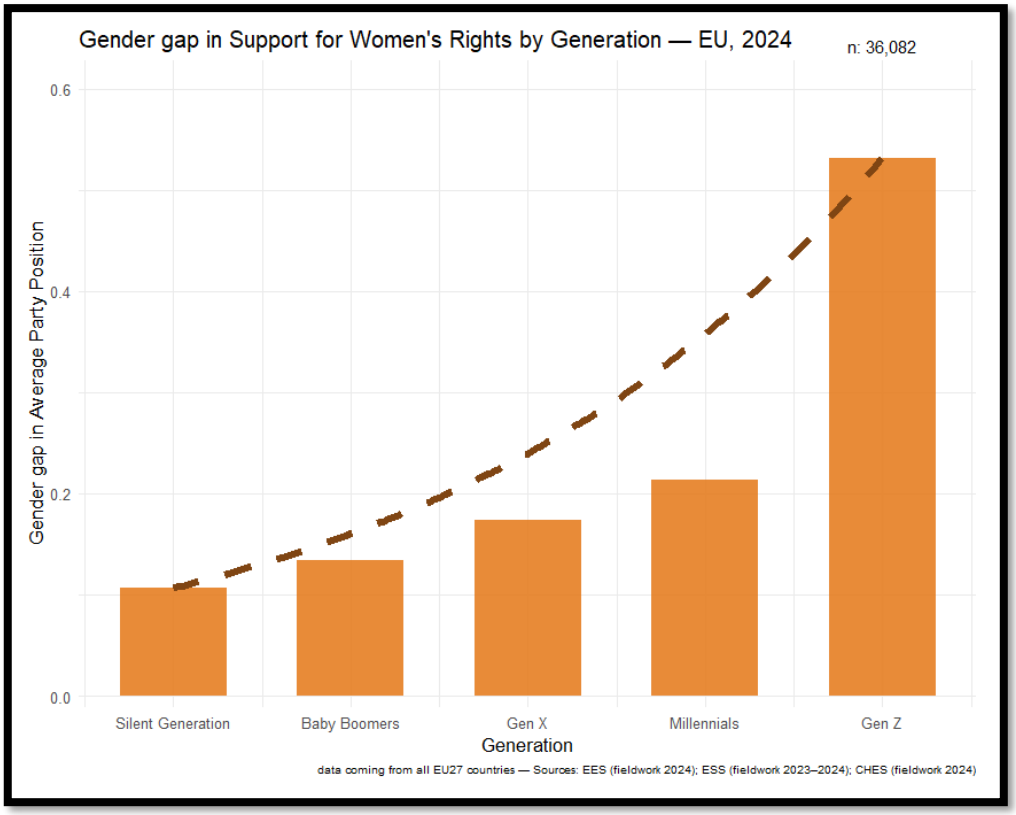
Figure 8



Support for Women's Rights by Generation and Gender, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show mean party positions on the CHES women's-rights item for Female (red) and Male (blue) respondents by generation; shaded ribbons are 95% confidence intervals. Lower values indicate greater support for women's rights. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 36,082). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

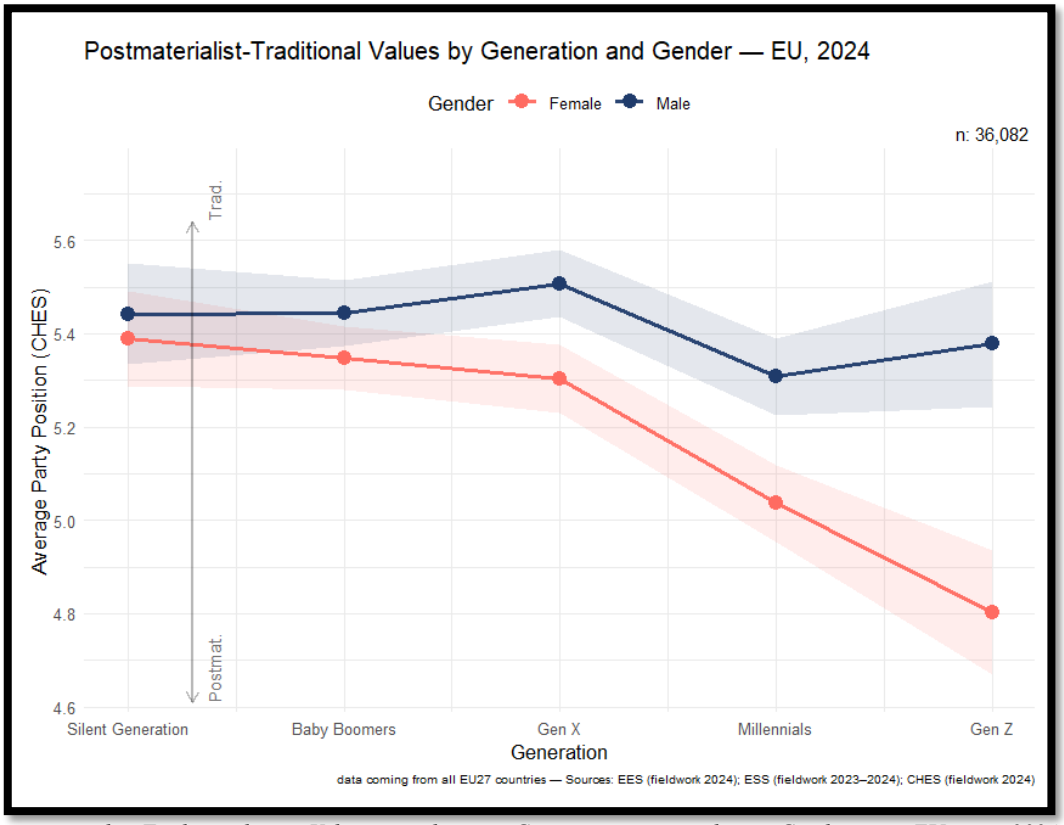
Figure 9



Gender Gap in Support for Women's Rights by Generation, EU, 2024

Note. Bars display the absolute gender gap in mean party position on the CHES women's-rights item, computed as |Female − Male|. The dashed anchored exponential line provides a descriptive summary of intergenerational change. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 36,082). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

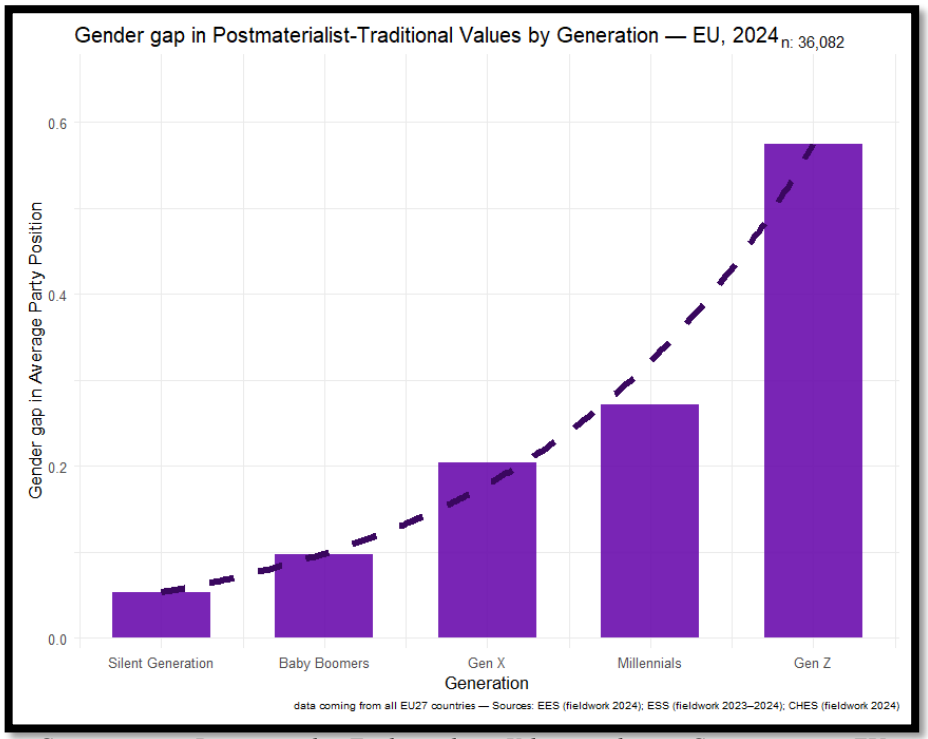
Figure 10



Postmaterialist-Traditional Values by Generation and Gender, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show mean party positions linked to CHES on the postmaterialist-traditional scale for Female (red) and Male (blue) respondents by generation; shaded bands are 95% confidence intervals. Lower values indicate more postmaterialist orientations, higher values indicate more traditional orientations. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 36,082). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

Figure 11



Gender Gap in Postmaterialist-Traditional Values by Generation, EU, 2024

Note. Bars display the absolute gender gap in average party position on the CHES postmaterialist-traditional scale by generation, computed as |Female − Male|; the dashed line shows an anchored exponential fit across generation endpoints as a descriptive summary. Pooled EU27 sample (n = 36,082). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

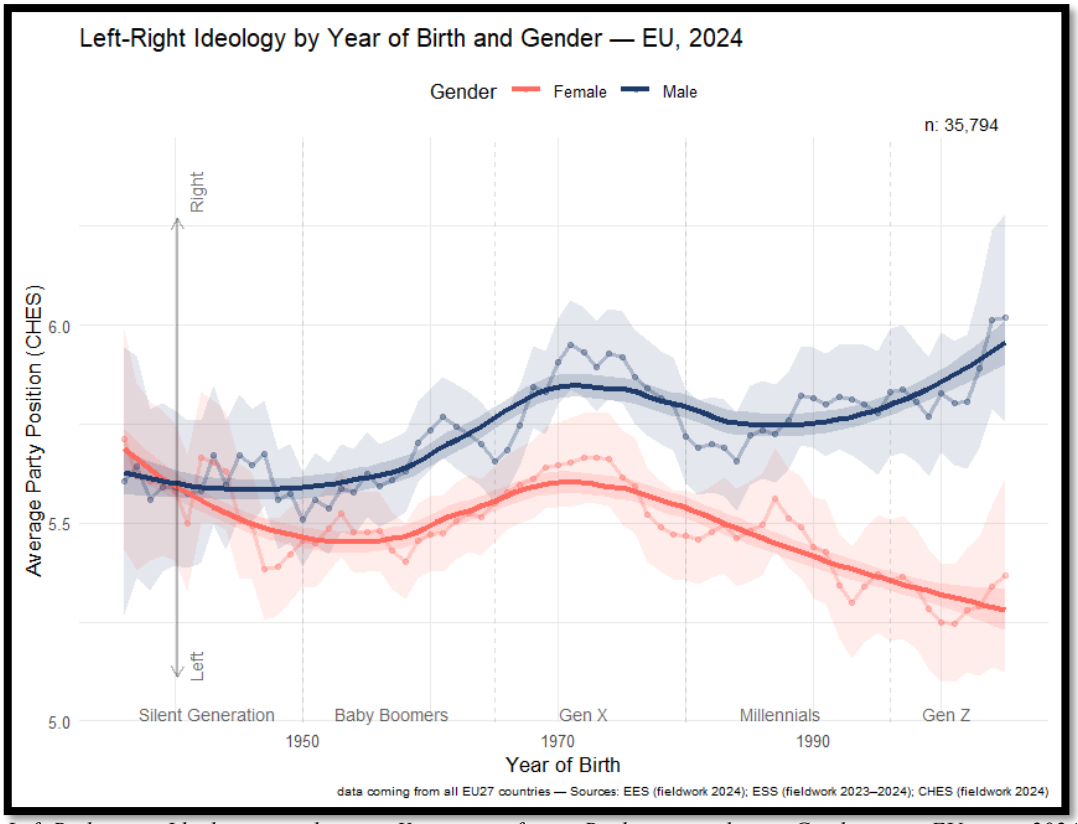
At the EU27-level, when looking at the attitudes of the two genders across different generations, regardless of the three ideological/political values used for the analyses (left-right, support for women's rights, postmaterialist-traditional), it is clear that a new political cleavage is forming in the newer generations – and especially in Gen Z men and women. This is crucial, since it confirms the extensive literature that covers the gendered behaviors and the positionings of today's young Europeans.

When looking at the graphs (Figure 6, Figure 8, Figure 10), the trajectory of the two gender-specific lines is pretty much similar – as older generations exhibit a similar pattern, regardless of being male or female. The gap is seen as progressively widening across the Generation X and Millennials – but it reaches its largest extent in the youngest generation, which includes people in their twenties or younger. Compared with Millennials, Gen Z shows substantially larger absolute gender gaps: about 1.8 times larger on left–right, about 2.1 times larger on postmaterialist–traditional values, and roughly 2.5 times larger on support for women's rights, so the youngest cohort displays the clearest and strongest gender divides.

Particularly when looking at Figure 10, it is interesting to notice that women are more progressive the younger they are – with Gen Z women being more progressive than Millennials, who are in turn more progressive than Gen X women. On the other hand, the male line is showing a different pattern: male Baby Boomers and male Gen Xers are more traditional than their respective previous generation, while, instead, male Millennials are somewhat reversing this trend and showing a more progressive attitude compared to Gen X men. With Gen Z men the trend is, yet again, inverted – with them showing a decisive shift toward traditionalism. This pattern can also be seen across Figure 6 and Figure 8. On the positioning scale concerning the support for women's rights, across previous generations, the two gendered lines are only slightly widening from each other – making the graph assume a roughly parallel line trajectory. With Gen Z, the balance is broken: Gen Z males show a sharp decrease in support for women's rights, while Gen Z females are assuming an opposing position.

Looking across the three dimensions, it can be observed (Figure 7, Figure 9) that while a gender gap was present in older generations in both left-right ideology and support for women's rights (although it still grows with younger generations) – the striking increase of the gender gap across generations can be seen in the postmaterialist-traditional axis. In the Silent Generation, the gap is small, but it progressively grows so that Gen Z displays the largest gap in all graphs, twice as large as Millennials, almost three times Gen X, and more than five times Baby Boomers.

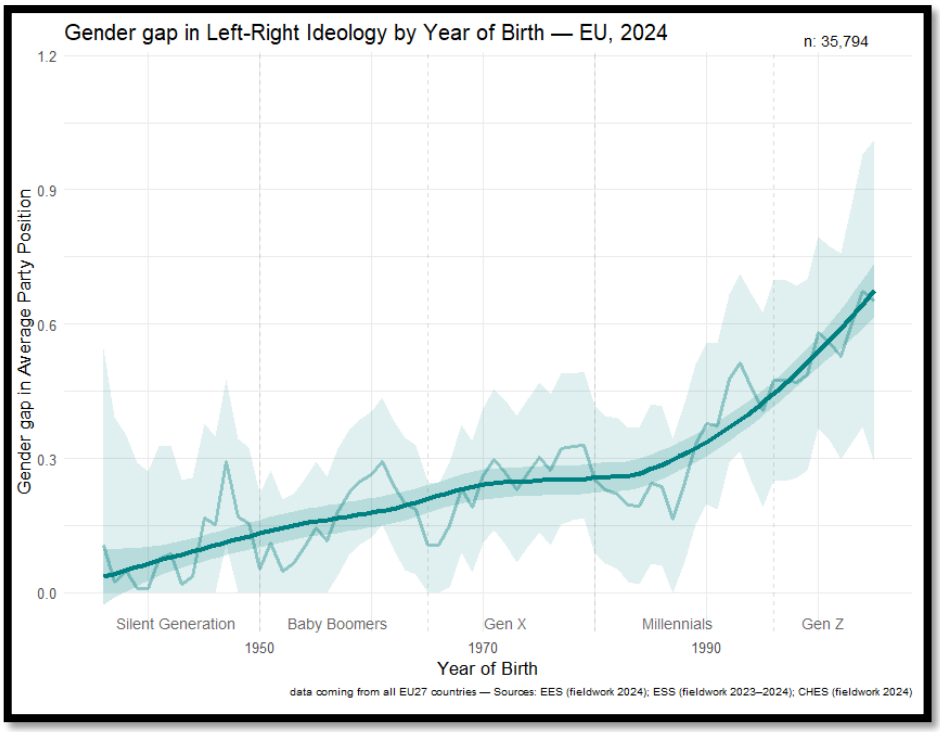
Figure 12



Left-Right Ideology by Year of Birth and Gender, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show mean CHES-linked left-right positions for Female (red) and Male (blue) by year of birth, estimated with centered five-year rolling windows. Shaded ribbons indicate 95% confidence intervals, and a loess smooth (span = 0.6) highlights the trend. Higher values = right, lower = left. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 35,794). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

