Is there a growing gender divide among young adults in regard to ideological left–right selfplacement? Evidence from 32 European countries

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Growing gender differences in political ideology among young people are a major concern because of their potential long-term societal implications. This study examines ideological shifts between young men and women in 32 European countries from 1990 to 2023, and how they are linked to societal levels of gender equality. Using data from several Eurobarometer surveys, we analyse the left–right self-placement of over 466,089 individuals aged 20–29. Using graphical analyses, regression models and age-period-cohort (APC) analyses, we find heterogeneity in the extent and development of ideological youth gender gaps. In 14 countries, the ideological positions of women and men are almost equal. In seven countries there is a modern youth gender gap in political ideology, with women being more left-wing than men. This has remained roughly stable since the 1990s. In 11 countries, a modern youth gender gap has emerged and/or widened over time. Finally, we find that modern youth gender gaps tend to be greater in countries with greater gender equality. The mainly small to moderate gender gaps—with important differences between countries—contradict the narrative of a strong and uniform shift towards a modern gender gap in political ideology among young adults.

Introduction

Gender differences in voting behaviour and political ideology, between young men and young women, have attracted great public attention. For instance, a much cited article in the *Financial Times* shows that a rapidly growing gender divide in political ideology among people aged under 30 has emerged and has been rapidly growing (Burn-Murdoch, 2024; e.g., Economist, 2024; Omer, 2024; Schmid, 2024; Thiel, 2024).

A growing political gender gap, especially among young people, can have important consequences for both the political sphere and private lives. If such trends emerge among the youngest citizens, this could be of particular interest and importance as it may be an early indicator of broader trends that could eventually affect society as a whole (Inglehart, 1977). In politics, such divides could intensify polarization around gender-related issues, with female-dominated parties increasingly advocating for gender equality while male-dominated parties oppose it. This risks turning gender equality into an ideological battleground, rather than an area for constructive cooperation (Kaufmann and Petrocik, 1999; Shorrocks, 2018; Hudde, 2023). Indeed, some far-right parties are already leveraging this divide by promoting antifeminist agendas and traditional masculinity to appeal particularly to young men (e.g., Bernárdez-Rodal et al. 2022). Such divides could be particularly consequential in people's private lives, because gender cuts across social networks, affecting family, friendships, and romantic relationships (Lampard, 1997; Muxel, 2014). When political gender gaps widen, they may complicate partner selection and relationships, potentially increasing singlehood and relationship strain (Easton and Holbein, 2021; Hudde and Grunow, 2024).

Several previous studies have examined gender differences in political views, (intended) voting behaviour, party preferences, party affiliation, and ideological leftright self-placement (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Gidengil et al., 2003; Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2004; Norrander and Wilcox, 2008; Giger, 2009; Kellstedt et al., 2010; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Condon

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and Wichowsky, 2015; Bittner and Goodyear-Grant, 2017; Harsgor, 2018; Shorrocks, 2018; Harteveld et al., 2019; Dassonneville, 2021; Diabaté et al., 2023; Marzęcki, 2023; Van Ditmars, 2023). In summary, these studies come to the conclusion that there used to be a traditional gender gap in Western countries, such that women voted for conservative parties more often than men, or placed themselves further to the right on the left-right scale than men. Since the 1980s, there has been a shift towards a modern gender gap in many of these countries, with women today voting more to the left and locating themselves further to the left on the political spectrum than men (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Giger, 2009; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Dassonneville, 2021; Hudde, 2023). Previous research suggests that the modern political gender gap may be driven by advances in gender equality (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Off, 2023). Therefore, one might assume that cross-country differences in political gender gaps are related to cross-country variation in gender equality (see also the research on the gender equality paradox (Stoet and Geary, 2018)). However, previous studies have analysed only individual countries, have studied all age groups (there has been no focus on the youngest citizens) and have not covered more recent years. Therefore, scientific testing of the widespread claim that there has been a rapidly growing gender gap among the youngest citizens in recent years is still missing.

In this article we extend previous research by tracing gender differences in political ideology, measured using left-right self-placement, of young people (20-29 years) in 32 European countries. By focussing our analyses on young people and using data that extend to the year 2023, we capture the age range within which, and the period during which, the ideological gender gap has increased rapidly, according to a recent report (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). In this paper, we first examine how the ideological left-right self-placement of young women and men has changed over time (from 1990 to 2023). Specifically, we seek to uncover if there is an increasing gender divide such that women are becoming more left-leaning and men more right-leaning. Furthermore, we employ APC analyses, because from a methodological point of view it is important to distinguish between period and cohort influences when analysing trends over time in order to be able to interpret possible changes in a meaningful way (Yang and Land, 2013). Second, we explore heterogeneity in countries' political gender gaps and test the idea that advances in gender equality could contribute to a political divergence between women and men. In sum, our paper provides a timely contribution to the important and ongoing question of whether and under what societal conditions young men and women are increasingly divided in their political ideologies.