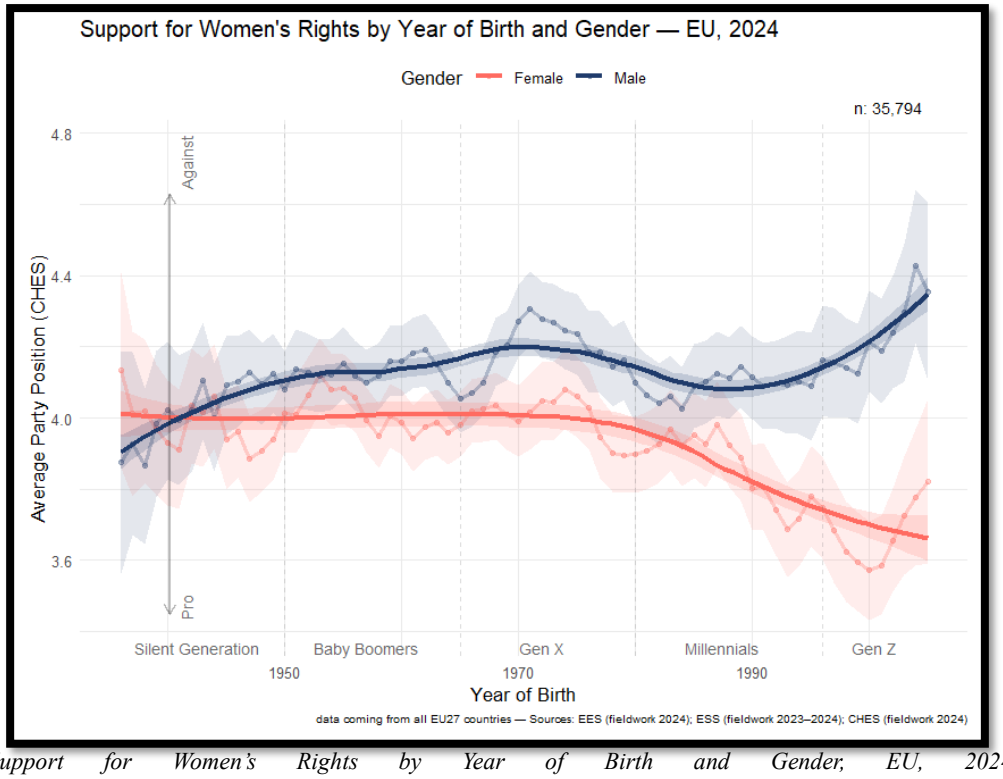
Figure 13



Gender Gap in Left-Right Ideology by Year of Birth, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show the absolute gender gap in CHES left-right positions by year of birth, estimated with centered five-year rolling windows. Thin lines show window points, thicker lines a loess smooth (span = 0.6), and shaded ribbons indicate 95% confidence intervals. Higher CHES values = right, lower = left. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 35,794). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

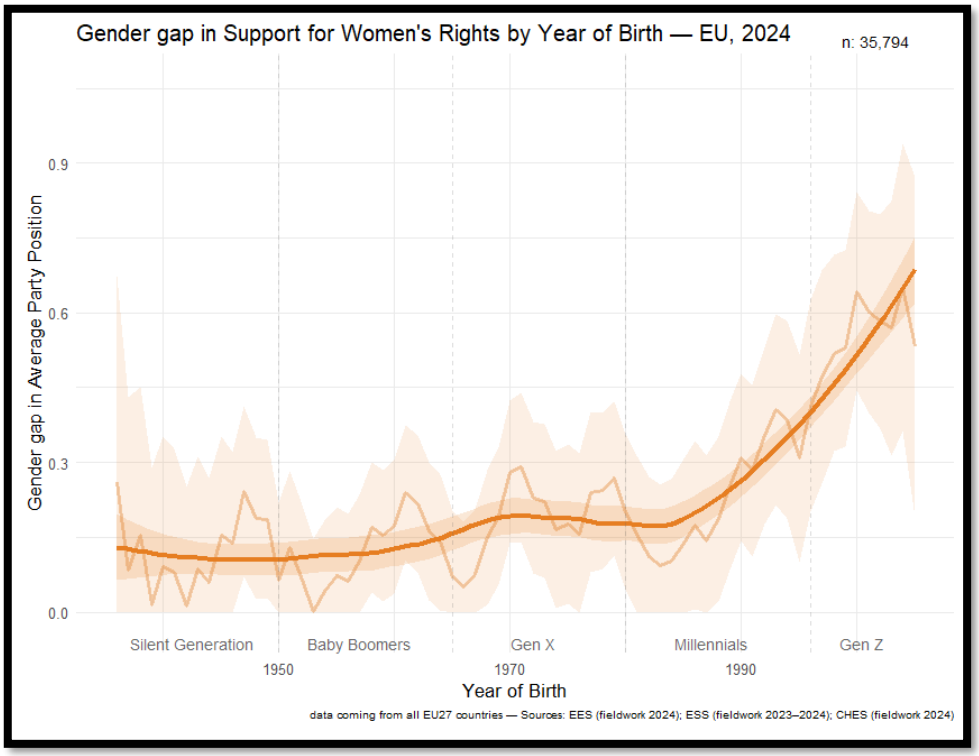
Figure 14



Support for Women's Rights by Year of Birth and Gender, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show mean CHES women's-rights positions for Female (red) and Male (blue) by year of birth, estimated with centered five-year rolling windows. Shaded ribbons indicate 95% confidence intervals, and a loess smooth (span = 0.6) highlights the trend. Lower values = greater support. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 35,794). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

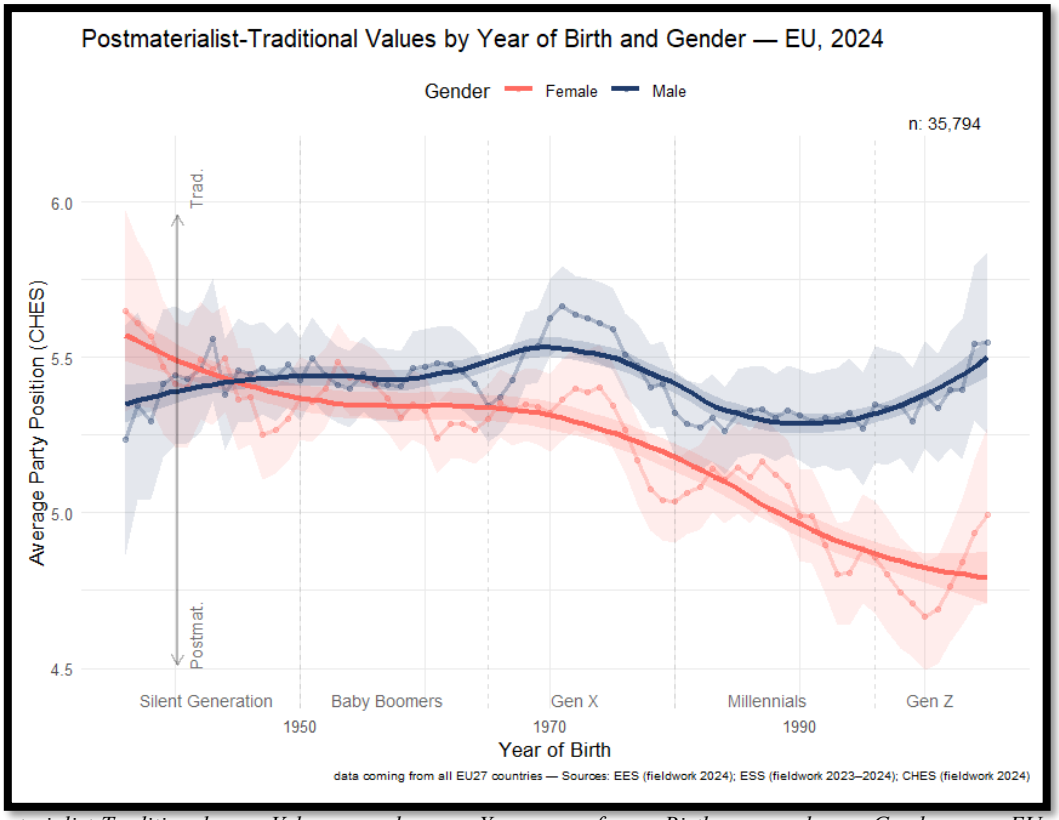
Figure 15



Gender Gap in Support for Women's Rights by Year of Birth, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show the absolute gender gap in mean CHES women's-rights positions by year of birth, estimated with centered five-year rolling windows. Thin lines show window means, thicker lines display a loess smooth (span = 0.6), and shaded bands indicate 95% confidence intervals. Vertical generation markers are included for reference. Lower CHES values = greater support. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 35,794). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

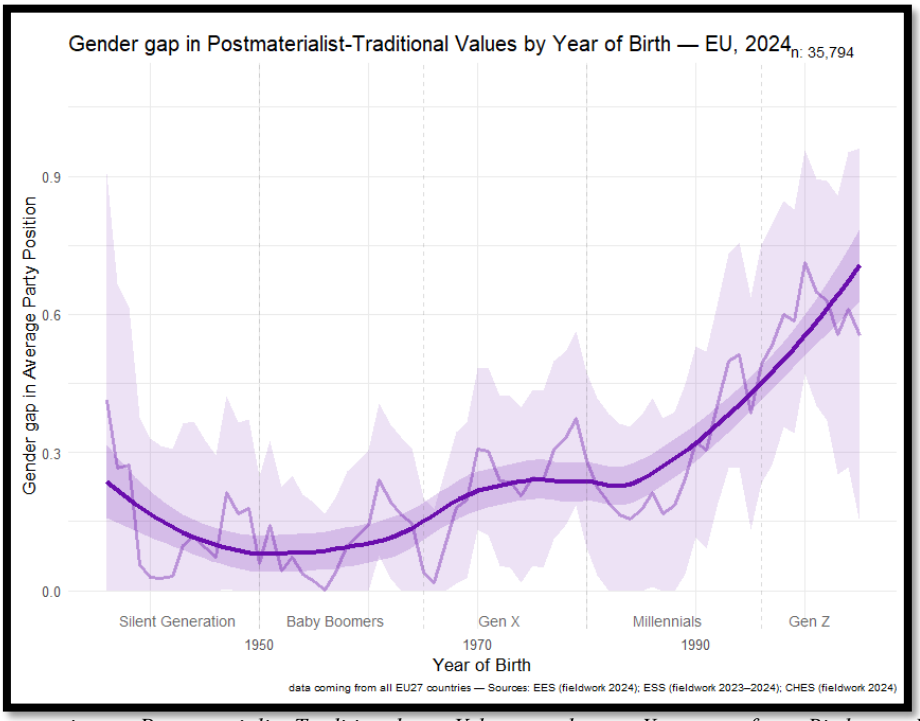
Figure 16



Postmaterialist-Traditional Values by Year of Birth and Gender, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show mean CHES-linked postmaterialist-traditional positions for Female (red) and Male (blue) by year of birth, estimated with centered five-year rolling windows. Shaded ribbons indicate 95% confidence intervals, and a loess smooth (span = 0.6) highlights the trend. Lower values = more postmaterialist, higher = more traditional. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 35,794). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

Figure 17



Gender Gap in Postmaterialist-Traditional Values by Year of Birth, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show the absolute gender gap in CHES postmaterialist-traditional positions by year of birth, estimated with centered five-year rolling windows. Thin lines show window points, thicker lines a loess smooth (span = 0.6), and shaded bands indicate 95% confidence intervals. Lower values = more postmaterialist, higher = more traditional. Generation markers are included. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 35,794). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

The analyses conducted on a year of birth basis (Figure 12, Figure 13, Figure 14, Figure 15, Figure 16[6]) can provide a more nuanced picture of gendered attitudes on the three-dimensional axes. What makes this detailed overview crucial is the possible identification of the three-phase transition (traditional gender gap, gender dealignment, modern gender gap) also identified by Giger's research (2009), following the expectations given in the above-mentioned theory of social modernization by Inglehart and Norris (2000).

It is crucial to note that the research is based on fieldwork carried out mostly in 2024[7] – hence it cannot be interpreted as a longitudinal assessment. Nonetheless, classical scholars have described the phenomenon in which, as voters get older and spend more time engaged in the electoral process, their political attitudes become increasingly stable (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1969). Therefore, although interpreted with caution, one can examine older generations' political affiliations and hypothesize a historical trajectory, which can be compared with previous literature and existing longitudinal studies on the gender gap.

Although with relatively wide confidence intervals, it can be observed that women pertaining to the Silent Generation and born before 1940 are actually holding more conservative values than their male counterparts: this might be a remnant of the traditional gender gap (Inglehart & Norris, 2000). In the subsequent birth years and up until Gen X, the behavior can then be retraced to what Giger has defined as a "gender dealignment" (2009): it can be seen that the gender gap in these birth years is relatively stable and low, remaining under 0.3 (Figure 13, Figure 15, Figure 17). Finally, from late Millennials and specifically from 1990, the modern gender gap (Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Giger, 2009) emerges – and it does so in a very prominent manner compared to previous birth years.

[6] The rolling five-year windows and loess smoothing applied in the year-of-birth analyses stabilize estimates and aid visual interpretation.
[7] Some interviews in the ESS were executed in 2023 (ESS ERIC, 2025).

4.2 Generational differences at the political extremes

The previous subchapter and analysis contained a substantial and methodological flaw that hindered a comprehensive and all-rounded picture of the gendered political differences inside each generation: an average of the CHES scale is not able to illustrate the internal division of each grouping (e.g. Gen Z women): simple average masks polarization and fails to capture whether a grouping is concentrated around the center or split between extremes[8]. To address this, the following section focuses on the shares of respondents linked to parties at the progressive and traditional poles, which directly measures polarization rather than mere dispersion.[9]

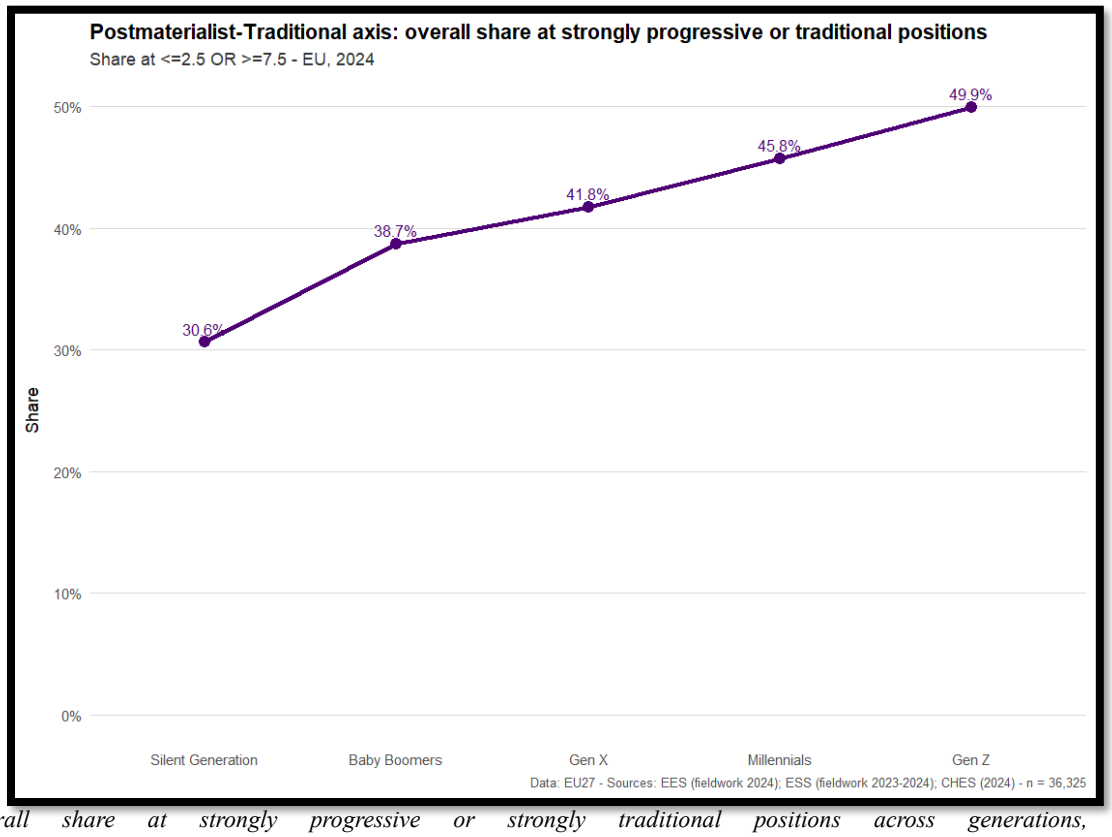
To focus attention on the poles of the ideological distributions, party positions were classified as "strongly progressive" or "strongly traditional" using cut points (strongly progressive if ≤ 2.5; strongly traditional if ≥ 7.5 on the CHES scale) applied also in the following subsections. The postmaterialist-traditional axis is used here because it is able to capture identity and culture-based divisions more sharply than the conventional left-right scale: a broader discussion of this choice will be provided in the Conclusions.