To investigate the development of left-right self-placement of young men and women over time, we use data from the Eurobarometer (EB) survey programme. This provides us with information on the left-right self-placement of 466,089 young people aged 20–29 years in 32 European countries.

Ideological placement is an important aspect of people's political orientation that is distinct from, but linked to, voting decisions and party identification (Pratto et al., 1997; Dalton et al., 2011; Dassonneville et al., 2020). Political ideology is less volatile than voting, as voting might also be driven by factors including strategic considerations, general discontent, and candidate effects (Bol and Verthé, 2019; Cohen, 2020; De Vries et al., 2021; Hudde, 2023). Especially among young people, the share of people indicating that they identify with any party has decreased internationally and is now below half of the population in some countries (Hudde and Grunow, 2025), whereas the share identifying themselves as being positioned at some point on the leftright scale is comparatively higher (Otjes and Rekker 2021).

We examine the ideological self-placement of young men and women, as measured with the left-right scale. The left-right scale is the most widely used measure for the ideological classification of parties and of citizens (De Vries et al., 2013). There is variation between countries in how people understand the left-right differentiation, but economic and sociocultural issues usually play important roles. The political left is typically associated with focussing on equality in various spheres (including economic and gender equality), sociocultural liberalism and with greater openness towards migration. The political right is typically associated with economic liberalism, sociocultural traditionalism, and less openness to migration (Lachat, 2018; Lindqvist and Dornschneider-Elkink, 2024). What components are most central to people's left-right identification can change over time. In the Netherlands-and likely in many other European societies as well-sociocultural issues have become increasingly important for their left-right placement, as compared to economic issues (De Vries et al., 2013).

In the next section, we outline theoretical arguments for the emergence of ideological gender gaps among young people and discuss how increasing gender equality might influence the political orientation of young women and men differently. Then, we introduce our data and methodological approach, followed by a presentation of our findings. Finally, we discuss our findings in light of existing theory and previous research.

Background

Whereas several studies identify a modern gender gap in Western societies, this very general observation does not apply (equally) to all societies and there is relevant heterogeneity in trends across countries (Giger, 2009; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Dassonneville, 2021). For many former communist countries, Abendschön and Steinmetz (2014) find a traditional gender gap—women being more to the right than men—using data from the European Value Study 2008. Giger (2009) analysed data on voting behaviour for 12 Western European countries from 1974 to 2000 and found a shift of women towards the left, and found that in some, but not all, countries, by 2000 women were more likely than men to vote for politically left parties. In particular, she found no modern gender gap for Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal and Greece), Great Britain, and Ireland. However, both Abendschön and Steinmetz (2014) and Giger (2009) assume that a modern gender gap will develop in all countries eventually, as a result of social modernization (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2000).

The study by Dassonneville (2021) provides the most important reference piece for our study, as she analyses gender differences in political ideology using data from various sources for 36 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. For most countries, her data cover the period from 1973 onward, up to 2017 (and up to 2018 for two countries). For all countries combined, Dassonneville identifies a trend of women becoming more left-leaning, but trends differ substantially across countries. In 28 countries, she finds that women's ideological position has moved to the left over time and this has contributed to a statistically significant increase in the gender gap in less than half of the 36 countries. Despite the increase in some countries, the overall gender gap in political ideology is relatively small. Overall, the heterogeneity in Dassonneville's country findings illustrates that one cannot infer from a small selection of countries to a broader group of societies, such as European or Western societies. Rather, country-by-country analyses are necessary.

An observed move towards a modern gender gap could be driven by period or cohort effects (Yang and Land, 2013). Period effects, major events and societal conditions, sometimes labelled the *zeitgeist*, change the political preferences of all age groups (Harsgor, 2018). For instance, the growing salience of gender equality topics could be inducing an increasing gender gap on politics among all age groups. Cohort change, on the other hand, means that a modern gender gap may emerge because older generations, among whom the gender gap is small, are gradually replaced by newer generations among whom the gender gap is bigger. In line with this, cohort succession is often viewed as the motor of social change (Ryder, 1965),

Political cohort differences may occur if people's political orientation develops during young adulthood and remains relatively stable thereafter (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Inglehart and Norris, 2000). Different generations can develop different political orientations because they experience different social and political environments during their young, 'impressionable years' (Sears 1983). However, research shows that adults' political orientation can change and that the stability of that orientation is far from absolute (Kuhn, 2009; Arzheimer and Schoen, 2016; Dejaeghere and Dassonneville, 2017), making political period effects possible. This aligns with previous research that has studied different types of political attitudes in various contexts, finding evidence for both period and cohort effects (e.g., most recently Jocker et al., 2024a, 2024b; Mitteregger, 2024a, 2024b).