First, for each generation and gender grouping it's reported the share of respondents whose linked party falls in the progressive tail plus the share whose party falls in the traditional tail (Figure 18); then the shares are separated to show how concentrated each grouping is at the two political extremes (Figure 19). Second, to summarize how the balance between extremes changes across generations, we calculate a simple balance score for each gender (% strongly progressive − % strongly traditional) and then track how this balance shifts in each generational transition (Figure 20). To show how men and women differ in these shifts, we compute a Gender Divergence in Change (GDC) index (Figure 21) – which corresponds to the absolute difference between the generational balance change for women and for men, expressed in percentage points. The GDC index summarizes, for each generation transition, how much female and male cohorts differ in their movement toward either the progressive or the traditional extreme.

[8] For example, if 50% of Millennial women are at CHES 6 and the other 50% are at CHES 4, the mean point is 5. But if 50% of Gen Z women are clustered at 2 and the other 50% at 8, the mean would also be 5.

[9] Standard deviation was not used here because it reflects overall spread but not the specific distribution at the ideological poles. The aim is to observe polarization and the proportion of respondents at the extremes rather than general variability around the mean.

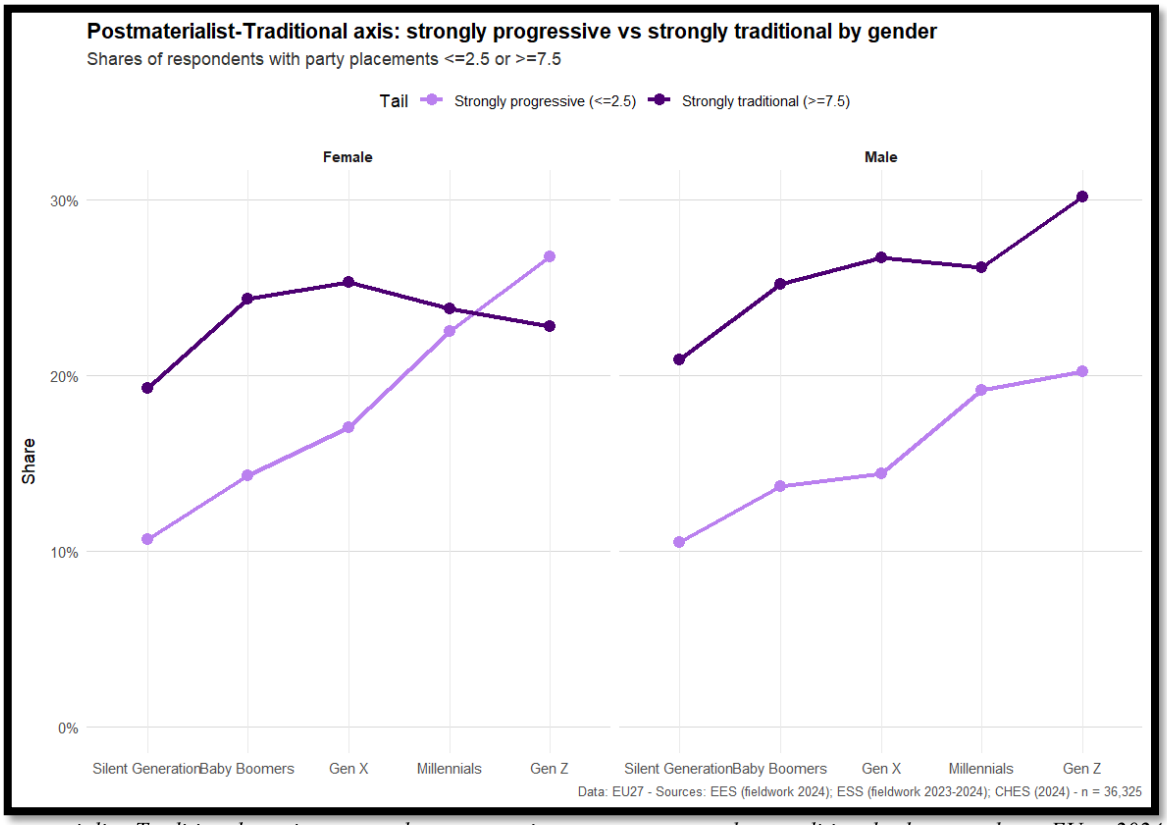
Figure 18



Overall share at strongly progressive or strongly traditional positions across generations, EU, 2024

Note. Line shows the combined share of respondents at CHES positions ≤ 2.5 or ≥ 7.5 for each generation. Estimates are pooled across EU27 countries, n = 36,325 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

Figure 19



Postmaterialist–Traditional axis: strongly progressive versus strongly traditional by gender, EU, 2024

Note. Lines show the share of respondents whose linked party positions fall in the strongly progressive (≤ 2.5, light purple) or strongly traditional (≥ 7.5, dark purple) tails of the CHES scale, plotted separately for Female and Male respondents by generation. Shares are pooled across EU27 countries, n = 36,325 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

Figure 18 illustrates a roughly linear trend: the younger the generation is, the more its members tend to align with anti-establishment, polarized parties that convey values associated by political experts (Rovny et al., 2025) as pertaining to the two edges of the political spectrum – specifically regarding the Postmaterialist-Traditional ("GAL-TAN") dimension of CHES.

Particularly, the percentage goes from 30% individuals from the Silent Generation to around half of the individuals in Gen Z, regardless of gender identity.

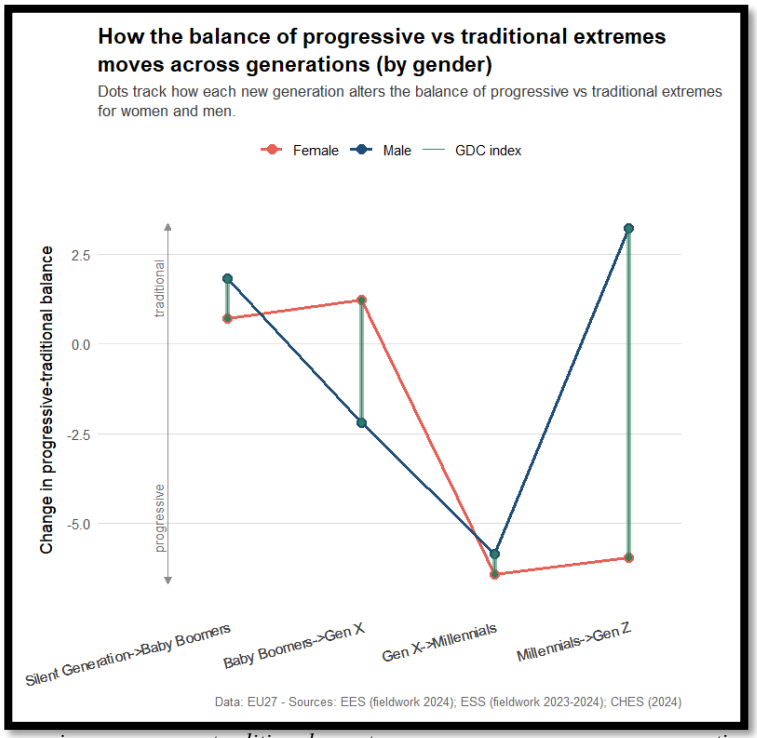
When looking at the rates of respondents with extreme placement divided by strongly progressive or strongly traditional tails (Figure 19), a fuller picture emerges.

Firstly, it is immediately noticeable that virtually no grouping has a vote share for strongly traditional parties under 20% (with the slight exception of Silent Generation women at 19.3 %). This finding very much resonates with 21st-century discourse regarding the rise and mainstreaming of far-right parties across Europe (Brown et al., 2023).

The strongly progressive tail, on the other hand, can be seen as much less prominent across the grouping, surpassing the 20% threshold only in three out of 10 gender × generation groupings. Particularly, "Gen Z women" is the only one that has a bigger percentage of its respondents choosing a strongly progressive party (26.7%) in contrast to a strongly traditional party (22.8%).

Looking at trends across generations, in the female cohort, the number of respondents choosing a strongly traditional party is pretty much stable, with the trend only slightly diminishing in younger ones but staying well above 20%. The "strongly progressive" rate gradually increases, reaching in Millennial and Gen Z women a relatively sharp increase of 32% and 57% compared to Gen X women. On the other hand, in the male cohort, this rate also increases across generations – with Gen Z men being nearly twice as likely (+92%) to choose a "strongly progressive" party compared to Silent Generation men.

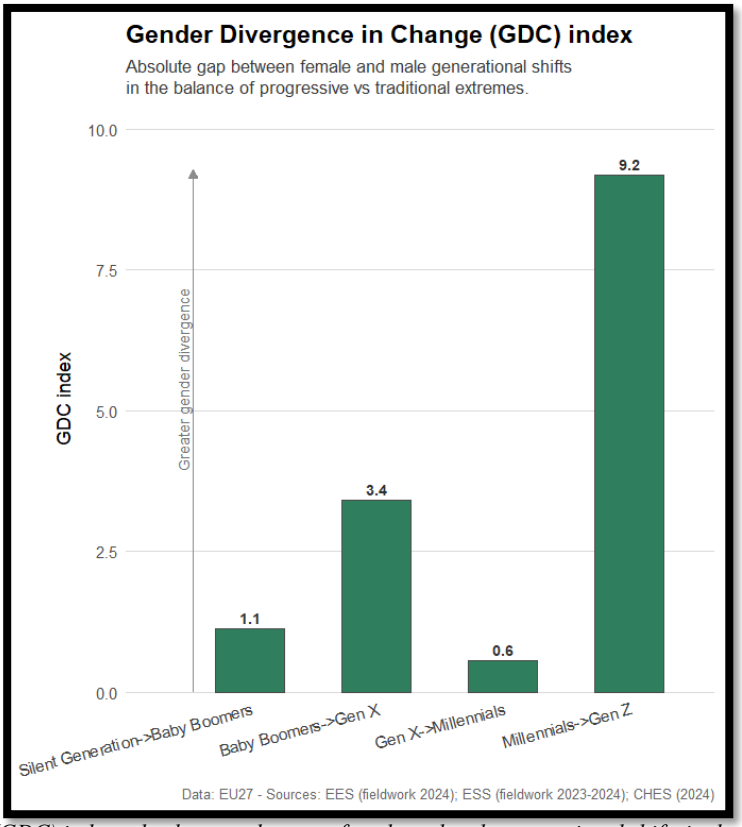
Figure 20



How the balance of progressive versus traditional extremes moves across generations (by gender), EU, 2024

Note. Dots plot generation-to-generation changes in the net balance calculated as % strongly progressive − % strongly traditional for Female (red) and Male (blue) cohorts; vertical bars indicate the Gender Divergence in Change (GDC) index for each transition. Data pooled across EU27 countries, n = 36,325 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

Figure 21



Gender Divergence in Change (GDC) index: absolute gap between female and male generational shifts in the balance of progressive versus traditional extremes, EU, 2024

Note. Bars show the GDC index, computed as the absolute difference in generation-level balance changes between women and men (GDC = |Δbalance_female − Δbalance_male|), expressed in percentage points, for successive generation transitions. Higher values indicate greater gendered divergence in movement toward the policy extremes. Estimates are pooled across EU27 countries, n = 36,325 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

Comparing Female vs Male trends (Figure 19), it's striking to observe the gendered divergence in the youngest generation. Gen Z women are decisively increasing their share of the vote for "strongly progressive" parties (standing at 26.7%) and instead decreasing it for "strongly traditional" ones compared to their Millennial counterparts. Gen Z men, instead, are substantially choosing for "strongly traditional" parties (the highest share out of all groupings, at 30.2%) and instead only slightly increasing the alignment with "strongly progressive" parties compared to the previous male grouping[10].

Millennials, despite displaying the second-largest gendered gap overall (Figure 11), are actually behaving similarly across the two genders: both Millennial women and men (compared to Gen Xers) slightly diminish their support for "strongly traditional" parties (women −6%; men −2%) and both increase their support for "strongly progressive" ones (women +32%, men +33%; Figure 19).

Figure 20 shows that generational transitions are not uniform by gender: while the Millennial transition is characterized by both female and male cohorts moving in the same direction toward a more progressive balance between the policy extremes, the transition into Gen Z exhibits strikingly different behavior for women and men. Earlier transitions show roughly parallel shifts, but in the youngest cohort the genders no longer move in tandem between the progressive and traditional tails.

Figure 21 quantifies this divergence: the Gender Divergence in Change (GDC) index (the absolute difference between female and male generation-level balance shifts, expressed in percentage points) is small for earlier transitions but rises sharply for the Millennials to Gen Z transition (GDC = 9.2). This indicates that the most recent generational shift involves substantially greater gendered divergence at the extremes than any prior transition.

Overall, these patterns confirm that, even when looking at the extremes of the political spectrum, Gen Z not only displays higher polarization but also exhibits a uniquely gendered trajectory and pattern.

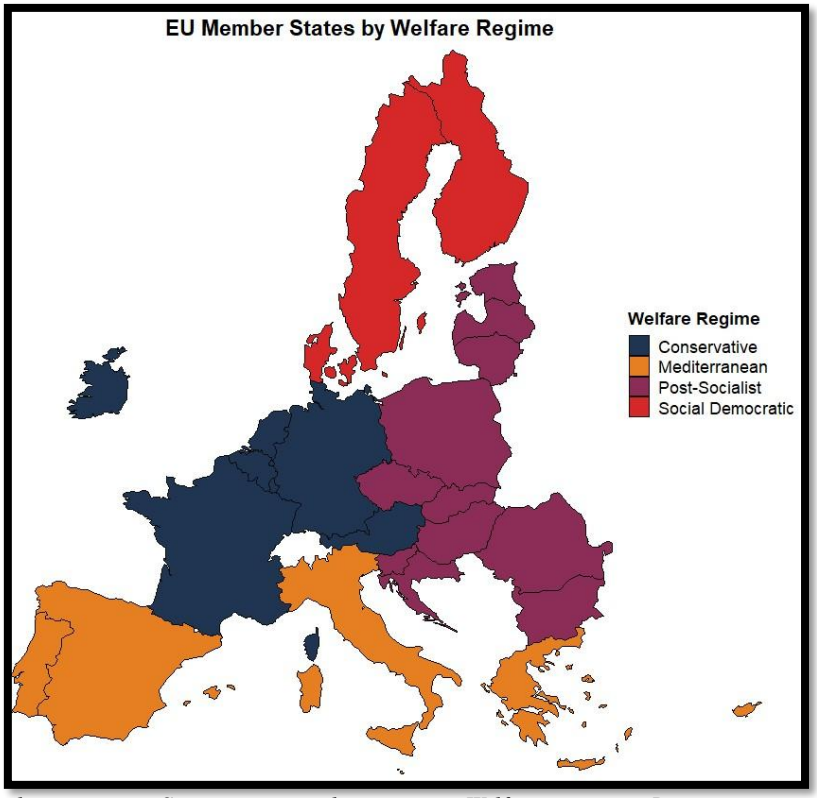
[10] In particular, Gen Z women are 32% more likely than Gen Z men to choose a strongly progressive, while Gen Z men are about 33% more likely than Gen Z women to choose a strongly traditional party.

4.3 Gen Z gendered polarization by welfare regimes

To allow a cross-national comparison of the Gen Z gender gap in political orientation, this study resorts to sub-continental divisions according to welfare state configurations. Welfare regimes are conceptualized here as broad institutional arrangements that structure life chances, social provision and family organization. They are not meant to suggest that every country within a regime is identical, but rather that these groupings capture shared patterns in social policy, labor markets and civic culture that plausibly shape political socialization and partisan supply.

The classification follows well-established comparative practice in the literature on welfare states and party systems, drawing on typologies ideated by scholars such as Esping-Andersen (1989) and Ferrera (1996). As a consequence, EU Member states are assigned to four regime categories (Figure 22): Social Democratic (Denmark, Finland, Sweden), Conservative (Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Ireland[11]), Mediterranean (Cyprus, Spain, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal) and Post-Socialist (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia).