For an emerging modern gender gap, both period and cohort effects are plausible. Among the vast list of recent trends and conditions that might increase political gender gaps, consider the topic of gender equality. In contemporary Europe, gender equality has not yet been achieved but the degree of gender equality is greater than ever before (United Nations, 2023).¹ At the same time, the topic of gender equality, including backlash against it, has increased in salience in the public discourse (Off, 2023; Anduiza and Rico, 2024). These conditions could potentially increase the political divide between women and men. If these conditions trigger a temporary change, possibly among all age groups simultaneously, it would be a period effect. If the conditions were to have a long-lasting effect that is restricted to certain age groups, such as those who are in their 'impressionable years', it would become a cohort effect. Empirical evidence on period change, cohort change, and the modern gender gap is mixed (Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Harsgor, 2018; Shorrocks, 2018).

Previous research and theoretical reasoning suggest that the modern political gender gap might be caused by advances in gender equality (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Off, 2023). Regarding cross-country differences, research from other fields shows a pattern whereby higher gender equality in a country can go hand in hand with higher gender gaps (see for example the gender equality paradox on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) achievement and on career choices (Stoet and Geary, 2018)). The political left and parties on the left have a long tradition of focussing more on gender equality topics than politically right parties (Debus, 2016; Jankowski et al., 2022).² Women and men generally differ in their perspectives on gender equality: women tend to have more egalitarian

attitudes to gender roles than men (e.g., Davis and Greenstein, 2009; Grunow et al., 2018). Those with gender egalitarian views are more likely to favour left parties than centrist or right parties (Diabaté et al., 2023). Further, men's higher and increasing support for the radical right has been, among other factors, explained by resentment towards advances in gender equality (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Off, 2024).

Despite advances in gender equality, women's discontent with gender relations in society might increase and pull them towards the political left. Following the Tocqueville paradox, decreasing inequalities can heighten sensitivity to remaining disparities as these become more salient and politicized (Tocqueville et al., 2000).³ Further, the relatively slow pace of change in certain domains-such as persistent gender pay and care gaps (Eurostat, 2024)-may fall short of women's rising expectations in increasingly egalitarian societies. The unequal pace of change in different domains—such as faster advances in labour markets but lagging equality in the gendered division of housework and family care-can create additional burdens for women. These may lead to greater frustration with the state of gender relations despite absolute improvements in gender equality (Sullivan et al., 2018; Kan et al., 2022; Zoch and Heyne, 2023). In line with this, younger women in Europe—who are experiencing greater gender equality than previous generations-are more likely to perceive discrimination against women as a societal problem compared to middle-aged or older women (Off et al., 2025). With heightened awareness of persisting gender inequities and growing frustration about the pace of change, some women might increasingly align themselves with left political positions that advocate for more policy interventions to advance gender equality and put a greater focus on this topic.

Among some men, societal advances in gender equality and women's heightened focus on remaining inequities may trigger responses that push them in the opposite direction to women. Especially in contexts of economic insecurity and constrained labour markets, improvements in women's relative status may activate zero-sum thinking among some men, who assume that this change will worsen their own situation and status, or actually experience this themselves (Kim and Kweon, 2022; Off et al., 2022). Such defensive reactions may intensify when public discourse increasingly emphasizes remaining inequities despite the progress made, potentially fostering resentment among men who view continued demands for equality as going too far (Cousineau, 2021; Off et al., 2022; Off, 2023). In this way, advances in gender equality might induce a counterreaction and a move towards sexist attitudes at times of 'feminist momentum' (Anduiza and Rico, 2024; p. 491; see also Valentino et al., 2018; Cassese and Barnes, 2019). Empirical findings on men's perspectives, and age gaps therein, are mixed. On the one hand, research finds that young men are on average equally likely to consider discrimination against women as a societal problem as older men (Off et al., 2025). On the other hand, young men are more likely than older men to reject advances in women's positions or measures like gender quotas, possibly because they see their status as being threatened by them (Kim and Kweon, 2022; Off et al., 2022). As a result, it could be that a subgroup of men may gravitate away from politically left positions towards either centrist politics that place less emphasis on gender equality concerns, or—if they are seeking antifeminist agendas—towards the far right (Träbert, 2017).

Increases in gender equality might affect the political gender gap not only by shaping women's and men's views on the topic, but also by rendering existing differences in views more salient and politically consequential. Alongside advances in gender equality it is typical for the topic to become more salient: for instance, because equality advances emerge from policy decisions that generate public discourse. As gender issues become more prominent in public debates, especially among young people, they might increasingly shape how people see themselves politically and cause them to align their broader ideological self-placement more closely with their gender equality positions. Thus, young women on average lean more to the left, and young men typically hold more right-leaning or conservative views. Indeed, sociocultural topics, including issues surrounding gender relations and sexism, have gained political importance among young people across Western societies as these have advanced towards gender equality (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Off, 2023; Anduiza and Rico, 2024).

In support of these theoretical arguments, Abendschön and Steinmetz (2014) found that women in countries with greater gender equality vote more to the left. Taking these theoretical considerations and empirical findings together, we expect that the ideological modern gender gap will be greater in countries with greater gender equality.

Material and methods

Data

We use data from the EB and Candidate EB from 1990 to 2023 (European Commission, 2024). We select all 174 EB from 40 different countries, which includes information on right–left self-placement. The EB surveys are conducted as face-to-face interviews. However, during COVID-19, some countries switched to web-based online interviews (for some of the respondents). Additional analyses considering this mode change are

displayed in the Supporting Online Material (SOM, see Figure S3 and S22). We also use data from the European Social Survey (ESS; European Social Survey, 2024) from 10 different survey rounds from 2002 to 2022 for the robustness analyses that are presented in the SOM.⁴

We use the United Nations Gender Inequality Index (GII; United Nations, 2023) as an indicator of gender equality. This index consists of three dimensions—labour market (e.g., labour force participation rates), empowerment (e.g., shares of parliament seats) and reproductive health (e.g., maternal mortality ratio)—and measures the inequality between men and women in a country. The index can take a value between 0 and 1, with lower values indicating greater gender equality. We assign a one-year lagged GII to each country in each wave of the survey, e.g., surveys conducted in 2000 receive the 1999 GII value. We assign the GII from the previous year to each country to ensure that the indicators on which the GII is based were measured prior to the left–right self-placement on the individual level.

Operationalization

In the EB, the *left–right self-placement* is measured on a 10-point scale, ranging from 1 (left) to 10 (right). The variable *gender* can have two values in our data: men or women. The few cases with a missing value for this variable or a non-binary response option were excluded from the analysis. The information on gender is self-reported by the respondents. The *age* was provided explicitly by the respondent, or we created it from the difference between the year of birth and the year of the survey.

Sample selection

As we are interested in changes over time, we have applied restrictions on the countries to be analysed. We only consider countries for which information is available for 10 different years over a period of at least 10 years. Data from the following 32 countries are therefore included in the sample: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom.

We only use data for men and women who were between the ages of 20 and 59 at the time of measurement (for our main analyses, only those who were aged 20 to 29).⁵ In addition, following the approach of other studies in the field (Dassonneville, 2021; Steiner, 2024), we only consider those who provided valid information about their left–right self-placement.⁶

For each year and country, we pool all survey data and thus our data consist of 829 country-year combinations, comprising 466,089 people aged 20–29 (237,276 women and 228,813 men) and 2,137,445

Statistical analysis

The individual year per country represents the units of analysis. For each of these country-year combinations, we estimate the mean value of the left-right self-placement of women and men, and the gender difference in left-right self-placement. In total, there are 829 estimates for men, 829 estimates for women, and 829 estimates for the difference between women and men.⁷

The means (for people aged 20-29) are shown in Figure 1 in a scatter plot, with blue dots representing the means for men and orange dots representing the means for women. To better identify time trends and to reduce the noise of individual years, we also draw a fractional-polynomial prediction plot (blue and orange lines) to visually see if there is any sort of trend over time. We use this method to identify the polynomial combinations that describe the data best using two polynomials. Fractional means that the polynomials can also be non-integer or that the same polynomial can occur several times (Royston and Altman, 1994). These fit lines are therefore more flexible than commonly used linear or quadratic fit lines, but not so flexible that they can map every small swing in the data, which makes them suitable for mapping long-term trends.

To compute gender differences in left-right selfplacement, we calculated a regression for each country that included gender, a year dummy and an interaction between gender and the year dummy. Based on these regression models, we then calculated the differences in the predicted margins for men and women for each (observed) year. These predicted mean differences between women and men in left-right self-placement (aged 20-29) are plotted in Figure 2. Positive values indicate that men lean more to the left than women, and negative values indicate that women lean more to the left than men. For ease of interpretation, data points indicating a statistically significant difference (p < 0.05) are coloured purple, and data points indicating a statistically insignificant difference are coloured grey. Again, a fractional-polynomial prediction plot (black line) is drawn to see if there is any time trend.⁸

With our previous approach of looking at 20–29-yearolds in different historical periods, we can observe changes over time, but it is not possible to distinguish between period or cohort effects as possible reasons for changes (Yang and Land, 2013). Therefore, we also conducted a more detailed APC analysis based on the intrinsic estimator for age-period-cohort effects in generalized linear models (Yang et al., 2004, 2008) for each country separately







Note: Each point represents an estimated value per country-year combination. Orange dots represent the estimated values of women and blue dots the estimated values of men. The lines represent the fractional-polynomial predictions for men (blue) and women (orange) across the country-years., Source: EB (1990–2023), our own calculations.