Figure 22



EU Member States by Welfare Regime, EU, 2024

Note. Map shows the assignment of EU27 member states to four welfare-regime categories used in Section 4.3: Social Democratic, Conservative, Mediterranean, and Post-Socialist. Colors correspond to regime categories as indicated in the legend.

[11] There is no separate Liberal group, as no country has enough cases to represent it independently; Ireland, the only "Liberal" EU member in the sample, is therefore grouped with the Continental countries.

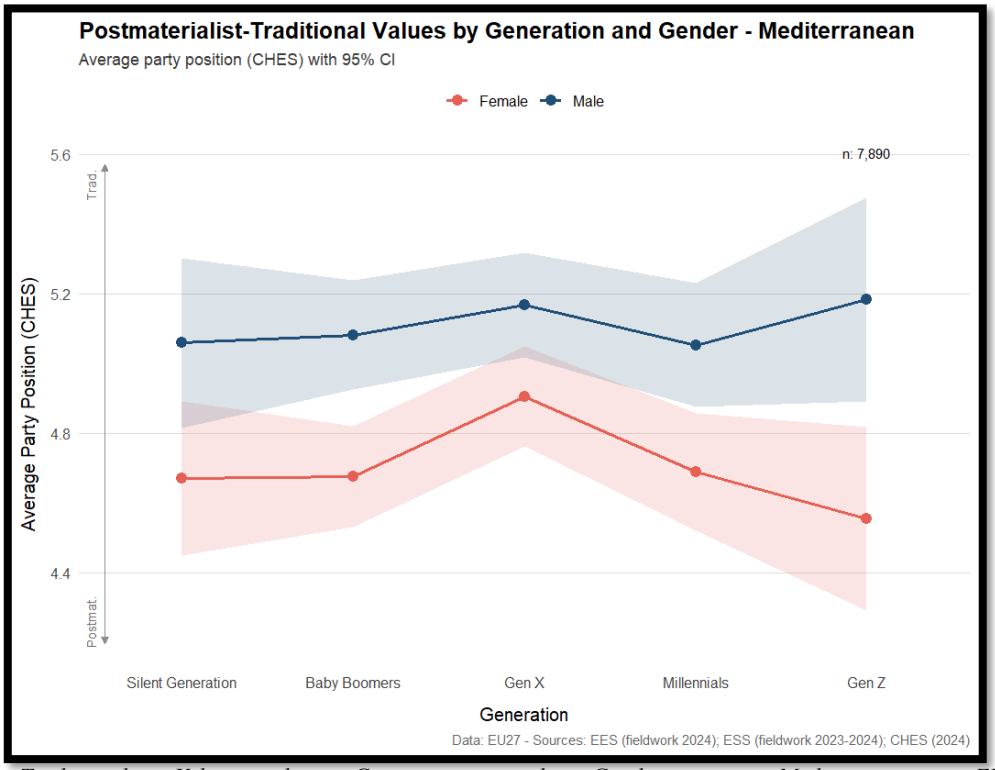
These four categories group countries with broadly similar welfare arrangements, familistic attitudes, and commodification patterns (Esping-Andersen, 1989; Ferrera, 1996) so that cross-regional contrasts can illuminate whether and how institutional context shapes Gen Z women's and men's location on identity and culture cleavages.

The calculations used here are direct replicas of those applied in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, but grouped by welfare regime rather than referring to the entire EU. The same CHES postmaterialist–traditional cut points define the extremes (≤ 2.5 as strongly progressive; ≥ 7.5 as strongly traditional) and the Gender Divergence in Change index (computed as the absolute difference between female and male generational balance changes from Millennials to Gen Z) is reused without modification.

In sum, the regime analysis offers a descriptive map of where Gen Z gendered polarization is strongest and whether similar patterns appear across social democratic, conservative, Mediterranean and post-socialist contexts. These regime summaries provide the distributional backdrop for the more detailed country and multivariate examinations that follow.

Beyond Gen Z-specific analyses, an assessment of the overall state for each country of the gender cleavage on political and cultural attitudes is also present (Figure 30). This overview situates the generation-specific findings within the broader landscape of European political life, highlighting persistent or emerging gaps that extend across age cohorts. Country-level estimates are calculated using survey weights provided by the ESS and EES datasets, ensuring representativeness with respect to national populations and correcting for sampling design, nonresponse and demographic imbalances.

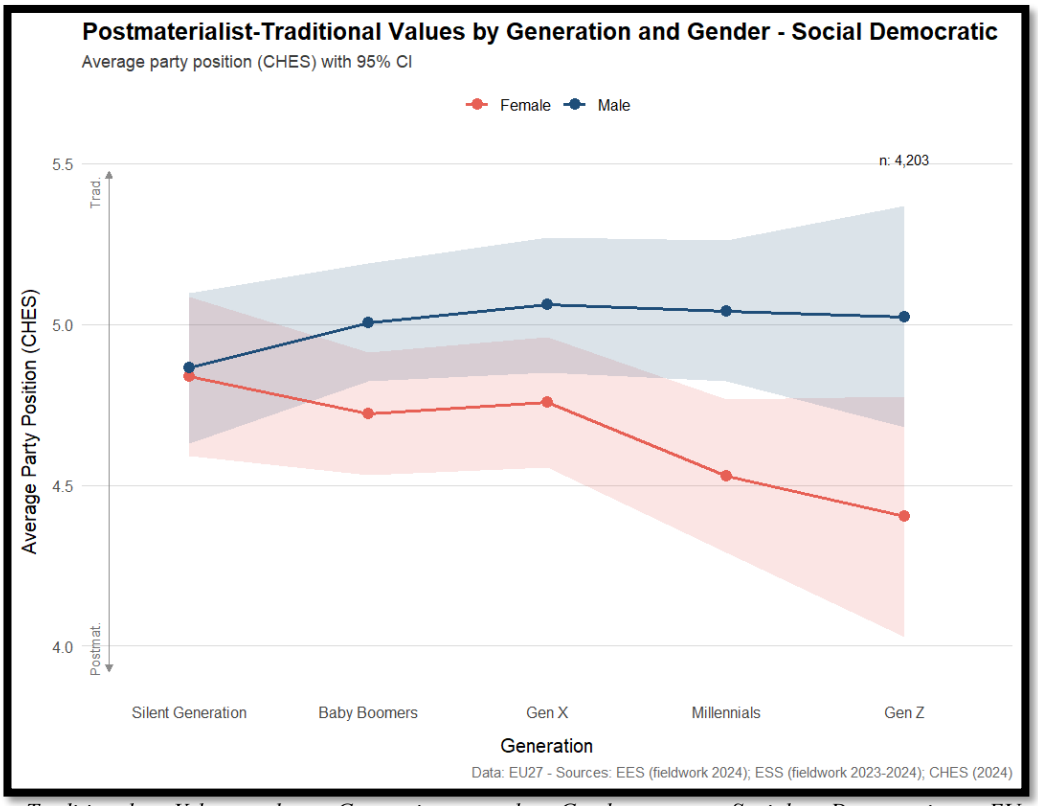
Figure 23



Postmaterialist–Traditional Values by Generation and Gender — Mediterranean, EU, 2024

Note. Lines present mean postmaterialist–traditional party positions linked to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) for Female (red) and Male (blue) respondents by generation, with 95 percent confidence ribbons. Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole; lower values toward the postmaterialist/progressive pole. Estimates are pooled across EU27 countries, n = 7,890 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

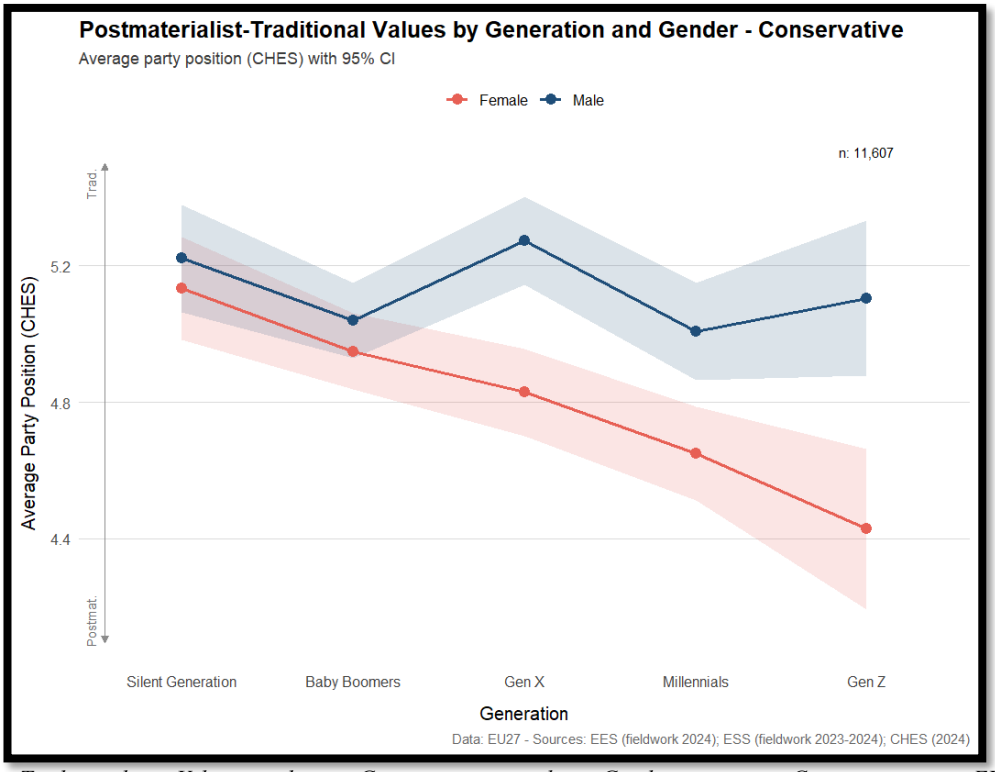
Figure 24



Postmaterialist–Traditional Values by Generation and Gender — Social Democratic, EU, 2024

Note. Lines present mean postmaterialist–traditional party positions linked to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) for Female (red) and Male (blue) respondents by generation, with 95 percent confidence ribbons. Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole; lower values toward the postmaterialist/progressive pole. Estimates are pooled across EU27 countries, n = 4,203 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

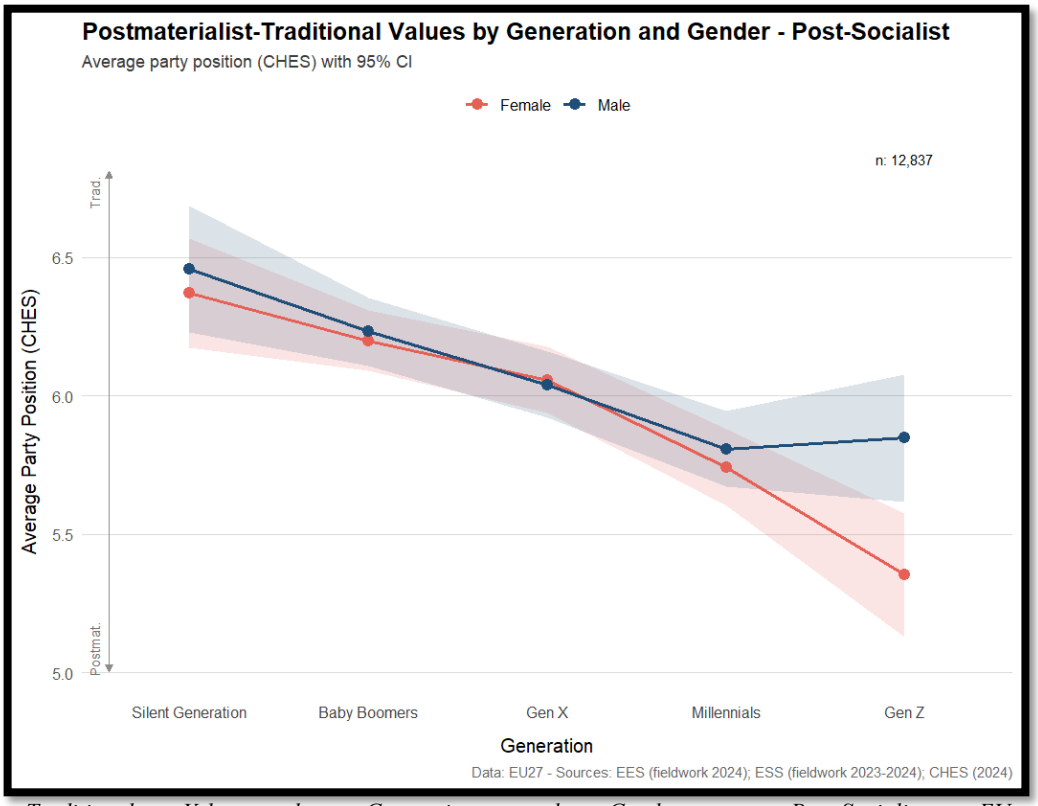
Figure 25



Postmaterialist–Traditional Values by Generation and Gender — Conservative, EU, 2024

Note. Lines present mean postmaterialist–traditional party positions linked to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) for Female (red) and Male (blue) respondents by generation, with 95 percent confidence ribbons. Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole; lower values toward the postmaterialist/progressive pole. Estimates are pooled across EU27 countries, n = 11,607 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

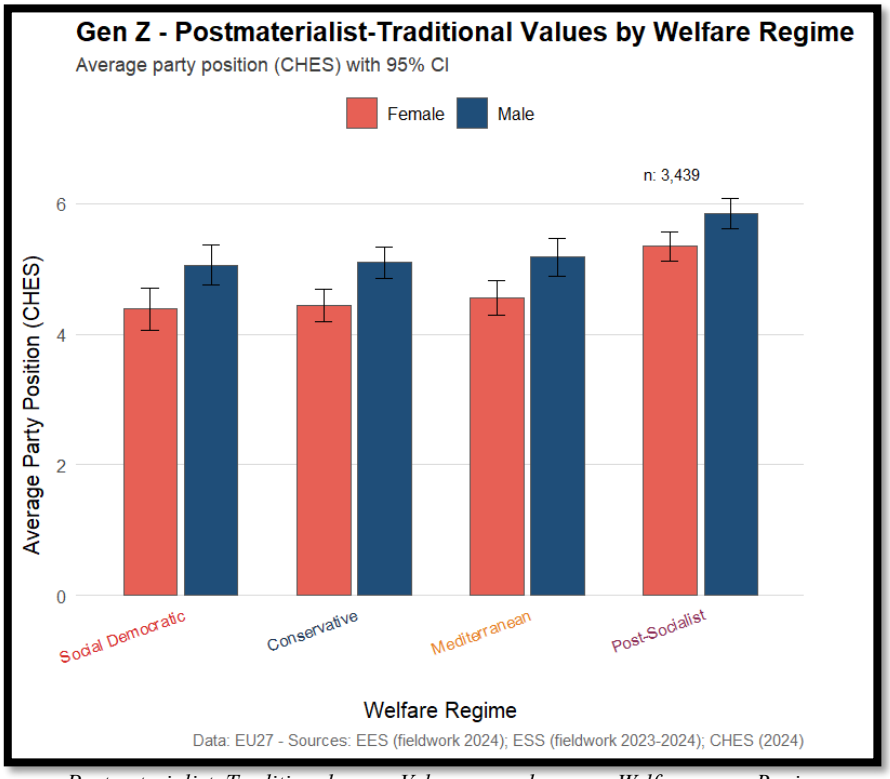
Figure 26



Postmaterialist–Traditional Values by Generation and Gender – Post-Socialist, EU, 2024

Note. Lines present mean postmaterialist–traditional party positions linked to the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) for Female (red) and Male (blue) respondents by generation, with 95 percent confidence ribbons. Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole; lower values toward the postmaterialist/progressive pole. Estimates are pooled across EU27 countries, n = 12,837 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

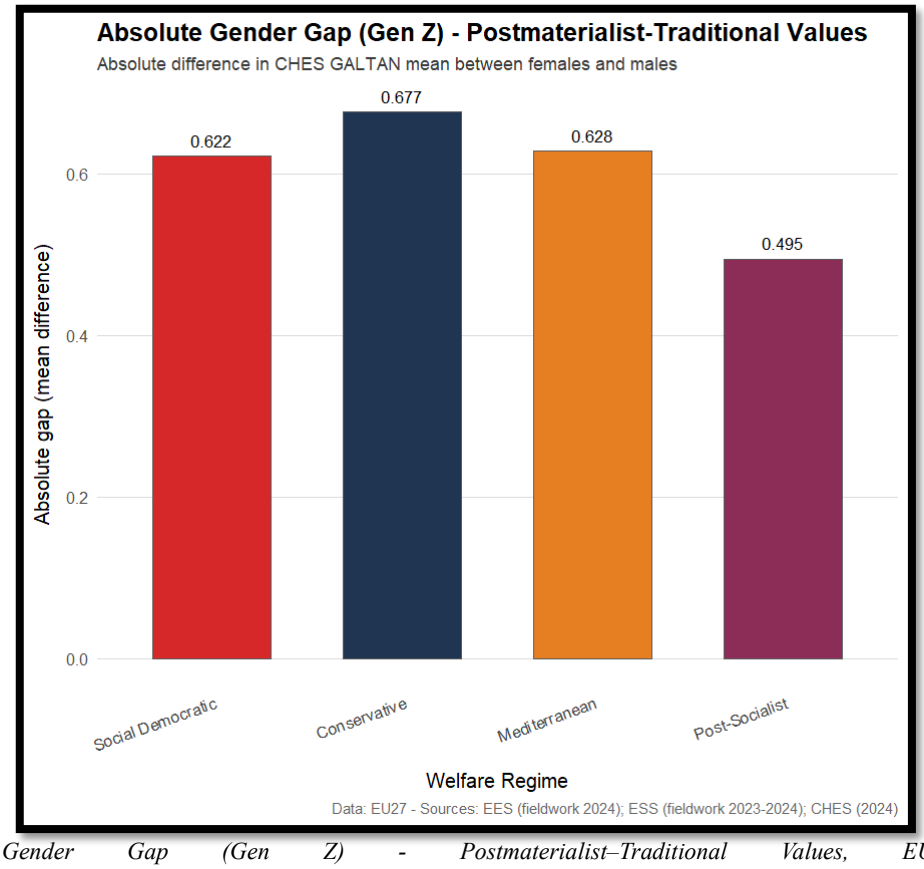
Figure 27



Gen Z - Postmaterialist–Traditional Values by Welfare Regime, EU, 2024

Note. Grouped bars present mean postmaterialist–traditional party positions (CHES) for Gen Z Female (red) and Male (blue) respondents by welfare regime, with 95% confidence intervals. Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole; lower values toward the postmaterialist/progressive pole. Pooled Gen Z sample for the panel: n = 3,439. Sources: European Election Study (fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (fieldwork 2023-2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2024).

Figure 28



Absolute Gender Gap (Gen Z) - Postmaterialist–Traditional Values, EU, 2024

Note. Bars show the absolute difference in CHES GALTAN mean between Gen Z females and males within each welfare regime (|mean_female - mean_male|). Sources: European Election Study (fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (fieldwork 2023-2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2024).

When looking at the different analyses of the gender gap by welfare regime (Figure 23, Figure 24, Figure 25, Figure 26), it can be noted that in all four of them the gap is not only present in Generation Z but also has widened considerably in comparison to previous generations.

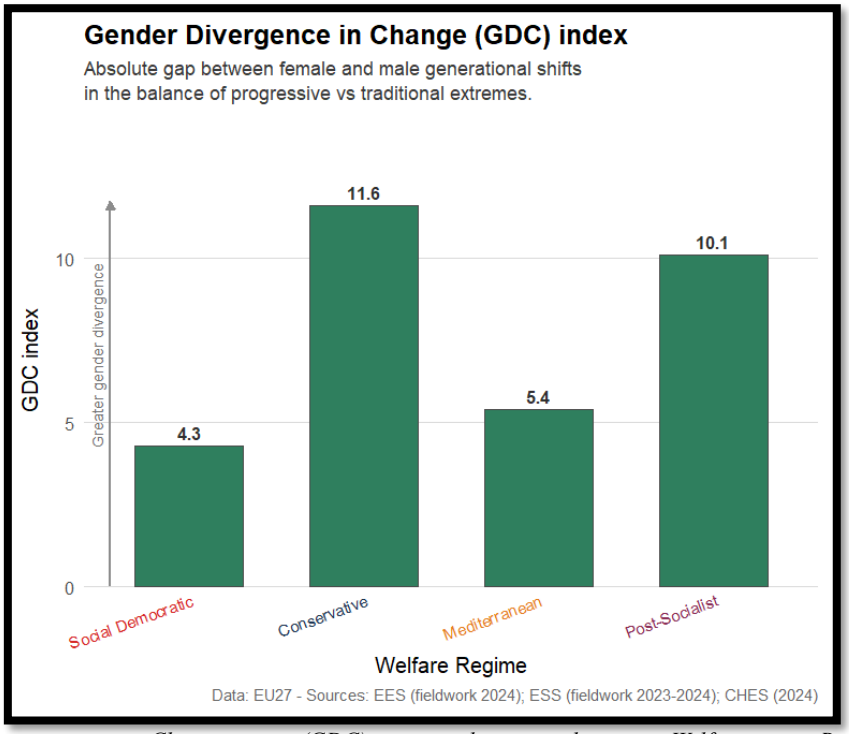
Of course, as expected, there are differences between the regime types. For the Mediterranean /Southern European countries (Figure 23), the gender gap is – while biggest in Gen Z – also substantially present in all generations. A similar pattern can be seen in Social Democratic/Nordic countries (Figure 24), whereas the gap is only absent in the oldest generation. The countries grouped in the Conservative/Continental welfare regime type show women being generally more progressive the younger they are, while men, in contrast, show a more stable path (Figure 25).

On the other hand, apart from Western Europe, the Post-socialist/Central and Eastern European countries exhibit an interesting and distinctive behavior (Figure 26) – with the gender gap appearing significantly only in Gen Z, while past generations display almost identical attitudes. In fact, when looking at Silent Generation to Millennials cohorts, a clear and straightforward pattern emerges: men and women are increasingly traditional the older they are. Gen Z is striking in comparison: while Gen Z women do follow this trend, being more progressive than Millennial women, male Gen Zers noticeably break the pattern and demonstrate more traditional positioning compared to male Millennials.

When comparing welfare regimes (Figure 27), the three Western European groupings cluster near the center of the postmaterialist–traditional axis. By contrast, Post-socialist countries differ markedly: even women in Generation Z in those countries register mean scores above the scale midpoint (at 5.35), which indicates a tendency toward traditional orientation on this dimension, a pattern that aligns with literature on post-socialist trauma and the associated tendency to stick to right-wing parties (Tavits & Letki, 2009; Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014).

Examining the absolute scale of the gap across various welfare regimes (Figure 28), the East-West divide persists, with Social Democratic, Conservative and Mediterranean countries showing comparable gender gaps while the Post-Socialist bloc exhibits the smallest mean difference between Gen Z women and Gen Z men. On the other hand, it's crucial to note that the Gen Z gender gap is approximately 7.41 times the Millennial gap in the Post-Socialist model, while the increase in the other regimes is more modest: about 1.89 times in Conservative, 1.72 times in Mediterranean, and 1.21 times in Social Democratic countries.

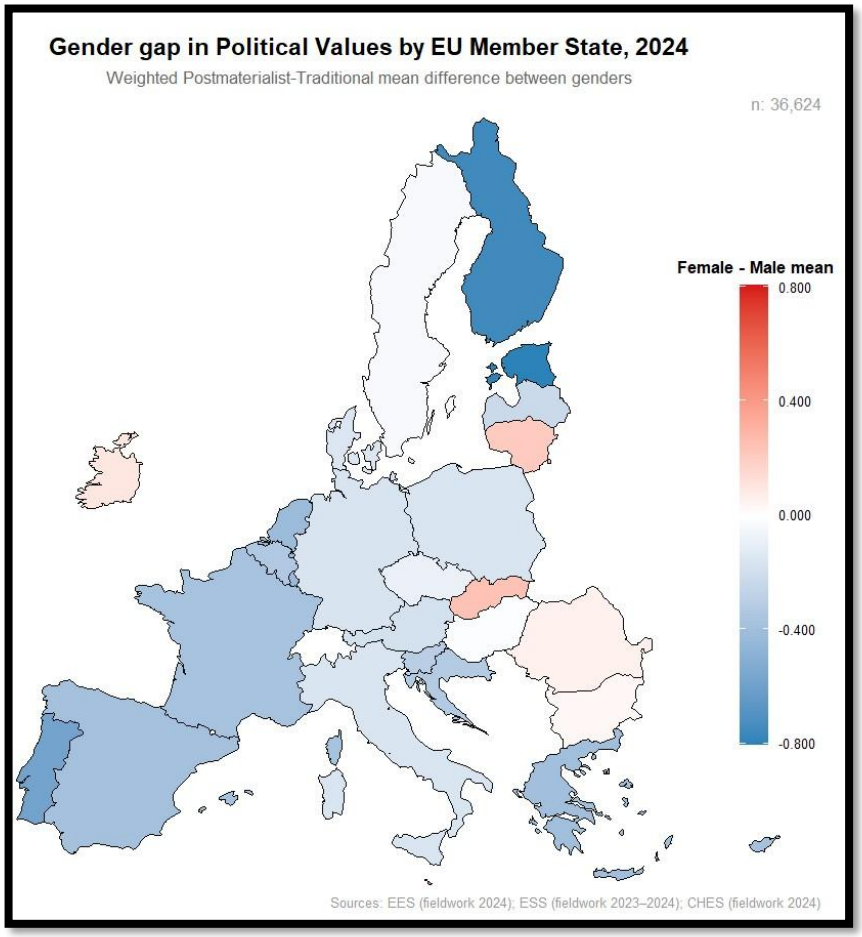
Figure 29



Gender Divergence in Change (GDC) index by Welfare Regime, EU, 2024

Note. Bars show the GDC index (|ΔD_female - ΔD_male|) in percentage points, where D = %strongly progressive - %strongly traditional and ΔD is the change from Millennials to Gen Z. Data pooled across EU27 countries; GDC calculated from CHES tail shares (≤2.5 progressive; ≥7.5 traditional). Sources: European Election Study (fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (fieldwork 2023-2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2024).

Figure 30



Gender gap in political values by EU member state, EU, 2024

Note. Map shows the survey-weighted mean difference in CHES postmaterialist–traditional positions (Female - Male) by member state, expressed in CHES scale points. Sources: European Election Study (fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (fieldwork 2023-2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (fieldwork 2024).

Figure 29 reports the Gender Divergence in Change (GDC) index for the Millennials to Generation Z transition across welfare regimes. Social-Democratic and Mediterranean blocs register modest GDC values (approximately 4.3 and 5.4 percentage points), indicating similar cohort shifts for men and women. By contrast, Conservative and Post-Socialist regimes show substantially higher GDC scores (≈11.6 and 10.1), signalling that men and women in these contexts experienced notably different movements between the progressive and traditional extremes.

Figure 30, despite not being specific to Generation Z, is crucial in order to compare the gender gap in political orientation on a cross-country basis and also to assess the results of this study against previous literature on the subject.

The Nordic countries were described as having the most pronounced gap in late 2000s research and also displaying the modern gender gap (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014) earlier than other European counterparts. This can be partially verified, as the gender gap was present in all generations (Figure 24) and, in Figure 30, Finland can be identified as one of the countries where the gap is most pronounced (≈ -0.75[12]). On the other hand, Finland cannot be described as an outlier – and the other Nordic countries (Denmark and Sweden) are not displaying particularly large gendered patterns.

Meanwhile, Southern European countries were historically described as having a less pronounced gender gap – showing moderate changes compared to other Western nations (Giger, 2009). This statement is not applicable to the results of this research: countries like Portugal (≈ -0.58), Spain (≈ -0.39), Greece (≈ -0.40) and Cyprus (≈ -0.38) are displaying a clear sign of a modern gender gap – comparable, if not larger, than the one observed in Conservative and Social Democratic countries. Therefore, while it was reported that the shift from the traditional to the modern gender gap began later for these nations (Giger, 2009), it can be claimed that the bloc has now caught up with its Western peers.

Ireland stands as the only Western EU Member State with a traditional gender gap, albeit small (≈ +0.10). This is in line with Abendschön and Steinmetz's evidence (2014) which already claimed that "Ireland seems to be the only Western EU country also displaying a traditional gender voting gap." (p. 331) – which further characterizing the Irish as a population with a particularly resilient

[12] Negative values for the gender gap (F−M) indicate that women score lower than men on the political orientation scale, meaning they are more progressive/liberal than men. Conversely, positive values indicate that women are more traditional/conservative than men.

traditional gender gap, contrary to past claims made by Giger (2009) as well as Inglehart and Norris (2000).

The evidence presented here regarding Central and Eastern European countries, pertaining to the Post-socialist welfare regime, aligns with trends presented in literature – which portrays this region as having a distinctly different pattern, historically resisting the widespread shift toward the modern gender gap (Abendschön & Steinmetz, 2014).

Overall, the analyses show that many countries in the bloc display little to no gender gap, with mean differences between women and men generally close to zero. Exceptions to this are Slovakia (≈ +0.24) and Lithuania (≈ +0.21), which display the most pronounced traditional gender gaps in the whole EU. Estonia is a notable outlier with a reversed pattern (≈ -0.80), while Poland has inverted its earlier 2008 pattern and now shows a modern gender gap (≈ -0.16). Slovakia remains the country with the most traditional gender gap of all, a position also highlighted in Abendschön and Steinmetz (2014).

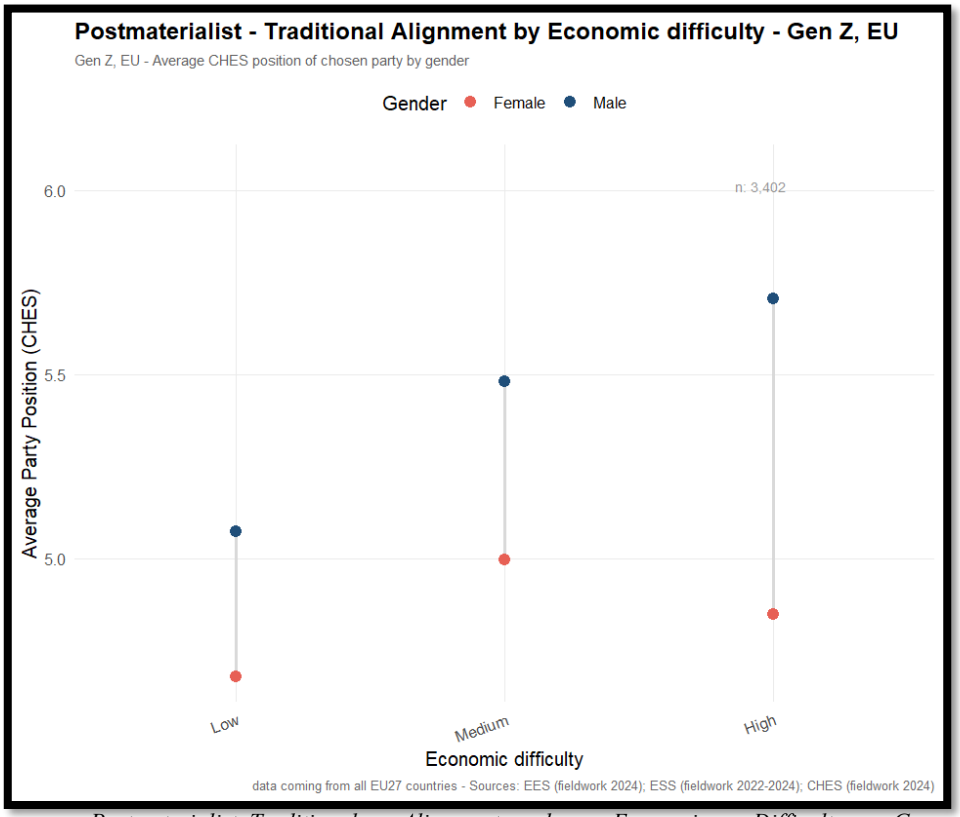
4.4 Predictors of the gender gap

This section shifts from where and in which institutional contexts the Gen Z gender gap appears to who it most affects, by mapping how social and demographic factors shape gender differences in party choice. Rather than tracing causal mechanisms, the goal is descriptive and comparative: to show whether the gap widens, narrows or changes direction across several axes of stratification, specifically economic difficulty, education, place of residence, parents' migration background, religious attendance and denomination, employment status and occupational class.