Predicted gender difference in left-right self-placement





Note: Each point represents an estimated value per country-year combination. Positive values indicate that men lean more to the left than women. Negative values indicate that women lean more to the left than men. Purple dots represent statistically significant gender differences in left-right self-placement. Grey dots represent statistically insignificant gender differences in left-right self-placement. The line represents the fractional-polynomial predictions for gender differences (black) across the country-years., Source: EB (1990–2023), our own calculations. by gender. Based on these models, we obtained estimates for the intercept and the deviation from it for each age group (five-year age groups from 20 to 59), birth cohort (five-year birth cohorts from 1935 to 2000) and period (five-year periods from 1990 to 2023). Based on these values, we then calculated predicted values for left–right self-placement across age, period and cohort for both genders (see Figures S7–S9 in the SOM).

In a final step, we want to analyse to what extent country differences in predicted gender gaps are related to gender equality. To illustrate the relationship between gender equality and gender gaps in left–right selfplacement (see Figure 4), we plot the predicted gender gaps (aged 20–29) together with the GII in a scatterplot (pooled across all country–year combinations). To be able to recognize a possible relationship, we also draw a fractional-polynomial prediction plot (black line).⁹

For our analyses, we used various Stata ados (spmap (Pisati, 2007), geo2xy (Picard and Stepner, 2015), palettes (Jann, 2018), and colrspace (Jann, 2022), as well as the country boundaries shapefile of the World Bank (World Bank, 2020).

Results

Figure 1 shows the evolution of young women's and men's ideological self-placement for all countries and Figure 2 plots the evolution of the gender gap within these countries.¹⁰ In both figures, the dots represent single years and the lines represent the fractionalpolynomial predictions. Looking at these trends across countries, heterogeneous patterns emerge.

First, there are seven countries in which a modern youth gender gap has existed and remained about stable since the 1990s. In two of these—the Netherlands and Norway—the size of the modern gender gap is moderate and remains relatively stable over time. In the other five countries, the modern gender gap is either small or moderate and is also mainly stable over time (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, and Germany).

Second, in 11 countries we observe a modern youth gender gap today, which has (further) widened over recent decades (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Greece, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom). In six of these 11 countries, there is a trend towards young men recently moving (slightly) further to the right and women further to the left, with the result that the gap is widening (Denmark, Finland, France, Lithuania, Slovenia and Sweden). In the other five countries, men are either stable in their ideological self-placement or moving towards the left, but women are moving at a faster pace towards the left, causing the gap to grow (Estonia, Greece, Luxembourg, Spain and the United Kingdom). *Third*, there are 14 countries without any meaningful youth gender gap today (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Latvia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Turkey). However, the development of a gender gap over time in these countries is heterogeneous. For six countries (Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta and Portugal), an almost parallel development in left–right self-placement between men and women can be observed so that a gender gap can hardly ever be identified. For another eight countries (Bulgaria, Latvia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, Poland and Turkey), a (small) modern gender gap was observed in the past, but more recently there has been a levelling off, so that a gender gap can no longer be observed.

To summarize, there is a small to moderate modern gender gap among young people aged 20-29 today in 18 out of 32 countries, and no gender gap in political left-right self-placement in 14 out of 32 countries. Overall, the largest modern gender gaps today can be found in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden. In addition to the development of the gender gaps over time, the heterogeneity in left-right self-placement between the countries is also worth mentioning (compare Bulgaria and Germany, for example). Furthermore, most countries show that the left-right self-placement of men and women has remained stable over time, or that both genders have moved further to the left. Noticeable exceptions to this trend are, for example, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Montenegro and Slovakia, where both men and women on average have placed themselves (slightly) further to the right over time.