Firstly, for every harmonized indicator, the study presents a descriptive portrait: a plot that shows where Gen Z women's and men's chosen parties sit on the postmaterialist–traditional scale within each category. As before, sparse categories are excluded to avoid unstable estimates. These comparisons reveal whether certain social variables (such as low education or high religiosity) intensify or mute gendered differences. Sparse categories are excluded to avoid unstable estimates.

Secondly, a regression model is illustrated to compare Gen Z women and men across the EU while jointly accounting for different predictors, providing a compact overview of how different social environments correspond to shifts in the Gen Z gender gap.

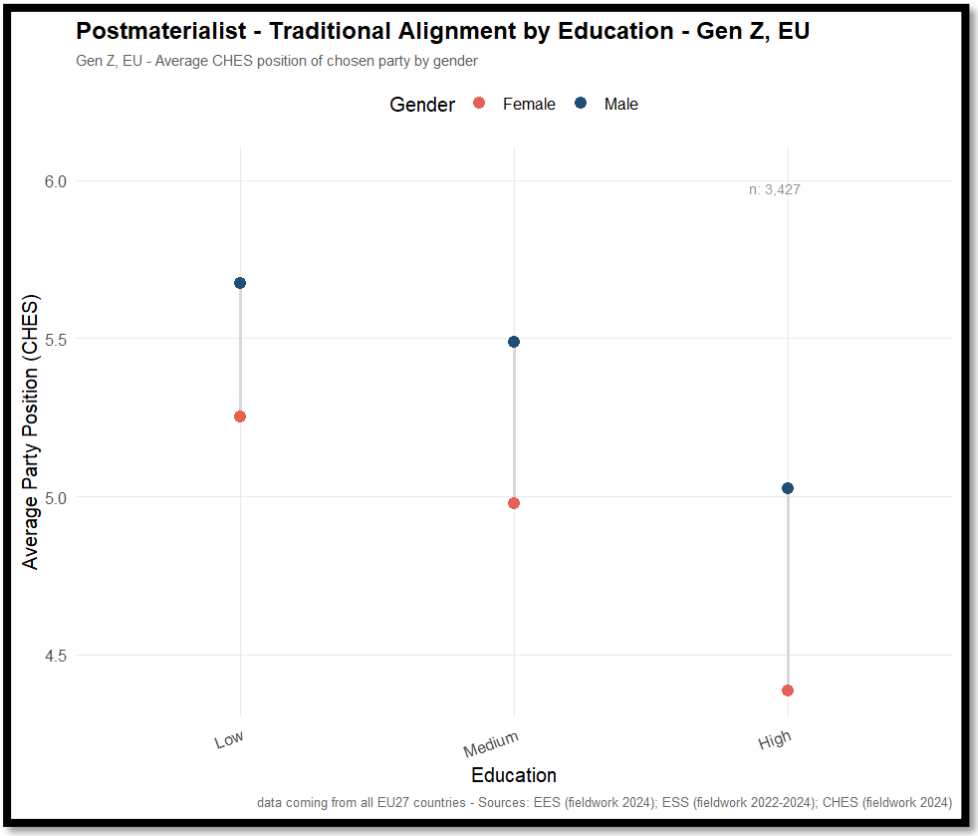
Figure 31



Economic Difficulty – Postmaterialist–Traditional Alignment by Economic Difficulty, Gen Z, EU, 2024

Note. Mean CHES party positions for Gen Z respondents by gender across economic difficulty tertiles; red = Female, blue = Male; higher values indicate greater traditional orientation. Pooled EU27 sample, n = 3,402. Sources: European Election Study (fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (2023–2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2024).

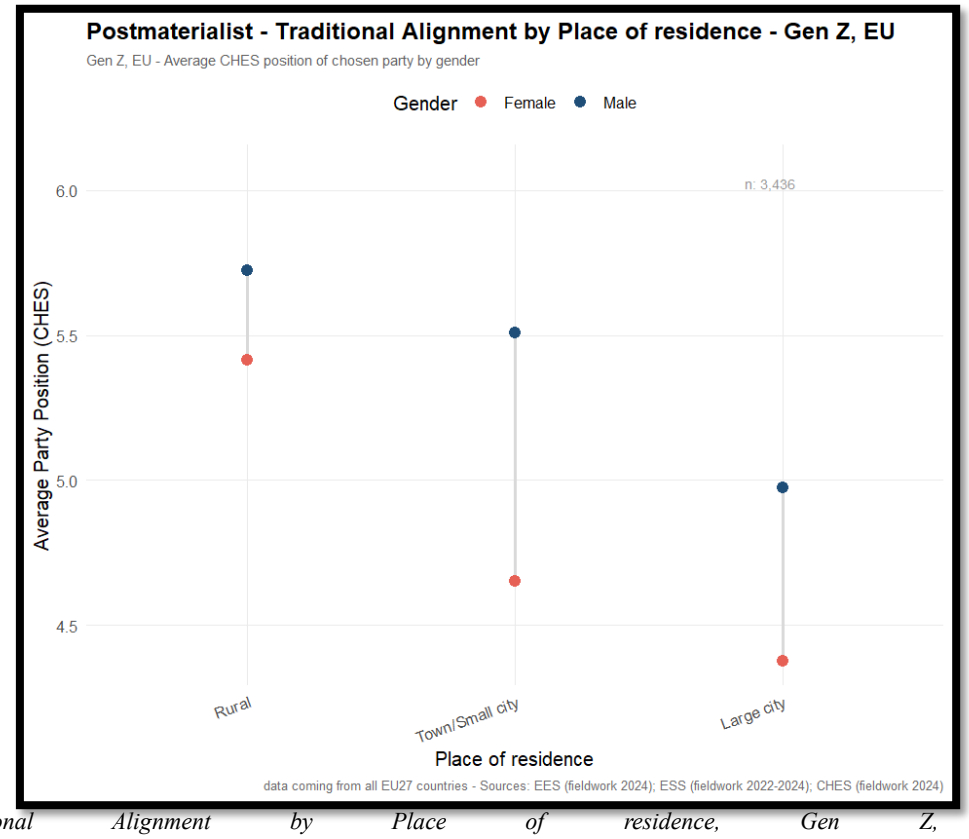
Figure 32



Postmaterialist–Traditional Alignment by Education, Gen Z, EU, 2024

Note. Mean CHES party positions for Gen Z respondents by gender across three education levels; red = Female, blue = Male; higher values indicate greater traditional orientation. Pooled EU27 sample, n = 3,427. Sources: European Election Study (fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (2023–2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2024).

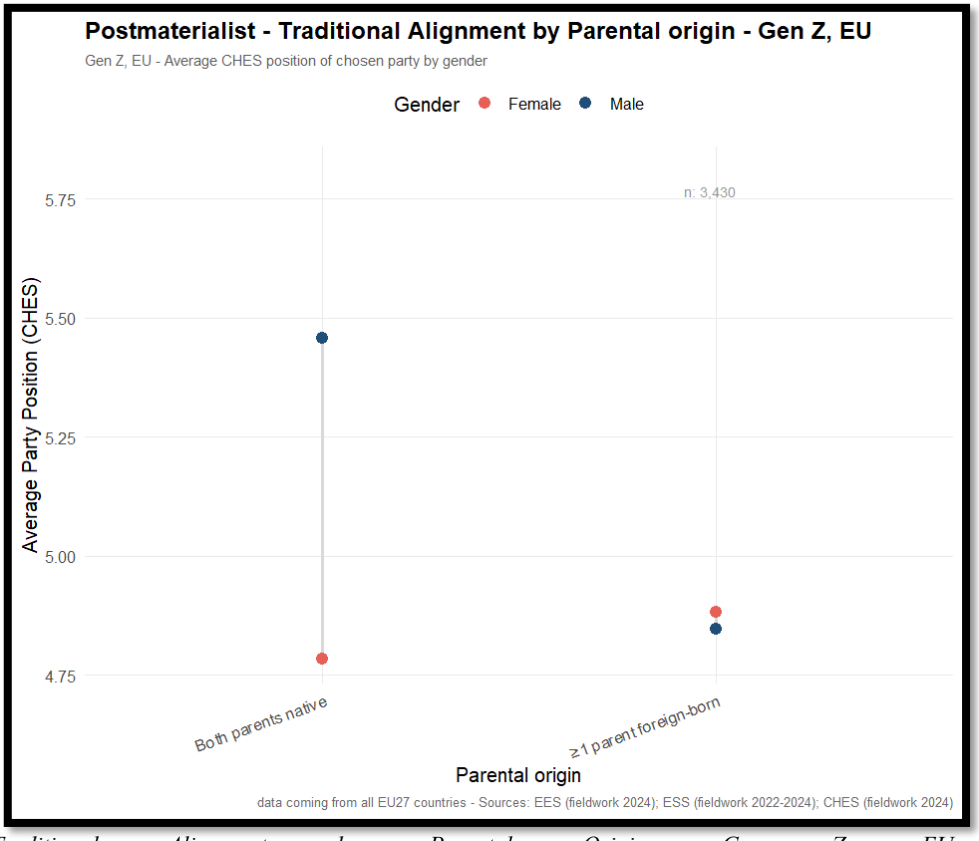
Figure 33



Postmaterialist–Traditional Alignment by Place of residence, Gen Z, EU, 2024

Note. Mean CHES party positions for Gen Z respondents by gender across urban–rural categories; red = Female, blue = Male; higher values indicate greater traditional orientation. Pooled EU27 sample, n = 3,436. Sources: European Election Study (fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (2023–2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2024).

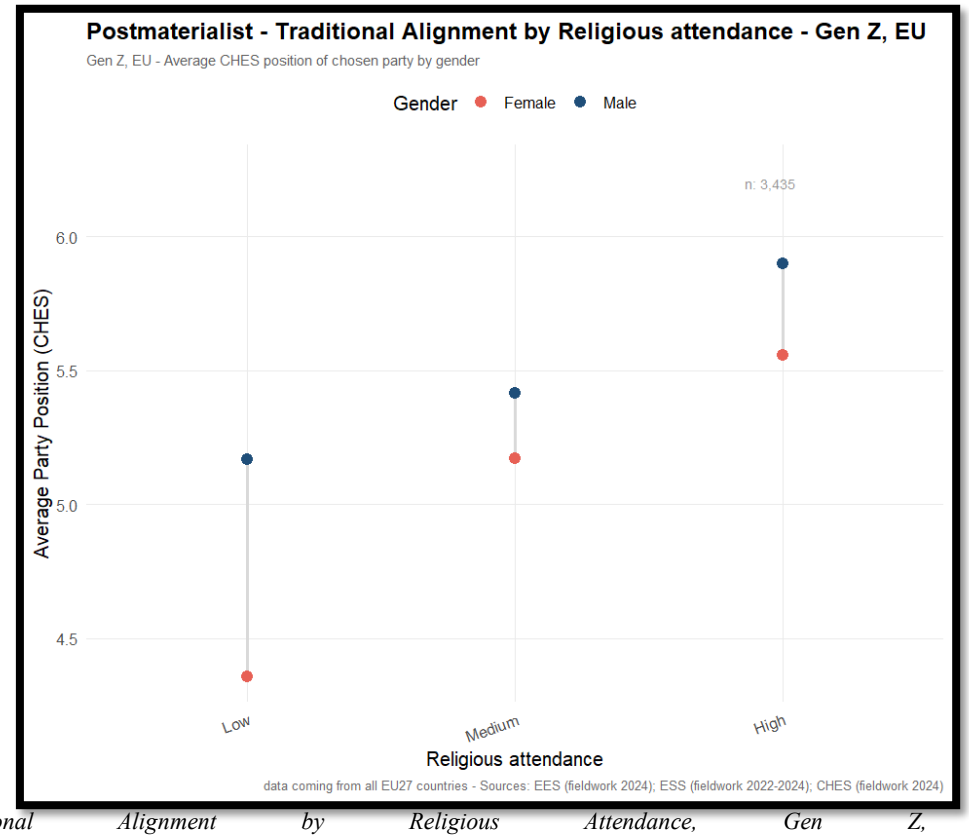
Figure 34



Postmaterialist–Traditional Alignment by Parental Origin, Gen Z, EU, 2024

Note. Mean CHES party position for Gen Z respondents by gender, comparing those with both parents native vs. ≥1 parent foreign-born. Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole. Pooled EU27 sample, n = 3,430 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

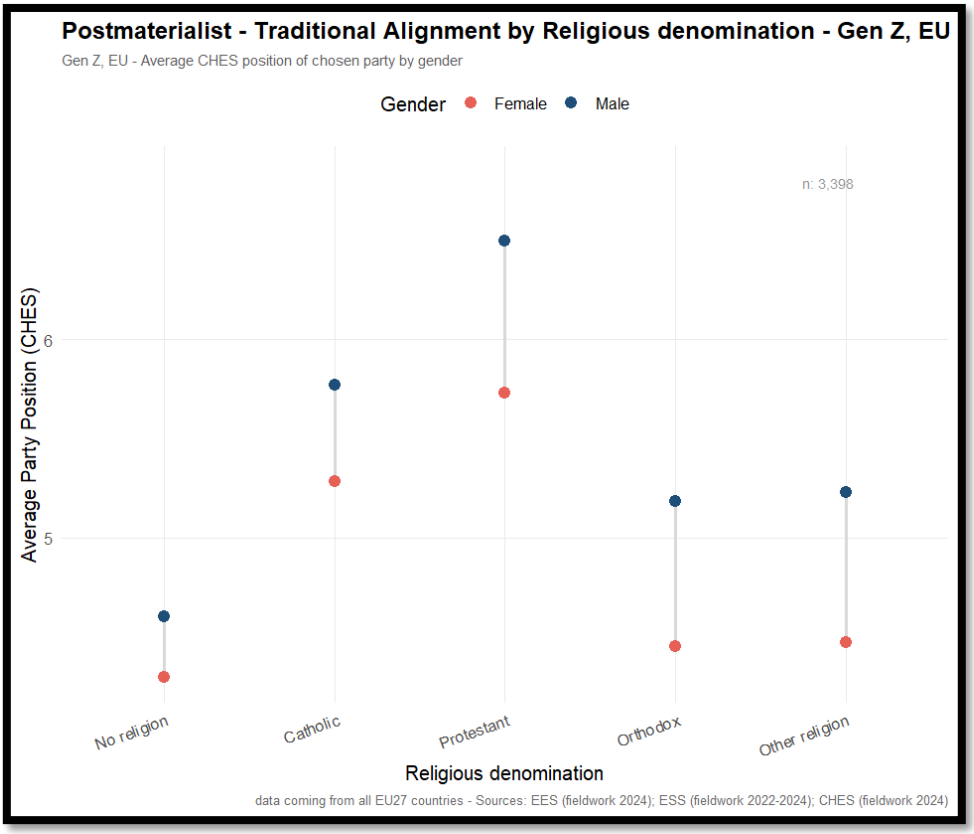
Figure 35



Postmaterialist–Traditional Alignment by Religious Attendance, Gen Z, EU, 2024

Note. Mean CHES party position for Gen Z respondents by gender and three attendance levels (Low, Medium, High); vertical segments connect female and male means. Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole. Pooled EU27 sample, n = 3,435 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

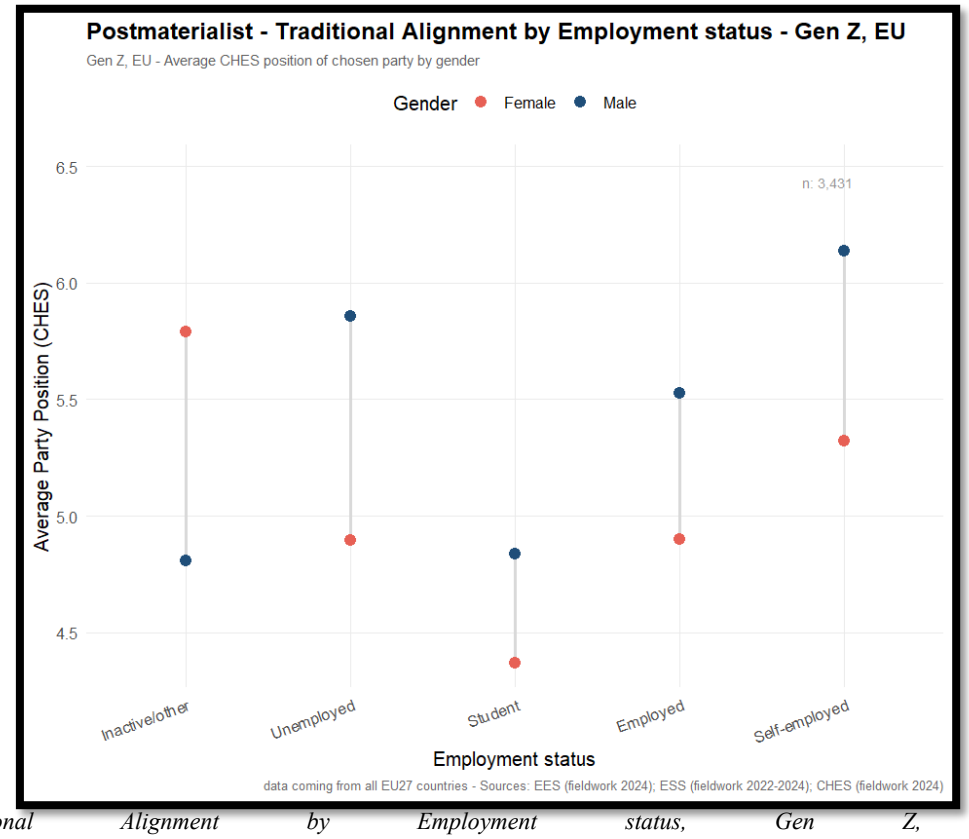
Figure 36



Postmaterialist–Traditional Alignment by Religious Denomination, Gen Z, EU, 2024

Note. Mean CHES party position for Gen Z respondents by gender across denominations (No religion, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Other). Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole. Pooled EU27 sample, n = 3,398 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