Given space constraints, we only depict the results of the APC analyses in the SOM (see Figures S7–S9) and briefly summarize the key findings here. Age effects: In many countries, there are (slight) effects (or simply stability) in that men and women continue to move to the right when they get older (see Figure S7 in the SOM). In some countries in Central Eastern Europe (e.g., Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia), there is an opposite pattern in that men and women tend to move to the left. In general, the age patterns for men and women are very similar in many countries. Period effects: In most countries, no substantial gender differences are apparent (see Figure S8 in the SOM). Only in Estonia, Finland and Sweden does it appear that since the 2010s, men have been moving slightly further to the right and women further to the left. In Norway, this development appears to have started somewhat earlier. Cohort effects: Regarding the cohort differences between men and women, it can be seen for Estonia, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Sweden that the gender gap among the youngest cohorts is growing slightly (see Figure S9 in

the SOM). In the other countries, the gendered patterns are quite similar, and the curves of the estimated values run very much in parallel, without any clearly visible substantial gender differences. In Norway, the gap was largest among the cohorts born in the 1970s and has since narrowed again. In summary, it can be said that in many countries, no real gender differences can be seen in age, period or cohort curves. If differences are discernible, this is mainly in countries where at least small to moderate gender gaps are observed in Figures 1 and 2.

Summarizing our results reported above (see Figures 1 and 2) and the robustness analyses presented in the SOM, we have created a map (see Figure 3) that shows for each country the group we would place it in in terms of the development of a youth gender gap in left–right self-placement over time. In total, we can distinguish between four subgroups (1, 2, 3a and 3b).

This summary is inevitably interpretative and it may be that another researcher would consider a different coding to be more appropriate for a particular country.

1 No modern gender gap: In these 14 countries there is no meaningful gender gap today. However, the development of a gender gap over time in these countries is heterogeneous. In six countries (Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta and Portugal) an almost parallel development in left-right self-placement between men and women can be observed over the observation period, so that a gender gap can hardly ever be identified. In eight countries (Bulgaria, Latvia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, Poland and Turkey) a heterogeneous development can be observed. (Small) modern and/or traditional gender gaps were observed in the past, but more



Figure 3 Countries classified by the development of gender gaps in left–right self-placement over time. Source: World Country Polygons, EB (1990–2023), our own calculations.



Figure 4 Association between predicted gender differences and gender inequality (pooled across 32 countries, 20–29-year-olds)'. Note: Each point represents an estimated value per country–year combination. Positive values indicate that men lean more to the left than women. Negative values indicate that women lean more to the left than men. Lower GII values indicate more gender equality. Purple dots represent statistically significant gender differences in left–right self-placement. Grey dots represent statistically insignificant gender differences in left–right self-placement. Grey dots represent statistically across GII. Source: EB (1990–2023). GII (1990–2023). GII (1990–2023). GII (1990–2023).

recently there has been a levelling off, so that a gender gap can no longer be observed.

- 2 Stable modern gender gap: In seven countries a modern gender gap has existed and remained mostly stable since the 1990s. In two of these countries (the Netherlands and Norway) the modern gender gap is moderate. In the other five countries (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czechia and Germany) the modern gender gap is small.
- 3a *Widening gap, diverging pattern*: There is a trend towards young men recently moving (slightly) further to the right and/or women moving further to the left, with the result that the gap is widening (six countries—Denmark (moderate gap), Finland (moderate gap), France (small gap), Lithuania (small gap), Slovenia (moderate gap), and Sweden (moderate gap)).
- 3b Widening gap, women shift left faster: Men are either stable in their ideological left-right selfplacement or moving further left, but women are moving at a faster pace to the left, causing the gap to grow (five countries; Estonia (moderate gap), Greece (small gap), Luxembourg (small gap), Spain (small gap) and United Kingdom (small gap)).

Figure 4 illustrates how ideological gender differences among the young are related to the gender inequality of

the countries. Overall, there is a trend towards greater modern gender gaps for higher levels of gender equality. The more gender equal a country is, the more likely women are to be more left-leaning than men in their political ideology. These findings are also supported by different specifications of regression models, including those that add country-level fixed effects to account for any time-constant differences between the countries or that include year-level fixed effects to account for any cross-European period effect (see Figure S25 and Table S3 in the SOM).

Discussion

Our study investigated the popular claim of a rapidly increasing gender divergence in political ideology among young people (e.g., Burn-Murdoch, 2024). To examine the development of left–right self-placement we utilized data from the EB covering 466,089 individuals aged 20–29 years from 32 European countries over the years 1990–2023.

We find that the development of left-right selfplacement of young men and women in Europe is characterized by heterogeneity in terms of the level of gender differences and their development over time. Today, no European country shows a clear traditional gender gap in political ideology. Compared to earlier research (Giger, 2009; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014), which frequently identified traditional gender gaps, particularly in southern European and former communist countries, we were thus able to show that these hardly exist anymore. This finding lends support to certain expectations of the theory of social modernization (Inglehart and Norris, 2000). In 14 of 32 countries studied, women and men are ideologically almost equally placed today, with neither a traditional nor a modern gender gap. In many of these countries, the development for young men and women has been strikingly parallel for decades, which makes it questionable whether pronounced gender gaps will develop in the future. These findings refute the expectations of social modernization theory that modern gender gaps should develop in all countries as modernization progresses.

In the majority of countries-18 out of 32-we observe small to moderate modern gender gaps in the left-right self-placement of young men and women today. In 11 of these 18 countries, the gender gap has increased up until today. However, in only six countries can this increase be attributed to a trend of young men moving (slightly) further to the right and women moving further to the left (observed in Denmark, Finland, France, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Sweden). In the other five countries, the gender gap is widening, with women turning to the left at a relatively fast rate and men remaining either stable or also turning to the left, but at a slower rate than women (observed in Estonia, Greece, Luxembourg, Spain and the UK). Overall, we find no strong geographic pattern of trends, with the exception of the Scandinavian countries, which all exhibit a modern gender gap today. When differentiating more broadly-simply distinguishing whether a modern gender gap among young people can be observed today or not-one can identify two additional tendencies. First, the share of countries without a youth gender gap is higher in Central and Eastern Europe than in other regions. Second, the three Western and Southern European countries without a gender gap-Ireland, Poland and Italy—have in common the fact that a high share of the population are Catholic. These findings partly align with previous research on gender gaps in the general population (Giger, 2009; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014). However, there are also several counterexamples to these patterns, i.e. countries with gender gaps that are in Central and Eastern Europe and/or that have a high share of Catholics. In sum, we therefore suggest caution when interpreting these patterns and we refrain from assigning a distinct developmental pattern to all Western European, Southern European, or former communist countries.

More detailed APC analyses of the population aged 20–59 indicate that in many of these 11 countries both

cohort and period effects underlie the divergent gender ideology patterns. However, period effects (especially after 2015) seem to underlie the divergent patterns in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) and some countries in Western and Southern Europe (France, Greece, Luxembourg and Spain). In Estonia, Slovenia and the UK, it seems to be cohort effects of those born in the late 1990s that are driving the divergent patterns.

Beyond the gender differences, our analyses reveal a trend in the vast majority of countries: both young women and men are on average either stable in their left–right self-placement or place themselves (slightly) further to the left today than they did a few decades ago. However, in Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Montenegro and Slovakia, for example, both men and women have moved (slightly) to the right on average over time. Furthermore, our finding of major country heterogeneity in political ideology among young people is in line with findings from previous research investigating the whole population (Dassonneville, 2021). In sum, the results do not lend support to the idea that young men are universally moving to the political right in terms of their self-stated political ideology.

Further, we examined whether the heterogeneity of levels in young people's gender gaps is related to countries' levels of gender equality (Stoet and Geary, 2018). As we expected, our analyses reveal a small but robust association whereby countries with greater gender equality also show greater modern youth gender gaps. Our findings are in line with previous research and theoretical considerations that have suggested that the modern political gender gap might be caused by advances in gender equality (e.g., Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Off, 2023). The countries where the youth gender gap is largest today are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden. This list includes all Nordic countries, which are the most gender egalitarian group of countries. Further, the Netherlands scores comparatively high on gender equality. While gender equality is generally lower in Central and Eastern Europe, the two listed countries from that group, Estonia and Slovenia, score among the most egalitarian from that group of countries. In line with the Tocqueville paradox (Tocqueville et al., 2000), this could indicate that in countries with higher gender equality, sensitivity to remaining gender disparities becomes more salient and politicized. In addition to the country-level gender equality that we have focussed on in our paper, it is plausible that other factors that vary between countries could help to explain differences in the gender gaps (and their development) between countries. However, investigating this is beyond the scope of our paper. Potential directions for future research on cross-national variations in modern gender gaps include examining differences in religiosity, policy frameworks (e.g., abortion rights), political systems, and economic development (e.g., Giger, 2009; Abendschön and Steinmetz, 2014; Otjes and Rekker, 2021).

Our research contributes to greater understanding of political standpoints, and under what societal circumstances young women and men diverge in their political standpoints. Whereas previous research found rapidly growing gender gaps in voting behaviour in several countries (Hudde, 2023; Abou-Chadi, 2024), our analysis of ideological self-placement reveals more modest trends. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between different aspects of political orientation. To develop a holistic understanding of political gender gaps among young Europeans, future research should examine how gender differences manifest in additional aspects of political orientation, including issue priorities and policy preferences regarding the economy, migration, gender equality, and the environment (Marzęcki, 2023).

In sum, the traditional gender gap in political ideology has disappeared among young people in Europe but a modern gender gap has only appeared in a subset of European societies and remains small to moderate in most places. We observe considerable heterogeneity between countries, which implies that one should not infer from a small selection of countries to a larger set of countries, such as European, Western or even global societies. Modern gender gaps, with young women leaning more towards the left than young men, exist in more than half of the 32 countries in our sample. Substantively, these gaps range between small and moderate. However, the course of history is rarely linear and is shaped by unexpected turns, and this might also apply to gendered dynamics of political ideology. If, however, past trends continue into the future, gender differences in political ideology will widen in several countries and the role of gender as a political cleavage will increase. Gender can be a particularly impactful cleavage and dividing line, as it runs not only through the political arena, but also through personal relationships, including family relationships, friendships and dating experiences.