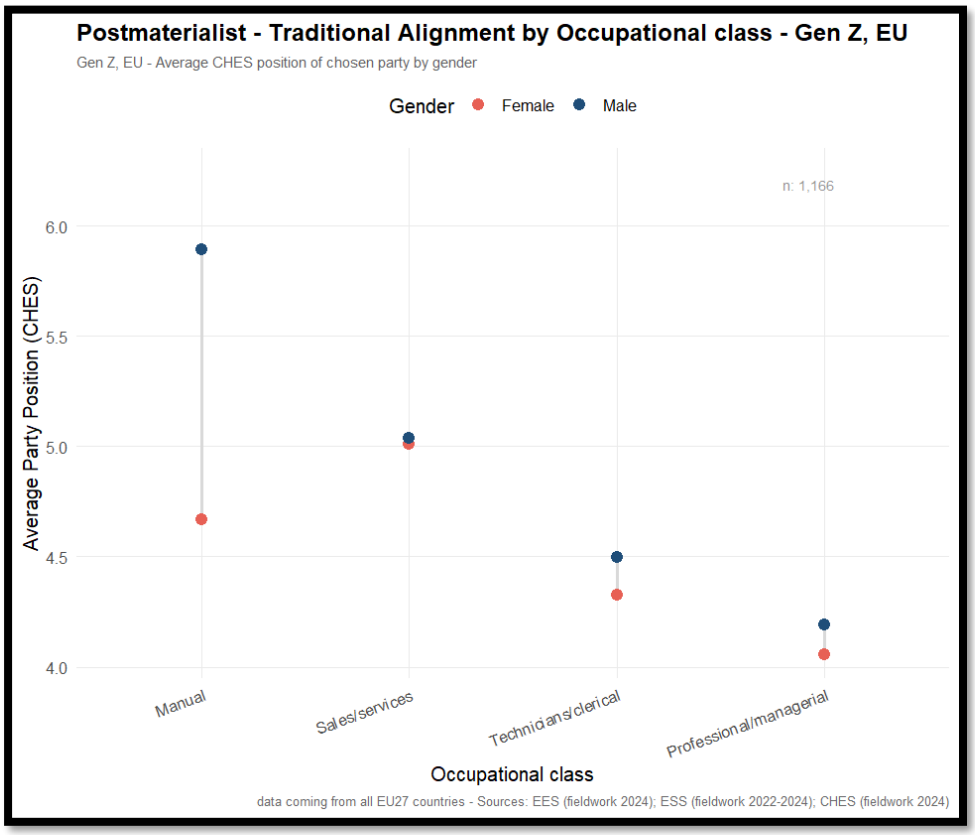
Figure 37



Postmaterialist–Traditional Alignment by Employment status, Gen Z, EU, 2024

Note. Mean CHES party positions for Gen Z respondents by gender across employment categories; red = Female, blue = Male; higher values indicate greater traditional orientation. Pooled EU27 sample, n = 3,431. Sources: European Election Study (fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (2023–2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (2024).

Figure 38



Postmaterialist–Traditional Alignment by Occupational Class, Gen Z, EU, 2024

Note. Mean CHES party position for Gen Z respondents by gender (Female = red; Male = blue) and occupational class. Higher values indicate placement toward the traditional pole. Pooled EU27 sample, n = 1,166 (European Election Study, fieldwork 2024; European Social Survey, fieldwork 2023–2024; Chapel Hill Expert Survey, 2024).

Looking at the evidence, it can be assessed that generally, with a low amount of economic difficulty, both genders tend to vote for more progressive parties and, additionally, the gender gap rises as the level of economic difficulty rises (Figure 31) – with the high-difficulty gap being about 2.18 times the low-difficulty gap.

Education (Figure 32) displays a similar pattern, where highly educated Gen Z men and women align with progressive parties more than their low- and medium-education counterparts. What is noticeable here is that the gap remains relatively stable across the three education levels and does not show any sizeable gradient.

Looking at the urban–rural cleavage (Figure 33), expressed in three levels according to the respondent's place of residence, progressive choices are more probable for both Gen Z cohorts in large cities, while traditional choices become progressively more common among individuals from towns, small cities, and rural areas. Interestingly, polarization appears strongest among respondents from towns and small cities, with the gender gap in this group roughly 2.8 times the rural gap and 1.4 times the large-city gap.

Figure 34 shows differences among respondents based on their parents' origin – whether both are native to the country or not. Respondents with two native parents show a gap of ≈0.68, whereas those with at least one foreign-born parent show ≈ -0.03: the contrast between these groups is therefore about 0.71 points.

Moving on to patterns of religiosity, the gap is larger among Gen Zers who attend religious services little or not at all, who, compared to the other groups, show a gap 3.4 times the medium-attendance group and 2.4 times the high-attendance group. Additionally, Gen Zers with medium to high attendance are, on average, more likely to vote for traditional-leaning parties (Figure 35). Interestingly, non-religious respondents show the smallest gap overall (≈0.31), followed by Catholics (≈0.49) – while Protestants (≈0.77), Orthodox (≈0.73) and "Other religion" (≈0.76) display relatively larger gaps (Figure 36). The misalignment between low-attendance and non-religious Gen Z respondents may indicate that the gender gap is particularly pronounced among those who identify with a religion but do not attend services.

Reflecting findings related to education, it's noticeable that students (Figure 37) exhibit the lowest values: since Gen Z respondents are generally over 18, those who are still students are possibly enrolled in some sort of tertiary education, which is consistent with their expected high educational attainment. Male and female students also show the smallest gender gap in political views, while the largest gap appears among unemployed and self-employed individuals. Inactive/other

respondents form a particular category, as females are more likely to vote for traditional parties than males, and vice versa: this group may include lower-engaged respondents.

Assessing occupational class (Figure 38) is more challenging, as the only substantial gap is found among those performing manual labor (≈1.22), while other classes show little to no gap (professionals ≈0.13; technicians ≈0.17; sales/services ≈0.03). The manual-worker gap is therefore roughly 9× the professional gap and over 40× the sales/services gap, but because the number of respondents in some occupational categories is small, these comparisons should be interpreted with caution.

Table 1. Gen Z Gender Gap – Standardized interaction effects (Gen Z, EU, 2024)

Predictor	***Coeff***	***CI 2.5%***	***CI 97.5%***	***Std. Err.***	***p-value***
Female (baseline gap)	-0.5277	-0.7107	-0.3447	0.0933	<0.001
Economic difficulty (z)	-0.2232	-0.4101	-0.0364	0.0953	0.019
Education (z)	-0.1054	-0.2944	0.0836	0.0964	0.274
Place of residence (z)	-0.0725	-0.2551	0.1101	0.0931	0.436
Religious attendance (z)	0.2419	0.0560	0.4278	0.0948	0.011
Parental origin (z)	0.2642	0.0805	0.4479	0.0937	0.005

Note. Coefficients from the model y = CHES ~ female + econ_z + edu_z + urban_z + attend_z + parents_z + female:econ_z + female:edu_z + female:urban_z + female:attend_z + female:parents_z. The row "Female (baseline gap)" reports the average difference (Female − Male) in CHES points when the standardized predictors are at their mean (Z = 0). The other rows show the female × Z interaction effects: each coefficient indicates how much (in CHES points) the Female − Male gap changes for a one-standard-deviation increase in the corresponding standardized predictor. Estimates use heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors; Source: European Election Study (EES, fieldwork 2024); European Social Survey (ESS, fieldwork 2023–2024); Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES, 2024).

Table 1 presents a compact multivariate summary of who the Gen Z gender gap touches, based on a single regression estimated on Gen Z respondents pooled across EU countries. The model compares women and men while taking into account five social variables: economic difficulty, education, place of residence, religious attendance, and parents' migration background[13]. Each of these social dimensions was converted to a common scale (so that a one-unit change means "one standard deviation" on that measure), and the table reports the baseline female–male difference

[13] Nominal multi-category factors (religious denomination, detailed sector, employment status with many categories, occupational class) produce multiple dummies that lack a single ordered scale. Their magnitudes are not directly comparable once dummy-coded. To rank predictors by standardized contribution to the gender gap we restrict to ordinal (3-level) or binary predictors.

when everyone is at the sample average, and how that gap shifts when we move one standard deviation along each social dimension. The “Female (baseline gap)” row shows the average gender tilt in party choice among Gen Z – and each other row shows whether and how much that tilt gets larger or smaller among people with more (or less) of the given social characteristic. Because the goal is descriptive comparison across the EU, country fixed effects are not included: the results describe broad cross-national patterns rather than within country causal effects.

The standardized interaction model confirms and extends the patterns described above (Table 1). At average levels of the observed predictors, women remain substantially more postmaterialist than men, reinforcing that the gap is not driven by a single subgroup. Moderators operate in expected directions: economic difficulty widens the gap, as men shift relatively more toward traditional positioning, while religious attendance reduces it, moving women closer to men. Parental foreign origin also reduces the gender gap, likely through different socialization pathways.

As mentioned above, the gender gap remains fairly stable across education levels (Figure 32) and varies non-linearly across place of residence (Figure 33). Because their interaction effects are not statistically significant in the multivariate model (p-values 0.274 and 0.436, respectively), these dimensions cannot be considered meaningful moderators of the Gen Z gender gap.

Taken together, these descriptive analyses provide a detailed portrait of gendered political attitudes among European Gen Z. The patterns documented across ideological dimensions, generational cohorts, political extremes, welfare regimes and social variables highlight the emergence of distinctive gender divides in the youngest cohorts. These findings set the stage for the discussion and interpretation presented in the following chapter.

Conclusions

This study aims to analyze the gendered contours of political attitudes among Generation Z across the European Union. Drawing on pooled cross-national survey evidence and on party position data, the research has combined descriptive maps, stratified comparisons and multivariate models to assess where, how and why young women and young men differ in their political outlooks.

Firstly, the evidence suggests that a new cleavage in political attitudes is already alive and is set to shape both current and future party discourse across European nations. Gen Z is, therefore, a generation strikingly different from previous generations, in which gendered shifts in political attitudes have generally been more coherent: that has been seen in both Gen Xers, in which females and males both shifted toward the right-wing, and Millennials, who – in turn – shifted toward more left-leaning positions regardless of gender (Figure 12).

Norris and Inglehart (2019) claim that the oldest generations are the ones most likely to share authoritarian parties and values, but the present study's findings point toward a different pattern – Silent Generation and Baby Boomer respondents have been found to be the generations least likely to align with parties at both poles of the political spectrum (Figure 19): the claim was also disputed by Rekker, who notes that these same cohorts are the ones most loyal to traditionally mainstream parties (Rekker, 2024). Rekker also argues that far-right support has been highest among Generation X due to the combination of this cohort being less loyal to traditionally mainstream parties than older generations and simultaneously less culturally progressive than newer cohorts (Rekker, 2024). This claim might hold when looking at generations as a whole, but when divided by gender, Gen Z males (Figure 6, Figure 12) are set to assume a more traditional stance than Gen X males – making them the cohort with the most right-leaning stances.

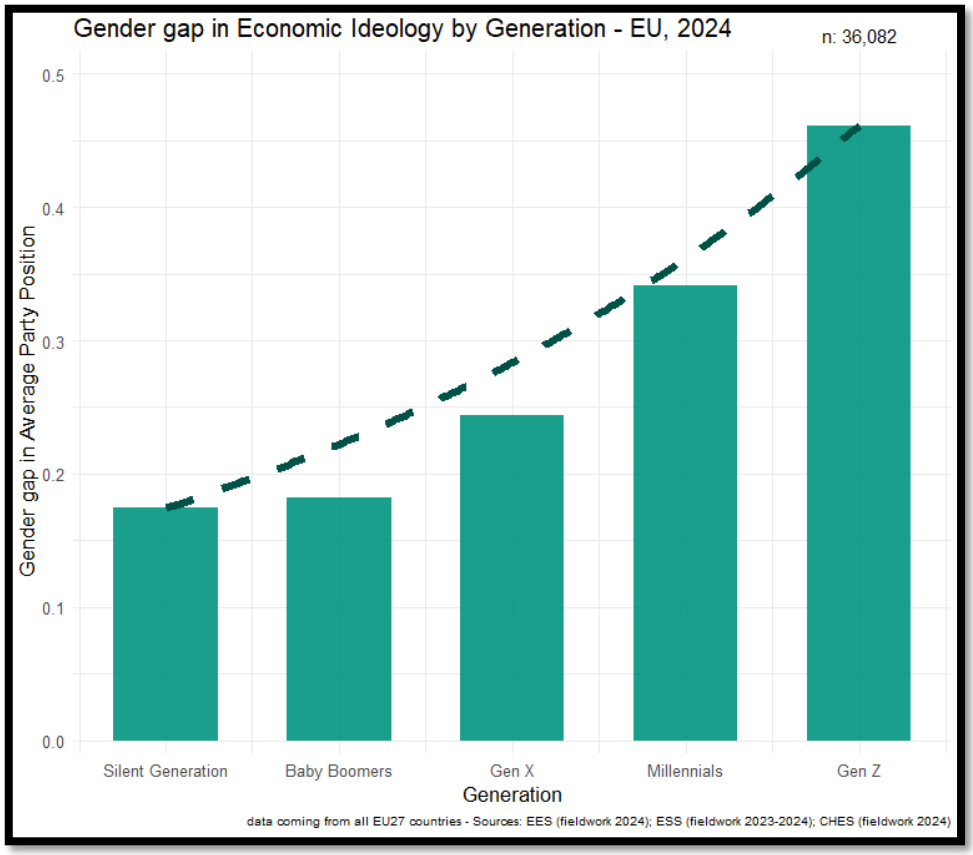
When looking at individual-level and macro-level determinants, the gender gap does not appear uniformly: social groups most likely to experience uncertainty and to feel they lack control over their lives, especially economically (high levels of economic uncertainty, unemployment, manual workers), are those who have the largest gaps between genders. Naturally, people who are more unsatisfied with their current personal situation are those who look for a drastic change and therefore are more likely to support anti-establishment, non-conventional parties further away from the political center.

On the other hand, it is crucial to reiterate what was claimed by Abendschön and Steinmetz (2014) about the importance of looking beyond the voter's socio-economic situation and including the socio-economic, cultural and political climates predominant in each voter's country when studying

the gender gap. That being said, it can be noted that – while differences persist on a general level between Member States (Figure 30), specifically between Post-socialist countries, these intra-EU differences seem to be somewhat decreasing in Gen Z. Despite classical recounts (Giger, 2009), the Mediterranean bloc displays roughly equal gender divergence to Social Democratic and Conservative blocs and, while smaller, the gap in Post-socialist Gen Zers is catching up with their Western European counterparts (Figure 26, Figure 28).

As it can be observed, although multiple CHES dimensions were initially considered, the GAL–TAN axis (a classification of parties based on being Postmaterialist or Traditional[14]) has proved particularly informative for understanding gendered political differences among Gen Z.

Figure 39



Gender Gap in Economic Ideology by Generation - EU, 2024

Note. Bars show the absolute gender gap in average party position on the CHES left-right scale, computed as |Female − Male| (higher = more right). The dashed line is an anchored exponential fit constrained to the first and last generation endpoints as a descriptive summary. Generations: Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z. Pooled EU27 estimates (n = 36,082). Sources: EES (fieldwork 2024), ESS (fieldwork 2023–2024), CHES (fieldwork 2024).

[14] Refers to parties' positions on democratic freedoms and rights. "Libertarian" or "Postmaterialist" parties favor expanded personal freedoms, such as abortion rights, same-sex marriage and participatory democracy, whereas "Traditional" or "Authoritarian" parties emphasize order, tradition and stability, viewing government as a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues.(Rovny et al., 2025).

This choice aligns with present literature that highlights the current state of the political discourse in the EU and beyond as based very much on identity politics, culture wars and social dimensions – rather than (as it was in post-WWII Europe) on an economic/social class dimension (Inglehart & Rabier, 1986; Achterberg, 2006; Dassonneville et al., 2024).

> "The social conflicts that were once frozen into the party systems of Western Europe have been transformed by a century of social and economic change. While the remnants of those historic cleavages still shape electoral politics today, party systems have been fractured by the emergence and mobilization of a second dimension of European politics—which is argued to derive variously from postmaterialism, globalization, and European integration. This new dimension is revealed by the now widely recognized advances of radical right, green, and social liberal parties at the expense of social democratic, Christian democratic, and conservative parties." (Noury & Roland, 2020, p. 308)

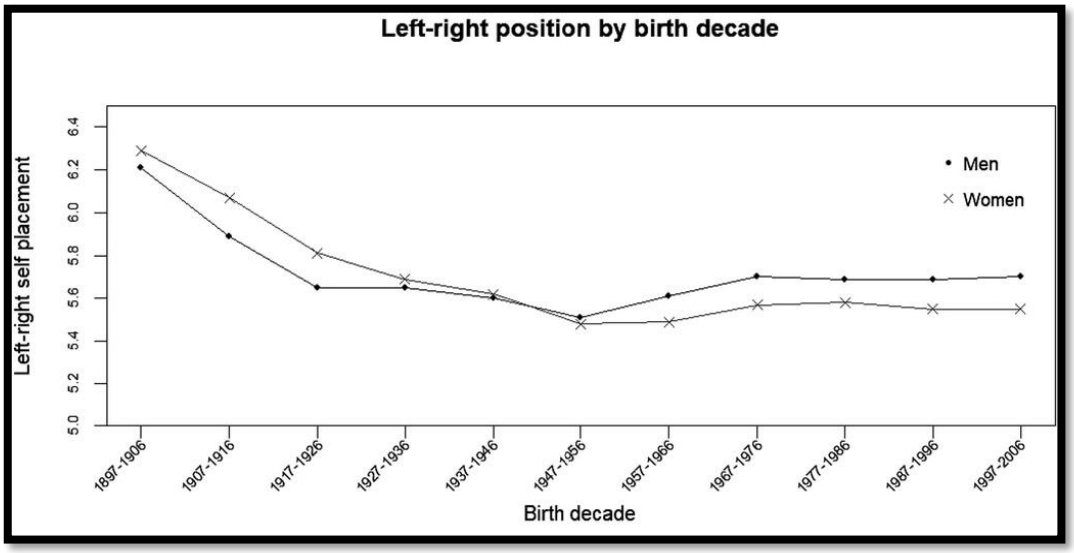
The view that cultural attitudes might be a meaningful driver of the gender gap in political positions among Gen Z is also supported by other recent work: Off and colleagues (2025) show that in the EU, younger men and women are more polarized on perception towards modern sexism than older generations. Therefore, a dimension that explores the current focus of contention between European parties better expresses how polarization is happening and where the genders are diverging. When comparing the gap in the Postmaterialist-Traditional dimension (Figure 11) with the general Left-Right dimension (Figure 7) or even the Economic stance dimension (Figure 39), it can be seen that the generational pattern of the gap is more divergent (with a bigger gender gap in Gen Z) along the Postmaterialist-Traditional axis, with the Economic axis showing the least divergence, leaving the broad Left-Right dimension in an intermediate position. This is empirical evidence that supports the existing literature on this topic.

Additionally, a recent longitudinal study by Campbell and Cowper-Coles (2025) exemplifies the limitations of relying on left–right self-placement[15]. Their analysis shows small, inconsistent gender differences (Figure 40), which they interpret as evidence of a minimal gender gap among younger cohorts. Campbell and Cowper-Coles' research seems paradoxical when compared to the present study's evidence. Nonetheless, I argue that it highlights a key methodological issue: as claimed by Bauer et al. (2017), the left-right self-placement scale is a problematic measure of ideology due to a lack of measurement equivalence. This scale is interpreted in highly variable ways across individuals and can therefore bias research results when comparing groups or studying

[15] The study uses sing combined data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Study (EVS), collected from 1981 to 2022 (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025).

ideology (Bauer et al., 2017). Therefore, using observational data (Bauer et al., 2017), such as anchoring individuals to party choice and CHES-coded positions on the Postmaterialist–Traditional axis, reduces this ambiguity and more accurately captures the cultural and identity-based conflicts shaping Gen Z's gendered political differences. This approach offers a unique lens for detecting emerging gendered cleavages and adds an original contribution to the study of generational political change.

Figure 40



Left–right self-placement of men and women by birth decade.

Note. Left–right self-placement scale ranges from 1 (left) to 10 (right). Reprinted from "From a gap to a gulf? Gen Z and the gender gap in political attitudes in post-industrial societies" by R. Campbell and M. Cowper-Coles, 2025, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2025D000000093

At last, a clear picture emerges for Gen Z men. In a context of widespread inflation, stagnant wages, rising housing costs, high youth unemployment, the erosion of the middle class and the retrenchment of social rights, many young men face sharply reduced life-course prospects compared with earlier cohorts. The groups who are most exposed to economic and class insecurity (the unemployed, manual workers, those reporting high material deprivation) are, as we have seen, those more likely to display the biggest gender divergence – which might stem from experiences of status frustration and relative deprivation. In a culture-dominated political arena structured around identity discourse, these economic injustices are frequently refracted through gendered frames and redirected toward women, migrants, queer people and other minorities, rather than toward calls to address structural capitalist drivers such as wealth concentration, labor market segmentation and welfare cutbacks.

This ties back with theories and literature discussed in the first chapters, such as Connell's hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) and Kimmel's *Angry white men* (2017), as it helps explain

why economic losses among Gen Z men can translate into support for exclusionary cultural politics instead of structural forms of political solidarity.

This paper has limitations that suggest directions for future work. First, the present study has captured a specific picture of generational gender gaps in the year 2024 – by contrast, a longitudinal analysis comparing past datasets and CHES surveys would be able to complement this research's evidence. Second, Gen Z samples remain limited in EU Member States – forcing a welfare regime-based comparison instead of a Gen Z-focused cross-national assessment of the gender gap. Third, this analysis operationalizes gender as a binary variable: future research should incorporate non-binary identities and intersectional perspectives to capture more nuanced dynamics (Albaugh et al., 2024).

As the end of the 2020s decade is approaching, by which point Generation Z will have fully entered the European electorate, the stark divergence between its male and female cohorts is set to represent not just a current trend but a defining feature of European politics and societies for the foreseeable future, with implications likely to spill over into the socialization of younger cohorts like Generation Alpha – raising critical questions about democracy, gender equality and, more broadly, societal cohesion..

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Appendix 1: Codebook

Concept / Construct	Survey	Variable Name	Description / Label	Coding / Values	Harmonization Notes	Missing Codes	Source / File
Gender	ESS	gndr	Respondent gender	1 = Male; 2 = Female	Recoded to binary 'Male' / 'Female'; cases outside 1-2 excluded from main analyses	7 = Refusal; 8 = Don't know; 9 = No answer	ESS11 integrated file (ESS11)
Gender	EES	d3	Respondent gender	1 = Male; 2 = Female; 3 = Other (panelled but excluded from main analyses)	Recoded to binary 'Male' / 'Female'; cases outside 1-2 excluded from main analyses	7 = Refusal; 8 = Don't know; 9 = No answer	EES 2024 Voter Study (ZA8868)
Year of birth	ESS	yrbrn	Respondent year of birth	Numeric year (e.g. 1998)	Invalid codes 7777/8888/9999 set to missing; used to derive generations (see gen boundaries)	7777 = Refusal; 8888 = Don't know; 9999 = No answer	ESS11
Year of birth	EES	d4	Respondent year of birth	Numeric year	Invalid codes set to missing; used to derive generations	7777/8888/9999 as per EES codebook (treat as missing)	EES 2024
Respondent identifier	ESS	idno	Respondent unique id	Numeric or alphanumeric id	Kept to track observations and create mapping outputs		ESS11
Respondent identifier	EES	resp_id	Respondent unique id	Numeric or alphanumeric id	Kept to track observations and create mapping outputs		EES 2024 (ZA8868)
Country	ESS	cntry	Country code as in ESS	Numeric country code (ESS codebook)	Filtered to EU27 list and normalized to alpha2 for merges		ESS11
Country	EES	country_alpha2	Country alpha-2 code	ISO alpha-2 (e.g. IT, FR)	Used to filter to EU27 and for mapping to CHES country codes		EES 2024 (ZA8868)
Last vote / party (local variable)	ESS	country-specific party vars (e.g. prtvtdat [AT], prtvtebe [BE], prtvtges [ES], prtvtdse [SE], ...)	Last party voted for in national election (country-specific variable names)	Local party codes (numeric scheme varies by country)	Extracted into a uniform column 'party_ess' in preprocessing; local codes mapped manually to CHES party identifiers	Special local codes filtered (e.g. 66, 77, 88, 99); treat as missing or not applicable	ESS11 (country-specific variables)
Last vote / party (harmonized)	ESS (derived)	party_ess (derived)	Harmonized party code column created in preprocessing	Numeric local codes preserved then matched to CHES ids	Created from country-specific party variables; used as input to manual mapping to CHES	NA for unmapped rows (written to diagnostics)	data_clean/ESS_party_mapping.csv and ESS11_clean outputs
Last vote / party	EES	q6_recoded (harmonized vote) -> party_ees (derived)	Harmonized EP vote variable	q6_recoded contains party codes in EES harmonized format	Mapped to CHES using EES_party_mapping.csv; unmapped cases flagged	Unmapped rows exported to diagnostics	EES 2024 (ZA8868)
CHES party identifier	CHES	party_id	CHES party identifier (numeric)	Numeric party id consistent with CHES trend files	Used as the common key to assign party-level scores to respondents' reported votes		CHES 2024 / CHES_clean2_EU27.csv
CHES - left-right	CHES	lrgen	General left - right position (party-level expert score)	Numeric scale (as in CHES codebook)	Assigned to respondents via mapping of reported vote to CHES party id; treated as continuous		CHES 2024
CHES - libertarian-traditional	CHES	galtan	GAL - TAN (postmaterialist - traditional) party position	Numeric scale (as in CHES codebook)	Used to study cultural value cleavages and to compute proportions at extremes using fixed thresholds		CHES 2024
CHES - support for women's rights	CHES	womens_rights	Expert-coded support for women's rights (party-level)	Numeric scale (as in CHES codebook)	Used as a measure of party-level stance on gender equality issues		CHES 2024; LU assigned from CHES 2019 when needed
Education	ESS	edulvlb	Highest level of education (detailed ISCED coding)	Numeric ISCED-based codes (many values: 0, 113, 129, 212, ... , 800)	Collapsed to three levels: Low / Medium / High following ISCED mapping; harmonized with EES d2	7777/8888/9999 = special missing codes	ESS11
Education	EES	d2	Highest level of education (harmonized)	1 = ISCED 0-1; 2 = ISCED 2; 3 = ISCED 3; 4 = ISCED 4; 5 = ISCED 5-6; 6 = ISCED 7-8; 97 = Other	Collapsed to Low / Medium / High to match ESS categories	97 = Other; other missing codes per codebook	EES 2024
Occupation - ISCO	ESS	isco08	Respondent occupation coded in ISCO08	Standard ISCO08 codes	Mapped to simplified sector/occupation groups for analysis	Missing codes per ESS codebook	ESS11
Employment sector	EES	d6a	Employment - economic sector	1 = Agriculture; 2 = State industry; 3 = Private industry; 4 = Public services; 5 = Private services; 6 = Other; 96 = Not applicable	Harmonized to ESS sector scheme	96 = Not applicable	EES 2024
Employment status	ESS	emplrel	Employment relationship / status	1 = Employee; 2 = Self-employed; 3 = Working for family business; 6 = Not applicable; others as codebook	Used together with sector to characterise work status; harmonized to EES d6 where possible	Missing and special codes as per codebook	ESS11
Employment status	EES	d6	Current employment status	1 = Self-employed; 2 = Employed; 3 = Still studying; 4 = Working in the household; 5 = Retired; 6 = Unemployed; 7 = Permanently sick or disabled; 8 = Community/military; 9 = Other	Harmonized to ESS categories where feasible		EES 2024
Subjective family standard of living	EES	d11	Subjective standard of living - respondent's family (poor - rich)	1 = 1 (poor) ... 7 = 7 (rich); 98 = Don't know	Used as proxy for parental socioeconomic background when ESS equivalent not available	98 = Don't know	EES 2024
Parental origin	ESS	facntr / mocntr	Father's / mother's country of birth	1 = Yes (born in country); 2 = No	Combined to binary indicator: 0 = both parents born in country; 1 = at least one parent born abroad	7/8/9 = refusal / don't know / no answer	ESS11
Parental origin	EES	d4c	Parental origin	1 = Both parents born in country; 2 = One parent born in country; 3 = Both parents born outside country; 98 = Don't know	Combined to binary indicator to match ESS derivation	98 = Don't know	EES 2024
Country of birth	ESS	brncntr	Respondent born in country	1 = Yes; 2 = No	Used as additional migration indicator when needed	7/8/9 = special missing	ESS11
Country of birth	EES	d4a	Country of birth (self-report)	1 = Born in country; 2 = Other (specify); 98 = Don't know	Harmonized where needed	98 = Don't know	EES 2024
Religion - denomination	ESS	rlgdnm	Religious denomination	1 = Roman Catholic; 2 = Protestant; 3 = Eastern Orthodox; 4 = Other Christian; 5 = Jewish; 6 = Islam; 7 = Eastern religions; 8 = Other Non-Christian; 66 = Not applicable	Collapsed to No religion, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Other	66/77/88/99 special codes	ESS11
Religion - denomination	EES	d9	Religious denomination	1 = Catholic; 2 = Orthodox; 3 = Protestant; 4 = Other Christian; 5 = Jewish; 6 = Muslim; 7 = Sikh; 8 = Buddhist; 9 = Hindu; 10 = Atheist; 11 = Non-believer/agnostic; 12 = Other	Collapsed to same categories as ESS		EES 2024
Religion - attendance	ESS	rlgatnd	Religious attendance frequency	1 = Every day; 2 = More than once a week; 3 = Once a week; 4 = At least once a month; 5 = Only on special days; 6 = Less often; 7 = Never	Recoded into ordinal attendance categories for analysis	77/88/99 special codes	ESS11
Religion - attendance	EES	d10	Religious services attendance	1 = More than once a week; 2 = Once a week; 3 = Once a month; 4 = About each 2nd or 3rd month; 5 = Only on special holy days; 6 = About once a year; 7 = Less often; 8 = Never	Harmonized to ESS attendance categories		EES 2024
Urbanicity	ESS	domicil	Type of area of residence	1 = Big city; 2 = Suburbs; 3 = Town or small city; 4 = Country village; 5 = Farm/countryside	Recoded to 3 levels: Large city; Town / Small city; Rural	7/8/9 = special missing	ESS11
Urbanicity	EES	d8	Type of area of residence	1 = Rural area or village; 2 = Small or middle size town; 3 = Large town or city	Recoded to match ESS 3-level urbanicity		EES 2024
Marital / partnership status	ESS		Marital or partnership status (variable varies)	Multiple codes in ESS; choose compatible ESS marital variable	Harmonized to EES d5 categories for analysis	Special missing codes as in ESS codebook	ESS11
Marital / partnership status	EES	d5	Marital and civil union status	1 = Married or remarried; 2 = Single living with a partner; 3 = Single; 4 = Divorced or separated; 5 = Widow/er	Harmonized to ESS where compatible		EES 2024
Subjective social class	EES	d7	Subjective social class (respondent)	1 = Working class; 2 = Lower middle class; 3 = Middle class	Used when ESS subjective class variable not available; mapped where possible		EES 2024
Income difficulty	ESS	hincfel	How well household income covers needs	Ordinal coding (see ESS codebook)	Used as material hardship indicator; harmonized with EES proxies	Special missing codes per codebook	ESS11