Notes

- From a global perspective, all European countries have comparatively high levels of gender equality. However, considerable difference between countries and country clusters remains. Gender equality is highest in Nordic countries and tends to be lower in Western and Southern Europe. The European countries with the lowest levels of gender equality include Turkey and several countries in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary (United Nations, 2023; for an analysis of gender role attitudes across European countries, see e.g., Begall et al., 2023).
- 2. This comparatively reduced focus does not mean that the issue is ignored on the right side of the political spectrum.

In her analysis of right-wing parties in Europe, Farris (2017) was able to show, for example, that right-wing parties also take up gender equality issues: for example, by stigmatizing Muslim men as opponents of gender equality. And thus, in parts of the political spectrum, a *femonationalism* is emerging that combines feminist arguments with nationalist ones.

- 3. While this mechanism has rarely been applied to gender inequalities (for a recent exception, see Diehl et al., 2024), it is well-documented in migration research as the *integration paradox*, where improved integration often correlates with increased perceptions of discrimination among minorities (for a review, see Schaeffer and Kas, 2024).
- 4. The results using ESS data are in general very similar to the results reported in the paper (see the 'other data' section in the SOM).
- Additionally, we repeated our main analyses for the age groups 18–23 and 24–29. We also repeated the APC analyses for 18–57-year-olds. These results are very similar to the reported results (see Figures S10–S16 in the SOM).
- 6. Further analyses and discussions of missing values can be found in the section 'missing values' in the SOM.
- 7. We have also analysed the individual surveys instead of pooling data over the years. In general, the results are very similar to those presented in this paper (see the 'reducing variation by pooling data' section in the SOM).
- 8. In our preferred, and reported, more conservative specification of the regression models, we do not assume a functional form of a time trend a priori. In further models, we included a linear time trend and a quadratic time trend, as well as the corresponding interactions with gender (see Tables S1–S2 in the SOM). Based on these models, we then again calculated gender differences in the predictive margins (see Figures S17–S18 in the SOM). Based on these less restrictive models, for most of the countries we arrive at similar conclusions (with a different functional form) regarding the time trends reported in the paper.
- 9. In addition to showing the graphical relationship, we have calculated different linear regression models based on these data (see Figure S25 and Table S3 in the SOM). First, a model that only contains the GII (ordinary least squares (OLS)). Second, a model that also includes country fixed effects (OLS + country fixed effects). Finally, we calculate a model that includes GII and survey year fixed effects (OLS + survey year fixed effects).
- 10. The labelling of the size of the gaps is based on our interpretation of the differences on the absolute scale. We choose this approach because the left–right scale is a widely used scale that is often interpreted in its absolute form. In addition, we divided the absolute differences by the standard deviation (see Figure S19 in the SOM). The largest difference is -0.75 SD in Finland in 2020. This can be classified as medium according to common conventions.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at ESR online.

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Author contributions

Richard Nennstiel (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [lead], Formal analysis [lead], Methodology [equal], Supervision [equal], Visualization [equal], Writing - original draft [lead], Writing - review & editing [equal]), and Ansgar Hudde (Conceptualization [equal], Formal analysis [supporting], Methodology [equal], Supervision [equal], Visualization [equal], Writing - original draft [supporting], Writing - review & editing [equal])

Data availability

All data used are publicly available (partly after registration). As these are third-party data, we cannot make them publicly available. In the following, however, we make it clear which data we have used and where they can be obtained.

Code to reproduce the tables, figures and supplementary analyses presented can be found under https:// osf.io/6tek3/.

World Bank Official Boundaries

The World Bank Official Boundaries data (World Country Polygons - Very High Definition) can be downloaded without registration using the following link https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/search/dataset/0038272.

GII data

The GII data can be downloaded from the United Nations website https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/the-matic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII without registration using the following link https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2023-24_HDR/HDR23-24_Statistical_Annex_GII_Table.xlsx.

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Eurobarometer data

The Eurobarometer data can be downloaded after registering with GESIS at the following website: https://www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer-data-service/ search-data-access.

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ESS data

The ESS data can be downloaded from the following website after registration: https://ess.sikt.no/en/?tab=overview. We used the data builder (https://ess.sikt.no/en/data-builder/?tab=round_country; on 21.02.2024) to create a dataset for the data of waves 1-10 for all countries, which contains all variables relevant for our analyses.

Data sets used

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